From Tokenism to Meaningful Partnerships

North-South research partnerships are a critical means of advancing global health research. However, research partners from the Global South have described feeling they were included to fulfill funding requirements, and offered only token roles, saying “we were there to colour the soup.” Despite good intentions, researchers from the Global North often fall into patterns of tokenism.

What follows are key lessons learned from our experiences of and data collected from two elrha-r2hc funded studies: (1) Aid when there is ‘nothing left to offer’: A study of ethics & palliative care during international humanitarian action, and (2) Isolation, quarantine, and research in Ebola management: A comparative study of stakeholder perceptions and experiences. These reflections point to possible strategies to move toward the goal of authentic partnerships during humanitarian health research. It reflects the reality that the overwhelming majority of transnational partnerships are collaborations in which researchers from Global North countries partner with researchers from what are essentially “research site” countries in the Global South.

Partnerships focusing on humanitarian research occur in the context of cultural differences, as well as historic, structural, and resource inequalities between partners from the Global North and South. Histories of colonization, racism, and past negative research experience are the landscape in which we build research partnerships, and complicate attempts to make them fair.

We identified four interconnected themes based on these studies and our experiences of transnational research partnerships: Time & Sustainability, Communication & Transparency, Power & Ownership, and Capacity Engagement. Each of these themes involves pitfalls that can pull research teams back into patterns of tokenism while at the same time offering opportunities to build more authentic partnerships. Here we describe pitfalls that can arise during the inception, implementation and dissemination phases of a research partnership, and recommendations to address them. This framework was inspired by the Canadian Coalition for Health Research Partnership Assessment Tool (2009). [https://www.ccghr.ca/resources/partnerships-and-networking/partnership-assessment-tool/]

The way we act in relation to these structures can help to change them, even if the change is slow and incremental. A single project or partnership will only have the ability to make small changes, and to act on one or a few sets of structures, but that can contribute to change over time. It is important to consider not only how we do research, but what the goals of research are, who gets invited, which roles partners play, and what outputs are considered valuable.

Created by ‘The Humanitarian Health Ethics Research Group’

Graphic Design and Template by Isis A Harvey
Harvey.Isis@yahoo.com

For more information visit: www.humanitarianhealthethics.net
Inception
- All partners should be involved from the beginning in setting the research agenda, establishing research questions, and selecting priorities where possible
- Authentic relationships take time to establish, but time pressures during the application process may undermine best intentions

Implementation
- Institutions in the Global North may not recognize the impact of fluctuating currency exchange rates on staff salaries
- Consider how research funding could be used to address unequal access to institutional supports (eg. academic libraries & data repositories)
- International researchers often make significant impositions on local researchers’ time, yet the project and related funding may be short-term

Dissemination
- The dissemination plan should be developed early on and reflect priorities articulated by all team members
- Efforts should be made to budget time and resources for the development of outputs that meet cultural/disciplinary norms of both partners in the Global North and South, even if that necessitates additional outputs

Cultural Differences and Global Inequality
Partners in the Global North often have greater influence over the research agenda and direction of projects because they often control funds that are then administered to partners in the Global South.

Capacity Engagement
- Teams should recognize and engage the high level of research capacity that exists in the Global South. Researchers there are experts on the local context with important knowledge to share
- Research partnerships may mirror historic colonial relationships in which communities in the Global South are perceived to be lacking skills and expertise; while resources, including data, biological samples and knowledge are exported

Dissemination
- Visa restrictions can limit the ability of researchers from the Global South to travel to events in the Global North. Seeking out events in the Global South provides more equitable access to dissemination opportunities.
- Plans for data and sample management should facilitate partners in the Global South to control materials and data.

Communication & Transparency
- It is important to openly discuss the likelihood of the project receiving funding as well as what will happen to the partnership if funding is not received
- Clarify how aspirations of ethical partnership are envisioned by team members and document these in an memorandum of understanding or terms of reference
- Transnational team meetings may be complicated by time differences, holiday schedules, unreliable telecommunications, and language differences. It is important to plan so that the burden of adapting to these differences does not fall disproportionately on partners in the Global South

Dissemination
- Plan for the fact that long distance communication may be difficult. Arrange for in-person meetings to discuss dissemination plans whenever possible
- Discuss authorship, strategies to include limited English speakers in manuscript preparation, data ownership, and stewardship of biological samples early and transparently

Global funding structures create power differentials within research teams which make it riskier and more fraught for partners from the Global South to express concerns or offer feedback.

Time & Sustainability
- These time pressures may be exacerbated in the context of research in humanitarian emergencies
- Efforts to include international partners as authors may be complicated by short time lines and delays in communication
- Teams should anticipate that research ethics board approvals and other project milestones may be delayed by infrastructure and capacity limitations

Dissemination
- Efforts should be made to budget time and resources for the development of outputs that meet cultural/disciplinary norms of both partners in the Global North and South, even if that necessitates additional outputs

Effective partnerships anticipate and plan for delays caused by infrastructure issues and complications of daily life in regions with chronically underfunded health systems, transportation, and telecommunications.