

SESSION 2 OVERVIEW

Constructing effective high-quality research partnerships

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ABSTRACT



Partnerships are viewed as a central part of the global food system transformation agenda. In recent years there has been a growing focus on research-for-development partnership models. The CGIAR framework for 'Quality of Research for Development' is helpful in organising ways to think about how research can be impactful. It organises four elements of research: Relevance, Scientific Credibility, Legitimacy and Effectiveness. Among research leaders, legitimacy and effectiveness have been found difficult to operationalise and this hinders adoption. In addition, a global assessment of agricultural research found that only about 2% of published agricultural and agronomic research has original and high-quality data for small-scale producers. Prioritisation of technical innovations, academic definitions of research excellence, unequal research collaborations, and funding constraints appear inhibiting to research application. My presentation emphasises research culture and how the perfect research-for-development strategy is of little use without research behaviours and attitudes to support it. I argue that legitimacy is a precursor to effectiveness. A shift in research approaches from research-for-development to research-in-development is one way to consider power over priorities and how research programming engages in partnerships.

The title of my presentation is the same as the session: 'Constructing effective high-quality research partnerships', but my talk focuses on what sits behind it, in terms of research principles, culture and approaches. First I will take you on a little bit of a journey to get there.

Figure 1 is a painting about the historical origins of island life in Malaita Province in Solomon Islands. It is painted by a local artist, named John Limaito'o and we quite often work with him for creating artwork around protected species, conservation and sustainability and food security. In this scene, women are coming ashore from the artificial islands in Langalanga Lagoon. They are bringing with them fish and other aquatic foods. On the other side, people are coming down from the bush. They are bringing roots and bush foods, and there is an old man with building materials. This is the heartbeat of the Malaitan food system. They exchange aquatic foods and products from the sea for products from the land. Figure 1 looks like a painting from a historical



Figure 1. Painting about goods exchange in Malaita Province, Solomon Islands.

past, long gone, but a lot of these practices continue to be foundational for food and nutrition security in these settings.



Figure 2. Takwa Market in North Malaita.

Figure 2 shows Takwa Market in North Malaita, and as you can see the market is very simple by some definitions. Food is often traded on the ground, but throughout Christianisation and colonisation and modernisation these practices have remained more or less the same, inferring that it is a pretty good way to think about food system resilience and food and nutrition security in these settings.

From the outside, these systems often get tangled into narratives about food system transformation, and that they require external intervention to be made more effective or efficient. An alternative way to look at it is that these are the building blocks of a more food-resilient future in the islands of the Pacific. It is true that there is fragility and that a lot of the species or foods that are being traded at these markets are experiencing threats, and that is clearly where research has a role to play.

But as a critical reflection: What kind of research are we doing? How do we make our research ‘count’?

Making our research ‘count’

For several years I followed a project called the Ceres2030 project, which had a number of elements to it. One element was that it sought to evaluate the utility of research in addressing the great challenge of ending hunger. Quoting from the editorial that was published in *Nature Plants* on 13 October 2020,

A surprisingly consistent result was that only around 2% of published agricultural and agronomic research has original and high-quality data about solutions for small-scale producers.

My point here is not to say that 98% of research is meaningless. I am sure it is very meaningful and has utility in various aspects of these fields. But the finding does raise a couple of questions about the research that we are doing and how we do it.

Words like ‘legitimacy’, ‘relevance’ and ‘effectiveness’ are being mentioned at this conference; and according to the prospectus this conference aims to focus on these features. This is something we work quite a lot with in the CGIAR, and the CGIAR has a framework of quality of research for development (Figure 3).

It is a really complicated space, and certainly not a new space: think about the utility of discovery science and various aspects of applied sciences, how they fit in with our pursuit and aspirations to do good and to make a contribution to these grand challenges.

- Relevance is the ability of science to listen, and to adopt priorities of the systems that it is trying to study.
- Scientific credibility is what we are taught at universities: how to define research questions; develop methodologies to answer them; our ability to analyse, interpret and draw conclusions from those data.

Everyone in this room is more or less capable of doing that, I'm sure. But we are not taught about relevance so much, and we are certainly not taught about legitimacy and effectiveness.

- Legitimacy is the ethical and fair representation of the participants in the system under study, to make meaningful contribution to the definition of research and the design of research, and its intended use.
- Effectiveness is the potential of the research to make a contribution; to be adopted.

The documentation of the CGIAR highlights this. A survey in June 2020 showed that among science leaders in the CGIAR, 'elements of legitimacy and effectiveness were most challenging to mainstream' into planning, management and practice (Figure 3). That raises a few questions, particularly given our own mandate that we are trying to make research count and make a contribution.

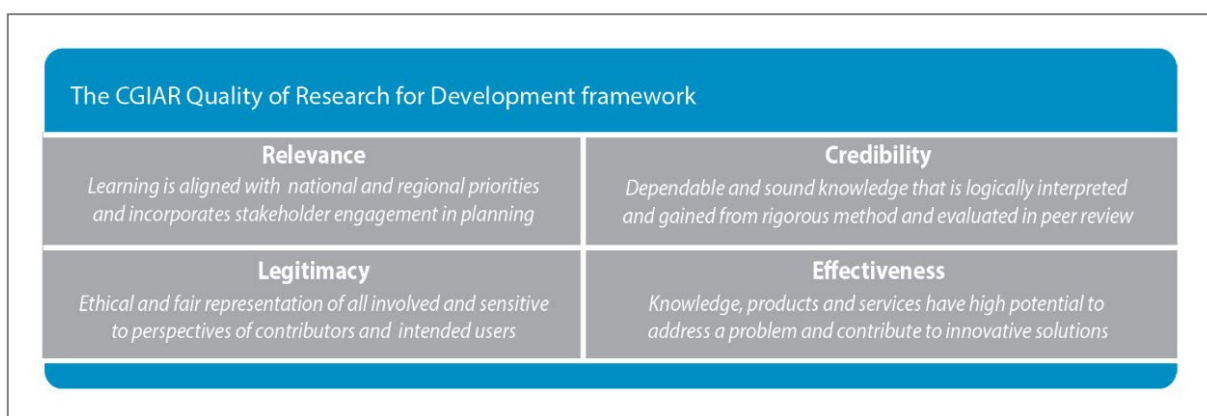


Figure 3. The CGIAR framework for recognising 'high-quality partnerships'.
 Source: Independent Science for Development Council (ISDC) 2020.

I think a lot of our university qualifications, and the educational system in educating our next generation of scholars, do not really pay attention to the *point* of doing research – at least in our fields. This is something we thought a lot about. Several years ago, as we were going through a process of designing two new ACIAR projects for work together with the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources in Solomon Islands, we wrote up quite a long journey of WorldFish in Solomon Islands (see Schwarz *et al.* 2021) – forty years next year – and we sought to discuss and use that experience as a way to think about these features: about legitimacy and effectiveness in particular.

We started working in Solomon Islands in 1985 under a hosting agreement with the national government. At that point, the ministry, today's ministry, was the Division of Fisheries under the Ministry of Agriculture, and it had about 20 staff members focused on coastal fisheries: areas that we are most engaged in. Fast forward to 2020 and there are now almost 60 staff members engaged in these areas of work; 80% of them have university qualifications and 100% of them have a diploma or above. The point is, the ministry is highly capable compared to the 1980s, and that means that WorldFish have to operate in a completely different way, and we have to think completely differently about the research that we do. The potential for research to be effective or impactful is possibly greater than ever. I think the Australian international development policy is well aware of that, and is recognising that there is a great need to develop approaches and practices to support those ambitions.

In the same paper, we sought to conceptualise some elements of thinking about the journey of partnership, and we used ‘power over priorities’ as a unifying concept. In Figure 4, these triangular-shaped bubbles are meant to represent (in blue) WorldFish’s power over priorities, and (in green) the ministry’s power over priorities. It is meant to represent that these days the ministry is not so much capacity-constrained as it is resource-constrained, and so we have to operate research programs and projects that seek to contribute to that resource.

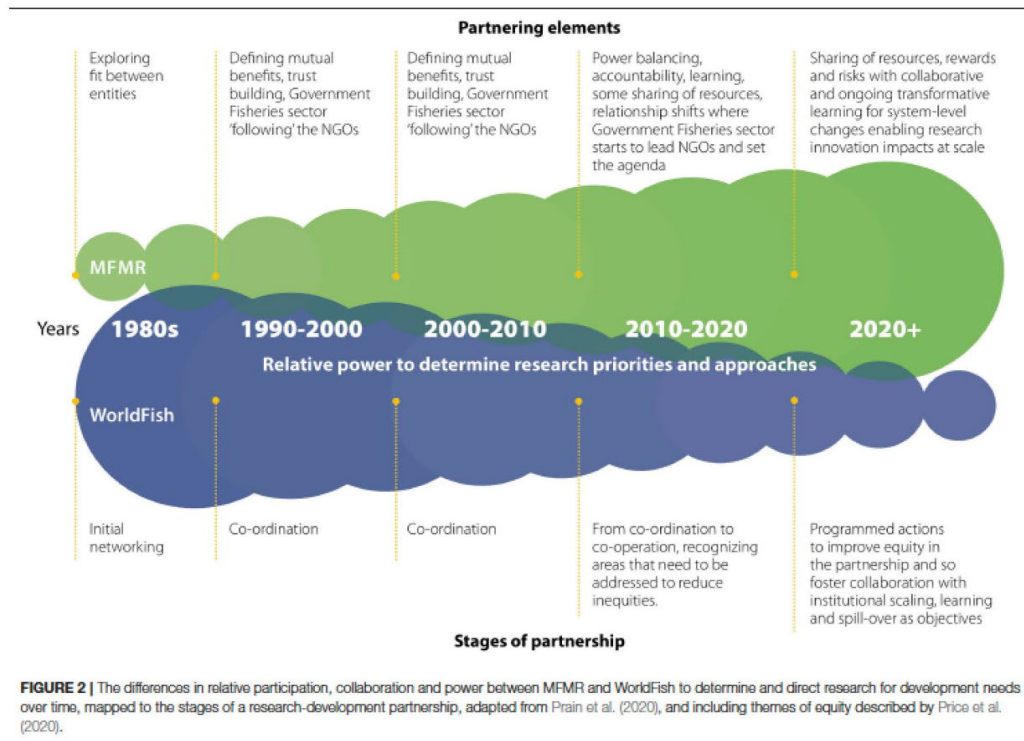


Figure 4. ‘Power over priorities’ illustration from Schwarz *et al.* 2021.

I would like also to make a point about the pursuit of organisational growth. The little blue bubble at the righthand end in Figure 4 is where WorldFish is today. In working for an international research organisation, the narrative is often about growing, with more money, more staff members. But an alternative way to think about it is ‘being fit for purpose’. Our programs in Solomon Islands are quite small, and quite fit for purpose.

This also prompts some concepts, or ways to think, or approaches, where traditionally we talk a lot about research *for* development. It is a choice of words that we use in framing our work, such as in this conference, in the research that we do, and so on. But this way of thinking can also involve a shift in thinking about research *in* development and an integrated approach – to acknowledge that development is actually *not* separate from research (Figure 5). I don't think the intention with the ‘research for development’ vocabulary is to separate them, but by definition it somehow does. I think it has also given rise to a whole new body of work around knowledge transfer, knowledge translation, and all these things that are essentially a ‘construct’ from doing research for development.

An alternative way to think about it is to focus on investing research funding and resources *into* the development space, and creating those unique research opportunities that are not possible without that investment.

Research-for-development:



Research-*in*-development:



Figure 5. Research approaches.



Figure 6.

We operate a program across the Pacific based on ACIAR support. Across the network there is diversity. The point of Figure 6 is to say that it is very difficult to arrive at a conclusion about what is a good strategy, what is the strategy for engagement, national partnerships, national research and development models, and so on. Blueprinting a strategy, or a step-by-step process through which others can follow in similar footsteps, is impossible, because the single conclusion I can draw – from all these countries that we are operating with, and the multitude of partners that exist within them – is that all of them are at different stages of their own journeys in participating or understanding the role of research, their exposure to international research, their willingness to engage with international research.

For an ACIAR Project Leaders meeting for the fisheries program, I was asked to focus on ‘the current strategies that you and your teams use to support the uptake and use of the knowledge you generate’. Again, this seems to be creating a position narrative: that first we do research and then we try to apply it somewhere or seek to have someone else apply it. I really struggled with this, because it is difficult to arrive at a blueprint or a strategy. We have documents that point our research pathways towards the national goal of the ministry and so

on, but they are just papers. A strategy is of little use unless there is a culture to support it. So my response was to deliver a cliché: ‘culture eats strategy for breakfast’.

Over the years we have started talking more about research behaviours and attitudes, and ways to think about how we do research, than we do about the technical content and the scientific credibility of what we do. That has necessarily, for us, involved a transition away from evaluating ourselves based primarily on how many publications we have, and looking much more closely at how we engage in the conversations we are having with the right partners and whether we are listening to design research that meets demand.

Finally, speaking particularly to the Crawford Fund scholars, I encourage you to immerse yourselves in the 1980s and 1990s literature on Participatory Rural Appraisal and action research, because that school of thought contains principles around doing research that I think are highly relevant for ways to also think about partnerships and ways to engage.

Also, ‘listen’, ‘have fun’ and ‘be nice to people’ (Robert Chambers 1997). I think those are very good principles.

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Hampus Eriksson is a systems ecologist with 20 years’ experience from transdisciplinary collaborations in the academic, fisheries and international development sectors in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. He holds a joint appointment as a Professor at the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS) at the University of Wollongong and as a Senior Scientist leading the WorldFish research program in Solomon Islands. In his WorldFish role he is also leading work in the CGIAR Initiative on Aquatic Foods, coordinating a growing program on island food systems. His research portfolio includes island food system assessment, and how to design and evaluate research for development initiatives in these systems. This is an applied research agenda that includes both theory and practice to nurture legitimate partnerships. Hampus is regularly sought by international organisations and research agencies, for advice and for leadership on incorporating such principles in partnership models and research design.