Notes from the BISA NGO Working Group Workshop, Portsmouth, UK
9 October 2013

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Theme of the Workshop: NGO Legitimacy and Accountability

Summary
The inaugural workshop of the Bisa NGO working group was held October 9 2013 in Portsmouth. The aim of the workshop was to bring academics and practitioners together to identify gaps in research and facilitate networking for future collaboration, and it was a great success.

There were five sessions in total. Each session identified particular aspect of research collaboration: gaps in research, synergies between research interests, practitioners' perspectives on collaboration, how to build a strong research community, and last but not least how to fund all these inspiring ideas.

The emphasis was on practitioners and their experiences working with academics and on NGO collaborative research projects in general. We like to thank them especially for their contributions, as their contribution was invaluable to the workshop.

The main outcome of the workshop is twofold. Firstly, we created an NGO focused platform for practitioners and academics to communicate. We intend to follow up on this with future workshops and fruitful debates. Secondly, the workshop identified a communication and dissemination gap between academics and practitioners when it comes to NGO research. Hopefully we can take steps to address this in future workshops and projects, and generate a deeper debate on how to bridge this gap.

Session One: NGO Legitimacy and Accountability: what are the gaps in research?

Objective of the session: to share general and specific thoughts about research gaps in the form of a debate.

Questions: how do we measure legitimacy and accountability? What are the research concerns of practitioners and what are the research concerns of academics? What gaps can we identify? Is it possible to bridge these gaps?

Presentation: by Christina Laybourn, One World Trust (OWT)

The opening presentation introduced the OWT and areas which it could expand in its research. OWT is a small independent research charity that focuses on measurable indicators for accountability in global governance. It has developed a sizeable database of NGO self-regulatory initiatives worldwide. Their website provides a searchable interactive map of NGOs' codes of conduct that can be searched by type of indicator, themes and countries. The issues raised were of the effectiveness of self-regulatory initiatives. Christina emphasised that in order to measure NGO accountability we need a better understanding, and analysis, of how these initiatives work as a measurement tool.

Debate: There was a lively debate on this topic.

Alex Jacobs flagged up that there is a gap in academic research here on the reliability of the tools used to manage the quality of programmes. We need stronger level of internal accountability before we can talk about external accountability. There is no analysis of trends in NGO accountability initiatives to give an overview and help practitioners to learn from the successes and failures in the implementation of accountability frameworks. There is also a problem when NGOs use consultancy firms for measurement and evaluation purposes as such firms often have very limited knowledge of development practices. This can, and does, cause problems for NGOs in terms of accountability.

Sinead Walsh pointed out that there is little theoretical knowledge in the literature on NGO accountability and a lack of microanalysis within NGOs. However, there is plenty of literature identifying the problems which gives the impression that there's a lot of work on accountability.

Peter Willetts pushed the debate further and asked why we are asking these questions in the first place? Has the managerial terminology taken over the real issues? Is the 'customer services' approach the best way forward? This again raised the issue of whom NGOs are accountable to and stimulated a debate on why NGOs are 'obsessed' with measuring quality performance.

The debate then focused on the risks involved when research becomes disassociated with practice and that there is a genuine need for practitioners and academics to work together to avoid these risks. Academics need to understand the reality of NGOs when it comes to measuring accountability and practitioners need to understand what good performance would look like and what steps they need to take in order to achieve that. This led to discussion about the issue of trust and legitimacy in the context of heavy politicisation (Vincent Keating). Another issue raised was the pressure of funding and how chasing after money can actually hinder the quality of output for both academics and practitioners.

Outcome: There is considerable work to be done on how academics and practitioners communicate. This is especially true for how to digest academic research and make it useful for practitioners but also about how practitioners can communicate their field knowledge to feed into research objectives. This seems to be a major gap. Given that there is considerable history on the use of accountability standards in NGOs there is a need for research that takes the long-view and provides an overview of trends, of what has/hasn't worked, for NGOs in the past. This is something practitioners have little time to reflect on. Such research would help NGOs in designing and applying future accountability criteria, as well as clarify how best to approach the issue of accountability in general in their organisations.

Session Two: What are the synergies between the research interests of participants?

Working group session.

Objective: To explore possible research collaboration based on the previous session and the theme of the workshop.

The participants were divided into discussion groups. The groups shared details of their current and planned research projects with others in their group to try and find similar interests and explore the potential for research collaboration. The groups were based on participants' area of expertise and interests.

Questions for group discussion: How do we build a strong research community around issues of NGO Legitimacy and Accountability: What data can we share? What funding bids do we hope to submit? What research initiatives and events are on the horizon?

Session Three: Practitioners' perspectives on research collaboration

Objective of the session: to explorethe successes and pitfalls of research collaboration in order to avoid potential problems and overcome hurdles in their future collaboration projects. Participants are to share their thoughts on problematic issues in research collaboration.

Questions: what are our common/differing motivations in research? (e.g. career structure, organisational imperatives). What are the obstacles to fruitful partnership, and how might they be overcome? What research outputs are pursued by each party? How can NGOs secure access to research? What outlets are there for NGOs to publish?

Questions for practitioners: What are their experiences of working with academics? What do they look for when seeking research collaboration with academics? What types of collaborative research are they interested in pursuing in future?

Presentation: by Rachel Hayman, INTRAC.

Rachel's presentation focused on experiences from a recent collaborative project, Cracking Collaboration, and the potentials and pitfalls of collaboration projects in general.

Potentials: increasing attention is being paid to the idea of research collaboration and co-production between different partners. The idea has caught the attention of research councils and funders, academic institutions and practitioners where the appeal is to demonstrate impact. Co-production is considered good for research and practice in terms of real impact, quality, learning and reflection (the last two are often cut in NGO budgets). There is space for research in international development that currently doesn't interact with practitioners.

Pitfalls: There are several challenges to consider:

- A 'tick-box exercise' collaboration versus deep collaboration
- Differences in world views and objectives, this needs clarity at onset
- Institutional barriers, senior buy-in, timeframe, different priorities, career structures
- Unexpected results and impacts
- Creating partnerships where none exist – the issue of trust in relationships

The pressing issue is to get the idea of collaboration noted, to get the message across to heads of research councils and make sure it's on their agenda.

Practicalities in addressing these issues:

- Building trust as a basis of partnership
- What roles should academics and practitioners play in collaboration? This is not simple
- Be clear on the purpose of the collaboration
- Clarify ethics, accountability, responsibility and expectations
- Think carefully about time frames and obstacles
- Make collaboration useful, accessible and relevant for all involved
- Find the time to develop partnership

<u>Debate</u>: This was also a lively and dynamic debate. The debate focused on time frames, communication, information dissemination within NGOs and between partners, and the language of the research collaboration.

Antonella Mancini discussed the problem of timeframes and the challenges involved. She used a recent report on a five-year research project with Comic Relief on lessons learned. Time frames with academics clashed and there were misunderstandings about the research purpose and objectives. Field staff turnover is a major challenge. Alex Jacobs discussed a successful collaborative research project between Plan International and Yale University in Peru (from extreme poverty).

Sinead Walsh mentioned how NGO research is influencing policy in Sierra Leone. Problems arose because the field-staff were so overburdened and lack of communication between the head office and the field level (a broader issue in NGO accountability research). She also pointed out that problems can arise in research collaboration between NGOs and academics regarding minor logistical things, things that are often overlooked when collaboration is being planned. This can include things such as accommodating researchers and managing transportation, these can take enormous resources (time and money), and be a real barrier to collaboration, in particular for NGOs as there is a lack of incentive for them to direct their resources for these purposes. Communication and dissemination are key issues in collaborative projects.

Sean Conlin talked about his experience working with the Department for International Development (DfID). There was the issue of different contexts, i.e. the context of DfID and the context of the NGO, which raises concerns about the managerial aspects and pressure of output (i.e. focusing on accountability to donors). There is also concern about the analytical frameworks of academic research that are often incomprehensible to practitioners and there is little attempt made on behalf of academics to make their work accessible and useful to practitioners. Practitioners are often expected to learn the jargon of academic research. (This has incidentally been a topic at several workshops and conferences recently). On the upside there are also exemplary collaborative research projects (a dam project in Sri Lanka where there was a policy response to a collateral research project problem). What seems important is the institutional link. What is the timeframe for expecting impact? Is it reasonable to expect all research projects to have impact?

<u>Outcome</u>: Collaboration in NGO research is essential. There is a need to improve the communication of practitioners' views and academic approaches to research. There is a need to clarify the role of institutions in research collaboration. This calls for a reflective mode on the research process and the obstacles and objectives of research collaboration. There is a need for greater precision in indices that measure accountability (Alice Obrecht). There is also a need to identify outlets for practitioners to publish/communicate/disseminate their findings to the academic community.

Session Four: Building a strong research community around issues of NGO Legitimacy and Accountability

<u>Objective of the session</u>: to foster a better understanding of what it takes to build a strong research partnership.

<u>Questions</u>: What are the difficulties in enabling academics and practitioners to come together? How can partnerships be formed? How can partnerships be effective?

<u>Presentation:</u> by Francis Hill (via Skype), ELHRA
Francis Hill gave an in-depth presentation of how to establish collaborative research projects focusing on how to find the right partners and making sure the objectives of all parties involved are clearly understood.

Frances focussed on two ELHRA projects; the R2HC and the HIF (see slides for details).

- There needs to be a safe space to develop partnerships
- ELHRA facilitates partnership matching. This depends on forms filled out by NGOs and academics and relies on people providing specific details for effective match.

- Its platform is mainly in the UK but it is seeking to open up internationally
- Partnership brokering workshops – designed to take partnership groups with specific ideas to the next level
- http://www.elrha.org/effective-partnerships-guide

Positions and underlying interests to consider when forming a partnership:

- Interest-based negotiation
- Resource map in order to establish a balance of power
- Different levels of expectations
- Poor communications
- Negative dynamic
- The one who initiates the partnership tends to have an effect on the balance of power
- Are partnerships always voluntary? Does this require a different approach?

Outcome: Any partnership needs to be greater than the sum of its whole. We need to balance the individual gains of a partnership with the objectives of the partnership as a whole. Differences are not necessarily difficulties. Three core principles for partnerships: Equity (leads to respect); Transparency (leads to trust); Mutual benefit (ensures engagement). We also need to acknowledge the importance or significance of serendipity and individual chemistry in the 'partnership cycle'.

Session Five: Funding

Objective of the session: Identify funding opportunities for NGO-related research. Based on the sessions above we want participants to have a clearer idea of where to look for funds and what to look for in research bids when designing funding strategies.

Presentation: by Colin Waring, Research Grants Officer at Portsmouth University

The following funds were discussed in detail:

- Economic and social research council ESRC
- Arts and humanities research council AHRC
- CASE schemes offered by research councils
- Cross council programmes
- EU Horizon 2020
- British Academy

Closing Statement

We like to thank you all for your participation and insightful contributions. There was great variety in the debates, which helped raise awareness about how to approach research on NGOs accountability and legitimacy; the problems and the solutions. We were especially happy that so many practitioners were able to attend and it was great to hear so many ideas about how to take NGO research collaboration forward. Special thanks also to the students who helped out on the day.

The theme of the next workshop will be announced through our mailing list and call for papers will be out in June 2014. Hopefully we'll see you all at the next workshop. In the meantime we'll be submitting a panel for NGOs for BISA's annual conference in Dublin (http://bisa.ac.uk/). We will circulate an email about the panel as soon as we can.