LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT NOTE

Research Partnerships in Practice

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1. Purpose

The purpose of this Learning and Development Note is to capture the discussions, lessons and reflections shared during a workshop focused on *Research Partnerships in Practice,* held on Wednesday 12 November 2014[1]. In particular, the Note is based on the contributions from workshop participants discussing why NGOs and universities partner, common challenges and successes experienced, and some recommendations for NGO-academic partnerships in Australia. With this information and insight, the Note aims to map out key issues that can help inform existing or future partnerships of this kind.

2. Background

The *Research Partnerships in Practice* workshop was a collaborative initiative of the Oxfam-Monash Partnership and the ACFID University Network. The workshop brought together a range of academics and practitioners that are, or have been, involved in a research partnership, to clearly identify and explore the opportunities and challenges of NGO-academic research partnerships in Australia (with a common understanding of terminology and expectations for the day, as highlighted in Illustration 1 – see Appendix); and to identify how the Oxfam-Monash Partnership and other networks, such as the ACFID University Network, could support new or different cross-sector research partnerships into the future.

Drawing from case studies of research partnerships developed by participants,[2] the workshop addressed the following questions:
a. Why have participants entered into a partnership with an NGO or a University? What is the purpose and incentive for partnering?
b. What successes have participants had with an NGO-academic research partnership and what factors led to that success?
c. What are some of the 'sticky issues' and how were these issues overcome/navigated? How do they affect research results and influence practice?

3. Current trends and context

Existing literature about partnerships and collaboration is rich, and focuses particularly on: benefits for NGOs[3]; benefits for academic institutions[4]; recommendations for different types of stakeholders[5]; and guidelines for constructing effective partnerships more generally[6].

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[1] The workshop was held as a part of the Oxfam-Monash Partnership *Futures Series* – a number of events launched in April 2014, focused on challenges and opportunities for building collaborations in international development.

[2] See case study posters put together by workshop participants.

[3] See Mortan, Quan, Nelson and Albright (2002) and Aniekwe, Hayman, Mdee, Akuni, Lall and Stevens (2012).

[4] See Moseley (2007) and Cottrell and Papart (2006).

Yet while existing resources do highlight the purpose and utility of working in partnership across various stakeholders, and point to some of the general issues and limitations of NGO-academic research partnerships, the literature lacks specific information about distinct points and issues in the project cycle; where good practice occurs, specific challenges that may arise, how these issues may be overcome or avoided, and how success can be scaled up. Given the range of NGO-academic research partnerships emerging in Australia, the organising partners therefore felt it timely to examine the 'real' experiences of researchers and practitioners involved in this partnering process.

Graphic illustrations were captured throughout the workshop, visually highlighting discussions and 'big ideas' that emerged through participant-driven inquiry. These illustrations are presented in Appendix A and referenced throughout the Note to draw connections where possible. Participant case studies, presented on the day as posters, are available in Appendix B.
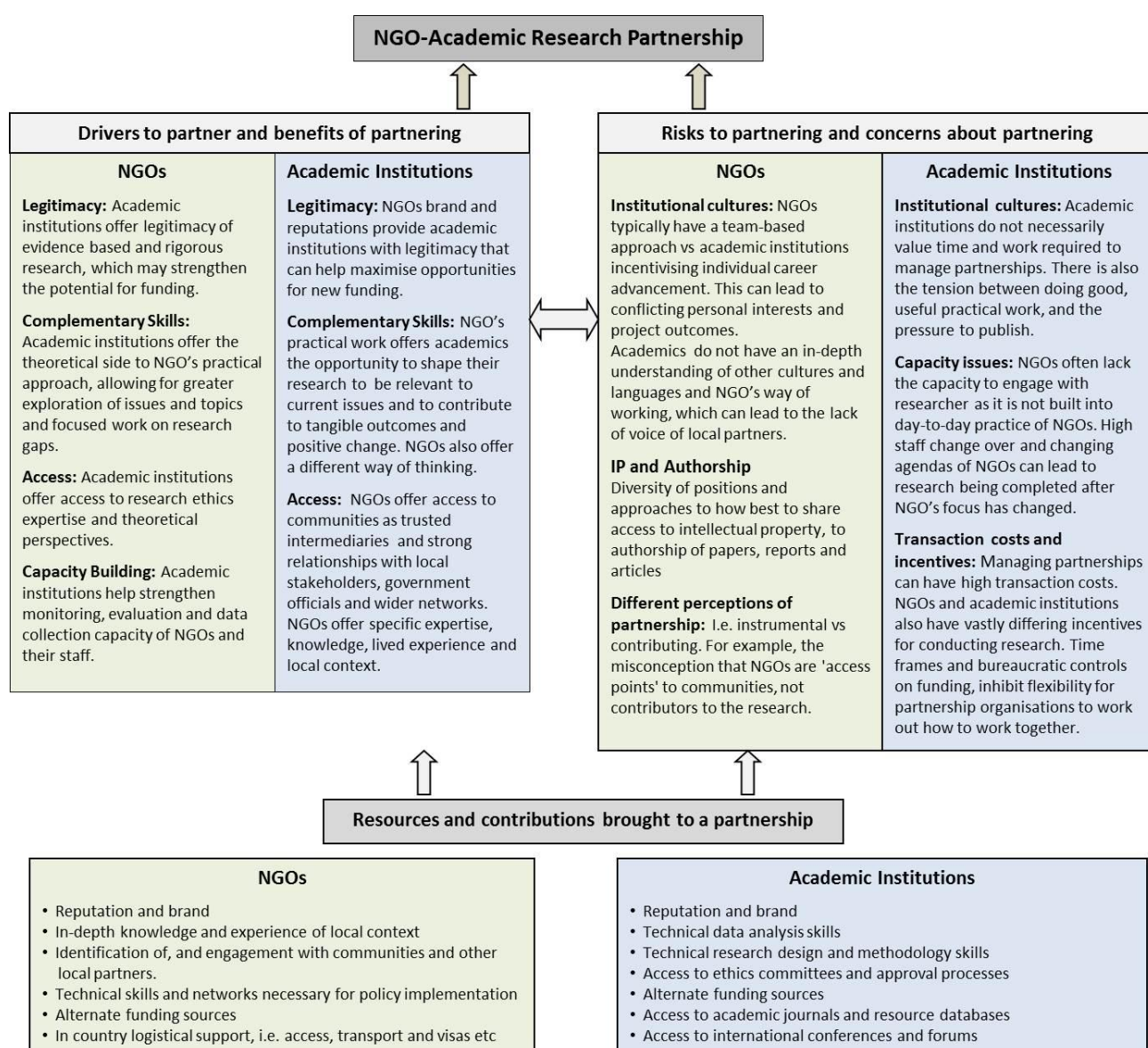
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[5] See INTRAC Briefing Note (2012).
[6] See 'ELRHA Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships' (2012).

4. Why partner?

Research partnerships between NGOs and academic institutions arise for a number of reasons. For some, such partnerships allow the participants to "pool skills, knowledge and experience"[7]. There is also a common sentiment that such partnerships represent a mutually beneficial two-way exchange; "[by] involving NGOs in research, academics can ensure their research is used and useful; by drawing on academic expertise, NGOs can enhance their methods for capturing results"[8]. To understand why workshop participants decided to partner, NGO and academic participants were separated into two groups and asked to explore the benefits and risks of partnering, and what resources their institutions bring to such a partnership. The results of these discussions are summarised in the table below (and captured in Illustration 2):

NGO-Academic Research Partnership

Drivers to partner and benefits of partnering

NGOs

Legitimacy: Academic institutions offer legitimacy of evidence based and rigorous research, which may strengthen the potential for funding.

Complementary Skills: Academic institutions offer the theoretical side to NGO's practical approach, allowing for greater exploration of issues and topics and focused work on research gaps.

Access: Academic institutions offer access to research ethics expertise and theoretical perspectives.

Capacity Building: Academic institutions help strengthen monitoring, evaluation and data collection capacity of NGOs and their staff.

Academic Institutions

Legitimacy: NGOs brand and reputations provide academic institutions with legitimacy that can help maximise opportunities for new funding.

Complementary Skills: NGO's practical work offers academics the opportunity to shape their research to be relevant to current issues and to contribute to tangible outcomes and positive change. NGOs also offer a different way of thinking.

Access: NGOs offer access to communities as trusted intermediaries and strong relationships with local stakeholders, government officials and wider networks. NGOs offer specific expertise, knowledge, lived experience and local context.

Risks to partnering and concerns about partnering

NGOs

Institutional cultures: NGOs typically have a team-based approach vs academic institutions incentivising individual career advancement. This can lead to conflicting personal interests and project outcomes.
Academics do not have an in-depth understanding of other cultures and languages and NGO's way of working, which can lead to the lack of voice of local partners.

IP and Authorship
Diversity of positions and approaches to how best to share access to intellectual property, to authorship of papers, reports and articles

Different perceptions of partnership: I.e. instrumental vs contributing. For example, the misconception that NGOs are 'access points' to communities, not contributors to the research.

Academic Institutions

Institutional cultures: Academic institutions do not necessarily value time and work required to manage partnerships. There is also the tension between doing good, useful practical work, and the pressure to publish.

Capacity issues: NGOs often lack the capacity to engage with researcher as it is not built into day-to-day practice of NGOs. High staff change over and changing agendas of NGOs can lead to research being completed after NGO's focus has changed.

Transaction costs and incentives: Managing partnerships can have high transaction costs. NGOs and academic institutions also have vastly differing incentives for conducting research. Time frames and bureaucratic controls on funding, inhibit flexibility for partnership organisations to work out how to work together.

Resources and contributions brought to a partnership

NGOs

- Reputation and brand
- In-depth knowledge and experience of local context
- Identification of, and engagement with communities and other local partners.
- Technical skills and networks necessary for policy implementation
- Alternate funding sources
- In country logistical support, i.e. access, transport and visas etc

Academic Institutions

- Reputation and brand
- Technical data analysis skills
- Technical research design and methodology skills
- Access to ethics committees and approval processes
- Alternate funding sources
- Access to academic journals and resource databases
- Access to international conferences and forums

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[7] *Promoting academic-practitioner partnerships in international development research,* INTRAC Briefing Note, 31 August 2012. p.1.

[8] Ibid.

By unpacking the benefits, concerns and potential risks associated with research partnerships as identified by participants, it became clear that there is much similarity across institutions, thus providing common ground to work from.

5. Exploring Case Studies

In an effort to organically identify and unpack key challenges, successes and recommendations for research partnerships, participants from each research partnership case study[9] were invited to respond to key questions in a 'fish bowl' question and answer format (highlighted in Illustration 3). The questions raised included:

- What have been the key factors contributing to the success of the partnership relationship?

- What have been the major challenges?

- If you were going to do anything differently next time, what would it be?

Successes

Various successes were identified across the different case studies. Some participants noted the successes generated by **including a diverse range of partners and organisations** (both big and small), as this encouraged strong collaboration, learning and skill development. Further, case studies highlighted the benefits of collaborating with individuals from across different disciplines - drawing in new skill-sets, and bringing different perspectives to a given piece of research. Among all case studies, an 'openness' to partnering was seen as important for building mutual respect between partner organisations.

Investing time into building relationships at the outset of a partnership was considered key to laying the foundations for a future (and ongoing) collaboration that could focus more productively on content and successful implementation. In some cases, participants noted that the unexpected challenges they had encountered (noted below) actually created opportunities to reflect on and strengthen partnerships.

Others noted successes in **data collection and analysis that provided useful information for advocacy and reporting**. In some instances, the capacity of staff to conduct this data analysis was improved through working in partnership, particularly when specific funding was allocated to the hiring of local staff.

Participants emphasised **the importance of debriefing on lessons learned, documenting researcher experiences and including communication and implementation plans in the research design**, and noted that these factors helped to strengthen partnerships and enhance research outcomes. It was pointed out that different ways of working may exist not only across the institutions that form the partnership, but also among the individuals directly engaged in it.

Challenges

Across the different partnership case studies, challenges were also identified. First, many reported **challenges with sustaining long-term institutional commitments**. For example, high staff turnover can be a recurring issue during the life of a partnership, resulting in a loss of institutional knowledge and relationships. Additionally, the long-term commitment of institutions in research partnerships became problematic if one partner lost funding and needed to be replaced. As indicated in case study successes, partnerships were likened to a long-term relationship; time is needed to build trust, and there is always the potential for institutions and individuals to clash. While an important process, the

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[9] See participant posters that explore each partnership case study in further depth.

time and related investment needed to build strong relationships was felt as an added pressure on top of the need to deliver timely project outcomes. On a related point, some participants noted that academic institutions and NGOs value and manage time differently, and that it is important to consider this when managing partnerships, given the potential for significant transaction costs to emerge.

When conducting research, others noted challenges relating to data collection. **The difference between the ideal and the reality of data collection capacity can lead to practical challenges**, including how to manage 'dirty data' (discussed as data that has discrepancies or was not collected correctly) which requires time and collaborative work to rectify. In some instances, partners lacked institutional capacity and time to manage complex research partnerships, and communication across many countries can exacerbate these challenges. Participants noted challenges with engaging in research that is both meaningful for in-country organisations and mindful of potential political sensitivities. Some participants experienced challenges in identifying local researchers early on, allocating resources to build relationships with overseas partners, and supporting research capacity in partner organisations. Finally, many participants observed that it can be challenging to shape outputs in a way that is relevant and impactful for all different partners.

Reflection on the successes and challenges opened the discussion up to considerations of how success could be scaled up and challenges resolved or avoided. **Thinking in hindsight about their case studies, presenters made the following recommendations both for their own partnerships and for future research partnerships:**

- **Testing phase:** When initiating a partnership, set up a meeting with all of the partnership's potential stakeholders before the partnership is formalised. This meeting is an opportunity to look at priorities and test personalities before getting down to business. Ideally, seed funding can support this phase to ensure that the individuals involved in an institutional partnership have the right skills, and that expected outcomes are clearly defined and understood. This allows for individuals to opt out, and is an opportunity to check on the needs and expectations of partner organisations in the design phase.
- **Upfront communication:** Frank and honest communication between partners from the outset of the engagement and throughout the life of partnership helps surface hidden motivations for partnering, and maintains clear channels of communication. Identifying the inherent imbalances between in-country and Australian partners, and putting strategies in place to help mitigate these can help to ensure that local partners feel valued and have clear channels through which to contribute.
- **Fully understand expertise:** All partnership participants need to be aware of each other's expertise, and what they each feel they can bring to a partnership. This needs to be built into and inform the whole project.
- **Treat the partnership like any relationship:** Time is needed to get to know partner organisations, individual staff and the context in which the work will take place. In doing so, this may mean assessing whether an individual or partner organisation is 'fit for purpose', allowing partners to assess a partnership throughout its life cycle.
- **Reflexive look at partnerships:** Partnerships need to be flexible to ensure that research is done collaboratively and responsively, rather than sticking to a set agenda. This process needs to be integrated into the project and budget to ensure the flexibility to adapt to things that are not working, and to capitalise on unexpected opportunities that arise.
- **Funding structure and staged funding for development and implementation:** Planning and budgeting for all stages of the project, including; scoping and planning; research analysis and synthesis; implementation; and communication of outcomes were identified as important to an effective partnership.

6. From Problems to Solutions

Based on the discussions throughout the day, three recurring themes and experiences were identified as central to understanding NGO-academic research partnerships; building effective relationships (between individuals within a partnership), effective project design and navigating institutional systems; and negotiating intellectual property (IP) and use of research outputs. The following questions were applied to these key themes to unpack participant experiences and ideas in these three areas:

- What do we want to do differently, in an ideal world?
- What are the barriers to doing it differently?
- What are the solutions?

Participant responses are summarised below (and highlighted in Illustration 4).

Building relationships

For effective partnerships, participants emphasised a need for an explicit focus on, and allocation of more time to, the relationship building stage of the partnership - rather than just to the design and implementation of a given project. As noted earlier, to support this process, participants discussed the need to allocate funding and time to this phase, with ongoing 'health checks' built in throughout the project. Participants noted that this allows for the aims and expectations of the partners to be revisited and reassessed; offers opportunities to reappraise the suitability of the partnership to achieve intended outcomes (i.e. is it fit for purpose?); and allows for changes and shifts to be made to ensure that partners meet their collective and individual objectives. Another consideration in this process of relationship building is the need to incorporate the perspectives of in-country partners at the outset of a partnership, to ensure that all partners have a full understanding of their respective rationales for partnering, and have a choice to elect whether indeed they should partner at all. Finally, participants emphasised the need to develop a clear 'business case' to support the allocation of time and funding to the relationship building phase, and to obtain management support for this process. One way of building such a business case would be citing the risk mitigation and enhanced efficiency to be gained through engaging in a thorough relationship building process.

Various barriers were highlighted in relation to building strong relationships. Partnerships are often built on institutional connections, and individual personalities may clash. Also, issues related to personalities may only emerge once the project is in motion. Staff with positions that are demanding and who are juggling multiple responsibilities can often struggle to dedicate time to the relationship building stage, and there are often restrictions (time, money, and incentives) to prioritising the relationship building process over their other responsibilities. Further, a lack of institutional support for the relationship building stage, or 'high level buy-in' for the partnership, can have detrimental effects on the partnership later on - for example, when an institution is interested in outputs only. Participants noted that there is generally a lack of institutional investment into the process of exploring potential partnerships, and felt there was a lack of documented learning around formal processes or 'best practice models' to help initiate and build these relationships. Partners noted that it can often be difficult to reorient or end ineffective partnerships early due to strong incentives to persist (such as funding), which typically require projects to be completed, regardless of their effectiveness. Partnership members trying to maintain contacts and niceties can also exacerbate this resistance to exiting the partnership, as can the common lack of flexibility in project timelines. This ensuing sense of 'lock in' was identified as a barrier to building adaptive and effective long-term relationships.

In thinking of solutions to address some of the barriers identified, there was a common call among participants for more awareness to be raised of the value of the relationship building phase for ensuring the success of collaborative partnerships. This needs to occur through crystallised learning

about how to work in partnership and further discussion of how to partner better. Better relationships can be established by facilitating opportunities to share experiences across institutions, such as through mentoring, staff exchange and co-location between partners. Also, building relationships should not just react to perceived capacity gaps; rather, it can be an 'active' process, in which academics and researchers seek one another out proactively. Allocating time and space for individual staff reflections and an assessment of the collective learning achieved by working in partnership can help inform future work. Building in cross-cultural training of staff with discussions of participatory design and open communication were also noted as possible ways of enabling stronger partnerships. Given the above, many participants raised the argument that the relationship building phase of a partnership should be identified as a distinct outcome of a project, and not just an assumed part of the process (viewing relationships as both a means and an end of a partnership).

Project design and Institutional Systems

In an ideal world, workshop participants acknowledged that suitable funding for project design, including dedicated time for building relationships (as discussed above), would assist with ensuring useful outcomes for all partners. Specifically, participants noted the importance of an ongoing dialogue and discussion regarding the different institutional systems (timeframes, accountabilities, management, etc.) of each partner. Including this as a deliberate discussion in a project design process was identified as a potential tool for building better partner relationships and enhancing the ability of the partnership as a whole to reach its mutual objectives. In an ideal world, time should be allocated to participatory design, not just participatory data collection, so to ensure that the capacity and expected knowledge outcomes of all partners are well understood from the outset. Two key areas for NGO-academic research partnerships that could be supported by investing in this process included reaching a common understanding of expected research outputs, and of how research findings might be used. Building in time to reassess these two areas throughout the project was deemed an important element of good project design.

Barriers to strong project design and effectively navigating institutional systems are similar to those discussed for building relationships. Specific barriers, however, included donors or funding sources that do not value or allow dedicated time for an in-depth dialogue process geared towards building, negotiating and sustaining a partnership. Further, and particularly for large or diverse institutions, working with different 'parts' of one's own organisation (i.e. across faculties in a university) can also be challenging. Many of these barriers relate to understanding the different operating cultures of the institutions involved in a partnership. On this basis, participants felt there was a need for partnership focal points or co-ordinators to make a clear business case within their organisation for why a particular partnership may be beneficial, before a project is initiated or secures funding.

Solutions to some of the potential barriers to good project design and navigating institutional systems included; adopting a phased approach to partnership building, factoring in health checks and evaluations as a part of the research design, and documenting and reflecting on early learnings regarding each partner organisation's ways of working. Institutional systems and efficiency can be improved by clearly documenting the time associated with each project activity, as well as the associated costs. Such documentation was deemed important for institutional memory and transition, noting the earlier concerns regarding staff turnover. Additionally, building internal capacity for partnership brokering, combined with the use of external resources such as expert partnership brokers, were identified as ways of clarifying the standards and expectations of investment in these resources. Finally, at the outset of a project, and to assist in properly understanding different institutions, it is paramount for partners to recognise, identify and be transparent about what they see as the flexible and inflexible aspects of a project.

IP and use of outputs

In an ideal world, participants identified the need to avoid making the assumption that partners will have the same approach to IP and the use of outputs. Common understandings can be established through open conversations about partners' different expectations at the beginning of the partnership, as well as throughout the project cycle. Issues specific to research partnerships that were identified as being important to discuss and review included; authorship; communication and dissemination of research findings; branding and associated risks; ethics and legal implications; and a need to consider the guiding principles and policies for NGOs (such as child protection). It was also noted that NGOs and academic institutions generally publish research findings for different purposes, and accordingly need to allow for different perspectives to be raised. Thus, it is necessary to communicate to each partner any potential issues that could breach institutional codes of conduct and/or guidelines at the outset.

Various barriers to navigating IP and use of outputs included the difficulties that may be experienced in designing IP agreements, and in agreeing on definitions of IP and outputs. Participants noted that it can be difficult to discuss potential issues when concerned about the 'need to be nice', or when fearful of making negative assumptions of the other, or of undermining the relationship. As such, it was observed that differing understandings of IP and the use of outputs are often unearthed only once partners have already begun to work with one another. Further, sometimes people that are central to the effective dissemination of outputs (e.g. branding, legal and communications personnel) are left out of the conversation. It was recognised that smaller institutions often lack the resources and processes to help mitigate these issues, which can cause complications when it comes to dissemination of research outputs. With respect to the dissemination of outputs, it was noted that both NGOs and academic intuitions often struggle with effective knowledge management, and when combined with the differences and changes in priorities set by management, this often results in limited opportunities to fully capitalise on research findings and partnership reflections. Time constraints, as well as the competition that may emerge between achieving organisational strategies and capitalising on opportunities that arise during the research project, can mean that projects may not achieve their expected outputs. It was recognised that there is a need for institutional support of partnerships of this kind to help mitigate these challenges and maximise the potential for meaningful outputs to be generated for all partners; this is particularly important after a project formally ends.

To address these barriers, negotiations at the beginning of the partnership need to be rigorous, and conversations need to be explicit about IP and use of outputs. Certain frameworks, such as risk management thinking, can be applied to IP, and should be factored into the output dissemination phase. Knowledge brokers and communications staff can help facilitate discussions about the need for developing different types of research outputs, and thinking about different ways of communicating research findings. Discussion about the different types of communication that will be needed to effectively disseminate outputs and share learnings should ideally be held during the project design phase.

Drawing from across these three themes, the following recommendations were highlighted for researchers and practitioners to consider for future partnerships:

- A phased approach to partnership building, with a specific, initial relationship building phase built in. Clear and structured meetings should be held both at the outset and throughout the project, to define aims and expectations, and to conduct ongoing health checks, evaluations and reflections throughout later phases of the partnership project;
- Partnership building sessions: allow partners to establish common understandings of respective goals, ways of working and partnership principles, including discussion of the value of participatory design and open communication;

- Think about support mechanisms that might help individuals engaged in partnerships 'navigate' their own institutions;
- Nominate institutional champions and highlight the experience of individuals involved in the partnership;
- Partnership tool kit: Develop a tool kit for your organisational approach to partnership that includes key contacts, learnings, case studies, check lists, along with a list of current partnerships[10], and;
- Ensure that you have access to, and communicate with, a network of practitioners and researchers that can provide advice and support.

7. Closing Reflections

The Research Partnership in Practice Workshop was an insightful exercise that provided a valuable space to share experiences across 'real life' cases of partnership. Participants noted their appreciation of the deliberate and honest accounts presented across partnership case studies.

At the same time, the workshop was considered a good 'first step' towards greater understanding of how to navigate NGO-academic research partnerships. Participant feedback suggests that further opportunities should be created to explore how success can be scaled up, to 'dig deeper' into problem solving on specific issues, and to compare across other partnership models.

References and further resources:

- Aniekwe, C.C., Hayman, R., Mdee, A., Akuni, J., Lall, P., & Stevens, D. (2012). 'Promoting academic-practitioner partnerships in international development research'. INTRAC Briefing Note. Available at: http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/749/Cracking-Collaboration_Briefing-note_31-Aug.pdf (accessed 1 Dec 2014).

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- Moseley, W. G. (2007). 'Collaborating in the field, working for change: Reflecting on partnerships between academics, development organizations and rural communities in Africa'. Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, 28, pp. 334-347.

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- Roche, C and Kelly L. (2013). 'Partnerships for Effective Development'. ACFID. Available at: http://www.acfid.asn.au/resources-publications/files/partnerships-for-effective-development (accessed 1 Dec 2014).

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[10] The Partnering Initiative is a non-profit organisation with a series of 'Tool books' that may be helpful in this regard. Further information is available through: thepartneringinitiative.org.

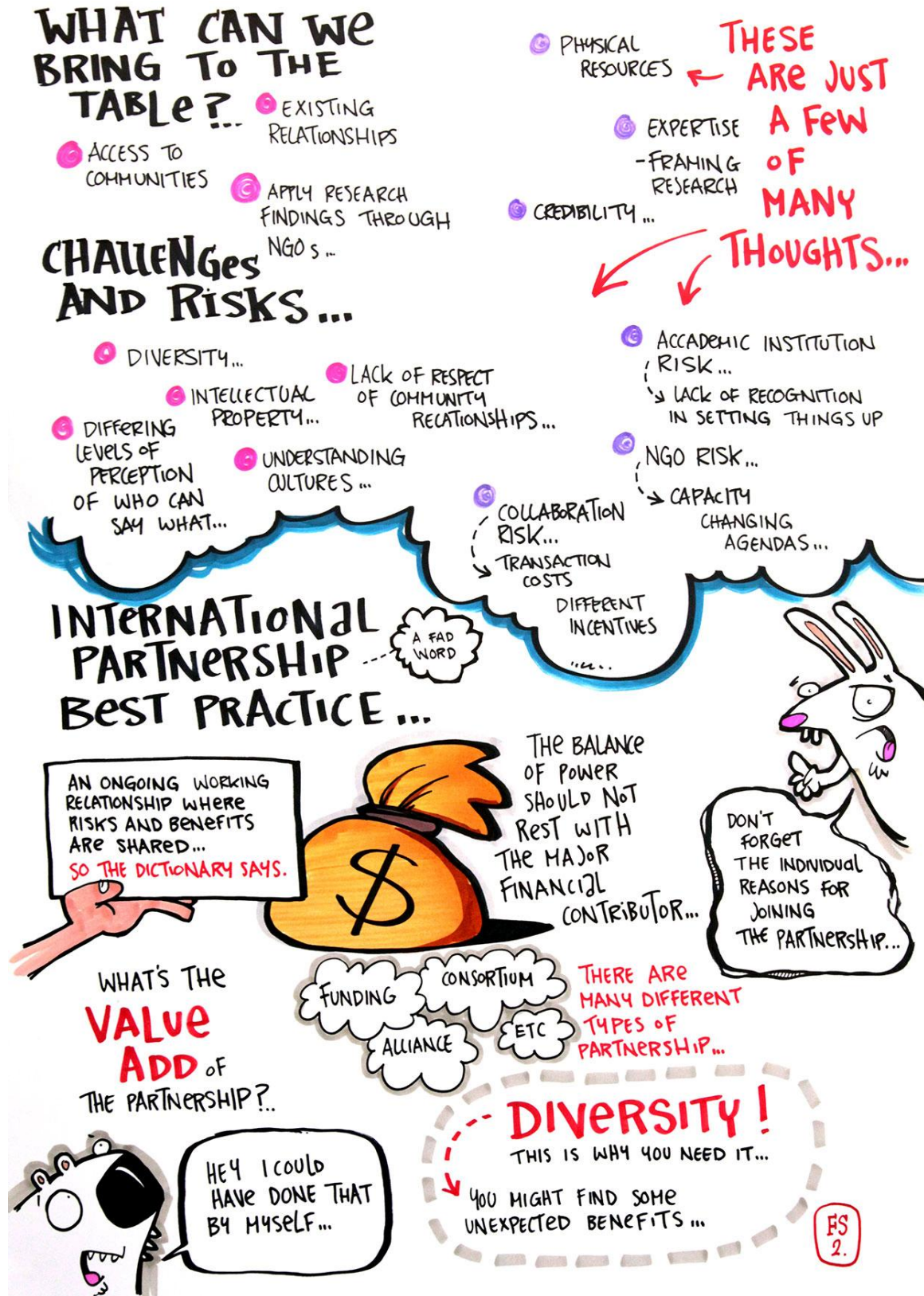## Appendix A – Graphic Illustrations

Illustration 1: Getting started – An activity focused on surfacing expectations, hesitations and common understanding of goals for the workshop.
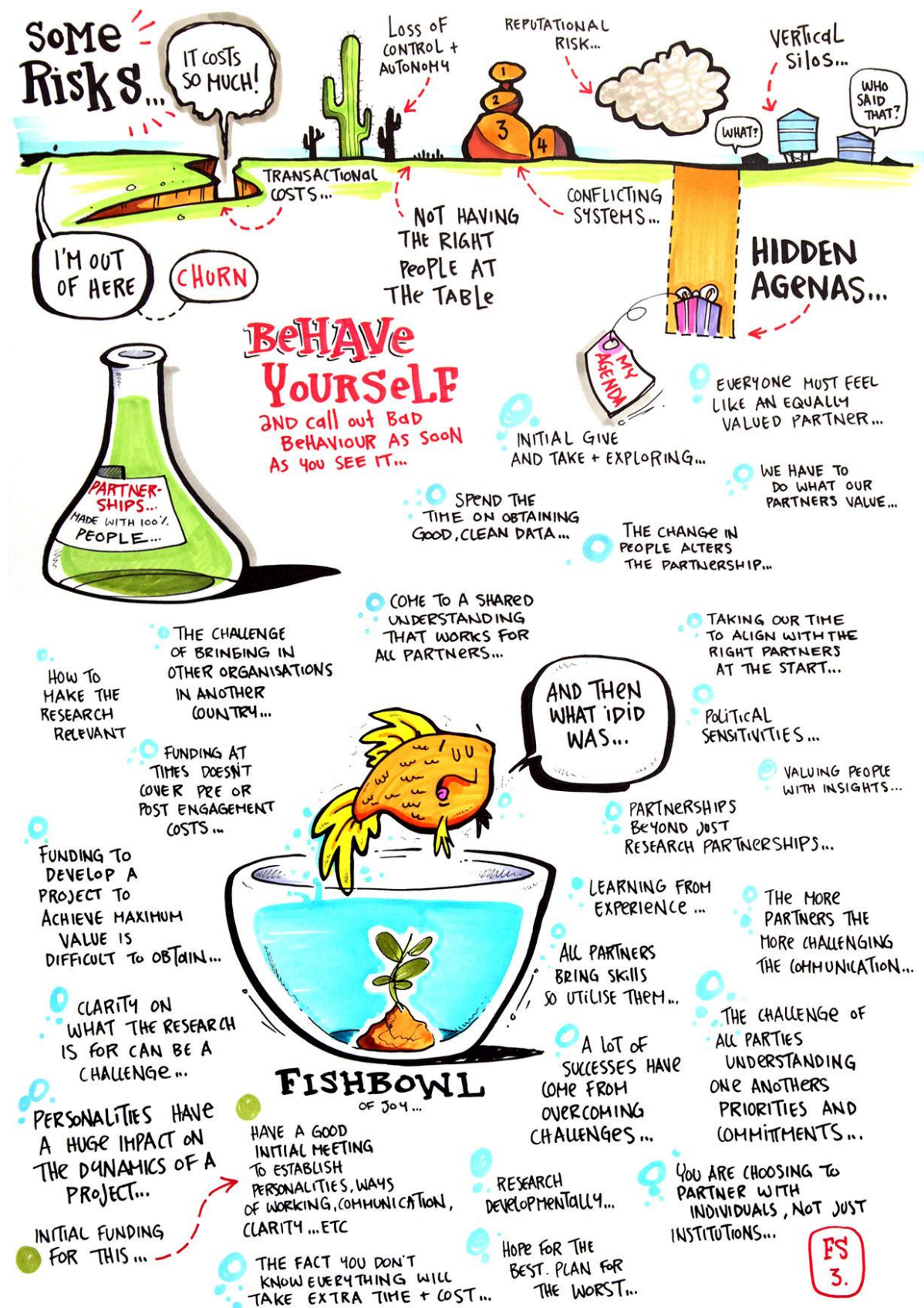
Illustration 2: Why partner? - An activity focused on understanding participants drivers/motivations and concerns about partnering.

Illustration 3: Case study panel – A 'fish bowl' discussion (question and answer) about partnership case studies.
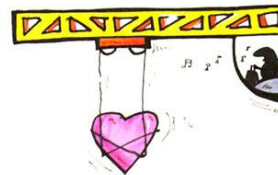
Illustration 4: From problems to solutions – An activity of carousel conversations focused on 3 common themes throughout the day.

BUILDING ★RELATIONSHIPS...
- ADOPT A PHASED APPROACH TO RELATIONSHIP BUILDING...
  - BUILD IN PARTNERSHIP TRAINING...
  - WITH PERIODICAL RELATIONSHIP HEALTH CHECKS...

PROJECT DESIGN AND ORGANISATIONAL ★SYSTEMS...
- DEMONSTRATE PARTICIPATORY DESIGN...
- THE VALUE OF...
- CONFERENCE TO SURFACE CHAMPIONS...
- KEEP CONTENT AND RESEARCH SEPERATE FROM ADMIN...
- RECOGNISE WHERE YOU CAN AND CAN NOT BE FLEXIBLE...
- EVIDENCE OF BENEFITS AND RETURNS...

IP & USE OF OUTCOMES...
- THAT'S MY IDEA. HANDS OFF!
- HELPFUL TO HAVE TOOLKITS AND CHECK LISTS...
- ...MODELS USED...
- ... EXAMPLES OF AGREEMENTS...
- ...WHAT DO OTHER NETWORKS DO?...

★ LEAD BY EXAMPLE...