

JOINT ACTIONAID/CARE RESEARCH PROJECT ON CHANGING AID RELATIONS

Lessons Learnt¹

The purpose of this lessons learnt is to capture the key learning from a joint ActionAid and CARE research project looking at the implications of changing aid relations, with particular reference to direct budget support. The project ran from May 2005 to June 2006, and involved joint agency working in four countries.

Many of the lessons learnt are not new, but will hopefully support others to avoid some of the pitfalls – and realise some of the benefits – of working in certain ways.

Joint working takes time and commitment but strengthens the project

- A joint research project can be very positive. It can add expertise to the process and weight and credibility to the final product. It also increases the readership of the final product;
- However, undertaking a research project between two organisations requires time to ensure that the aims and objectives for each organisation are clearly articulated before the project begins. This is likely to take a lot of discussion, negotiation and some compromise!
- Agree project frameworks collaboratively and allow national research teams to develop appropriate research methodology in their context. This is particularly effective through design workshops that bring the whole project team together;
- A strong and focused team (made up of people from both organisations and the Research Manager if relevant) managing the process is key to the success of the project. The more dedicated the team can be to the project, the stronger the research and final products will be;
- In country research teams needs to clearly set out the roles and responsibilities for each organisation in the process. If it is decided that one organisation will take the lead in the process, the expectations of this role needs to be clearly defined by both organisations to avoid misunderstandings and frustrations.

Good Practice Inter-agency Working

- Full strategic and operational level commitment
- Shared aims and values
- Involving relevant people
- Roles and responsibilities clear but support innovation
- Effective management
- Funding structures that are flexible and sustainable
- Data/information sharing
- Joint training
- Team commitment
- Effective communication
- Location
- Creativity from adversity

From: *effective interagency working: a review of the literature and examples from practice, LGA research Report 40, nfer*

Build in flexibility for creativity and innovation

- Ensure that all members of the project are aware of any minimum requirements in terms of project outputs;
- Make sure there is a balance between flexibility in the project design so that teams can adapt to and reflect dimensions specific to their context, while still contributing information that can be synthesised to represent commonalities across contexts;
- New team members bring fresh perspectives and added value to project but take care that these augment (rather than replace) agreed objectives through solid handover processes;
- Allow research findings to shape the final report depending on their importance and likely implications in relation to the strategic aims of the research;

¹ This lessons learnt includes reflections from a joint ActionAid and CARE staff review and reflection in London, 23 June 2006, and comments from consultant members of the project team

- Research can be a catalyst for collaborative working in networks by creating a community of interest – consider whether its desirable or necessary to sustain this community when the project ends;
- A review workshop provides space for national teams to come together to decide on and develop the key findings and recommendations and acts as an incentive for teams to meet deadlines.

Advance planning critical to genuine ownership

- Include activity in annual planning in order for staff time to be allocated and performance management indicators to be put in place;
- Using consultants can mean that staff may not feel responsible for the project. Ensure clarity about who is responsible and who is accountable for ensuring project outputs are delivered – especially when working with external consultants;
- Manager commitment and support for project team members staff can be illustrated and given through regular meetings, requesting updates against progress plans and participating in substantive discussions;
- Team members with less experience need support from peers and project champions – this requires a time investment that must be recognised.

Undertaking solid research

- Research projects take time! It is important to make sure there is sufficient time built into the project timescale to enable the team to undertake thorough research and analysis and produce a robust final report;
- External consultants may be recruited to fill gaps but don't underestimate need for strong briefings and management through regular meetings and milestones;
- Don't under-estimate the in-house skills and knowledge. Before automatically deciding on using external consultants, discuss the option of staff members carrying out the research as this will not only strengthen organisational ownership of the findings but also avoids the problems of managing consultants;
- Where consultants are used, both organisations need to factor in time to work on the final report to guarantee a high standard and organisational ownership of the findings.

Develop the project plan and budget in tandem

- Be realistic about costs – don't optimistically under-budget in the hope that things will 'just work out';
- Under budgeting can delay implementation and create tension between partner agencies;
- A basic understanding of financial and management structures of partner organisations is essential to supporting discussions on how the budget will be designed and administered e.g. is financial management central or decentralised;
- Any expenditure should be agreed with partner agencies before payment is made and partners should agree to regularly update each other on budget against expenditure;
- It is possible for the organisations to contribute different amounts to the project but it is important that there is clarity from the start about each organisation's ownership of the project. For example, will one organisation have a greater stake in decision-making? Or will the organisation that is contributing less money put in more time to managing the process? Etc.

Research project cost structure

- The biggest unanticipated cost of this project was external consultants necessary in each of the countries because ActionAid and CARE in-country staff were committed to existing work. This increased the cost of the project by over £20,000 – nearly double the original budget agreed;
- National consultants in Malawi, Uganda and Tanzania charged roughly US\$300 per day and the length of the consultancy was estimated at 20-25 days in each country. In the event, the national research probably took longer than this – possibly around 35-40 days including report write up;

- The cost of holding a design workshop, and a review workshop, was significant but were viewed by the project manager and research team as a hallmark of project success.

Topline budget breakdown

	£	%
Consultant fees	34,893	76.3%
Workshops	7,241	15.8%
Other	3,610	7.9%
Total budget	45,744	