

# HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH LEARNING SERIES: EQUITABLE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

## EVENT DETAILS

**On the 8th of July, DSAI's Humanitarian Action Study Group held the second webinar in its Humanitarian Research Learning Series.**

The series aims to support and facilitate high-quality research, exchange of ideas, relationship-building and networking among the academic and practitioner community working on humanitarian action in Ireland.

We are grateful to the speakers for their contributions:

- **Martin Ewi**, Regional Coordinator - Southern Africa, Complex Threats in Africa Programme, Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa);
- **Dr Akinola Olojo**, Senior Researcher, Complex Threats in Africa Programme, Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa);
- **Molly Gilmour**, PhD Researcher, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow; and
- **Dr Brendan Ciarán Browne**, Assistant Professor of Conflict Resolution & Reconciliation (Belfast), Trinity College Dublin.

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## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

This discussion brought together researchers from across three institutions engaged in different forms of research partnerships in humanitarian contexts, along with participants from across humanitarian research and practice. It sought to address the following questions:

- What conditions can lead to equitable and fair research partnerships?
- What are the challenges or obstacles to building lasting and sustainable collaborations? And
- What practical steps and strategies can researchers take for overcoming these?

## EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS

Overall, partnering in research can bring **invaluable expertise, knowledge and deeper understanding**. Partnership can make research more cost-effective, enhance quality, and help to ensure appropriate and relevant research, as Martin Ewi noted. Dr Akinola Olojo highlighted how partnerships can also create greater opportunities for impact, as local partners can have different access, influence and networks for dissemination locally and nationally.

Research partnerships are **extremely diverse**. As Mr Ewi noted, partnerships are not monolithic and this means that no one approach will be universally applicable. In any partnership, researchers should begin by asking – *why partner, what will it bring?* The right approach will vary by context, but transparency and openness about the nature of the collaboration, and expectations of all parties, are key at the outset.

The most important condition, as Mr Ewi highlighted, is that partnership is **mutually beneficial**: all partners should feel they benefit from the exchange. To ensure equitability, ownership of the project has to be shared, and responsibilities of partners clearly delineated.

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## CHALLENGES & OBSTACLES TO COLLABORATION

Panellists highlighted several challenges that undermine equitable, effective research partnerships.

One such challenge is **attitudinal**. Dr Olojo emphasized that an obstacle particularly to researchers based outside Africa, is the common assumption that respondents in communities are naive, and therefore do not have a clear idea of the problem under inquiry by researchers. In fact, they often have a very good understanding of what it takes to solve a problem, but systemic challenges in their communities or states curtail their agency. It is therefore vital for researchers who approach partners and community members to not see them solely as a source of data.

Molly Gilmour likewise drew attention to parallels between research and humanitarian practices that can create and sustain **two-tier systems of power** that artificially distinguish between national and international staff, for example, as further evidence of systems that are harmful to equitable and just collaborations.

**Political circumstances** create a second set of obstacles. Mr Ewi noted that across different contexts in Africa, governments can be extremely hostile to researchers and NGOs, making research partnerships extremely important but often challenging. Similarly, Dr Brendan Ciarán Browne drew on his experience of long-term collaboration with research partners in Palestine to highlight challenges many actors in that context are facing, including the threat of physical attack, displacement, and targeting of buildings. The result is that many researchers operate in a permanent state of exceptionalism, which can make collaboration in these contexts extremely challenging.

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**Researchers should endeavour to give more agency not just to local communities, but also to local consultants who they engage with in the course of their research projects – reinforcing their voices, especially as individuals from those communities [...]**

**There are instances where local communities or consultants are engaged in research, but they never get the kind of recognition they deserve as part of collaborative efforts.**

Dr Akinola Olojo

**Financial considerations** create a third set of obstacles. Dr Browne noted that many research organisations are operating at a time of huge financial pressure, and all partners need to be sensitive to this. Running costs, which are fundamental to the continued operation of many research organisations, are sometimes not permissible within budgets, and even where they are, researchers may fail to (or be reluctant to) include these in budgets. Several panellists spoke about how this can generate distrust and a perception that external partners are mobilizing large financial resources at their expense. Panellists also highlighted the issue of prioritisation, whereby some partners may not consider the project as a priority. This often affects the timelines for the delivery of key project outputs. Transparency and openness about finances and time investments, and how and why resources are allocated across partners, is critical to addressing this.

Lastly, **academic institutional practices** can create a fourth set of obstacles. Pressure by funding institutions to prioritise outputs over long-term, sustainable collaboration may generate incentives to produce work with limited investment in relationship-building. The timelines associated with projects play a major role in this. Dr Browne shared reflections from his collaboration with Al Quds University over several years, and the incremental steps involved in creating exchange opportunities, formalizing collaboration and undertaking larger research projects. Mr Ewi likewise shared examples of repeated efforts to build a research partnership for a project in a highly insecure context, and the significant investment in time entailed in identifying partners and building relationships. This investment is not always consistent with research funding timelines.

Institutionalised practices also extend to issues of **recognition and credit for collaborators**. Dr Olojo highlighted the usefulness of co-authoring with partner researchers in the field. This can enhance partnerships compared to engagements where partner researchers are limited to the roles of research assistants or data consultants.

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## RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

In addition to these long-standing issues, the current global health crisis creates new challenges for researchers and practitioners alike.

Ms Gilmour shared her experience as a PhD researcher whose plans for fieldwork in Lebanon were interrupted by COVID-19, and the questions this raised for her in relation to the sustainability and nature of her partnerships with humanitarian organisations there. Particularly, Ms Gilmour prompted participants to reflect on **the potential of research and aid to create unequal power imbalances**, and how the crisis is an opportunity to rethink these, and interrogate why, for example, progress on localisation, has been so slow.

Ms Gilmour also raised the issue of **methods training** for doctoral students and early career researchers, traditional approaches to which may be inadequate to respond to the evolving situation. The current crisis may provide an opportunity and impetus to revisit methods training and introduce new ways of analysing the social world through remote methods and engagement with existing sources.

Panellists also spoke about **opportunities and risks associated with technological solutions**. While digital platforms can connect partners during periods of limited mobility, Dr Olojo highlighted that these may not be sustainable in the long-run, owing to the cost and inaccessibility of data and platforms for many. Ms Gilmour highlighted this as a particular issue in the context of humanitarian research, where we work in spaces of stark inequalities, many of which are exacerbated by the pandemic. Broader ethical, safety and rights implications are also significant: Dr Olojo and Dr Browne both drew attention to the risks of online communication when discussing sensitive issues related to insecurity and human rights. As researchers grapple with the current context, far more attention is needed on issues of secure data sharing and storage.

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## RESOURCES

Larissa Fast, [Researching Local Humanitarian Action through Partnerships with Local Actors](#), ODI Humanitarian Policy Group (August 2019).

Mia Perry, [A Critical Resource for Ethical International Partnerships](#), (April 2020).

Oscar Abedi Dunia, Maria Eriksson Baaz, David Mwambari, Swati Parashar, Anju Oseema Maria Toppo and James B.M. Vincent, [The Covid-19 Opportunity: Creating More Ethical and Sustainable Research Practices](#) (June 2020).

DSAI Humanitarian Action Study Group, [Humanitarian Research Learning Series - Institutional Funders' Panel Summary](#) (May 2020).

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## STRATEGIES FOR STRONGER PARTNERSHIPS

- **Dedicate time and resources to building relationships.** All panellists spoke to the importance of investing time in building sustainable, long-lasting partnerships. Where researchers have the opportunity to do so, investing time in the location of study and in collaborations over an extended period builds what Dr Olojo referred to as 'mutual confidence' which in turn, affects not only the quality of the partnership, but also the quality of the resulting research. Grants that allow time to build relationships and networks, alongside more flexible approaches by institutional funders can support this.
- **Rethink and restructure extractive and hierarchical modes of knowledge production.** Recognising, challenging and transforming unequal practices is key to building more equitable partnerships. Practical steps include reflecting on ownership of results – how communities actually benefit from research carried out and insights generated; and reshaping unequal practices in authorship – how research collaborators are recognised and credited for their contribution and leadership in authorship, reporting and visibility in project materials and events. Research and methods training for early career researchers should also reflect these principles.
- **Take issues of ethics, accountability and protection seriously.** Research in and on humanitarian crises has always been high-risk and politically sensitive, particularly for local and national partners, but collaborative approaches have not always recognised this. As researchers navigate new circumstances and limited mobility in the global health crisis, much more discussion and careful consideration is required to ensure the safety and protection of collaborators in online spaces, and to minimise the transfer of risk.