

Equitable Partnerships Brief #2

Applying Partnership Principles in Projects

- for Agrifood Research and Innovation for Development - Version 1.0

Strong partnerships are central to impactful Agrifood Research for Development (RI4D), but what constitutes a good partnership? The Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAiR) developed nine Partnership Principles (PP) that define quality in partnerships by anchoring them in values of collaboration, equity, inclusion, respect, and transparency.

GFAiR Partnership Principles (click [here](#) for full description of PPs)

PP1: Co-design goals & plans	PP2: Free & fair knowledge exchange	PP3: Shared responsibilities
PP4: Mutual learning	PP5: Enhancing collective research capacities	PP6: Equitable benefits
PP7: Results shared that enable application	PP8: Sustainable outcomes	PP9: Contextual flexibility

GFAiR PPs can be applied by research teams at all stages of a research project's lifecycle as demonstrated in the guide below. Applying them from the start is highly recommended.

Steps for Applying Partnership Principles

Research stage (Applicable PPs)	Researcher actions	Partnership pitfalls to avoid
Pre-proposal: <i>Identification of stakeholders & scoping of issues</i> PP: 1, 2, 9	• Identify relevant actors through a selected process, e.g., participatory stakeholder mapping. Include NARS, farmers, women and youth, other end-users, community actors, and local knowledge holders. • Facilitate meetings/workshops to jointly define the research problem. Leverage diverse knowledge systems and worldviews. Record stakeholder expectations and challenges that are relevant to the research problem. • Encourage open communication in the partnership	• Defining the research problem unilaterally before engaging partners and end-users. • Limiting stakeholder mapping to well-connected actors. • Using communication platforms that disadvantage

	from the start. Consider digital and non-digital means of communication. • Assess cultural, political, and institutional contexts before agreeing on partnership aspects.	partners with limited digital access.
Proposal development: <i>Research design & planning</i> PP: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9	• Co-develop research questions and methods with partners, ensuring SDG alignment while factoring challenges of local stakeholders. • Design equitable knowledge-sharing infrastructure while factoring available platforms, diverse language-use, and accepted formats. • Negotiate roles. These should be based on: - each partner's current comparative strengths (using various tools)¹. - considering longer-term equity goals to strengthen capacities, through e.g., collaborative roles. - participation opportunities for all partners during all stages, from research to communications. Record roles in jointly agreed TOR as part of an MOU. • Include conflict resolution² and decision-making protocols in the MOU. • Build explicit capacity development goals for all partners in the project plan. • Achieve consensus on authorship, IP, and benefit-sharing arrangements before work begins. • Build a sustainability plan with post-project resourcing. • Align the project's governance, including structures and practices, with local and institutional context. For instance, leverage existing water users' groups or women's self-help groups instead of creating new ones.	• One partner or the lead institution dictating research questions without genuine co-design. • Assigning roles based on hierarchy, convenience or for tokenism. • Deferring authorship and IP discussions to the end of the project. • Roles based on existing capacities creating a bigger divide rather than ensuring roles based on collaborations that build capacities.

¹ Example tools include:

- [The Association of Commonwealth Universities tool for skills and roles assessment](#)
- [Identifying and Using CGIAR's Comparative Advantage](#) by Independent Science for Development Council (ISDC)

² Possible conflict areas in projects like data ownership, visibility and recognition, authorship, and funding commitment changes are commonly covered in MOUs. For unforeseen conflict types, step-by-step approaches like discussions within stipulated time, constituting a committee with all partners or agreement to jointly nominating an external independent entity could be stipulated in the MoU.

Implementation: <i>Data collection & fieldwork</i> PP: 2, 3, 4, 5, 9	• Create transparent data repositories accessible to all partners. This should include all collected and generated data, as well as M&E data. • Track accountability against agreed responsibilities regularly and flag deviations early. • Carry out structured and regular monitoring, such as monthly partner check-ins, to understand what is working and what is not. Ensure this is undertaken with all partners engaged and with joint responsibility. • M&E assessments are reviewed by the entire project team (including implementing partners), with regular discussion among the partners about what to adapt or adjust based on monitoring data. • Pair experienced and less-experienced partners for development of joint capacities. Document learnings.	• Local partners having only data collection responsibilities. Local partners must be involved in decisions about data use and interpretation. • Restricting data access to partners during ongoing fieldwork. • Skipping reflection sessions when timelines are tight. • Following approaches that may be culturally inappropriate to community partners.
Making sense of findings: <i>Analysis & interpretation</i> PP 2, 4, 5, 6	• Organise sessions where all partners, including farmers and other community stakeholders, jointly interpret outcomes and can see how these stack up against the expectations of all stakeholders. • Ensure availability of draft findings to all partners before external publication. • Conduct structured learning sessions covering confirmed and unexpected findings. Document lessons. • Initiate authorship attributions, in line with agreed terms.	• Analyses solely by the lead institution and seeking buy-in later from other partners. • Presenting findings externally before all partners have reviewed and agreed. • Excluding community-level partners from interpretation. • Omitting failures and what did not work well from the learning review.
Sharing results: <i>Dissemination & communication</i> PP: 2, 6, 7, 9	• Disseminate findings through multiple formats for varied audiences. • Ensure all partners can access and share the findings. • Design opportunities for all partners to communicate results. • Ensure there is a budget for communications, e.g., to provide for translation into accessible languages and visuals if required by the audience. Ensure the range of partners' voices are integrated into the communications. • Ensure all partners, particularly local partners, are appropriately attributed and acknowledged in writing and verbally. • Provide communication and branding guidelines for all teams to follow to ensure joint recognition of partners before any audience (e.g. internally, the project	• Publishing behind paywalls as it restricts access to end-users in low-resource settings. • Crediting only senior or Northern authors while omitting local contributors. • Translating or adapting materials without local partners' involvement. • Not giving the local partners an opportunity to lead authorship. • Well-resourced organisations undertaking communications and receiving disproportionately more credit than other partners.

	investors, and in external-facing communications). • Design co-authorship opportunities for partners, supporting partners as required in developing publishing skills.	
Closing & continuation: <i>Review and scaling sustainably</i> PP: 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9	• Review partnership with all partners to assess whether the partnership principles, agreed partnership roles, practices, and accountability were met. • Determine if institutional capacities of all partner organisations and the systems were strengthened. • Confirm that all benefits were shared equitably as agreed and resolve disagreements. • Develop a collective strategy for continuing work after handover. Emphasise local ownership. • With end-users and policy stakeholders involved, co-design scaling efforts. • Ensure all partners have equal access to evaluation teams. Lead implementor has responsibility to ensure the evaluator has full details of partners.	• Conducting the final evaluation unilaterally. • Settling for capacity strengthening of local partners without recognising the need for learning or capacity strengthening of all partners and the larger research system itself. • Concluding without resolving unmet benefit-sharing or authorship commitments. • Attempting to scale without involving local partners. • Engaging with end-users only during scaling and not earlier. • Scaling narratives that are solely driven by funders or lead institution.

Inclusive and Impactful Partnerships

The Partnership Principles were developed to enable:

- competitive research design that demonstrates credible governance, stakeholder ownership, and sustainability pathways.
- impactful implementation through clear allocation of roles, strong accountability, and reduced friction among partners in research consortia.
- high-quality research that integrates diverse knowledge systems and enables adaptive learning.
- likelihood of uptake by linking research outputs to user, policy, and investment pathways.
- long-term institutional value through trust, repeat collaboration, and credibility.

As an independent organisation deeply rooted in the Global South, GFAiR has built inclusive partnerships by bringing together researchers, policymakers, funders, and communities for Collective Actions. GFAiR is committed to play the role of a convenor, facilitator, and knowledge broker to help research teams identify the right stakeholders, foster mutual learning, and connect their work to initiatives and policy pathways for a lasting impact.

Acknowledgements & Further Recommended Reading

Swiss Alliance for Global Research Partnerships

GFAiR is indebted to Swiss Alliance for Global Research Partnerships, whose [Guide for Global Research Partnerships](#) inspired and served as conceptual scaffold for its Partnership Principles.

Southern Voice

GFAiR extends its sincere appreciation to Southern Voice for their synthesis paper “[Envisioning an Equitable Future for Research Across the North-South Divide](#)”. This work lifted our understanding of research relationships by offering candid and varying perspectives on challenges to equity in research, accompanied by insightful presentation of segmented approaches to address these.

Essence and UKCDR

GFAiR gratefully acknowledges Essence and UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR). Their good practice document “[Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships](#)” exhaustively details barriers to equity through perspectives from across the research ecosystem and describes practical solutions that guided our own approach.

Global Health Partnerships and The Association of Commonwealth Universities

GFAiR is grateful to [Global Health Partnerships](#) and [The Association of Commonwealth Universities](#) for their practical and accessible tools designed to support researchers at every stage of the research journey. Their efforts have influenced our thinking, and their commitment to translating complex partnership principles into user-friendly guidance reflects a shared dedication to making research collaborations equitable.

Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service (IAES), CGIAR

GFAiR acknowledges the partnerships analyses undertaken by the IAES and the guidance, valuable insights and reviewing by Allison Grove Smith pertaining to all stages of the project cycle. IAES implements evaluations for CGIAR and is the secretariat for Independent Science for Development Council (ISDC) and the Standing Panel on Impact Assessment (SPIA). Read the ISDC advice to CGIAR on defining, among partners, [comparative advantage](#), and the IAES Evaluation Function [summary of evaluative evidence](#) about partnership as a way of working.

This brief is part of the Equitable Partnership Brief Series designed for Agrifood Research and Innovation for Development. The series currently includes briefs on:

- Partnership Principles
- Applying Partnership Principles in Projects
- Assessing Partnership Principles in Projects
- Partner-Inclusive Language
- Case studies of applied Partnership Principles

We welcome collaborations to further co-develop these or other guides and case studies that can assist in more equitable partnerships in research and innovation.

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