Research for health in humanitarian crises

PARTNERSHIPS REVIEW: RESEARCH FOR HEALTH IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

ABOUT ELRHA

We are a global charity that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators, and the private sector.

We have supported more than 200 world-class research studies and innovation projects, championing new ideas and different approaches to evidence what works in humanitarian response. But it's not just about pinpointing what works. We transform that evidence-based knowledge into practical tools and guidance for humanitarian responders to apply in some of the most difficult situations affecting people and communities, so that those affected by crises get the right help when they need it most.

RESEARCH FOR HEALTH IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES (R2HC)

R2HC aims to improve health outcomes for people affected by humanitarian crises by strengthening the evidence base for public health interventions. Our globally recognised research programme focuses on maximising the potential for public health research to bring about positive change and transform the effectiveness of humanitarian response. The work we do through the R2HC helps inform decision making.

Since 2013, we have funded more than 60 research studies across a range of public health fields.

HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FUND (THE HIF)

The HIF aims to improve outcomes for people affected by humanitarian crises by identifying, nurturing and sharing more effective and scalable solutions. The HIF is our globally-recognised programme leading on the development and testing of innovation in the humanitarian system. Established in 2011, it was the first of its kind: an independent, grant-making programme open to the entire humanitarian community.

Through HIF, we fund, support and manage innovation at every stage of the innovation process. Our portfolio of funded projects informs a more detailed understanding of what successful innovation looks like, and what it can achieve for the humanitarian community. This work is leading the global conversation on innovation in humanitarian response.

OUR DONORS

Our work would not be possible without the support from our donors:

Our Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises programme is specifically funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), Wellcome, and the UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).

Our Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) programme is specifically funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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FOREWORD

Jess Camburn, CEO, Elrha

COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP, INCLUDING WITH PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CRISIS, IMPROVES THE QUALITY, IMPACT AND UPTAKE OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION[1]

We strive to improve humanitarian outcomes through partnership, research and innovation. From our very beginnings we have worked to facilitate, champion and support partnerships between humanitarian actors, academia and the private sector. During the last decade, we have learnt a lot about what works from our own practice, from the experience of our partners and those we fund and from the work of others seeking to improve partnership approaches more broadly in humanitarian research and innovation.

Now in our tenth year, the time is right to review our progress on partnerships, to listen to the experiences of our stakeholder community and learn more about the actions and approaches that enable partnerships to thrive.

Through external reviews carried out for both the Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) and Humanitarian Innovation Fund (the HIF), the experiences of teams funded through our two programmes are examined and positioned within the wider discourse on research and innovation partnerships. Because the approaches of research and innovation are often quite distinct, we have presented the specific findings from each of our programmes in individual reports which are intended to provide guidance to our research and innovation communities. The collective findings and the feedback from those we fund are also helping us to deepen our understanding across all our work, and are improving our ability to respond to the challenges and opportunities for building effective and equitable partnerships in humanitarian settings.

As a funder, supporting and investing in partnerships for humanitarian research and innovation is a logical approach. Firstly, enabling research and innovation partnerships with actors directly involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance dramatically increases the likelihood that their work will be relevant to, and taken up by policy makers and practitioners.

Secondly, when managed carefully, these partnerships allow the humanitarian community to benefit from the skills and expertise of a wider, global community and enable non-humanitarian actors to work in humanitarian settings in a responsible and ethical way. We are pleased that the feedback from our stakeholders and the broader research undertaken through our reviews endorses this approach.

However, despite a clear rationale on the value of equitable partnerships, there are many challenges that make this difficult to achieve in the humanitarian sector. The practical and logistical challenges of working in insecure environments, with short-time frames, high-turnover of personnel and limited resources pose significant barriers. But beyond these, we must also recognise the particular dynamics of culture and power at play in the humanitarian system, which can present perhaps the most critical obstacles to equity within a partnership.

The reviews highlight that many of the local partners to large INGOs and northern-based academic institutions both feel and experience a lack of respect in the role they can play within humanitarian research and innovation partnerships. This needs to change. Focusing on the health of the partnerships behind research studies and innovation projects, can contribute to more effective and efficient implementation. Partnership strengthening activities are frequently overlooked in the enthusiasm to just 'get on with the work', with few donors attaching significant importance to these aspects.

Strong and equitable partnerships do not materialise without consciousness and intent. Time and resources are needed to build, manage, maintain and nurture partnerships and funders, including ourselves, need to recognise this in grant-making strategies. Drawing together our learning from the last ten years, we have set out our updated principles of partnership which we strongly believe enable healthy and equitable research and innovation partnerships to be achieved, and are committed to upholding.

[1] See our Elrha Guiding Principles, visit https://www.elrha.org/about-us/

Across all our work, we will continue to assess how we support those we fund to achieve these principles by providing the time, space and, critically, the resources within our grant-making and management processes, to allow partners to engage on an equitable basis from the very start of a partnership. We will continuously review our grant-making and reporting processes to identify further actions we can take to support a better balance of power within the work that we fund.

We believe that collaboration and partnership improves the quality, impact and uptake of research and innovation. The partnerships we enter into, or support through the work we fund, may be one small part of the collective effort to improve the way humanitarian response is designed, developed and delivered, but is an essential ingredient.

That's why we champion, evidence, and advocate for the power of partnerships to deliver better outcomes for people and communities caught up in humanitarian crises. But we can't pursue this alone. If we all focused our efforts on four simple rules of engagement as outlined here, our principles of partnership, imagine the transformation that could happen: the new collaborations that could flourish and thrive, the previously unheard voices that could surface, and the knowledge and skills that could be shared on a global scale.

ELRHA'S PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIP

- Equity – Every partnership should embed a culture of mutual respect and achieve a balance of power and decision-making. Partners should take proactive steps to overcome barriers to equity between parties.
- Transparency – Partnerships should be formed on a basis of openness and trust. Transparency between partners helps build trust and enables partners to work effectively when things go well, and importantly, when things go less well.
- Mutual benefit – For partnerships to thrive, all partners must feel the value of working together. Agreeing benefits for partners from the start means partnerships are more likely to stay on track and last longer.
- Responsibility – Focusing on the roles and responsibilities of partners towards each other as well as towards their shared work and stakeholders, helps build a culture of ethical behaviour and accountability that supports equity in a partnership.

INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian crises have continued unabated in recent years. In 2016, the number of people in need of international humanitarian assistance reached over 164 million (Elrha 2017). There has been increased interest in research and innovation to better mitigate the impact of humanitarian crises by generating evidence of what works in humanitarian settings and identifying innovative solutions to humanitarian challenges. The relationship between research and innovation can be conceived in different ways, but they are often seen as overlapping because research informs innovation and overall humanitarian response; but also because much of what is done in innovation must be supported by research. Elrha works in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators and the private sector to tackle humanitarian challenges through research and innovation with two major programmes: Research for Health in Humanitarian Crisis (R2HC) and the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF).

'Localisation' has become one of the most widely discussed topics in the humanitarian sector since the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 when humanitarian actors led a call for the international humanitarian system to commit to including 'local' actors in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action (ICVA 2018). The process of localisation has been variously understood as including provision of more direct funding to existing national and local actors, empowerment of people affected by crises as humanitarian actors, increased decision-making power at operational levels, better connection of international action to national and local realities and investment in strengthening and sustaining the institutional capacities of local and national responders (ICVA 2018). The positioning of communities and people affected by crisis at the centre of humanitarian action is reinforced by the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), which describes the essential elements of principled, accountable and high-quality humanitarian aid.

Humanitarian studies scholars also came together at the 2016 WHS to discuss how ethical humanitarian studies can contribute to humanitarian response, resulting in the articulation of six commitments (IHSA 2016). These outline an ambition to make humanitarian research more inclusive and relevant, by involving communities affected by crises and practitioners in the design and implementation of research, collaborating with research institutions in crisis-affected areas, and making research knowledge accessible beyond traditional conferences and publications. These ideas are picked up in the Australian Red Cross's 2017 publication 'Localising the Research Process' (ARC 2017) in which decentralised research is positioned as critical for contextually appropriate processes and outcomes.

Betts and Bloom (2013) describe two worlds of humanitarian innovation, one dominated by those at the top developing humanitarian solutions, the other focused on fostering local innovation; and they argue that these two worlds struggle to meet. They also observe how the humanitarian market operates differently from other markets because the sector is relatively closed and dominated by preferred suppliers (large humanitarian actors) with innovation users having little or no purchasing power or choice about the innovations they receive (Betts and Bloom 2014). Since the commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, many actors are pushing for change. The speed of change is slow, but there is increased attention on how to involve communities affected by crises in humanitarian innovation processes, as co-creators rather than just as end-users.

Three years on, despite the stated commitments of donors to provide more direct funding to national and local actors, a considerable majority of humanitarian research and innovation funding from the UK, the US and Australia still goes to universities in those same countries. In practice, this bias towards organisations and institutions in the Global North is mirrored in both Elrha's R2HC and HIF programmes. For R2HC, the majority of grants to date have been awarded to northern universities and INGOs – and this is an area which Elrha is keen to address. Whilst the R2HC annual call for research proposals is framed in a broad enough way that it can accommodate good research ideas, there is recognition that those based in the Global South have a significant contribution to make in terms of setting the research agenda but have yet to be fully included:

> "Ensuring that there is participation from institutions in the Global South is really important ... I think very often the more interesting and more important scientific questions come from the field, and come from groups in the south."
>
> (UK academic respondent)

For the HIF, the majority of grants to date have also been awarded to actors from the Global North, often large INGOs or academic institutions, with only a small number of grants having a local or national actor as project lead. Both programmes are making strategic and deliberate efforts to address this imbalance.

The language of fairness and equity in partnerships has evolved differently for humanitarian research and innovation. For development research, this language came to the fore with the launch of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and its explicit focus on fair and equitable research partnerships. The literature on humanitarian research partnerships, however, is scant. The wider literature on development research partnerships, and the practical guidance available to support those entering into research partnerships, are relevant for humanitarian research partnerships given commonalities around the research process and the main actors involved – whether academics or practitioners. Partnerships are recognised as important within the literature on humanitarian innovation, but the literature has not to date explored the internal dynamics of partnership.

Given the maturity of the R2HC and HIF portfolios, and of the cumulative experience of grantees in partnering for research or innovation, Elrha commissioned a review of partnerships in each of the programmes. The purpose of these reviews was to gain a nuanced understanding of opportunities for and challenges to fair, equitable and effective partnership working in academic–humanitarian research and innovation collaborations[2]. The basic methodology and approach to the reviews was the same, comprising a review of the literature (as well as core documentation from Elrha), and key informant interviews with grantees and a small number of respondents with a strategic relationship to Elrha. However, the two programmes are very different – both in their approach to partnership, and the types of partners whose work they fund – and the review findings reflect this.

Partnering between humanitarian researchers and humanitarian practitioners has been an explicit requirement of R2HC, and R2HC staff have supported and invested in partnership strengthening in various ways. By contrast, partnership has not been so systemically supported within the HIF and partnership support has been more limited, focused on hosting networking events and brokering partnerships with greater attention to partnership within specific funding calls, such as those delivered with the HIF's strategic partner, the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN).

Whilst R2HC grants have been awarded to research teams comprising academics and practitioners generally in universities, NGOs and UN agencies, HIF grants have been awarded to a more diverse set of organisations, because innovation has tended to require involvement of the private sector alongside humanitarian actors. As a result, different types of grantee respondent were consulted during the reviews.

There is already considerable literature on the nuts and bolts of managing research partnerships and consortia. Given the 2016 Grand Bargain commitments to localisation made by donors and humanitarian organisations,[3] the reviewers have put particular emphasis in both reviews on issues of power, participation and voice as key considerations within fair, equitable and effective partnerships. Whilst the role of populations affected by crises in relation to research and innovation partnerships was beyond the scope of the reviews, it emerged as an important and interesting issue for discussion, and is therefore included in the findings.

[2] The review of R2HC was carried out by Kate Bingley and the review of HIF by Kate Newman. They are co-heads of the Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning at Christian Aid: https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/programme-policy-practice/research-evidence-and-learning-rel

[3] The Grand Bargain commitments are summarised on the Agenda for Humanity website: https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861

GLOSSARY

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GCRF	Grand Challenges Research Fund
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IHSA	International Humanitarian Studies Association
(I)NGO	(International) Non-Governmental Organisation
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
PI	Principal Investigator
R2HC	Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises
RCT	Randomised Control Trial
UK	United Kingdom
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit (Istanbul 2016)

REVIEW OF RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS IN ELRHA'S RESEARCH FOR HEALTH IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES PROGRAMME

1. SUMMARY

The Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) programme, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and the Wellcome Trust and managed by Elrha, aims to improve health outcomes by strengthening the evidence base for public health interventions in humanitarian crises.

Elrha commissioned this review of R2HC research partnerships to document a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges to effective partnership working in academic–humanitarian research collaborations. The methodology comprised a review of the partnerships literature and Elrha documentation, and key informant interviews with a purposive sample of fourteen people; twelve were identified from seven research partnerships operating across a range of countries and disciplinary areas. They came from universities in the south, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and NGOs in the global south. Interviews provided insights into the nature and dynamics of research partnerships.

Review findings show that there are many opportunities and challenges associated with effective humanitarian research partnering, and that fair and equitable partnerships do not materialise without consciousness and intent.

Factors found to promote fair, equitable and effective partnerships include establishing a way of working that encourages trust, empathy, honesty, openness and flexibility among partners, with each partner being clear on its own non-negotiables. Functional interpersonal relationships are important, as are the individuals who straddle the worlds of humanitarian response and research. Open discussion of roles and responsibilities in all stages of the research cycle, and creating the space for mutual learning, can help to break down assumptions and ensure knowledge and experience are effectively harnessed. Humanitarian health research commonly involves evaluation of a humanitarian intervention or approach; the buy-in of the intervention implementer is crucial, and it is also important to ensure that timeframes for the research and the intervention align.

Factors found to inhibit fair, equitable and effective humanitarian partnerships operate at three different levels. At an individual level, mindsets can mean a lack of respect for different knowledge and skills, or a reluctance to consider how affected populations might actively participate in the research process. At an institutional level, academics are not necessarily trained to manage projects or partnerships and may not have experience doing so. Northern academic incentives affect authoring and conference participation, and may privilege peer-reviewed journal articles over other more accessible outputs, such as briefings or infographics, that may be more effective in sharing learning. At a systemic level, in the humanitarian ecosystem there is still a strong tendency for northern research funding to go to northern universities.

There is evidence in this review that the quality of relationships and processes affects the quality of research, and concrete examples demonstrate that valuing the knowledge and expertise of in-country partners and local/affected populations in processes such as research design and data analysis can enhance the research by generating better quality data and more relevant findings. The leadership and management style of the grant-holder affects the way in which the partnership operates, for better or for worse, and this relational aspect should be assessed as part of donor granting processes.

Whilst some review respondents felt that they were championing good partnering practice, such as seeking to involve southern practitioners and academic partners in co-production of knowledge, there is more work to be done by all actors in the humanitarian research ecosystem to ensure that such practice becomes the norm. Key recommendations to the humanitarian research sector include several specific considerations for donors and research fund managers to actively incentivise equitable research partnerships, stimulating intellectual leadership and more active involvement of actors in the global south in humanitarian research agenda setting and throughout the research process.

2. BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND APPROACH

The R2HC programme was first conceived with a view to stimulating more health research in humanitarian settings in low and middle-income countries (LMICs). Since its creation in 2013, it has been funded by DFID, NIHR and the Wellcome Trust, and managed by Elrha. R2HC aims to improve health outcomes by strengthening the evidence base for public health interventions in humanitarian crises.

Humanitarian crises, as defined by Elrha for the purpose of the programme (Elrha 2013), include natural disasters, conflicts or complex emergencies in LMICs, either at the national or sub-national levels. In 2013, the R2HC's set of guidelines for research proposals stipulated that they should be concerned with health outcomes in the acute, post-emergency or early recovery phases of a humanitarian crisis – and that proposals focusing on resilience/disaster risk reduction, or on the longer-term recovery and development phase, would also be considered if a clear link was made with health outcomes.

The majority of research grants awarded through R2HC are through annual calls for proposals. Initially, rapid response grants were also available. These enabled pre-approved studies to be conducted, when 'triggered' by a specific event or humanitarian crisis. There have also been two targeted emergency calls.[4] The main research calls involve a two-stage process, with an initial review of expressions of interest and shortlisting, and an offer of seed funding of up to £10,000 for applicants selected to go forward to the full application stage.

Partnership has always been an explicit component of the core grants. R2HC requires that all research teams comprise both academic researchers and humanitarian practitioners, to ensure academic rigour on the one hand, and operational relevance, feasibility and potential for uptake on the other. One third of Principal Investigators (PIs) of R2HC-funded grants are based in UN organisations, governmental bodies or humanitarian NGOs; typically they have an academic background and/or are researchers themselves, and may have affiliations with academic institutions. The other two thirds are based in academic/research institutions. Elrha has invested in strengthening research partnerships through provision of seed funding grants, workshops, brokering and guidance – support which has evolved over time.

To date, Elrha has funded more than 50 studies[5] across a range of public health fields, including communicable and non-communicable diseases, gender-based violence, health services, health systems, injury, mental health and psychosocial support, nutrition, sexual and reproductive health, and WASH. Given the maturity of its portfolio, in February 2019 Elrha commissioned this review of research partnerships under R2HC.

The purpose of the review is to document a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges to fair, equitable and effective partnership working in academic–humanitarian research collaborations, by examining the experiences of R2HC-funded research teams within the wider discourse on research partnerships. In addition, Elrha wanted to:

- identify factors that contribute to and inhibit effective humanitarian research partnerships;
- consider how it might better support and strengthen such partnerships in the future;
- contribute to its work on the value of research and innovation partnerships in humanitarian contexts.

The methodology comprised a review of the research partnerships literature, and key informant interviews with a purposive sample of fourteen people, including two respondents in strategy or governance/advisory roles with Elrha and R2HC, and twelve grantees.

The literature review included a review of Elrha's partnership guidance materials (both published and unpublished), and grantee reports from R2HC (calls 1 to 4 that were awarded from 2014 – 2016). The reviewer used the grantee reports to gain insights into the wider R2HC portfolio, and to support the framing of interview questions.

[4] The 2014 Ebola epidemic response in West Africa, and the 2017 Food and Nutrition Call.
[5] Please note that as of November 2019 Elrha has funded more than 60 studies through R2HC.

3. INSIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE

A literature review was conducted in order to situate research in the humanitarian ecosystem, and to identify themes informing design and analysis of key informant interviews. The primary focus was on literature on partnerships for humanitarian research, and the search was widened out to include development research partnerships. Literature on health research partnerships was not systematically reviewed, but some of the literature identified on research partnerships in humanitarian and development settings does relate to health.

3.1 SITUATING RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITARIAN ECOSYSTEM

"We respond to each new emergency with the same tools we used to manage the last one, never truly knowing whether any of it worked, or what alternative methods might work better." (Levine 2016: 1)

There has been a drive in recent years to generate more reliable evidence from humanitarian settings of what works, where and how. Working as a medical response coordinator at the start of the West Africa Ebola crisis, Levine (2016) found a lack of evidence on acute care and public health interventions in humanitarian emergencies, noting that humanitarian healthcare is based largely on anecdote rather than evidence. Responding to this perceived lack of evidence, Evidence Aid, part of the Cochrane Collective, has worked to highlight gaps in the literature and the highest priorities for disaster research. Elrha has also played a role in identifying gaps and priorities as part of its wider work to bridge the gap between research and practice, and commissioned a Humanitarian Health Evidence Review in 2013, updated in 2015, to provide a frame of reference for R2HC.

There has also been increased attention to research uptake and impact in the humanitarian and development sector. The literature on research impact has shifted away from a simplistic linear concept of knowledge transfer to embrace the complexity of "research ecosystems that encompass knowledge production, communication, access, uptake, adaptation and use" (Fransman and Newman 2019: 3). But barriers to evidence-informed decision-making and practice persist in the field of humanitarian research. For example, academic incentives in the global north still revolve largely around publication in peer-reviewed journals, affecting choices around authoring and conference participation, and the value placed on different kinds of outputs.

Humanitarian research partnerships

The literature on humanitarian research partnerships is scant. It is therefore useful to draw on insights from development research partnerships, given that the basic research process is the same in both settings, and also given common challenges around conducting research in resource-constrained settings. It will be interesting to reflect through the course of this review on what is distinctive about humanitarian research partnerships.

3.2 INSIGHTS FROM THE DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE

Partnering in international development is by no means a new phenomenon, and is an integral part of the organisational identity of some development and humanitarian INGOs. For example, Christian Aid and ActionAid have clearly articulated partnership principles and frameworks, and regularly reflect on their partnering practice (Elbers 2012, Elbers et al. 2015). Whilst some of the knowledge generated by NGOs remains in grey literature, much has also been written in the published literature about the ideal characteristics or principles, as well as practice, associated with north-south NGO partnerships (Elbers 2012, Elbers et al. 2015).

Also relevant is the work of the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA), an international professional body that provides training and support to strengthen international collaborations, and advocates for better partnering practice in all sectors. PBA's partnership model identifies core principles of diversity, equity, openness, mutual benefit and courage (PBA 2016), and has influenced Elrha's own thinking on humanitarian research partnerships.

Aniekwe et al. (2012) state that a renewed interest in research collaboration between NGOs and academics in international development can be attributed to two main drivers: the "evidence-based logic" that frames public policy in the UK, Europe and beyond, and the "demand for demonstrable impact from development interventions." At the same time, they argue academics are under pressure to be able to demonstrate how their research is having an impact upon society, and reflect on motivations for, and institutional and philosophical barriers to NGO–academic collaborations.

Olivier et al. (2016) look at benefits, challenges and successful approaches in NGO–researcher partnerships in global health research, and find that collaborations characterised by trust, transparency, respect, solidarity, and mutuality contribute to the development of successful and sustainable NGO–researcher partnerships. They also refer to a division of labour between academics and NGOs wherein academics typically access funding and design the research, and NGOs do fieldwork and other data collection, with academics having ownership over results.

According to Fransman and Newman (2019: 2) the literature suggests there are "clear benefits to research partnerships between academics and development practitioners." These include instrumental benefits such as greater access to data for academics and to technical expertise and infrastructure for INGOs, but also broader social benefits of partnerships. These might include: a shared commitment to responsive research that balances rigour and relevance, promoting "engaged excellence" (Leach et al. 2016); a shift to working across disciplines , beyond the silos of the academy (e.g. Lang et al. 2012); and a redistribution of global research resources and outputs with implications for the integration of alternative epistemologies, ontologies and ethics into theory and practice (e.g. Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2014; Hall and Tandon 2017). However, the same literature also identifies significant challenges such as divergent priorities, schedules, and capacity; hierarchies of knowledge; and constraints to participation.

3.3 TOOLKITS AND RESOURCES ON RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

In his review of resources and guidance available to help actors enter into research partnerships[6], Walker (2018) identifies an array of materials, many of which provide practical, step-by-step guidance on how to manage project and partnership processes for research implementation and uptake. He identifies Elrha's 'Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships' (2012) as the only guidance resource specific to humanitarian research partnerships. This guide contains a set of practical tools to support effective collaboration between humanitarian and academic organisations, with case studies drawn from real-world examples, and key reflections. Challenges identified as specific to humanitarian research partnerships include the rapid turnover of humanitarian staff; limited experience of some academics in emergency settings; and major changes in operational environments (Elrha 2012: 29).

[6]A consolidated list of these resources is available at Annex 4: https://rethinkingresearchpartnerships.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/fair-and-equitable-partnerships_research-report-public.pdf

Elrha 2012 highlights the potential clash between the institutional cultures of humanitarian practitioners and academics, around pace, priorities, realities, principles of robust research versus 'good enough' research, ethical codes, and incentives (Ibid: 55). Arguably these cultural differences also apply to development practitioners and academics.

On the same theme, the Rethinking Research Partnerships process (RRC 2017) highlighted that academics tend to pursue their own (individual) research agenda and interests, whereas staff in an NGO typically work in line with priorities articulated in organisational strategy. Elrha 2012 also notes that some NGOs have their own research departments, and that in-house researchers can be effective bridges and catalysts for collaboration with academics.

Also on this topic, Fransman's 2019 study explores how UK-based INGOs engage with research, and aims to provide guidance to INGOs developing a research approach within their organisation. She identifies that INGOs engage with research in many forms, and that research governance in INGOs varies considerably. She notes also that INGO researchers differ from academic researchers and come from diverse backgrounds. As well as conventional research skills, other notable 'research literacies' include the ability to broker diverse knowledge communities, provide mentoring support and communicate effectively.

Elrha's 'Effective Partnerships Handbook' (2015) was the basis for effective partnering workshops offered to grantees by Elrha, and designed to assist partnerships in the early stages of the research cycle. Three guiding principles of partnership are stated as equity, transparency and mutual benefit.

The handbook offers a useful set of tools for scoping and building partnerships, with some specific guidance on aspects of research partnerships such as ethical procedures, intellectual property and research uptake, but the guiding principles are not always explicitly reflected in the tools provided.

Walker (2018) notes that in general the resources reviewed do not generate a fundamental appreciation of why equitable partnerships are beneficial, or spotlight the politics and power dynamics around partnerships, though Dodson (2017) explored the role of funders in equitable and effective international development research collaborations. Addressing this gap, Christian Aid's toolkit (RRC 2017) and resource materials (Christian Aid 2018) include an explicit focus on power dynamics and politics of evidence within partnerships.

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) has an explicit focus on fair and equitable research partnerships. In a study commissioned by the GCRF, Newman et al. (2019: 3) argue that "for ODA-funded research to contribute to real-world impact, we need to ground that research in the experience and current practice of development practitioners, and their knowledge and understanding of what impact is needed and how this might be created." The authors identify eight principles for fair and equitable research partnerships for development research: put poverty first; critically engage with context; redress evidence hierarchies; adapt and respond; respect diversity; commit to transparency; invest in the relationship; and keep learning. Reflecting on the third principle, the authors note that whose knowledge is valued, and who participates in the different stages of the research process, are underpinned by expectations about what constitutes 'quality evidence'; and that often there are unspoken hierarchies of evidence at play, which marginalise the knowledge and experiences of southern academics and practitioners, and which, in turn, has implications for research impact.

3.4 INSIGHTS FROM THE HUMANITARIAN LITERATURE

Humanitarian research papers do not systematically include reflection on research process or partnerships. Vega's (2018) analysis of 1,699 humanitarian supply chain publications using case studies, from journals published between 1995 and 2015, notes that "results show … insufficient information about the research process" (2018: 137). It can be assumed that this "insufficient information" includes little or nothing on partnerships.

All of Elrha's R2HC grantees are required to report on their partnering experience, but whilst some provide very considered insights, with reflections on issues such as participation and power dynamics within the partnership, others give scant attention to partnership matters. Typically, reflections focus on practical or business aspects of partnering, many of which are already covered in existing resource materials (e.g. Elrha 2015: 54). These include considerations such as: budget (the importance of funding partners' time, and engaging at different levels of partner organisations – including with the leadership); staffing (and the challenges of staff turnover); communication between partners; roles/responsibilities (clarity and complementarity of roles, and the need to understand capabilities of all partners involved); negotiating MoUs; governance arrangements; the importance of government buy-in and engagement with the local community.

Insights were shared on challenges around research ethics within partnerships, the importance of research capacity within implementing (I)NGOs, levels of ownership of the research, opportunities for mutual learning and capacity strengthening, and the role of local researchers as cultural brokers. Some of these issues were explored further in interviews. Elrha's grantee reports also provide a useful reminder of challenges faced by research teams in humanitarian settings – from the in-country implementing partners already over-stretched with commitments around humanitarian response, to the research project delayed as a result of riots impacting on staff movement.

Although collaborative links between researchers and host organisations, host populations and local research assistants usually exist – for transactional reasons, such as feasibility or relevance – there is little in the literature about the nature of these interactions or how they affect knowledge generation. An exception is van der Haar et al. (2013), who concentrate on collaborations between researchers and other actors in the field, in contexts of conflict or violence. They consider how 'research encounters' between these actors shape the process of knowledge construction in 'interactive' qualitative and participatory research. Although this is different from much humanitarian and health research, the authors argue that the negotiated co-production of knowledge "means that research can build on the knowledge and interpretive power of the actors that are pertinent to the research" (p. S23). This is an important consideration for what is needed to be genuinely inclusive of local knowledge in humanitarian research.

Panter-Brick et al. (2018: 18–19) locate the academic-humanitarian research partnership in a nexus of relationships:

> "Establishing lasting partnerships between academics, humanitarians, funders and local communities can make contributions to generating credible evidence and improving its uptake by frontline agencies. Such partnerships are crucial to help us strengthen the evidence … However, we need to structure partnerships with sustained funding: it requires time and effort to establish productive dialogue between academics and humanitarians, and then communicate insights to wider audiences, including donors and the media."

Dijkzeul et al. (2013), in their introduction to a special issue of Disasters on evidence, identify that the movement towards evidence-based practice in humanitarianism has tended to lag behind the same trend in development more broadly, and argue that there is a need for more long-term partnerships between research institutions and operational agencies.

In a paper on the ethics of conducting research in global health emergencies (GHEs), Mitra and Sethi (2016) observe the increasing number of collaborations and partnerships in GHE research, but note that coordination between response and research is often a challenge. Given that one of the main types of research on health in humanitarian settings focuses on testing or evaluating an intervention or approach, this suggests the importance of considering the relationship between intervention and research, and the particular implications this has for partnering such as the importance of aligning timelines across activities, implications of which are explored further in section 4.

Gaps in the literature

Three areas emerge as gaps in the literature on humanitarian research partnerships: the role of individuals, partnership intermediaries, and capacity development and learning. Whilst Godoy-Ruiz et al (2016:10) identify that "personal relationships and one-to-one interactions" are an important aspect of sustained, effective partnerships, the personal element is given relatively little consideration in the published academic literature in a discourse dominated by the institutional dimensions of partnership; the critical role of individuals within institutional partnerships is more visible in INGO grey literature.

Walker (2018) notes that partnership intermediaries are the least considered in the literature he reviewed on development research partnerships. By contrast, intermediaries are explicitly acknowledged in humanitarian practice as an important part of the innovation ecosystem (e.g. Ramalingam et al. 2015). Little has been written on the concepts and practice of learning and capacity development in humanitarian research partnerships, though the RRC/Christian Aid resource materials (2018) touch on experiences, especially of southern research partners, in this regard.

Young mother with her daughter with severe acute malnutrition during a mother-child interaction activity as part of home based testing in Saptari, Nepal. Taken as part of the study 'Follow-up of Severely Malnourished Children (FUSAM): Effectiveness of a Combined Nutrition Psychosocial Intervention on Health and Development.'
Photo credit: Action Contre La Faim France

4. REVIEW FINDINGS

Twelve grantees were identified for interview from seven diverse research partnerships funded by R2HC between 2013 and 2016 under its first three annual open calls. Elrha steered the reviewer to partnerships they knew to have particularly rich experiences and insights to share.

The reviewer finalised the list ensuring that partnerships included a southern institution as part of the core partnership, on the basis that local stakeholders should be actively involved in shaping the humanitarian research agenda and responding to humanitarian challenges. Some partnerships were large and complex consortia conducting multi-country research, whilst others comprised a core group of two or three partners conducting research in one location. They operated across a range of disciplinary areas and conducted health research in a range of countries in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Middle East.

Key informants came from a range of organisations and institutions: universities in the global north and south, INGOs, and NGOs in the global south. In most instances, Elrha linked the reviewer to the grant-holder or PI, who then provided access to one or more respondents within the same partnership. The vast majority of R2HC grantees to date have been northern academic institutions, and to a lesser extent international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and UN organisations. The reviewer therefore tried to access perspectives from researcher and practitioner partners in the global south wherever possible, but this was not feasible in every case. Other limitations in the review arise from the relatively small number of interviews conducted, given the breadth and diversity of the research partnerships in terms of scale, theme and discipline. Interviews provided insights into the nature and dynamics of research partnerships, rather than in-depth case studies of any particular partnership.

The rest of this section is based on findings from interviews, and the assertions it makes are drawn from respondents.

4.1 SCOPING AND ESTABLISHING A PARTNERSHIP

In some of the R2HC partnerships, the working relationships between organisations and individuals were already in place, and R2HC funding provided an opportunity for continued collaboration. In other cases, seed funding from R2HC was seen by respondents as having played an important role in helping to establish a partnership, providing the space for partners to undertake joint field visits, and to jointly develop ideas and co-design the research.

Where a partnership (or certain relationships within it) was newly established for the purposes of the R2HC research bid, grant-holders talked about practical considerations in terms of skillsets and attributes required for the research to be successful – including, for example, disciplinary backgrounds, or access to and credibility with local stakeholders in the country where the research would be taking place. Some talked also of ideological considerations informing their choice of partners:

"I wanted to make sure I wasn't a helicoptering scientist. ... I wanted sustainable infrastructure ... hence the choice of national university partner. ... Partnership is critical to achieving our objectives. Without a dedicated local partner, (there is) no way we would have pulled off what we pulled off." (Northern university respondent)

In practice, when trying to identify new partners, the partnership team leaders tended to seek out recommendations from colleagues in their own institutions and beyond, or follow up on personal contacts from their professional networks. Sometimes, personal recommendation and referral by a colleague or friend led to very strong and successful working relationships:

"You can fall into a fantastic partnership – by referral. A friend and colleague referred me ... She'd worked with colleagues of mine for fifteen years. She was a 'do-er', in the sense that what she said would then be done ... She came in originally as a consultant rather than a co-PI – for funding/efficiency reasons partly. That footing of equality wasn't there when I put in my application. I wouldn't take the risk when I didn't know the partner that well. Now she's my top research partner. For new applications, I'm trying to get her to be co-PI." (Northern university respondent)

In other cases, suggestions from colleagues or professional acquaintances didn't work out at all well, and respondents reflected that they ought to have done more thorough research into the individual or organisation concerned, for example checking on their reputation in the wider sector, or more consciously trialling the partnership in a preparatory phase, or even sticking to partners that they had already worked with. There was also recognition of the opportunities and risks that come with new partnerships, and the investment required to make them work:

"Longstanding relationships are of value. If you've worked with these individuals for a decade in the past there's already strength and trust. When you're trying to launch a new partnership out of nowhere, it's less certain what the outcomes will be. It could be favourable, but there's more risk attached. It can offer a new lens, but it requires sufficient support."(Northern INGO respondent)

Those respondents who were not responsible for convening partnerships were generally confident and clear about their distinctive and complementary role and contribution in the R2HC partnerships they were involved in, as well as their own motivations for partnering. But reflecting on the composition of their R2HC research partnership, one respondent noted that for an effective study in future, they would need to involve a partner that is well positioned to take the research findings and influence government policy, to go beyond influencing the practitioners and communities involved in the research.

4.2 PARTNER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Some partnerships had moved beyond the conventional division of labour (Olivier et al. 2016), where the role of NGOs (and in-country[7] partners more broadly) may be limited to data collection. In different ways and to varying degrees, there was evidence of in-country partners engaging – and being acknowledged – in processes of research design, data analysis and academic writing.

In one instance, the lack of involvement of partners in planning the research had direct consequences for the quality of the data collected; health clinic workers responsible for implementing the intervention being evaluated were not consulted on appropriate timing, which meant the study was structured instead around the needs of the researchers. When researchers were surprised to find that there was no difference between the control and intervention group on some measures, and asked groups of health care workers why they thought this was, they responded by saying that the data collectors had arrived when they were busy, and so when they got towards the end of the questionnaire they were just ticking boxes without reading the questions properly because they knew they had to get back to work.

One of the researchers involved in this project recognised with hindsight the importance of factoring in the time and budget to take into account the needs of all the actors.

One in-country partner highlighted the importance of their own role in research design and data analysis, to ensure contextualised interpretation of the data, and in so doing, made a compelling case for fully involving local partners in design and analysis:

> "(My role included) advising on design, to ensure it's grounded in the culture, relevant and ethical; and ensuring the analysis was relevant to the context ... Looking at the data coming out, and listening to how western people analyse the data, and having my take on it – as a biologist and as someone from the culture itself – I felt a huge responsibility for what results mean in this culture, and to enlighten and share with western scientists, to ensure they're not missing the point." (In-country respondent, NGO)

This reinforces the point made by van der Haar et al (2013) that what a researcher finds out is inherently connected to how they find it out, and this includes the way in which they relate to others with differently situated knowledge about the subject of the research. This is further echoed by the example shown in Case Study 1.

[7] The term 'in-country' is used in this report to denote individuals, respondents, organisations and institutions (with a specific focus on research and/or practice) in LMIC settings where humanitarian research is taking place.

CASE STUDY 1: SITUATED KNOWLEDGE SHAPES PARTNER ROLES

An evaluation was undertaken to assess the effectiveness of a psychosocial intervention with youth in a refugee setting. One of the roles of the in-country research lead was to advise on how data collection tools were designed, and to ensure the approach was relevant, ethical and grounded in the local culture.

The research team's relationship with the refugees was all-important, and their independence from the organisation delivering the intervention enabled good communication between them and the young refugees. A member of the team explained:

> "Kids complained to me that questionnaires were re-traumatising them, asking them about their past experiences. So, we developed a new questionnaire which ended on a more positive note – asking how they cope with stress. We developed a whole resilience measure that we published as a result of the beautiful interaction between the beneficiaries and the scientists."

From this newly-devised questionnaire, they were able to identify that whilst the intervention was building resilience at individual level, it was not taking into account resilience-building at family and community levels. As a result of these findings, the implementing partner has now adapted its intervention approach, to more effectively build resilience at these levels.

This example demonstrates how valuing the expertise of in-country partners and the affected population can enrich the research, making it more relevant and appropriate and thereby also improving the quality of the intervention, and making a greater contribution to published research knowledge.

Another in-country respondent expressed regret that their research team was not more involved in data analysis, and noted that the data had instead been exported to the northern university partner for analysis. A national research council request for a full copy of the final dataset prompted open discussion of data management, access and ownership with the northern university, and the in-country respondent felt confident that they would be more fully involved in analysis in a future iteration of the partnership.

"Our team, our research team has years of experience in research, sound knowledge of techniques and tools in the research we're applying ... We were involved in design, (we) helped to make the design more context specific – mixing practical things from the field, and theoretical things ... We took joint decisions on research design and implementation ... In day-to-day management, we were left independently, so it was easy to mobilise the team in the field, make decisions as per context ... We felt if we could have engaged in that process (of data analysis) it would be more helpful in terms of enhancing our capacity ... Now we are part of the manuscript writing team ... It's good learning for all of us." (In-country respondent, NGO)

Some northern grant-holders have considered how best to involve in-country partners in the publication process. In the words of one PI:

"Each organisation is leading at least one paper ... They are academic partners, not just worker bees. I'm not sure if they were co-PI on the grant or not, but (they've been) with me in all levels of output." (Northern university respondent)

In another partnership, the northern-based PIs felt that it was only ethical to include as co-authors people who had played a substantial role throughout the project even if in practice they have a minimal role in writing a paper – and that this should include, for example, the in-country research manager. But whilst this indicated that the notion of co-authorship may be shifting, in-country and practitioner voices (north or south) are still typically excluded unless they have directly contributed to data analysis or have written sections of a paper.

Respondents' experiences of participating in international fora to share research findings varied widely. In one partnership, the (northern-based) PI and the in-country research lead always present their research findings together:

"Whenever we go to disseminate the results of this research, (Y) always ensures I'm there to represent the partnership. To make sure it's an equal partnership when we present to the international community." (In-country respondent, NGO)

"If I went to London or WHO, (Z) would have to be invited as well. Insistence on doing things together. Having her present at the meetings really did make a difference. (It's an) important aspect of a live partnership if you're trying to do it well. Problem-solving as a team. Bringing together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Thinking through challenges." (Northern university respondent)

At worst, however, an in-country respondent described how she had been given a grant to travel to a conference in the USA along with two other (northern) members of the research partnership, but was then not included in the presentation of their research, despite having played a crucial role in overseeing the research on the ground: "I was just there like a spectator." Another southern respondent was given the opportunity to present at a forum in Geneva but observed that the vast majority of the other participants and presenters were from the UK and the USA.

"I wish in some of these collaborations, people are able to do something like this when it comes to dissemination. Most of them collect data and leave there – you're not part of analysis, writing or dissemination. But if local collaborators are involved at all levels, that is really great." (In-country respondent, university)

It is important to explore the assumptions underpinning choices about the roles and responsibilities of different partners, and the extent to which there is scope for equitable involvement in decision-making and explicit attention to co-production of knowledge. Clearly, it is not always possible or desirable to include all partners at every stage of the research. But international gatherings and authored publications provide a particular opportunity for voice and visibility of southern partners on the global stage. Choices around who should participate, and how, should be made with conscious consideration of the potential benefits and trade-offs.

4.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION AND RESEARCH

In research that evaluates humanitarian interventions, R2HC does not fund the intervention itself, only the research. This invariably means that for this type of research, there are multiple funders involved, complicating partnership dynamics. It is therefore critical that there is close collaboration and coordination between partners from the outset on both the intervention and the research design, not least to ensure that timeframes align.

In one example, a project received seed funding to help further develop its research concept, which was based on testing an intervention being delivered in the field. During these early stages, it became clear that the intended 'intervention delivery partner' was no longer interested in being involved. The PI identified a new organisation to take their place, but having not been involved in the initial research design stage, this new partner – and the field team in particular - never really developed ownership of the project, which created challenges when the research was being implemented. The research was always treated as an add-on to the intervention partner's existing programme of work, and internal coordination (between staff at different levels within the large INGO) was also problematic.

This demonstrates the importance of commitment and early buy-in from the intervention partner; partner involvement in bid development and research design can facilitate this. One academic suggested that it can be better for the intervention partner to also lead on research (i.e. as grant-holder) in this context, to ensure that the research component is sufficiently prioritised against multiple organisational commitments.

Another academic noted that once research has shown a humanitarian intervention or approach to be effective, the non-availability of donor funds for subsequent scale-up limits opportunities for practitioners to put learning from research into practice. Given the intricate relationship between humanitarian intervention and research, humanitarian donors should be urged to allocate a percentage of funds for high quality research alongside humanitarian interventions rather than holding separate and unrelated funding mechanisms. They should also ensure that funding is made available for scale-up where an approach has been shown to be effective.

4.4 PARTNERSHIP VALUES, PRINCIPLES AND WAYS OF WORKING

Insights from respondents affirmed the importance of particular values and ways of working in partnership: they highlighted trust and empathy, honesty and openness.

"Transparency was the key for us to be able to work together. X was very transparent. We had frank discussion. We knew what was supposed to be done, where, when." (In-country respondent, university)

Two respondents provided examples of where trust was lacking (for example around budgets), and how this was experienced by non-lead partners as debilitating; it was further exacerbated by constant changes in personnel which meant that trust had to be slowly rebuilt time and again. This lack of trust had consequences for the research, as protracted negotiations over budget allocation resulted in delayed transfer of funds, which hampered progress of research on the ground. More positive examples demonstrated that trust established over time leads to more resilient partnerships, better able to deal with challenges outside partners' control – such as currency devaluation, or unexpected changes in the external operating environment.

Other respondents stressed the importance of asserting their bottom line on issues such as ethics, and the importance of mutual respect:

"Mutual respect, listening – but really listening. Inviting to the table is one thing, but having equal power dynamics at the table is another." (In-country respondent, NGO)

These reflections are much in line with the core principles articulated by the Partnership Brokers Association in 2016: diversity, equity (leading to respect), openness (leading to trust), mutual benefit and courage.

Further, the notion of each partner reaching clarity on their own non-negotiables is suggested as part of the checklist tools in the resources on fair and equitable research partnerships (Christian Aid 2018) and noted as a success factor by Elrha (2015:14).

An additional attribute which was greatly appreciated by non-lead partners was flexibility, having the space to negotiate contested issues, and to change approach where necessary. Two examples were given, both related to the ethics of implementing a randomised control trial (RCT), one of which is discussed in Case Study 2.

CASE STUDY 2: LISTENING AND COMPROMISE IN A HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

One partnership experienced a clash of institutional (and individual) goals and priorities during an evaluation of an intervention in a humanitarian setting. The PI wanted to include a control group for the purposes of robust evaluation. The INGO programme implementation team and the in-country research lead both considered that to prevent someone in great humanitarian need from entering the programme intervention and allocating them instead to a control group, would be unethical.

The PI, based at a northern university, observed that:

"Humanitarian triage is to give people affected by crisis priority. Academic priority is rigorous comparison. We came up with a way that was both scientific and rigorous ... It's too easy to impose a research design that's been thought through in the application process."

The in-country research lead consulted families among the crisis-affected population, and explained the importance of comparing a treatment group with a control group, and asked what solution they proposed. Ultimately this dilemma was solved by securing enough funding to ensure that anyone allocated to the control group could enrol in the programme intervention at a later date.

"That was a hard battle and one that we wouldn't necessarily have won if we hadn't listened to each other," commented the PI. "(INGO X) is streets ahead in terms of thinking about the ethics of the programme."

This is a compelling example of partners listening to each other's perspectives, and demonstrating flexibility in thinking and approach, to reach a satisfactory and negotiated solution.

4.5 EXPLORING THE INSTITUTIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL ELEMENTS OF RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Institutional characteristics and challenges

Much has already been written about the different operating cultures and incentives of practice-oriented organisations and academia (e.g. Elrha 2012). One respondent talked about the huge difference of culture between the 'do-ers' and the 'academics', and the importance of dialogue to bring the two to understand each other. Another described them as planets operating in a shared ecosystem but travelling at different speeds.

At a practical level, most of the partnerships encountered some kind of challenge in relation to different kinds of bureaucracy. A university-based academic talked of the challenges they faced within their own institution, because of the need to comply with procurement and finance processes dictated by government, and the challenge of ensuring resources were made available in a timely fashion for travel to research sites – adding that administrators didn't always understand the demands of research. Some grant-holders complained of the slow release of funds from Elrha owing to protracted negotiations and paperwork, and in some instances further delays followed as sub-agreements were signed with universities. Some noted that these delays in contracting are particularly problematic where there's a predicted start date on an intervention being evaluated.

"With academics, sub-agreements can take anywhere from 2–6 months. So you've wasted a year of the project's timeline on contracting. (There has to be) lots of trust in partnerships with funding from this donor because of delays in contracting. To move things forward, one partner is working in good faith for six months or more." (Northern INGO respondent)

The role of individuals and 'hybrid' identities

In the reviewer's experience, it has long been recognised by INGOs committed to a partnership approach to development and humanitarian work that any institutional partnership is underpinned by relationships between individuals. Whilst the published academic literature lends more weight to institutional considerations, interviews revealed that the role of individuals within humanitarian research partnerships is critical to their success. It's about who you can work with to get the job done.

"Partnerships can go wrong if the interpersonal doesn't work out. We got on extremely well. We shared the same excitement for the science, and the same detail for implementing things, the same drive for doing things better ... One of the joys of this project are that X and I are continuing to partner ... That partnership gave birth to new partnerships, new projects, new ideas. R2HC cemented an intellectual and interpersonal partnership." (Northern university respondent)

The interest and enthusiasm of one individual can make or break an institutional partnership. Among the respondents, there were two examples of an individual being obstructive and undermining the efforts of other partners, which others in the partnership had to find ways to work around and with. This points to the importance of investing time in relationship building, preferably with opportunities for face-to-face engagement. Many respondents valued the workshops organised by Elrha which brought together teams to talk through partnering issues at seed funding stage. Respondents also reflected that it is important to acknowledge changes of personnel within a partnership, make the space to integrate new motivations and perspectives, and to continue to strengthen the partnership.

One respondent paid tribute to their PI, recognising how he contributed to a successful partnership in the way he interacted with and convened different stakeholders:

"He was able to forge a really good working relationship with all the partners, and with people within the refugee setting. He visited there before we started the project, established the link, knew the organisations that were there. He knew how to form a working partnership and be able to take that from the start to the end." (In-country respondent, university)

This review of R2HC partnerships interviewed respondents with 'hybrid' identities extending beyond that of their current institution, with deep-rooted experience of operating in both a northern and southern context, or in academia as well as practice. For example, the researcher at a northern university whose origins are in the global south, or the research lead at a northern university who self-identifies primarily as a practitioner. In the field of mental health in particular, academic researchers often had some level of experience as practitioners, sometimes as part of their university role. Increasingly, development and humanitarian NGOs are recognising research as part of their wider mandate, and provide resources for dedicated teams with research skills. These trends are discussed in detail by Fransman (2019) but were beyond the scope of this review.

Individuals with 'hybrid' identities can be well placed to act as intermediaries within research partnerships, communicating across different cultural norms and language – of different countries and peoples, or institutional cultures, or different domains of work. One respondent was acutely aware of how her identity and experience positioned her to play a role in building bridges across the partnership, and she reflected that this was a crucial role in any research partnership:

"(It's a) unique perspective that I hold. Usually you have the scientist in their own world, practitioner in another world, they don't always understand each other properly … I understand how each works, and because of that mutual understanding I can help build bridges, and resolve a lot of the challenges that arise." (In-country respondent, NGO)

4.6 RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND INCLUSION OF AFFECTED POPULATIONS

Although within the R2HC 'research partnerships' is primarily understood to refer to the academic and practitioner members of the research team, and the review was not foreseen to address wider collaboration, arguably the local community comprises another set of actors in the research partnership. These actors might include people directly affected by humanitarian crisis, as well as those hosting refugees or displaced persons on a short-term or protracted basis. Several respondents talked of the challenges of conducting research in crisis-affected communities, and the importance of hiring researchers from the local community, people who understand the local language and context:

"It is always difficult working in humanitarian crisis – especially in mega-disaster. People have their own priorities and are looking for food and non-food items, so when we go collecting information it's quite tough. To do research in humanitarian crisis, having a good collaboration with the community is very crucial … In this project, especially two to three months after the earthquake, people weren't much interested in the research or psychosocial (intervention), they wanted something very tangible/visible. Persuading them of the value of research was tough. We hired local researchers, trained them adequately … We also had a facilitator to facilitate the research and programmes at community level. Again, someone from the local community who understood the community and language. These are some of the dynamics we need to take into account when implementing research." (In-country respondent, NGO)

The relationship of both researchers and humanitarian practitioners to the local community is critical, and yet the role of local actors within the research process and their contribution to knowledge production is rarely acknowledged explicitly. Whilst Elrha's 'Research Ethics Tool' (Siriwardhana 2017) emphasises involvement of the local community at every stage of research from design to restitution of findings, this is not often seen in practice. This relationship was conceptualised in different ways in research projects, though the local community was not generally seen as a partner alongside the organisations and institutions in the formal partnership (perhaps in part because 'local community' is an amorphous term and by no means homogenous, and would not be funded to carry out work in the same way as other organisations or institutions in the partnership).

Nevertheless, some respondents saw the relationship with the local community as integral to the partnership, and a 'given', through the choice to work with partners in-country who had pre-existing relationships with, for example, local leadership or youth groups. By contrast, others made little explicit mention of engagement with the local community. In some cases, it was also recognised that those delivering the intervention, or part of the research team on the ground, were themselves affected by disaster or conflict and this needed particular consideration in the research approach.

There were two partnerships in which the relationship with the affected population at local level was both explicit and visible as part of the research approach. Both involved research in a refugee setting. One included a mechanism set up to facilitate engagement with the affected population in a refugee camp where some people had been displaced for more than twenty years:

"The relationship with the affected population is absolutely critical. We've always had a Community Advisory Board (CAB). We consult regularly on critical decisions; it's especially important for sensitive topics, because of the difference between how we (northern academics) see the world, and how they see things. It's important to tap into local understandings of how a research programme should run, and gather local knowledge … They have helped us make decisions that have been critical to the success of research projects. They provide advice that we usually heed, that help us achieve our goals – this is the instrumental argument. But there's also the moral argument – you want to ensure you're grounded in existing leadership structures. You'd ideally also want the CAB to sustain the intervention, though I'm not sure if that's realistic." (Northern university respondent)

In the second example, there was active involvement of refugee and host populations in a randomised control study of a psychosocial intervention for young people. Researchers were recruited from the host community as well as the wider refugee community. The in-country research lead spoke of "constant meetings" with them to allow for regular feedback and ensure that the research was robust and grounded in the context. Being totally independent of the intervention partner meant that study participants could share their perspectives with the research team with no fear of bias or coercion, and the research lead's own status as part of the local population was also critical in securing the buy-in and enthusiasm of local actors:

"We were in this with the refugees – it was really important that they feel in control. We gave them agency and ownership (of the study), a voice in interpreting the results … We involved the refugees to evaluate the programme – it wasn't someone coming in (from outside) to evaluate us. (My) being part of the people, that was part of the tension – but that's where it resulted in success. Very few are able to develop such beautiful partnerships … (We need to) change mindsets, to put refugees front and central, not as beneficiaries or guinea pigs." (In-country respondent, NGO)

This example contributes to an argument that the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), which puts affected people and communities at the centre of its nine commitments, should be a live reference point for humanitarian research partnerships, as well as humanitarian interventions.

4.7 POWER DYNAMICS AND KNOWLEDGE HIERARCHIES IN PARTNERSHIPS

"Usually there are power dynamics between west and east, academics and practitioners, or scientists and beneficiaries – usually one has the power over the other. In this context, we made sure that whoever was at that table, we made sure they were equals, their voice was heard, taken into consideration seriously." (In-country respondent, NGO)

Power dynamics play out in different ways across research partnerships; some respondents actively reflected on these dynamics in their own partnership context. Grant-holders have power as convenors and gatekeepers, and ultimately have control of the research budget which enables them to invite other partners (or not) to international workshops and conferences, for example for dissemination of research findings.

Grant-holders play a key role as project and partnership managers, and yet project and partnership management has not traditionally been part of academic training, so these skills must be learned directly on the job or are acquired through other roles. The leadership and management style of the grant-holder affects the way in which the partnership operates, for better or for worse.

A specific dimension of power dynamics in research partnerships relates to whose knowledge and experience is valued:

"Unconscious bias: you have it, whether you recognise it or not. This is a barrier to equitable partnerships." (In-country respondent, NGO)

Hierarchies of knowledge manifested themselves in sometimes unexpected ways. For example, one PI and her colleagues were repeatedly treated with disrespect by an eminent researcher at another university in the global north, possibly on account of his pejorative attitude to women. In a different example, a northern university respondent described themselves as one of the "survivors" of the research project, and their negative experience was closely linked to how knowledge hierarchy played out in practice:

"I wasn't respected, valued or listened to … I tried to resign several times, that gave me some power. Academics and practitioners have different strengths and weaknesses. The field experience was not respected. … Neither had any experience of Country X. Or any experience of humanitarian work. Their expectations were entirely unrealistic … And there wasn't a willingness to accept that we might know about some of these challenges." (Northern university respondent)

Negative experiences such as these did not necessarily impact on the ability of the partnership to produce research outputs per se, but limited the productivity of the partnership in other ways, limiting the potential of research relationships for transformational learning and change.

On a more positive note, there were respondents who recognised that interdisciplinary working had enriched their research as well as providing them with new insights:

"The disciplinary expertise converged to bring some really insightful results that we wouldn't have got if we'd only had research in one or two disciplinary areas. If we'd only done the laboratory research or the community social surveys, we wouldn't have got the breadth of knowledge or the depth of understanding." (Northern university respondent)

"This criss-cross between disciplines is really important. That alerted me to think in different ways. I learned all about the humanities and mental health, which was not my field. I felt like I got a whole PhD! It was enriching, inspiring. Coming from another discipline, you can ask naïve questions. It taught me a lot, humbled me – the more you know, the more you know that you don't know. But I also felt I was an added value, to challenge assumptions. It was hugely beneficial for me and for the research." (In-country respondent, NGO)

4.8 PROMOTING LEARNING IN PARTNERSHIPS

Opportunities for learning were created on the initiative of individual grant-holders, rather than being actively incentivised by Elrha through provision of dedicated resources within grants. This is a limitation of current donor funding to support the R2HC programme. There was evidence that both formal and informal approaches to learning were valued by respondents:

"It was not very formalised. We had our weekly conference calls where we were discussing each and every step of the research undertaking. And X was the lead, and all of us were there. Through that process, I learned a lot of things on how to do research in a humanitarian setting. We had to discuss issues that came up in the field, and how we'd resolve them; how to plan better. Through that process there was a lot of learning and sharing. And I consider that to be part of the informal way that we learned a lot on what it takes to do research in a humanitarian setting … In the near future, I might consider myself to apply as PI." (In-country respondent, university)

"The capacity building piece worked very well. You work in lower resource settings, money doesn't solve problems if capacity to deliver isn't there. That's been my focus and I'm passionate about it. Capacity development was written in from the start. We had formal discussions on cluster-randomised trial design, on climate change, disasters and emergency response; and almost every week I'm having informal discussions on why we did certain things. It's largely my own passion. This is how I work. It takes a lot of energy but it's a lot of fun, very meaningful ... I'm from one of these countries, and locals have to take ownership of research." (Northern university respondent)

One in-country respondent felt that training from the grant-holder on administrative and financial issues would have saved them a lot of time and effort when it came to project reporting, because they were not well versed in the requirements of international donors.

Opportunities for exchange, especially south-south learning between peers in different countries, were appreciated, and there was appetite for more frequent face-to-face engagement. One consortium lead noted that as their research project was coming to an end, there was a desire among partners to come together to discuss learning and what might come next; whilst R2HC funds were not available for this, they were actively trying to integrate it into successor projects.

Elrha itself provides opportunities through the R2HC for sharing and learning on partnerships through a range of activities. This includes conducting surveys and commissioning reviews, such as this one, to capture learning which then feeds into guidance documents and webinars. Elrha also convenes events such as the R2HC biennial Research Forum, and panels at relevant conferences, where experience on research partnerships is shared and discussed. Such opportunities are available to different members of research teams, to northern and southern research institutions alike. It was beyond the scope of this review to look into such learning opportunities provided through the R2HC.

It is possible to learn from negative as well as positive experiences. In instances where partnerships did not operate in a way that was conducive to open discussion, sharing and learning, respondents were able to reflect on what they had learned in the face of adversity, and what they would do differently in any future research partnerships:

"I learned about partnering. I learned how to work with other people with different mindsets, people who think differently from you – you have to think out of the box." (in-country NGO respondent)

These same respondents noted also that the donor reporting process does not necessarily capture the reflections of all partners, as reports are generally coordinated or written by the grant-holder, and that this can be a missed opportunity for all involved to understand the wider dynamics at play in the research partnership, especially if joint reflections are not taking place.

One respondent recognised that they were working with a highly capable in-country partner, but made the case that donors and academics in the global north still have a significant role to play in enabling more equitable partnerships:

"Research is a unique area where some of these (power) dynamics/inequities persist because of very high technical skillsets required to implement an RCT ... In the absence of support for capacity development and a push for equitable partnerships, you are bolstering power inequities, undermining local partners, bolstering the power and prestige of northern academics. It needs to be acknowledged, there's complicity ... (The research) lead needs to know that they're responsible for that, as well ... Academic actors have much to learn from local implementing partners. Much of this learning occurs naturally in the process of co-planning and implementation.

"However, a more formal system for learning from partners' existing experience (e.g. through conducting a partner SWOT analysis, shadowing concurrent project implementation and/or service delivery) could be productively built into start-up procedures ... If plans for assessing and building capacity can be built into the project proposal and budget, it is more likely that this can be implemented in a comprehensive, systematic (rather than as-needed, sometimes haphazard) fashion. Donors can facilitate this process by more formally requesting such components in their requests for proposals." (Northern university respondent)

Photo from Elrha's field visit to the HEAT project. Taken as part of the study 'Heat Emergency Awareness and Treatment (HEAT) Bundle.' Photo credit: Sarah Palmer-Felgate

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a wide range of partnering practices operating within Elrha's R2HC programme and varying levels of experience in managing or engaging in humanitarian research partnerships. It is encouraging that many respondents are actively reflecting on their aspirations and practice in research partnerships. The reviewer was struck by the level of ambition and complexity of some projects and consortia in the context of two-year research grants from Elrha, and the challenge of coordinating such projects whilst at the same time developing new partnerships.

Several respondents who felt they were championing good partnering practice – such as engaging in genuine dialogue and negotiation across institutional and cultural divides (academic–practitioner and north–south) in the co-production of knowledge or, for example, acknowledging practitioners as co-authors – reflected that these practices were far from the norm in the wider ecosystem of humanitarian research partnerships. It is clear that there is a need to strive consciously for fair and equitable partnerships, and that they will not materialise without this intent, as choices must be made around roles and responsibilities of partners, behaviours of individuals and partner organisations, and ways of working across a research partnership. Insights from this review also confirm the crucial role of southern organisations in humanitarian research partnerships, and some of the challenges of ensuring their equitable participation.

Review findings suggest that the quality of research relationships and processes do affect the quality of research itself – for example, intervention actors need to be appropriately involved in the planning of research if their knowledge is to be effectively harnessed, or this can adversely affect the quality of the data collected, and in turn, the research findings. Local knowledge should be harnessed to ensure research design and analysis are grounded and relevant in the context, such that the research can have greater impact.

The quality standard for research in Elrha's R2HC programme needs to move beyond 'robust methodology' and 'publishable findings' to take account of this relational dimension. For example, as part of the granting process, there might be some assessment of the quality of leadership and management provided by the grant-holding institution/individual, and of the extent to which space within the partnership is created for dialogue and mutual learning. In this way, the evidence base for public health interventions in humanitarian settings would be further strengthened.

Whilst the review focused on research partnerships within a humanitarian setting, it is interesting to reflect that most of the findings resonate in development more broadly – but the potential tensions in the relationship between research and any intervention implemented at the height of a crisis will of course be more acute.

Three areas emerged as gaps in the literature on humanitarian research partnerships: the role of individuals within institutional partnerships, the role of partnership intermediaries, and concepts and practice around learning and capacity strengthening.

This review identifies ways in which individuals play a critical role in contributing (or not) to the success of a research partnership. It also suggests that individuals with 'hybrid' identities cutting across categories and constructs such as 'academia' and 'practice' can play an important role in building bridges and mediating relationships; and that grant-holders have a responsibility to convene, lead and manage partnerships in a way that honours the expertise and contributions of all partners, and is conducive to reflection and learning.

This review makes the following recommendations to donors and research fund managers:

- Seek ways to enable southern-based institutions to lead on humanitarian research bids, and promote intellectual leadership from the global south. This will help to ensure that the questions emerging from the field are those that are addressed in humanitarian health research.
- Seek ways to actively incentivise equitable research partnerships. Increased capacity should be included as an explicit outcome alongside research outputs, with dedicated funding available in grants. Alternatively, a separate funding mechanism could be made available for capacity strengthening, as this kind of granting mechanism does not currently exist in the humanitarian research sector.
- Promote the many existing practical tools on research partnerships as part of the granting processes. Elrha should continue to offer tailored support and guidance to humanitarian research teams on partnership issues, and this provision should be extended to reach more grantees. Useful additions to the existing guidance include tools to enable individuals to reflect on and address unconscious bias, and more systematic use of a structured reflection tool for use across the research partnership (e.g. the partnership review template in Elrha 2015:48).
- Seek ways to incentivise mutual learning within partnerships. Funds should be made available for learning, reflection and capacity strengthening activities within partnerships. Partners' joint reflections should be captured and shared in donor reports.
- Allocate a percentage of funds for high-quality research alongside humanitarian interventions – rather than exclusively viewing research as a separate stream.
- Assess quality of leadership and management in research partnerships, alongside other dimensions of the research quality standard, as part of the granting process. At minimum, PI's should provide examples of their experience and track record of leading/managing research partnerships. Donors could actively solicit feedback from non-lead partners as well as grant-holders on progress when research is underway.
- Put in place a whistleblowing policy such that non-lead partners can raise concerns about the partnership directly with the donor or research fund manager.

It recommends also that grant-holders and PIs should commit to leading and managing partnerships in a way that honours the expertise and contributions of all partners, and is conducive to reflection and learning. This might entail a specific requirement by the donor that the grant-holder/PI work with partners to agree a code of conduct (or ways of working), to serve as a reference point for accountability across the partnership, and the output is shared with the donor.

All partners should engage with existing insights from practice (literature, guidance and toolkits) to help improve their own practice in partnering – whether that is about agreeing and asserting their own non-negotiables, or deciding which tools to use in partnership discussions as a way of understanding each other.

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