

Research collaboration for impact evaluation: A study of gender and WASH in central Vietnam

*Caitlin Leahy, Keren Winterford and Juliet Willetts, University of Technology Sydney;
Nghiem Phuong Tuyen, Vietnam National University; Lee Leong and
John Kelleher, Plan International Australia*

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a new opportunity and urgency for effective partnerships for sustainable development, calling for new research models and non-traditional forms of data. SDG17, target 16, calls us to ‘enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilise and share knowledge, (and) expertise to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals’. The 2030 Agenda as a whole promotes integration between goals which requires collaboration across disciplines, sectors and geographies.

This paper examines a research collaboration and unpacks the innovations, enablers and constraints within it. It analyses effective research collaborations to explore the intersection of two SDGs, Goal 5 which focusses on gender equality, and Goal 6 whose focus is clean water and sanitation.

Partnerships in research

Partnerships in international development research have a particular set of characteristics which give rise to certain enablers and constraints. The modalities and configurations of such partnerships are becoming more diverse but typically comprise partners from supporting countries (the global north) and implementing countries (the global south) bringing together academics and practitioners.

As global issues become more complex, there is growing recognition from both researchers and practitioners of the need to collaborate. Practitioners increasingly value evidence and researchers increasingly look for opportunities for applied and grounded approaches. However, Carbonnier and Kontinan (2014) assert that research partnerships in international development reflect the same unequal donor-recipient relationships of international development cooperation. This plays out in unequal funding, unequal knowledge and the utilisation of expert networks in favour of partners from the implementing countries. Capacity development is seen as one approach to avoid a traditional and unequal division of labour in which the implementing country partners organise logistics and collect data and the supporting country partner/s design, analyse and publish the research (loc.cit).

Upreti et al (2012) suggest that research partnerships seek to learn from each other and develop new forms of knowledge production. Capacity development can be used to facilitate a process of mutual learning if it can move beyond transfers of skills and resources to promoting two-way exchanges that improve research outcomes and bring partners into a collective action arrangement. The Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing

Countries (KFPE) states in regard to the different types of knowledge partners bring to collaborations, ‘the more fully the potential for synergies inherent to this knowledge is tapped, the more knowledge and insights are multiplied—and the more promising the research project’ (KFPE 2014). Bradley (2007) suggests that in essence, successful capacity building should enhance all researchers’ ability (and that of practitioners in the case of research-practitioner collaborations) to define a relevant, needs based research agenda and stick to it.

The Vietnam study

Research aim

Over a 12-month period, the main objective of the study was to examine the effect and impact of Plan International’s Gender and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Monitoring Tool (GWMT)¹ in three central provinces of Vietnam and its achievement of strategic gender outcomes. The causes and circumstances that led to these outcomes were also explored. Strategic gender outcomes are those that move beyond practical changes in roles and relationships between women and men, to those that indicate a shift in power relations towards increased gender equality (Moser 1993). A gender outcomes framework was used as the basis for design and analysis for the research.²

The partnership and research methodology

The research utilised various methods and a quasi-experimental design to compare the experiences of different groups who had had varying degrees of exposure to the GWMT. Semi-structured interviews with 48 people and participatory pocket voting activities with 139 people in seven villages in Central Vietnam were used to uncover strategic gender changes experienced by women and men of different ages and ethnicities, including people living with disabilities.

The motivation for partnership was based on Plan Australia’s interest in partnering with ISF-UTS based on its record of high quality and rigorous WASH research as well as experience working with in-country research institutions (in this case, CRES). ISF-UTS was keen to partner with Plan to build on previous work Plan had done on exploring gender outcomes in WASH programs.

The research concept and hypothesis were defined by Plan Australia and ISF-UTS in 2014 and a proposal for a two-year research study was submitted to the Innovations and Impact Fund under the Civil Society WASH Fund within the Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The original submission to DFAT was

not successful and DFAT subsequently offered an opportunity to reshape and resubmit the proposal informed by a 12 month funding arrangement.

The collaborative approach between the research partners was designed to ensure academic rigour, ethical approaches, and research quality and integrity as well as ownership of the process and results by Plan practitioners and government partners in Vietnam who were well placed to influence or set policy and strategy.

Summary of research findings

Improved gender equality

The findings of the research are not the focus of this paper and are therefore summarised. The research uncovered considerable positive strategic gender change occurring in the sites where Plan is implementing WASH programming. It was clear that WASH programming contributed to the achievement of gender equality, evidenced by the links participants made to WASH programs, policies or outcomes in general. For example, women were encouraged to participate in WASH related training whereas previously only men took part in such public activities. The research also found that change processes towards gender equality are complex, non-linear, influenced by a range of factors, and can require a range of stakeholders to catalyse and reinforce positive gender equality outcomes for these changes to take place.

Research communication

For research to have impact, the findings must reach those who can use them. This research was intended to inform the practices of the research partners, Plan Australia and Plan Vietnam, their government counterparts in Vietnam, as well as other civil society organisations undertaking work in the WASH sector where there is greater focus on gender and inclusion. All academic outputs have been led by ISF-UTS and co-authored by Plan International and CRES. The research findings have been communicated in English and Vietnamese as full and summary reports and in one journal article.³ A version of this article was presented at the 6th Research for Development Impact (RDI) Conference in Sydney in June 2017 and the work will be presented amongst other global work on links between gender and WASH at the Stockholm World Water Week conference in Sweden in August 2017.

Capacity building through collaboration

The research was designed to provide capacity development for the CRES and Plan Vietnam partners. This was partly due to the funding requirement to describe 'how local research capacity would be developed' but also due to the values underpinning this research partnership which focussed on supporting local research capacity and avoiding extractive research processes. The key innovation in this research was the formal training, 'learning-by-doing', critical reflection and mentoring approaches exemplified by workshops and partnership check-ins. These approaches are in line with the interconnection of the SDGs within the 2030 Agenda.

Training and piloting workshop

The first in-country workshop combined skills training with testing and refinement of research tools that had been developed by ISF-UTS and its partners. Piloting was built into the training which allowed the researchers and practitioners to apply their learning and also strengthen their skills in qualitative research. Post-pilot reflection resulted in real time improvements to the research tools and process. Vietnam-based partners commented afterwards that the research 'reflected the reality of the situation'.

The workshop served to further collaboration within the research partnership. The face-to-face format and discussion allowed active involvement of the local researchers, practitioners and government partners. Participants reflected that they felt their views and opinions were listened to and their contribution was valued. One CRES researcher commented that:

...this training method is active and we can change the questionnaire. Usually it's just provided and we have to use it. This way, we get the knowledge better (workshop evaluation March 2016).

Because the researchers who conducted field interviews and the program staff who managed logistical aspects of data collection all undertook the same training, they were aware of the need for research ethics, merit and rigour but also of flexibility for field work. During data collection itself, remote support was provided as well as clear templates for collation of data. Regular check-ins between ISF-UTS and CRES ensured critical reflection and ongoing improvement of practice. CRES reported that their practice improved along the way and they reminded each other to always ask 'why? why? why?!' (Data collection check in call, May 2016).

Collaborative analysis workshop

The second in-country workshop took a similar learning-by-doing approach where research partners were trained to analyse the research. The workshops outlined, for example, the difference between inductive and deductive analytical processes and the rationale for applying each at different points in the analysis. This contributed to strengthening analytical capacity beyond the specific requirements of this research. Participants were provided with extracts of raw data to work with as well as initial analysis of other data sets which they then deepened, critiqued and contextualised through activities and discussion.

A space was provided for the different perspectives to come together, challenging and contesting early findings and conclusions. Intense debate and discussion took place providing the opportunity for ISF-UTS as lead research partner to learn from Vietnamese-based partners to situate findings in a broader context reducing the chance that data would be misinterpreted.

All Australia based and Vietnam based partners took part in the workshop. All were encouraged to engage with the data. This reduced the risk of surprises when the research findings were later revealed and increased the chances of the research results being used and shared.

Providing space for Plan Vietnam, together with government partners, to examine and discuss emerging findings also strengthened these relationships. Setting aside the time to discuss research communication and to map out the audiences, key messages and appropriate formats in Vietnam could also mean a better chance of results leading to change in policy and practice.

Enablers of the partnership

Funding arrangements and requirements

The success of the partnership was enabled by a number of factors. Firstly, the funding provided through DFAT's Innovations and Impact Fund (under the Civil Society WASH Fund) provided an opportunity to examine a potential innovation—the GWMT. This meant that research could be defined more broadly than a more standard type of evaluation. The research hypothesis and methodology were co-designed by the Australian-based university and NGO partners which meant that the agendas of two partners were more likely to be aligned from the outset. The Fund also required development of local research capacity, which ensured that from the beginning a learning component was included in the process.

Existing relationships

There were a number of existing relationships that were built upon to set up and carry out this research. This allowed the partners to have honest and respectful discussions when challenges or differences of opinion arose. Plan Australia and Plan Vietnam had an established partnership and had worked together on WASH projects since 2006. Since 2011, they had also worked to jointly develop, trial and implement the GWMT. ISF-UTS and CRES had collaborated on previous research and had a good working relationship. Since 2007, Plan Australia and ISF-UTS had had a relationship through membership of the Australian WASH Reference Group—a collaboration between academic and practitioner groups. Plan had also commissioned ISF-UTS to conduct or contribute to various studies and the two organisations shared mutual engagement in sectoral learning events and conferences.

Clear roles and communication

Roles were clearly defined from the outset and were supported by clear lines of communication between all partners during an initial foundational meeting. Roles were defined through contracts (between Plan Australia and ISF-UTS, between ISF-UTS and CRES, and between Plan Australia and Plan Vietnam through the Plan International internal grant funding agreement process) but also through work schedules and project plans. To manage the project and the partnership, a weekly phone meeting was set up between Plan Australia and ISF-UTS and three teleconferences were organised between all partners, including a final reflection on the partnership itself.

CRES commented during reflection that we 'assigned roles that fits with partner's capacity, spent time to make sure all parties understand what and how the research would be performed and defined tasks clearly with feasible deadlines'

(CRES researcher, March 2017). For example, Plan Vietnam and CRES cooperated effectively during data collection that relied on Plan's knowledge of sites, participants and local contacts, and CRES' research practice and rigour. CRES has since drawn on this model to ask for more time to establish clear role and relationships.

Openness and flexibility

The openness demonstrated by partners was also an enabler of success. The already established trust between partners meant that research limitations and flexibility were openly raised and honestly recorded. It also meant that challenges to the methodology and early research results were made in good faith, leading to robust discussions between ISF-UTS and Plan Australia.

Flexibility was demonstrated by partners in changing circumstances. The initial submission for the study anticipated funding of \$200,000 over a two-year timeframe. The resubmitted proposal approved by DFAT scaled back both the time frame to one year and funding to \$100,000 which meant that partners needed to work together to revise the research methodology and design. Flexibility meant that the number of participants and villages could be further scaled back during an early phase of the research. Random sampling was also revised due to local realities in Vietnam that surfaced during the first in-country workshop.

Challenges and constraints

Timeframe and resources

Whilst the funding arrangements enabled the partnership to form around an interesting research opportunity and with a capacity development focus, the funds and timeframe were largely insufficient to support a truly collaborative approach. The workshops and pilot processes were particularly resource and time intensive, yet yielded the most positive outcomes for the partnership. Considerable time was needed to set up and maintain a genuine collaboration including regular communication as well as time to understand the objectives of each partner and subsequently align the research process. Considerable time for discussion was also needed during the analysis and writing stages to build trust and mutual understanding from each party. Investment of such time is needed for any collaboration such as this, yet the funding and timeframe provided by DFAT did not reflect this resulting in all partners making substantial in-kind contributions to cover this short fall.

Undefined mutual capacity development

ISF reflected that there was a missed opportunity for more explicit mutual capacity development, where ISF-UTS would define its own learning needs as part of the design of the learning component. Such learning would have included a more in-depth understanding of the GWMT in-practice, for example, by attending a GWMT session. Deeper learning about the local context would also have aided the research design and analysis of the data. Whilst workshops did result in greater learning by ISF-UTS, other partners and researchers learned a great deal through the overall process

of the research. This could have been a more explicit objective.

Ceding decision-making authority

Interests and agenda of researchers and practitioners are often not completely aligned. Whilst partners demonstrated openness and flexibility, several ‘sticking points’ arose during the research process and partners needed to accommodate others’ interests. One partner reflected on one such example regarding research tools saying: ‘No one was 100 per cent happy with where we landed, rather, we agreed that it was good enough’ (Partner reflection, teleconference, December 2016).

One example was the key data collection tool which was a semi-structured interview containing broad questions but which relied largely on probing. ISF-UTS felt that this was the most appropriate tool to explore strategic gender outcomes with women and men. Plan Australia were concerned that this form of interview would not elicit the type or amount of data required. Recognising ISF-UTS’s research expertise Plan ceded decision-making authority, however a clearer process for reaching agreement could have been built into the process.

Lessons learned

Co-design

Assessing and then describing change processes, particularly gender change, is very complex and this study relied on the multiple perspectives and the contextual insights of each partner to manage this with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Ideally, co-design should have taken place at the earliest stages of the research to consider the research questions, analytical framework and the earliest drafts of research tools. Carbonnier and Kontinen (2014:12) have pointed out the need for seed money for exploratory meetings and joint research design, which is often not available. Although this research involved all partners, including CRES and Vietnam government partners, exploratory meetings may have strengthened the research process and results.

Integration across SDGs

The research was originally designed prior to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015. However, the research topic as outlined, did bring together two critical sustainable development goals: SDG5 and SDG6. Had there been an explicit intention to integrate them, greater effort would have been made to ensure that the research itself supported this.

Conclusion

This research collaboration demonstrated several common characteristics of researcher and practitioner partnerships in international development. However, it also pushed these boundaries to bring about positive outcomes for the research and the partnership itself. There were particular enablers of these impacts such as the funding arrangements, pre-existing

relationships, clear roles, and lines of communication, openness and flexibility of partners. There were also a number of constraints including limited time and resources, and a missed opportunity to establish an explicit mutual capacity building objective which may have been used to maximise the innovations around collaboration and capacity building.

Overall, the research demonstrated a quality process and credible research results. It also demonstrated that researchers and practitioners can bring together interests and agendas that are not completely aligned. Collaboration and mutual appreciation of the distinct but complementary contributions that NGOs and academics can bring to improving development outcomes, can still produce results.

Ultimately, the test of the impact of this research and research partnership is what each individual amongst the partners will take forward into their subsequent roles and experiences, and what effects the research and its findings have both on them, and others, to whom the findings are communicated.

Notes

- 1 For full information on the GWMT, see <https://www.plan.org.au/~media/plan/documents/resources/gwmt-march-2014.pdf> (last checked 07 July 2017).
- 2 The gender outcomes framework draws on research carried out by the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology (ISF-UTS) and International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA) in 2009–11 (Halcrow et al 2010). It was developed by Naomi Carrard and Juliet Willetts from ISF-UTS. For more information, see Carrard, NR, Crawford, J, Halcrow, G, Rowland, C and Willetts, JR (2013) ‘A framework for exploring gender equality outcomes from WASH programmes’, *Waterlines: International journal of water, sanitation and waste*, 32(4), 315–333.
- 3 For the full research report, see <http://www.cswashfund.com/shared-resources/references/practical-strategic-changes-strengthening-gender-wash>. The research has also been published in Leahy, C. et al (2017) Transforming gender relations through water, sanitation and hygiene programming and monitoring in Vietnam, *Gender and Development*, 25(2) (forthcoming).

References

- Bradley, M 2007, ‘North–South research partnerships: challenges, responses and trends: A literature review and annotated bibliography’, IDRC, Canadian Partnerships Research Awardee paper.
- Carbonnier, G and T Kontinen, 2014, *North–South research partnership: Academia meets development?* EADI Policy Paper Series, Bonn, Germany, June 2014.
- Moser, CON 1993, *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, practice and training*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE) 2014, *A Guide for Transboundary Research Partnerships*, 2nd ed., Switzerland.
- Upreti, RU, AB Zimmermann, B Debele and G Cisse, with contributions from the NCCR North–South Regional Coordinators 2012, *Partnerships in Development-oriented Research: Lessons learnt and challenges ahead*, Kathmandu, Nepal: NCCR North–South, South Asia Coordination Office.