What makes development oriented research partnerships effective? Looking back to move forward

Report on a workshop conducted on 21 August 2012 within the frame of the International Conference on Research for Development (ICRD) 2012 in Bern (www.icrd.ch)

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Introduction:

Research partnerships are meaningful when partners can expect significant added value from their collaboration. Successful partnerships are based on mutual interests, trust and a shared vision. Partners are confronted with various challenges such as defining the agenda and responsibilities together, dealing with different expectations and goals, communicating across a variety of epistemological borders, strengthening capacity, finding adequate funding – to list the most important ones mentioned in the literature.

This session focussed on experience with North-South and South-South research partnerships, and envisioned ways ahead to strengthen such partnerships. The presenters addressed the following questions:

- How was the added value of the research partnership defined in your case? What approach was chosen, what processes were defined, and what methods or tools used to implement them?
- What worked (enabling factors)?
- What did not work (hindering factors) and why?

In addition, suggestions for responding to other challenges – such as funding, asymmetries, conflicting expectations and goals, etc. – were made

Presenters:

Bishnu Raj Upreti, NCCR North-South
Allan Lavell, La Red in Latin America
Garry Aslanyan, ESSENCE on Health Research
Bassirou Bonfoh, AfriqueOne

Results:

As mentioned by all presenters, one of the key ingredients for successful research partnerships is a strong commitment of the researchers involved. The following enabling and hindering factors were underlined by the speakers during their presentation.

Enabling factors:

- Defining the agenda and responsibilities together
- Using process-oriented procedures (reflective learning and adaptation)
- Willingness and capacity to deal with power issues and cultural values
- New/innovative concepts: e.g., a transdisciplinary research approach
- Allocation of resources for capacity building and the creation of and facilitation by stable regional bodies
- Common guidelines and procedures
- Exchange visits and face to face meetings
- Validation & testing interventions (e.g. the NCCR North-South's priority actions, "PAMS")
- Long-standing collaboration (long term > 12 years)

Hindering factors and major challenges:

- Research environment in the «South»: Lack of strong and broader national policies and lack of funding
- Dealing with power asymmetries
- Gaps between funders and research institutions
- Access to scientific journals and data for both reading and publishing purposes in the «South»
- Language barrier
- Mismatch between expectations of research and policy (linking research, policy, and practice)
- Missing capacity in the «South» for grant management
- Shifting priorities in capacity development
- Career pathways

Results from the discussion after the presentations:

1. Concerns:

Capacity building:

- How can we ensure that we have a critical mass of researchers and academics to build institutional capacity at universities and research centres in the «South»?
- How can we improve the effectiveness of degree-related capacity building efforts? (usually there is a need for modifying/adapting curricula).

- How can we best deal with the usual lack of a long-term perspective? The benefits of research partnerships usually become truly effective only over the long term. Therefore, the research community has to take responsibility to transform projects into programmes to reach this aim – this cannot be left to donors.
- How can we make data and literature more accessible: how can open access to resources be ensured in the «South»? And how can we help more «Southern» researchers successfully submit their articles to well-known «Northern» journals?

Dissemination of results:

- Dissemination of transdisciplinary research results: what is the adequate form of dissemination for such research results? How should researchers communicate their approach to non-academics? How do we overcome the barriers of publishing transdisciplinary research results in high-impact factor journals?

Diaspora

- Research partnerships and the diaspora: how can Southern researchers who work in countries other than their own remain connected and informed about opportunities for partnering, especially when they work in the North?

Donors

- How can we best deal with pressure from donors when they have to show "change"? Indeed, this means that the pressure is handed on to researchers, who have to modify practices and goals even if they are good and work well.
- How do we deal with Northern research institutes when they are "donors": how can a joint agenda be defined under such conditions?

2. **Good practices ("Looking back to move forward"):**
- Define concentrated action with a clear objective: this can have a "viral effect" on policy, processes etc.
- Move from North-South partnerships to an autochthonous form of research partnerships (i.e. "South-South" partnerships)
- Develop a common research agenda and approach
- Engage with power issues right from the beginning
- Transform/link projects into programmes
- Institutionalize networks and platforms
- Encourage matching funds to ensure that greater ownership is achieved; this can also become the source of a change in research policy at various levels (i.e. up to the national level)

Towards the end of the discussion the following suggestion was made, covering several of the above suggestions and inspired by the good practices presented at the beginning; the suggestion was then illustrated with a figure:

- Improve the environment: Diversify funding and resources and bring results into circulation. Create a platform where different aspects can be dealt with. Create this platform (in the South) with known partners.