



Third Global Symposium  
on Health Systems Research  
Science and practice of people-centred health systems  
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Swiss TPH



Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute  
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Introduction by Thomas Schwarz, Medicus Mundi International Network  
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## An ideal match! Successfully connecting NGO practice and Health Systems Research

### Background

Medicus Mundi International, Network Health for All, is a network of organizations working in the field of international health cooperation and global health. The Network promotes access to health and health care as a fundamental human right and supports the efforts undertaken in this respect by its members.

Today's session organized by our Network is in line with one of our key fields of activities. MMI wants to create platforms and opportunities for actors in international health cooperation to critically reflect their own methods and practices, share information and experiences and learn from each other in order to develop their institutional and personal skills and practices. In this regard, how to successfully connect NGO practice and health systems research has been a key topic of our Network and our networking over the last years – and will remain it in the future.

### The session in the context of the Symposium

Let me quote the Symposium programme: “Strengthen learning communities and knowledge-translation platforms working, to support people-centred health systems across disciplines, sectors and countries and, particularly, bridging practitioner, activist and researcher communities” is one of the objectives of this forum.

In people centered health systems of developing countries, international NGOs and their national partners are essential resources both for the provision of health services and the development of sustainable health systems *and* for health systems research.

In our session we want to share and discuss with you two examples of how members of the MMI Network have started integrating an evidence based approach into their institutional culture and operational practice. We want to show the positive impact of collaborative research, but also experiences of how to cope with eventual challenges during the process of collaboration.

Be it for shaping the research agenda, for prioritizing research needs, for accessing research objects or for turning research outcomes into action and for ensuring that research has impact on people lives, we want to show that NGO practitioners or “doers” are an interesting partner for the health systems “thinkers” as they are close to local needs and communities, to those who are needed for, those who benefit from research, those who should be the owners of research and the actors of change.

Two cases will be presented and discussed by my colleagues from Cordaid, the Swiss TPH, Memisa and the ITM Antwerp. The focus will be less on the content of the research collaboration, but rather on the processes.

## **How to successfully connect NGO practice and Health Systems Research?**

There is a considerable literature on applied research, implementation research, solution-oriented research, or demand driven research, as most of you know better than I - and I suggest that we will not enter into a discussion of the terminology and methodology today.

I was absolutely inspired by the plenary on research paradigms and by the sessions on participatory action research, and it is great to see the draft “Cape Town statement on advancing implementation research and delivery science” - which I signed as one of the first after having discovered the draft.

In our session we will focus on something rather concrete, the collaboration between NGOs and research institutions. This partnership has been analyzed in various publications. When the MMI Network, in 2009, developed its “Research Policy”, we have been mainly inspired by the study on “The role of NGOs in global health research for development” by H el ene Delisle and colleagues (2004).

Today, however, I will refer to two academic newcomers: First to the not yet published master thesis “Get evidence into NGO practice and policy - Get NGO practice into research” undertaken by Nicole Moran at the Swiss TPH and including interviews with many members of the MMI Network. Nicole – who is present at the Symposium with a poster and is also here in the audience – identified enablers, barriers, and supportive tools for integrating research into

NGO programming; for translating research findings into NGO practice and policy, and for NGO – Research Institute collaboration. As a concrete product of her thesis, she developed a toolkit for NGOs to get evidence into their practice and for supporting researchers to get NGO practice into their research. Here some key statements of her work, as starting points:

*“The need for stronger linkages is acknowledged by both parties: Research institutions recognize the comparative advantage of having an NGO as a partner for research; NGOs recognize the expertise and experience of research institutions that can support them in the process of integrating rigorous research into their work.” “There are still many challenges to tackle for NGOs as well as for partnerships between NGOs and research institutes; for instance, the limited experience and capacities of many NGOs to integrate and use research, and differences between goals, time frames and work cultures of NGOs and research institutes.” (Nicole Moran, Get evidence into NGO practice and policy - Get NGO practice into research)*

On the other hand, let me refer to studies undertaken by Kate Gooding from the University of Leeds, mainly in Malawi, on NGOs and research. Her studies are not yet published either. Kate states:

*“NGOs’ involvement in service delivery and advocacy may provide opportunities that can support research. First, involvement in service delivery may mean NGOs can identify research questions that respond to frontline knowledge gaps, so ensuring research is relevant. Second, service delivery may provide a source of research data, through opportunities for field testing, evaluating different service delivery approaches and using data collected as part of programme monitoring and evaluation. NGOs are well placed to ‘get research out of practice’. Third, involvement in advocacy might bring a commitment to promoting action on research findings and provide a channel for research communication, so helping get research into policy and practice.” (Kate Gooding, NGO service delivery as a goldmine for research data: experiences from NGOs in Malawi)*

## **Introduction into the session’s program**

### **Collaboration on sexual and reproductive health in the Great Lakes area**

*Christina de Vries, Cordaid, and Nina Ndabihore, Swiss TPH*

My colleagues Christiina and Nina will show you that NGO/research collaboration has proven to be successful and highly relevant for:

- evidence for policy influencing at donor and at institutional levels
- evidence to improve intervention effectiveness
- evidence on outcomes
- evidence for the importance for raising more funds for applied research

## **Social protection and adherence to an equity fund in Mauritania**

*Elies van Belle, Memisa, and Bart Criel, ITM Antwerp*

The Belgian NGO Memisa and its partners have chosen to follow a people centered approach and to cooperate both with communities and research institutes to understand the complexity of social protection beyond health care and to increase access for the poorest. Elies and Bart will present the case of a social protection program in Mauritania to illustrate different methods and domains of collaboration between an NGO and a research institution.

## **Instructions for the preparation of the discussion**

For the discussion that will follow the inputs, I propose to refer to three “check-lists” I found in a very useful small paper on “Promoting academic-practitioner partnerships in international development research” (INTRAC, World Vision, Bradford University, 2013):

### **Recommendations for International development NGOs**

- Take a position on research collaboration, reflecting on institutional obstacles such as staff time for research and research skills required to participate in research
- Carry out cost-benefit analysis of collaboration with academics in order to address demands for evidence and value for money, as well as to promote innovative approaches and best practice
- Encourage staff and partners to highlight research gaps and questions to academics and research funders
- Demand open access to academic publications and datasets which have emerged from collaborative Research

### **Recommendations for academic institutions involved in international development**

- Review incentives for collaborative research projects, recognising the benefits of alternative forms of publication and impact in career pathways
- Provide support to promote collaboration, for example additional support with proposal design and support for secondments
- Invest in collaborative relationships through joint activities, such as teaching and seminars, and fellowships for NGO researchers involved in collaborative work
- Encourage collaboration between students and NGOs, e.g. internships, placements, PhD projects, in order to build up an ethos of mutual respect between researchers in different types of institution
- Turn to NGOs for information about research gaps and questions.

### Recommendations for research funders

- Provide more funding streams that focus on innovative collaborative research, encouraging research which pushes beyond traditional academic outputs and tackles burning issues arising from real needs.
- Collaborative research needs to be assessed using appropriate criteria, recognising challenges and needs which differ from more traditional research projects.
- Recognise that collaboration requires more time and resources for managing relationships, more capacity building, and more diversity in dissemination and publication activities.
- Carry out a review of collaborative research projects to ascertain their added value, challenges and weaknesses.
- Interrogate how local organisations and people benefit directly from international development research; this might include considering compensation for the time and resources they devote to providing data and feedback

So let us go.

Documentation and references:

[www.bit.ly/mmi-evidence](http://www.bit.ly/mmi-evidence)