SVRI Forum 2015 Pre-Conference Workshop Reflections: Building and sustaining fruitful partnerships between activists and researchers

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Overview

Research-practitioner partnerships are essential to advance the field of SIPV towards innovative and effective prevention and response solutions. Such collaborations have enormous potential for combining complementary, multi-disciplinary strengths to generate meaningful and relevant knowledge that can be easily translated into action. For example, activists and programmers can help to frame research questions that emerge from practice, adapt research methodologies to be acceptable and feasible, and help ensure research findings are accessible to communities, partner organisations, and policy makers. On the other hand, researchers can contribute expertise in research design, evidence-based theory to drive programming, and provide rigorous, credible data to understand the impact and process of change effected by interventions. Often these partnerships are initially welcomed as optimistic win-win agreements, and many thrive and result in long-term collaborations throughout all stages of research and development (design, implementation, evaluation, analysis, and scale up), or through multiple studies or programmes. Other partnerships, however, are less successful—challenged by competing priorities, funding inequities, misunderstandings and other tensions.

Workshop Aims

The workshop explored the potential challenges and strengths of activist-researcher partnerships through participant sharing and case study examples. Explicit aims were to: a) recognize value of strong research-activist partnerships; 2) openly discuss potential pitfalls and (frequently unacknowledged) tensions; and 3) identify practical strategies to set up and maintain strong collaborative partnerships throughout all research and development stages. Twenty-six enthusiastic participants attended the workshop, comprised of a diverse group of researchers, activists, and donors from 12 countries.

Workshop Agenda

- Introductions, expectations, and establishing safe space
- Case study presentation by Dipak Naker (Raising Voices) & Karen Devries (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine): Potential strategies and learnings from activist-researcher partnerships
- Ideas Bazaar: Series of questions and small group activities to uncover potential benefits, challenges, and solutions in activist-researcher partnerships
- Group discussion & synthesis of ideas
- Evaluation & closing

Key Ideas That Emerged

The workshop unearthed complex dynamics that often underlie partnerships between activists, practitioners, and researchers. Many participants expressed their surprise at the tone of the discussion—and in particular the candor with which participants were willing to share and unpack challenging experiences. The open sharing in a safe space was a welcomed and, at times, cathartic experience for many, highlighting the importance of establishing such a space at the outset of the workshop as well as the salience of the topic discussed. Indeed, there was a consensus in the room that a practical focus—the 'how to' of creating mutually enriching, sustainable partnerships—is critically important as a foundation for groundbreaking work in the SIPV field and yet nearly always overlooked or ignored. These two pieces of learning are very instructive. While the discussion took many twists and turns and it is not possible to capture everything in this summary, below we highlight some key ideas that appeared to resonate most strongly.

Pitfalls to Avoid	Strategies to Adopt
• Speaking different languages (e.g., 'long-term' and 'scale' mean different things to different actors) • Over-reliance on quantitative methods that may be difficult to interpret • Last minute inclusion of activist partner late in the proposal development stage • Wanting to modify the programme content or implementation model during the evaluation • Ill-thought through selection of partners (e.g., Are values aligned? Be picky about who you take on this journey…) • Leaving potential tensions unaddressed: differing timeframes, organizational cultures, pay scales, and the genuine fear many activists have of being 'judged' • Getting 'stuck' in initial roles; failure to grow, adapt, and transform within the partnership • Creating a skills hierarchy within the partnership, where research skills are assumed to be more critical than programming expertise, community relationships, and the practical know-how of implementing interventions • Ignoring issues of power and voice that can materialize within any partnership • (Activist) making assumptions/conclusions about the impact of program work based on shaky evidence • (Researcher) failing to translate academic papers/technical findings into more intuitive (accessible) headlines	• "Our Work" – a shared broader vision for the partnership is the essential foundation for any effective partnership • Establish MOUs with clear objectives, roles, responsibilities and time frames (which take into account partner priorities and allow for feedback loops/research integration, especially process-related findings) • Name (and value) the complementary skills each partner brings and understand what is important about project processes and outcomes to each partner. While findings must be presented objectively, activists can collaborate on overall framing and context of the work • Have an inception and design workshop early in the collaboration to clarify research questions, methodologies, and management processes within the partnership. Include a discussion (and decision) regarding how data will be made comprehensible to the programme team whose work is being evaluated • Align the theoretical models of the intervention and the research • Invest in relationship building throughout. Articulate the shared benefits and characteristics of a healthy partnership • Make transparent, frequent, and clear communication a priority. Share information; think about creating a digital platform • Include (integrated) mixed-methods research whenever possible, and a focus on process documentation to help activists better tell their story • Think about activism early: How will research findings amplify the activist voice? What are the opportunities? • Plan and reassess (continuously) together. Remain flexible and take the exit door if it's just not working!

Moving forward

It is clear from the active workshop participation and informal comments from participants throughout that more opportunities to engage in candid discussions about research-activist partnerships are needed. It may be of interest to participants (and the broader field) for organisations to share illustrative documents of partnership agreements, agreement negotiation agendas, or partnership building strategies in order to bolster this conversation with actionable guidance. While not very common, there are a few existing resources on the topic of building meaningful researcher-activist partnerships. If you know of others kindly share with Anik (*geversanik@gmail.com*) or Sophie (*sophie@raisingvoices.org*).

- Growing as an activist organization through evaluation research (Raising Voices, Uganda)
http://raisingvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/LP2.EvalResearch.FINAL_.redesign.dec2015.pdf
- Strengthening Research and Action on Gender-based Violence in Africa (International Center for Research on Women, USA)
http://www.icrw.org/publications/strengthening-research-and-action-gender-based-violence-africa