The Oxfam–Monash Partnership

ANNA DONALDSON and ALEXANDRA KENNEDY, THE OXFAM–MONASH PARTNERSHIP

Through our mid-term review, we have shown that NGO–academic partnerships are challenging, complex, hopeful, ethically difficult, demanding, resource-intensive, rewarding and progressive.

Oxfam–Monash Partnership Mid-Term Review, 2013

1. BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The Oxfam–Monash Partnership (OMP) is a formalised collaboration between Oxfam Australia and Monash University, established with a Memorandum of Understanding in 2008, and formalised by a $3 million philanthropic donation in 2010. During the five years of its current funding term, collaborative research has been one of the Partnership's core activities, alongside work in the areas of student engagement and practitioner development.

The successful establishment of the OMP was dependent on several key enabling factors.

- Strong personal relationships being established across organisations, and the commitment and motivation of key individuals at the senior management level in each institution
- Development of a 'bold vision' shared by key staff from each organisation, and mutual willingness to engage in lengthy negotiations to cement the proposed relationship
- Goodwill and positive working relationships established through a student placement program in South Africa, initiated in 2008
- Availability of external donor funding

To initiate concrete research projects, a conference was convened in 2010, bringing Oxfam and Monash staff together to identify critical research questions, map out potential projects, and discuss ethical frameworks for engagement in research. The result was the instigation of our three major research projects:

- Community-driven accountability in Cambodia
- Gendered impacts of climate change in Bangladesh
- Accountability in the South African health sector reform process

After several years of fieldwork, these three research projects will be drawing to a close in 2014. This case study will therefore discuss the OMP's lessons and experiences of collaborative research with reference to these three projects.

2. OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE

At the time of the OMP's establishment, broad agreement existed within both organisations as to the underlying rationale for working in partnership; namely, that the respective strengths of each organisation could, if brought together, serve to enhance development effectiveness. With particular regard to research, it was expected that academic staff would benefit from Oxfam's local relationships, knowledge and access to communities, while Oxfam staff were expected to benefit from the additional research capacity, expertise and methodological rigor of Monash academic staff. It was also hoped that collaborative research would enable a stronger and more direct connection between research, programming and development policy, and a broader sharing of findings for the benefit of the development sector.

These mutual points of interest, and the perceived benefits for each organisation, were crucial prerequisites for the relationship's development, and the notion of complementarity has accordingly remained an essential guiding principle for the OMP's work. Indeed, ensuring that the OMP's work provides benefits to both organisations remains the central goal of all strategic and programmatic decisions made by the OMP today, and this has informed ongoing shifts in the Partnership's immediate priorities and objectives, in response to changing strategies, structures and imperatives at both Oxfam and Monash. The OMP remains equally accountable to its external donor, which limits reorientations of the Partnership's focus and scope.

3. RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE

The research mandate of the OMP has been to fund and facilitate a number of 'action research' projects, with a thematic focus on gender equality, accountability and climate change adaptation. To this end, the Partnership has funded the three aforementioned projects, as well as a project on empowering community voices, and a project on rural women's livelihoods in Sri Lanka.

A particularly distinctive feature of the OMP's research was its commitment to an action research methodology.[1] The intent of this commitment was to ensure that research contributed logically and directly to Oxfam's programming work, as well as providing an innovative example of the role that collaborative research might play in enhancing community empowerment processes.

While action research initially seemed best placed to produce the direct and tangible impacts required by Oxfam, it is also a highly demanding and relatively uncommon research methodology in the development field, and many of the OMP's key challenges have therefore related to the unique difficulties of conducting action research in practice. Some of these challenges are discussed below, and include the length of time taken to generate results, differing NGO and academic understandings of an action research methodology in practice, and conflicting demands on NGO and academic staff regarding the desired end outputs of research.

The planning, implementation and dissemination processes for OMP research projects, including the dominant contributions of each organisation, are outlined in Table 1. However, it is also important to note that these roles have sometimes been blurred, with staff from each organisation often able to contribute both theoretical and practical insights into the research process, and with teams typically pursuing a highly collaborative approach throughout all stages of the project.

---

[1] This method sees research as a process of working closely with communities to identify the challenges that they are experiencing, develop and implement strategies to address these challenges, and observe and report on the outcomes. Ideally, lessons learnt are then incorporated into a renewed strategy, which is continuously observed, documented and improved upon.

Table 1: Organisational contributions

Process	Oxfam contribution	Monash contribution	OMP management
Planning	Joint identification of research question Identification and preliminary engagement of target communities Joint preparation of research proposal	Joint identification of research question Design of research methodology Joint preparation of research proposal Ethics approval	Facilitating project team formation Assessing research proposal and drawing up project funding contract and terms of reference
Implementation	Facilitating entry to fieldwork with communities and other local partners Joint data collection Jointly identifying key lessons	Joint data collection Data analysis Jointly identifying key lessons	Disbursing funds Routine progress reviews and sharing progress with key stakeholders
Dissemination	Sharing findings with relevant teams at Oxfam and the development community more broadly	Academic publication and conference presentations	Dissemination through newsletters, website and the hosting of knowledge-sharing events

4. RESEARCH OUTCOMES AND UPTAKE

While the final reports for the OMP's three major research projects are still being concluded, there have been a number of key outcomes and impacts that can be identified for each research project.

Cambodia: Steering multi-level accountability systems from the ground up in Cambodia

- Identified and produced learning notes on concrete strategies for NGOs to assist communities in holding external actors to account for decisions that affect their livelihoods (with a specific focus on accountability in the context of land grabs)
- Increased community awareness of accountability mechanisms and processes, through exploring these mechanisms at community meetings and feedback sessions
- Strengthened the capacity of local NGOs to support community-driven accountability processes, by including and training them during community workshop and feedback sessions, and by working with them to develop the strategies mentioned above
- Identified gaps to be considered and filled in current NGO approaches to accountability in the context of large scale infrastructure development
- Produced evidence to better inform advocacy on land grabs and community relocation, which is now being used by advocacy and campaigning teams at Oxfam

The Oxfam-Monash Partnership

Bangladesh: Gendered impacts of climate variability, particularly in relation to slow-onset change and climate events in Bangladesh

- Generated new evidence regarding the particular impacts of climate change on gender relations and gender inequality in Bangladesh
- Produced learning notes for Oxfam staff to inform advocacy, policy and programming around gender and climate change in Bangladesh; some of these learning papers are contributing to the development of Oxfam's Climate Change Learning Framework
- Identified and reported on gaps in current NGO approaches to promoting women's health, safety and wellbeing in the context of climate change

South Africa: Developing a People's Policy for Health in South Africa

- Enabled community participation in the drafting and implementation of the National Health Insurance (NHI) reform scheme
- Increased the level of community understanding of the NHI
- Strengthened the capacity of local community-based organisations (CBOs) to deliver accountability programs, by partnering with these organisations and training them in the use of community participation models and techniques
- Developed a clear model for conducting inclusive public consultations, which is being shared with government to improve their democratic accountability processes
- Produced evidence that is currently informing the development of an Essential Services Program for Oxfam South Africa

As these outcome summaries demonstrate, both Oxfam and Monash have benefited from the knowledge and impact generated through the OMP's research projects, and a number of communities and local organisations have also gained skills, knowledge and capacity for self-empowerment through engagement in the research projects. At the same time, the scope and extent of the research's impact has varied across projects, with some teams generating greater direct impact than others. An analysis of the underlying reasons for these varying levels of success highlight a number of instructive lessons regarding NGO–academic research partnerships more broadly.

5. LEARNING AND LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Reflecting on the factors that have varied across the OMP's three research projects, a number of issues present themselves as contributors to the efficacy and ultimate impact of collaborative action research endeavours. Our projects have particularly highlighted the importance of:

- **In-country support structures for the research and its findings**

  Given the OMP's action research approach, the presence of local NGOs/CBOs or an Oxfam country office to support the research, as well as to implement the strategies produced by the research after the project's conclusion, has proved to be an important factor in facilitating the research's direct impact.

- **Clarity of expectations regarding desired outputs**

  The degree to which Oxfam's needs and expectations have been clearly and expressly communicated throughout the research design and implementation process has been an important factor in determining the extent to which research findings have been fed back in to Oxfam's programs, policies

The Oxfam-Monash Partnership

or approach. Furthermore, misunderstandings regarding the desired *format* of the research outputs (short learning notes, briefing papers, detailed reports or otherwise) have arisen in some instances, due to the sometimes conflicting demands for academics to produce publishable academic material, and for NGOs to gain access to concise and practically applicable information. More explicit communication and understanding on this point from the outset may support greater research uptake and impact.

- **Appropriate selection of research question**

  The scope and focus of the original research questions, and the extent to which these can be effectively explored through action research methods, has been a decisive factor in the ultimate outcomes of the OMP's research projects. Given the action research imperative, research questions that focus on how to enhance processes for the benefit of communities (such as enhancing community consultation processes in the South African case) may yield more directly beneficial results for NGO programming through action research methods than questions that seek to gain new understanding of a broader issue (such as the impact of climate change on gender relations).

- **Team dynamics and communication channels**

  While difficult to predict or control for, project team dynamics have had observable impacts on research outcomes across the OMP's research projects. Significant time and effort should therefore be dedicated to the team formation process, as well as to clearly delineating roles, responsibilities and expectations within the team from the outset. A specific recommendation arising from the OMP's experience is to have a dedicated research advisor responsible for facilitating comprehensive initial negotiation between team members, on many of the key points mentioned: the research question and research design, required outputs and work plan for the research team members, intellectual property arrangements, and the drafting of a distinct communication plan for how and where the research learnings will be shared.

Another central and important lesson emerging from the OMP's research work has been that the time required to generate credible academic research outputs can be somewhat incompatible with the shorter term planning, reporting and funding cycles of NGOs, and with the constant NGO imperative to produce tangible impacts and results. This can create challenges in sustaining the institutional relationship throughout the necessarily lengthy fieldwork stage of research, during which time solid outputs are not yet forthcoming, and NGO needs may change. Connected to this issue is the need for ongoing organisational commitment to a research agenda on the NGO side, without which it can be incredibly difficult to justify the use of NGO time and resources on collaborative research projects.

If there is one overriding lesson learnt throughout the OMP experience, however, it is that relationships of this nature take significant time, resourcing and long-term commitment to generate significant and mutually beneficial outcomes. To support this process, key enabling factors include strong personal relationships, clear terms of reference, dedicated human resourcing, good communication, mutual understanding of organisational differences, and the availability of adequate funding.

The Oxfam-Monash Partnership