

Maintaining Momentum in Collaborative Research Design

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Over the last few years, INTRAC has built up relationships with many academics on common research interests, such as in monitoring and evaluation methods, civil society accountability, beneficiary feedback processes, evidence and knowledge in NGOs, NGOs and language policies, NGO legitimacy and operating space, partnership principles, and civil society aid dynamics. Some of these relationships have developed into collaborative activities including research-council funded projects, donor-funded projects, joint conference panels and workshops, and publications for different audiences. Some have gone nowhere.

INTRAC's engages in these collaborative endeavours for multiple reasons. Academic partners bring research skills, expertise and resources that complement INTRAC's own capacities and knowledge. We are keen to push civil society actors to think harder and deeper about their practice, and academic input helps this process. INTRAC brings access to a vast network of NGOs and civil society groups, connections with donors and civil society funders, and dissemination and impact possibilities.

Collaborative Research Design – how can we maintain momentum?

On several occasions in developing collaborative research proposals with academics we have struggled to keep practitioners engaged over the length of time it takes from first discussing an idea to getting a project underway. There has been a push for academics to engage research stakeholders early on in research design processes – and this is something that INTRAC facilitates – but as soon as you bring practitioners together around an idea, they are looking for the next steps, the outputs and the results having invested time, energy and resources into the process. Good research ideas have disappeared onto the shelf because by the time the first proposal has been rejected, the INGOs have moved on to other priorities. And very often the original INGO people involved have moved to other jobs or roles. After fielding regular enquiries for updates on proposals that often take many months to develop, get through the funding system, and to start up (if successful) I often find that motivation and enthusiasm to be involved had dissipated or the research is no longer as urgently relevant as it seemed at the time. This limits the possibilities of seeking alternative ways to work collaboratively on good ideas.

In an ideal world the decision-making process for research applications would be much shorter. Can we push for innovative approaches to the decision-making process for collaborative research? Do others have similar experiences of this challenge? What ideas could we share about how to maintain momentum on collaborative research ideas while decisions are pending? What ideas can we share about how to ensure that when the research finally gets going, it is still relevant to the INGOs who may have moved on in the meantime?

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