

Maximizing meaning, mutually: INGO research partnerships

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International nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) represent a microcosm of global dynamics: multiple, shifting centres of power, a growing multiplicity of stakeholders bound together through complex relational ties, attempting to address intertwined, seemingly intractable issues. In many ways, they are a researcher's dream: established multi-site entities, often employing a mix of interventions across a variety of contexts and over time, ideal for comparative analysis. They offer a wealth of data and a unique insider perspective on emergent patterns and interpreting key explanatory factors. Reciprocally, international relations scholars – well versed in global governance structures, multi-layered bureaucracies and complex causal chains – can contribute conceptual frameworks and analytical tools to this burgeoning group of international actors. There exists great potential on both sides to maximize mutual understanding of the evolving structures, roles and influence of INGOs.

The promises and the pitfalls of practitioner-academic relationships are well documented. Ideally, such partnerships offer the best of both worlds, combining insights from practice and analytical tools to deepen understanding, democratize knowledge and develop innovations that better address societal concerns. For researchers, these collaborations can help to identify emerging issues, and test new concepts and propositions. By partnering with practitioners, researchers can gain access to and legitimacy with people and information they otherwise may have difficulty reaching.

By working together, practitioners and academics can advance methodological tools, like how to operationalize complex constructs like 'active citizenship' or resilience, or create multi-dimensional indicators of inequality. Crucially, collaboration can provide researchers with a reality check, helping them to avoid omitted variable bias, or even worse, misguided inquiry based on spurious correlations. Despite such enormous promise, joint research remains relatively uncommon.

A fundamental challenge in practitioner-academic relationships is essentially where each sits on the intrinsic-instrumental inquiry continuum, the extent to which the underlying aim of the work is to develop generalizable theory or solve specific problems. These different orientations influence how collaborators perceive their role, to observe and interpret information or to create change. As Fox aptly states, 'an interesting question may not be seen as relevant and a relevant question may not be seen as interesting' (2006, p. 30).

These different orientations can give rise to both relational and operational tensions. Two key factors specific to INGOs hold additional implications for this type of research. First, relative to domestic nonprofits, INGOs typically have a greater number of and more diversity in the units of analysis. Second, compared to other large, complex organizations with great scope and diversity, like national governments, the United Nations or NATO, INGOs have very strong norms regarding inclusion and collaboration. Thus, the complex INGO structure requires careful attention to the unit(s) and the corresponding data, sampling and relational implications.

Given the great potential and great challenges of practitioner-academic partnerships in general and with INGO structures specifically, they are most likely to be successful when they take advantage of and shed light on the scale and diversity that makes INGOs unique. Based on Brown's (2001) four patterns of practice research engagement (focused puzzle-

solving, intervention and assessment, issue exploration and agenda setting, long-term domain development), this chapter identifies areas of maximum mutual overlap and proposes three areas of joint INGO inquiry.

Focused puzzle-solving uses existing methods to determine what works more and less well in which contexts to address well-defined problems. This approach is likely to be the least interesting for researchers and may already be happening as part of INGO evaluations, so will be less relevant for practitioners. *Intervention and assessment*, which involves developing and testing approaches to solving particular problems, is likely more relevant for practitioners than interesting for researchers. It may be most attractive to methodologists piloting novel evaluation tools, and similar scale and context applications as with focused puzzle-solving.

Issue exploration and agenda setting is characterized by new, intractable or rapidly changing issues. Similarly, *long-term domain development* aims to build theory and practice by creating and experimenting with frameworks to address such issues. These two final practice research engagement approaches reflect the nature of many of the issues INGOs attempt to tackle – entrenched poverty, overlapping inequalities, environmental and political shocks – and therefore offer the greatest potential for overlap and mutual gain.

As such, fruitful areas of joint INGO inquiry could include complex impact chains, citizen engagement and power relations, and the role of and relationship between INGOs and other actors in the international arena. All three of these areas deal with intractable or rapidly changing issues and require more comprehensive, nuanced frameworks to understand. By identifying their joint research selectively and structure their relationships explicitly, INGO practitioner-research partnerships can further our understanding about the conditions, roles and influence of these diverse and powerful international actors that is both interesting and relevant.