

# Research Partnership Case Studies

## Oxfam Monash Partnership

### Background to the research:

Since 2010, the Oxfam Monash Partnership (OMP) has paired academics with Oxfam's field-based teams and communities – combining world-class research and development experiences to address the root causes of poverty that affect people around the world.

Academics from Monash University and staff from Oxfam Australia were already engaging with each other since 2008 (through a Memorandum of Understanding), but in reality, the OMP took off when funding through a philanthropic donation secured support for the partnership in 2010.

Research partnerships is only one area of interest within the OMP. Other areas of focus include student engagement and practitioner development and learning events. The focus of this case study is on research partnerships.

The OMP describes its mission: *The mission of the Oxfam-Monash Partnership is to improve development practice and its outcomes for communities. More specifically, the Partnership aims to bring together the differing yet complementary resources of the NGO and academic sectors, and combine these resources to achieve greater development impact than would otherwise be possible.*

### Interest in the research partnership:

Both Oxfam and Monash share an interest in research that has real world impact. Oxfam is interested in the evidence base to inform and drive connection between programming and public policy.

As described by Monash: *“Monash is keen to support identified needs in the sector. Oxfam is in the best position to articulate these needs and can bring this understanding to Monash.”*

The value of the partnership was described in relation to bringing multiple forces together, bringing *together talents from two sectors* with shared interest to address intractable issues of development and to inform public policy.



Oxfam-Monash Partnership Research Symposium "Learning Through Partnership". Credit: Carla Gottgens/OxfamAUS.

## Outcomes of the research:

The OMP has not just generated learning from specific research activities but also contributed to broader perspectives on knowledge and learning. This is described from the perspective of Oxfam:

*This partnership has influenced our thinking a great deal, especially in terms of how we understand our work and apply knowledge in the organisation. Both are key priorities for the organisation.*

## The practice of partnership:

Key dimensions of the partnership described by both Oxfam and Monash are noted below.

### Long term perspective.

The research partnership is uniquely long term and sits above research often focused at program or project level.

As described by the partners, there is value in this longer-term perspective, which:

- ▶ addresses longer-term horizon needs within the sector
- ▶ enables maturity in conversations
- ▶ builds and is informed from relationships which take time to develop.

*“You have to be realistic about the partnerships – it’s not just smooth sailing. There are different perspectives, time frames. The length of partnership means that challenges can be discussed and put on the table. There is a willingness to find a way forward.”*

### Senior leadership commitment.

A governance committee with representatives from each organisation supports the partnership and provides an enabling environment for staff from both organisations to work within the partnership.

*“The governance committee is part of the enabling environment for the partnership. You need to have representatives from both organisations who are invested in the work and provide a supporting environment to the staff.”*

The governance committee was described by partners as being able to address organisational challenges which may impede the partnership working. As described by one partner: *“Organisations have their own ways of working, which may impede the partnership practice. The role of the governance committee is critical to ensuring that organisations can collaborate despite their different institutional arrangements.”*

### Review and renewal of the partnership.

The partnership has been strengthened through continuous review and reflection. A five-year partnership agreement was established in 2010. To support a next phase of the partnership a review and planning process was carried out in 2015, which was supported by an external facilitator and resulted in a renewed commitment to partnership. Following this review process, a strategic statement of intent was formed and principles and objectives of the partnership were committed to for the next five years. As described by one partner, this process enabled *“An expression of what each organisation wants to achieve and what the partnership wants to do together.”*

### Built from values perspectives and shared interest.

The foundation of ‘shared values’ was reconsidered during the most recent partnership review in 2015. The values perspective and establishing shared interests prompted discussion on key questions such as: *what shared values do we hold? What are our combined aims? Why would we want to work together as entities?*

Annual cycles of planning, review and reporting are also established. These offer the means to share the partnership work and the value of the partnership to a broad range of stakeholders both within the partners but also externally.

### Partnership Lead.

A unique feature of the OMP is that the funding supports the position of a Program Lead, with the “role of working between but also within both organisations”. In-kind resources from both Oxfam and Monash are also provided to support the work.

The Program Lead is a valued resource and is described by partners as essential to making the partnership work. Being part of multiple conversations and knowing when to bring parties together is described as key to the partnership. As described by one partner: *“I don’t think the Partnership would have been successful without this role. To be able to work between both organisations it’s fundamental to understand the two contexts: the research and development sectors. And to not just understand them but have a passion for both sectors. Valuing an evidence base to inform policy and practice is at the heart of the partnership, and also to the success of the role.”*

### Connecting different perspectives.

Both organisations recognised that they needed to know their own organisational interests first and then consider where they overlapped to identify complementary perspectives and agendas. This process of articulating the respective organisational needs was re-examined as a part of the 2015 review. As described by a partner:

*“To manage the surface area between the partners, we try to overlap (the organisational) circles. As part of the process of partnership, we are getting to know different faculties of Monash University, and the faculties are trying to understand the different parts of Oxfam.”*

Over time, the OMP has learned that it is important to regularly revisit the opportunities for joint work to ensure complementarity.

### Identifying research focus.

Following the 2015 review, a new approach for the research partnership is that Oxfam leads the identification of its research needs. This is a shift from previous open calls for proposals from Monash academics which were then matched to Oxfam staff. This enables Oxfam staff to identify the priorities and bring them to the Partnership.

### Co-design of research.

Once research priorities are decided the actual research approach is one of collaboration between Monash researchers and Oxfam staff.

*“It’s something that may be unique, but we take it for granted that we co-design the research. It’s sort of our natural way of working. Because we are interested in translational research, we engage with industry and civil society, and there is a feedback loop – to relate the research to real world issues.”*

### Advice from the experienced:

Informed by their research partnership experience, here are a few words of advice on how to best support research partnerships:

▶ Streamline your partnership processes (such as administration, finance, communications) as much as possible, recognising that organisations work in different ways.

*“Organisations come with their own sets of working arrangements. They operate on their own set time frames, systems and processes. You have to be mindful that in a partnership like this, things take longer than in a single organisation.”*

▶ Recognise that organisations and staff have different incentives for research partnerships, identify these and make explicit in order to effectively manage.

*“Individual and organisational priorities are different at different points in time. Academics are required to demonstrate research income and how much they are publishing. This doesn’t necessarily have bearing for humanitarian workers who may not be aware of the time investment required to get research published.”*

- ▶ Recognise that relationships matter and take time to develop.

*“Good relationships are resource intensive – the Program Lead is a key part of building and maintaining the relationships that are the key to the success of the partnership.”*

- ▶ Both academics and practitioners place a high value on research translation and uptake, however, each group may interpret and value these activities differently. To recognise the investment of research participants, researchers, NGO and community-based staff, it is integral to have clear and agreed plans for research uptake...

*“The traditional processes of research dissemination through academic journals doesn’t always reach communities in a timely way – if we are able to agree on who the key audiences are for our research – together and in advance - then our work has a greater direct impact on those who would most value its findings and recommendations.”*

## Lessons learned:

### Insights from the case study resonate with broader perspectives on research partnerships:

- ▶ Build relationships as an essential foundation of your partnerships and this takes time and resources
- ▶ Identify both individual and shared interests, of each organisation and individuals involved in order to then identify shared interests and complementary value of working together
- ▶ Consider a long-term perspective recognising how long it takes to prepare and set up a partnership
- ▶ Conduct regular reviews for your partnership in order to reflect and improve on practice based on lessons emerging
- ▶ Ensure you have organisational support to create an enabling environment for your partnership
- ▶ Secure resources to manage the working relationships and business processes of partnership

## Journal publications and other resources related to the research:

Numerous reports related to the OMP are found on the partnership website.

See website: <https://www.monash.edu/oxfam>

Reports related to specific research areas are also found on the website highlighting specific research activities, including in the area of gender in Sri Lanka; accountability in Cambodia and South Africa; gender and climate change in Bangladesh.



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