



## Bridging the gap

Research collaboration in fragile  
and conflict-affected states



# Bridging the gap

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We would also like to acknowledge the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law ('the Platform') for their funding and valued support throughout the organization of this workshop series.





## Executive Summary

The international development community often lacks evidence-based research to inform its programming in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS). Both donors and implementing organizations recognize the need to engage with national capacity in order to gain a contextually-grounded perspective, particularly in countries where international access is limited by insecurity. However, multiple barriers prevent international development and national research actors from collaborating meaningfully. A lack of networking opportunities during planning of research projects is part of the challenge.

### *Workshops series: providing an opportunity for networking*

A consortium of organizations, Integrity Research and Consultancy, SpringFactor and SPARK, conducted a networking activity, supported by the Secretariat of the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law to better understand what constrains research collaboration. The aim

was to explore the barriers and enabling factors to using national research capacity in FCAS. We chose three locations to compare how international development and national research actors work together in environments where conflict and instability are widespread: **Mali**, **South Sudan**, and **Syria**. We also selected **youth employment** as an example of international development programming that involves collaboration with national research actors.

### *Project scope*

The budget for this work was made available by the Platform with in-kind contributions provided by Integrity, SpringFactor and SPARK. The workshops and consultations were conducted over a period of three months from March to May 2015.

### *Approach*

We designed a series of participatory workshops in Bamako, Juba and Beirut (for Syria) to explore the topic of research collaboration and to provide an opportunity for international development actors (donors and implementing agencies, including NGOs and companies) and national research actors (universities, companies, think tanks, youth groups and independent consultants) to network on the utilization of national and local research capacity. The workshops were complemented by stakeholder interviews in the three countries. A final consultation was held in The Hague in May 2015

### *Findings*

Seven key barriers emerged through the discussions in each workshop, grouped into two broad categories:

<b>Barriers to collaboration between international development actors and national research actors:</b>	1. Limited opportunities for international and national actors to communicate and network on research
	2. Research agendas driven primarily by international actors without consulting national research actors
	3. (Perceived) lack of research capacity among national actors leads international development actors to look elsewhere for research services
	4. National actors often required to produce research outputs in languages different from their national languages, using unfamiliar development terminology
<b>General barriers to conducting research in fragile and conflict-affected states:</b>	5. Political, social and cultural factors can prevent national researchers from gathering quality data
	6. Areas may be entirely inaccessible for research purposes due to conflict or instability
	7. Limited resources provided for national research within international programmes

Workshop participants also proposed a mix of **enabling factors**, combining general, overarching solutions with specific recommendations, to help overcome these barriers:

- 1 International development and national research actors mutually build capacity on conducting research in FCAS
- 2 Increased opportunities for research networking between international development and national research actors
- 3 National research actors given more opportunities to work with international development actors in designing research for programming
- 4 More structural support provided for research capacity by government at the national level

Our findings are based on participant input from the three workshops, complemented by interviews and a consultation in The Hague. As such, they are not intended to be research findings, but rather a starting point for discussion and future projects.

### *Findings on youth employment*

While the primary focus of the workshops was research collaboration, the theme of youth employment was used as one example of where national research capacity can inform program design. In particular, international actors recognize the need to gather better country-level data about the connection between unemployment and youth participation in violence in FCAS. National researchers provide a nuanced understanding of how to define youth (which varies widely across countries) and how to speak with respondents about such a sensitive topic. Youth employment served to focus the discussion among a diverse group of participants and lend a more practical bent to the workshop in Mali. It also encouraged members of Malian youth groups to become vocal participants in the debate.

### *Preliminary best practices*

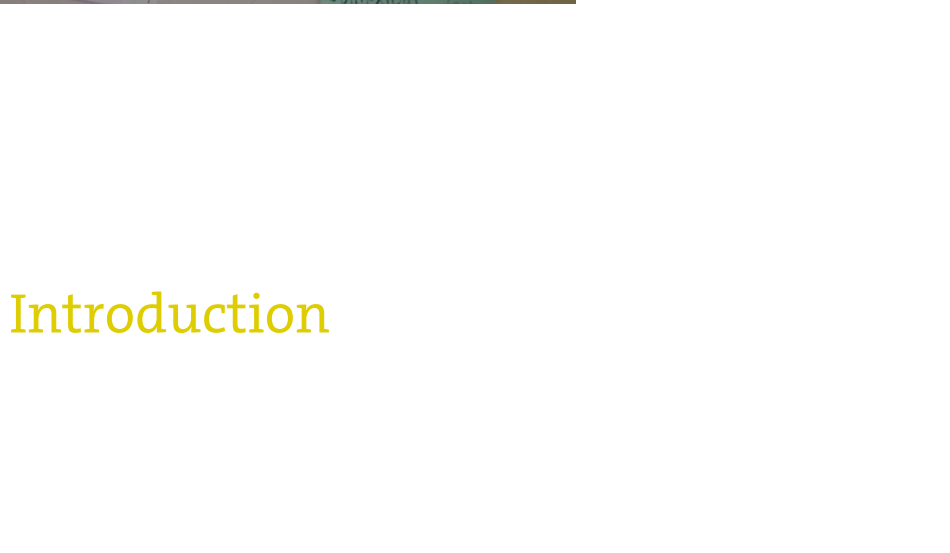
This project has uncovered a few **preliminary best practices** to help international development and national research actors collaborate more effectively on research for international programming. This list is not exhaustive. It stems from the insights of research participants, a preliminary review of the literature, and existing programs with proven results.

- 1 **Twinning arrangements between national and international research institutions or individuals**, whereby national researchers are paired with international advisors who can support their work and provide mentoring on various aspects of research.
- 2 **International investments in long-term partnerships with national researchers** offers them the opportunity to build up their skills and to contribute meaningfully to ongoing programs.

- 3 Participatory approaches to national research conducted for international programming to provide opportunities for national researchers to lead on community-driven research.
- 4 Involve national actors at multiple stages of the research cycle, rather than just data collection, in order for their insights to inform the design and implementation of research projects.

No doubt there are other practices implemented by international and national actors to be explored in further networking activities and research projects.





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A consortium of organizations – **Integrity Research and Consultancy**

A consortium of organizations – **Integrity Research and Consultancy**, **SpringFactor** and **SPARK** – implemented a series of workshops in **Mali (Bamako)**, **Juba (South Sudan)** and **Beirut (for Syria)** to promote networking on research collaboration between international and national actors. Through these workshops, we identified both barriers and enabling factors to collaboration. We identified a number of preliminary best practices primarily targeted towards international development actors seeking to improve opportunities for utilizing national research capacity. We intend these to serve as a starting point for future engagement and research projects.

The budget for this work was made available by the **Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law** with in-kind contributions provided by Integrity, SpringFactor and SPARK. The workshops and consultations were conducted over a period of three months from March to May 2015.

### 1.1 Setting the scene: why the lack of research collaboration?

This workshop series relates to the wider debate about the need for international development programming to be more politically smart and locally led.<sup>1</sup> One practical way of doing so is through greater collaboration with national research actors to contribute to the evidence base for international programming.<sup>2</sup> In a recent briefing note, the Independent Research Forum argues that the greater involvement of national research actors, or what it calls “bottom-up participatory learning”, is essential to realizing the post-2015 Sustainable Development agenda.<sup>3</sup> We have indeed witnessed growing demand from donors for their implementing partners to engage with national research capacity in generating evidence for programming. Tenders with a research focus released by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), for instance, strongly encourage or require bidders to include ‘Southern’ research organizations as partners in their consortia.

While there remains a dearth of literature exploring whether the utilization of national research capacity does indeed improve results in programming, this has been one of the lessons drawn from our first-hand experience providing research services for the international development community in FCAS, including Mali, South Sudan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan and Syria. National researchers in these countries have provided in-depth contextual understanding crucial to designing programs, and often have far wider physical access to research locations, especially in highly conflict-affected areas that international actors may be unable to reach.

While the international development community recognizes the benefits of working with national research actors, they are often remote from the original source of funding. As shown in Diagram 1, the research supply chain is comprised of several layers and distinct contracting processes, leaving national and local research actors far removed from the design of research within international programming.<sup>4</sup> This limits their ability to contribute meaningfully to the evidence-base for programming, along with a number of other barriers explored throughout this workshop series and detailed in section 2.

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<sup>1</sup> As seen in a recent series of discussion papers published by the Overseas Development Institute, <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9204.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> As an example: Devex, “Why country researchers are key to the post-2015 agenda”, <https://www.devex.com/news/why-country-researchers-are-key-to-the-post-2015-agenda-81265>.

<sup>3</sup> Independent Research Forum 2015, “Ground post-2015 frameworks in bottom-up action learning,” Feb. 2014, p.2

<sup>4</sup> Integrity Research and Consultancy, “Addressing the Challenges of Research Supply Chains in Conflict and Fragile Environments,” Concept Note, February 2012

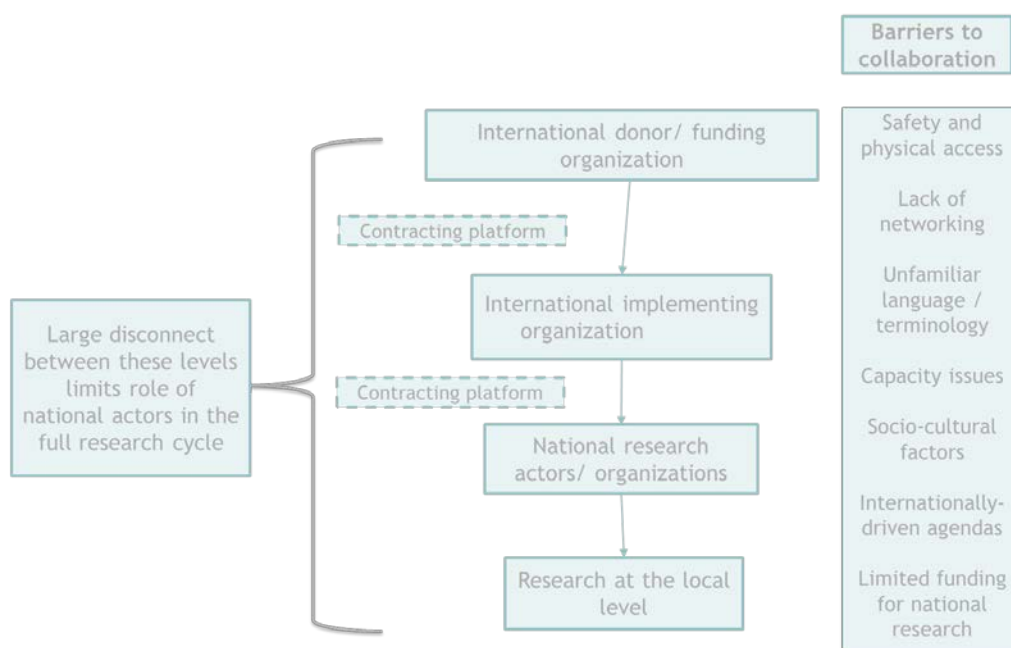


Diagram 1. Simplified version of the research supply chain in FCAS

### *Fragility and conflict focus*

We focused on countries experiencing high levels of insecurity, including ongoing civil conflict, given that the challenges surrounding the procurement of research are magnified in these contexts. In times of insecurity, research is often one of the first activities to be interrupted, especially as researchers themselves are endangered by conflict. Conducting rigorous research can be extremely difficult in contexts where ongoing conflict also prevents physical access to certain locations. This often renders the international development community more reliant (or entirely reliant, in the case of Syria) on national research actors to collect data in areas where access by internationals is limited or entirely restricted.

### *Theme of youth employment*

The workshops were conducted around the theme of youth employment, which is a critical area of research for international development actors seeking to better understand whether it can help reduce participation in violence. Focusing on this theme allowed us to narrow the discussions while still identifying important lessons that could be relevant for other areas.

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## BOX 1 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

- **International development actors:** A general reference to the international development community, comprising donors (both bilateral and multilateral) and implementing organizations, including non-
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- governmental organizations (NGOs) and development companies.
  - **National research actors:** A general term used to refer to academic institutions, companies, think tanks, and independent researchers/consultants and other national research institutions/individuals. Collectively, these actors represent national research capacity.
  - **National research:** Term referring to research that occurs at a country level, implemented by national research actors.
  - **Local research:** Term describing research that is occurring at a sub-national level, whether in communities, districts or states/provinces. Often conducted by researchers from those areas, referred to as 'local researchers.'

We have actively sought to distinguish between the terms “local” and “national” research. The former is often used as short-hand for the latter, when in fact the terms refer to different concepts.

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## 1.2 Methodology

**Workshop Facilitation:** We conducted three full-day workshops in Bamako, Juba and Beirut using a facilitation methodology developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs known as Technology of Participation (ToP). The specific tool we selected was the Consensus Workshop, which we have re-named Brainstorming Workshop.<sup>5</sup> This tool was selected for two principal reasons: (1) its emphasis on interactivity and full participation from all attendees, regardless of nationality or job position; and (2) it generates findings that are comparable across the three country contexts by eliciting responses in a similar format.

**The target audience for the interviews and workshops included:** independent local researchers; local/national research organizations (e.g. companies, think tanks, universities); national university representatives; donor representatives; international NGO representatives; international consultancies. The workshops had 24 participants in Bamako, 14 in Juba and 9 in Beirut (we were unable to bring Syrian researchers to the workshop due to the challenge of movements in and out of the country). We held a final workshop and presentation in The Hague, attended by 18 people. Annex A contains a full list of participants.

**Stakeholder Interviews:** In order to complement the findings from the workshop, our team conducted interviews with key individuals, ensuring we included both of national and international respondents. These interviews allowed us to gain a more in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by both groups when seeking to collaborate on research projects. See Annex B for the interview guides.

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<sup>5</sup> The method for designing and conducting a consensus workshop is based on *The Workshop Book: From Individual Creativity to Group Action*, Brian Stanfield, Institute for Cultural Affairs, 2002.



## Chapter 2

# Our findings from Bamako, Juba and Beirut

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The findings below are based on participant input from the three workshops, complemented by interviews and a consultation in The Hague. As such, they are shaped by the specific attendees and not intended to be representative of international and national actors in Mali, South Sudan and Syria. The workshops did, however, allow us to compare findings across the three contexts and begin to identify and summarize trends.

The main limitation of the methodology used is that the findings combine the views of both international and national workshop participants, rather than seeking to actively separate them, as would be done in a research project. The key benefit, however, was providing participants with an

opportunity to network and jointly explore the challenges of research collaboration without having to separate into two distinct groups.

### 2.1 Key barriers

The following focus question guided our discussion on barriers to research collaboration: **What factors prevent research produced by local and national actors (including youth) from informing programming by international actors on youth employment?** Each workshop generated seven to nine barriers each, which were aggregated to form the seven overarching barriers outlined in this section.

The workshop series initially sought to focus on barriers to the uptake of research conducted by national research actors for use by international development actors. However, an analysis of the barriers also required a broader understanding of the challenges along the full spectrum of the research cycle: from procurement and data collection, to analysis and programming. The seven barriers have therefore been organized into two broad categories. Individually, each barrier does not fully explain what prevents or inhibits collaboration between national and international actors, but taken together they outline factors that exacerbate this issue.

#### Barriers to collaboration between international development and national research actors:

- 1 Limited opportunities for international and national actors to communicate and network on research

The challenge of creating and effectively utilizing platforms of communication between national research and international development actors was highlighted in each workshop as a fundamental barrier to successfully engaging with national research capacity.

Beirut participants spoke of a sense of “disconnect” between international and national actors. They noted that the “rules of the game” in Syria are constantly changing, meaning that understanding what research is needed requires strong communication between international actors and Syrian researchers on the ground. Limited platforms for interaction mean that these changes are not always communicated in the fastest and most effective way. Participants in Juba highlighted a general lack of networking opportunities, leading to a “lack of awareness of local and national research organizations” among international actors.

A similar sentiment was expressed in Bamako: “on se connait pas” - we don’t know or understand each other. Participants noted that because research positions are under-paid and tightly controlled by the government in Mali, often the largest market for research lies with international actors. Therefore, researchers who are already connected with international actors, often through studying abroad in France and elsewhere, have privileged access to research opportunities. A Malian researcher presented a study he had conducted on youth employment during the workshop session, in conjunction with the University of Copenhagen. While participants found the study inspiring, it was also seen as an exception to the experiences of the majority of national researchers in Mali who do not have access to these

opportunities. It is also difficult for national researchers to build long-term relationships with specific individuals within international organizations, as many move to a new posting within several years.

## 2 Research agendas driven primarily by international development actors without consulting national research actors

Donors do not or are not always able to work in a demand-driven way when conducting research in FCAS. Research priorities and timelines are established well in advance, according to the particular procurement timetables of different international organizations (particularly donors), leaving little space for consulting with national research actors on the design or implementation of research projects. Additionally, national research actors are rarely informed of how their outputs are used by international actors, diminishing opportunities for joint analysis on how research produced nationally can inform programming.

In Beirut, participants spoke of a “white man” approach to describe how the international development community has responded to the Syria crisis, noting that national perspectives on research are not always taken into account. A Syrian working for an international NGO who attended the workshop said she had often felt silenced by international actors, who did not respect her opinions and analysis. The lack of feedback loops to ensure that national researchers are informed of how their outputs are being used is another example of the international dominance of research agendas, citing the “irrelevance for local communities” as a key concern. In Syria, however, establishing these loops is often very challenging due to the nature of the conflict. The majority of international development organizations operate remotely and are unable to access researchers directly, unless they are brought into neighboring countries, mainly Turkey and Lebanon.

In Juba, participants highlighted the issue of research fatigue; there is much duplication and repetition of research by international actors, which has led to disengagement from both South Sudanese researchers and research respondents. This has stemmed partially from a reported lack of consultation with national actors when designing programs, even prior to planning research activities.

Similar points were echoed in Bamako, however with one key difference: Malians who attended the workshop noted that the international development community has pre-determined priorities because they are not sufficiently aligned with the government. This is risky given the government’s role as a gatekeeper for research, and can expose national research actors to risk if they do not follow the government mandate. This is particularly true for academic researchers, who suffer more constraints than researchers working for Malian NGOs that often have connections to international NGOs, which offers them shelter. Participants further noted that “whoever pays, decides” and that “donors arrive with the questions and the answers.” Another challenge is the fact that different donors have complicated procedures for the procurement of research services, including national research. Most researchers are unaware of these procedures; they bump into this bureaucratic wall and tend to become discouraged.



### 3 (Perceived) lack of research capacity among national actors leads international development actors to look elsewhere for research services

The question of “research capacity” was discussed in detail in each of the three workshops. Two key perspectives emerged: several participants noted that national researchers lack the skills to produce quality research (supply side), while others noted that international actors’ perception of this capacity gap is greater than the reality, leading international actors to look elsewhere (demand side). Many national researchers are highly qualified, but invisible, and international actors assume they must look regionally or beyond to find the right candidates. In other cases, capacity truly is low and international actors must either build capacity or work with international researchers.

In Beirut, participants spoke about the “absence of a culture of research” in Syria, stemming from the impact of living under a dictatorial regime that unilaterally determined the research agenda and actively discouraged critical thinking skills. This has also led to a distinct lack of access to mentoring opportunities to complement any formal training received through education. On the demand side, international actors noted the difficulties involved in finding objective researchers that will not be biased towards a particular community or faction in the war. However, other participants noted that this is only a perceived bias and that the question of finding objective researchers is far more nuanced.

In the Juba workshop, participants spoke at length about the fact that qualified and skilled national researchers are often overlooked by international actors, who assume there is a general lack of national capacity. Participants did also acknowledge, however, that the national research sector does suffer from a lack of skills and training. This is largely attributed to the lack of education and training opportunities throughout decades of conflict.

Unlike Syria and South Sudan, the key challenge in Mali is not entirely conflict-related, but rather due to an absence of investment in research capacity. Participants spoke at length about the lack of “rigor” in research; the quality and standards of the outputs are too low to be of use for the international community. In addition, younger researchers are consistently locked out of opportunities, while older researchers are seen as the trusted elite, making research an unrealistic avenue for youth employment. The best young researchers will often leave the country as soon as they can.

### 4 National actors often required to produce research outputs in languages different from their national languages, using unfamiliar development terminology

Challenges related to language were discussed in depth in Bamako and Juba. In Mali, the biggest constraint according to participants is the fact that English has become a lingua franca in the international development community, despite the fact that French is the official national language. English is not widely taught in schools and is therefore not spoken fluently by most researchers. Malian researchers who are comfortable in English therefore have greater access to research opportunities with international organizations, in addition to international researchers with English language skills. A similar issue was raised amongst the Juba participants as well. Many researchers were trained in Arabic in Khartoum. Given that



the transition to independence, and to adopting English as a national language, is still relatively recent, researchers are faced with the challenge of needing to adapt to this new environment.

Participants in Juba also focused on the “terminology disconnect” between international and national actors. Workshop participants, particularly national researchers, noted that international development actors are working in a sector with specific terminology or ‘jargon’ and expect this to be incorporated into research outputs. Although the analysis may be accurate, national researchers receive feedback that their reports are too simple and do not contain the terminology that is expected. This raises the question of whether the international community is hearing what it needs to hear, or what it wants to hear when it comes to presenting research findings.

### General barriers to conducting research in FCAS:

- 1 Political, social and cultural factors can prevent national researchers from gathering quality data

In Bamako, participants expressed concern that “political/cultural sensitivities can put researchers at risk.” Researchers are vulnerable when they do not receive political support for what they do, and therefore being fully independent is considered risky. Issues related to youth employment are particularly sensitive. In the case of this workshop, a representative from the ministry dealing with youth employment was invited in order to make a few remarks and allow participants to feel comfortable enough to participate. The government has a tendency of keeping the official number of unemployed youth low, because it can be politically-sensitive information. There are also ethnic sensitivities in addition to political ones. Inter-ethnic strain has worsened over the past few years. Conducting research on or with the Tuaregs in Northern Mali, for instance, is seen as challenging, especially by Malian researchers from other parts of the country.

In Juba, participants discussed various “contextual factors affecting the quality of research”, including culture, politics, gender, age and ethnicity, many of which have been magnified since the crisis erupted at the end of 2013. There are several aspects to consider when deploying researchers in different locations of the country. Tribal and linguistic identifications can endanger researchers who risk their safety by interviewing members of other groups (for example between Dinka and Nuer). Less extreme but still challenging are the aspects of gender and age: many research respondents will not speak to women, or to researchers who are perceived to be youth (a large range, between 18 and 24 years, in South Sudan). In these cases, it is therefore easier and safer for international actors to hire regional or international researchers who will not face the same constraints.

In Beirut, focus was given to issues of “mistrust” that have built up after years of intensive civil war in Syria. Respondents are increasingly reluctant to speak to researchers, as they do not know what the research will be used for, and whether researchers are affiliated with groups such as the state intelligence services. This mistrust has also resulted in an increasing “research bias,” as researchers are only able to gather data within their pre-existing social communities. Due to a mix of these factors, the quality of data decreases and may not be

usable for international programming, a challenge facing both national and international actors in the current context.

## 2 Areas may be entirely inaccessible for research purposes due to conflict or instability

The challenges of remote management extend to various aspects of international programming in FCAS, and can heavily affect the ability of both international and national researchers to collect data in areas that are inaccessible due to conflict.

In Beirut, participants noted that there is no “one Syria”: the country is sub-divided, and therefore research may be localized (which is still needed and useful), but will not be fully representative. Additionally, international actors do not have direct access to researchers within Syria to train them in the required research methodologies and to de-brief with them following data collection. This either requires additional resources to bring researchers to neighboring countries, or finding alternative means of communication. We were unable to bring Syrian researchers to the Beirut workshop in order to directly understand their own concerns and challenges.

South Sudan faced the same challenge and shift with the crisis that erupted in December 2013. Prior to this point, researchers were able to access all ten states to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. As fighting spread throughout the countries, more states became entirely inaccessible, and research opportunities dwindled. Coupled with the challenges of accessing vast areas of the country during the rainy season, this has meant that both national and international researchers have been unable to access certain areas of the country to collect data.

## 3 Limited resources provided for national research within international programs

Even though budgets for international programs in Mali, South Sudan and especially Syria are large, funding available for research components can often be limited and dominated by international actors. Three main issues dominate: research budgets tend to constitute a small percentage of overall program budgets; international development actors prefer to work with international organizations, allocating limited resource to national research actors; and international researchers generally have higher fee rates than national researchers, thereby taking up a larger proportion of the budget.

In Juba, participants noted that international actors have “control” over the research agenda and often favor working directly with other international development organizations. Given that research budgets are already low, national research actors will therefore have a smaller allocation from donors than international development organizations. The question of salaries was highly sensitive, given that national researchers in South Sudan are generally paid far less than international researchers.

In Mali, participants noted that the international community tends to have a short-term perspective and requires results to be delivered quickly within a certain budget. This can favor international research actors who mobilize quickly but do not always understand the

constraints of doing research in Mali, which often requires long lead-in times and working within a certain cultural context (for instance, communicating with the government).

In Beirut, participants noted that reasonable research budgets exist in international programs, however due to the challenges of physically accessing Syria, international actors are more likely to contract international organizations, including NGOs and consultancies, to manage the implementation of research projects. The question of the absorptive capacity of the country also arose: participants were unsure whether the international development community would be able to work effectively with national researchers even in the case of unlimited research budgets, given the challenges of conducting research in an open conflict zone, including remote access and assuring data quality.

## **2.2 Enabling factors**

To explore the factors that enable engagement with national research capacity, a second focus question was posed in each workshop: **In what ways can both national and international actors address these challenges (referring to the barriers above) and improve the uptake of local research?**

The workshops uncovered a mix of enabling factors, combining general, overarching solutions with specific recommendations. The majority of these factors focused on actions that international development actors can take in order to improve collaboration with national research actors, likely because the former create and provide the research opportunities in international programs. The following four categories capture the areas of activity proposed by participants to enable international actors to use national research capacity to inform their programming:

- 1 International development actors and national research actors mutually build capacity on conducting research in FCAS

Participants across the three workshops identified capacity building as a factor that would contribute to increased collaboration between international development actors and national researchers. However, while building capacity is usually seen as an activity conducted by international actors *for* national research actors, participants advocated more of a mutual learning approach. Concretely, this can be done in a number of ways. When conducting research, assembling mixed teams (comprising both international and national researchers) can allow national actors to be involved at all stages of the research cycle (design, data collection, analysis and programming) to promote learning by doing. This may also naturally increase the exchange of information regarding new, innovative research tools used in fragile environments, for instance using mobile technologies to gather data in hard-to-access locations. Another option raised particularly in the Beirut workshop is to develop mentorship systems, pairing international and national actors either through institutions or on specific research projects. This would, however, be very challenging to accomplish remotely with researchers that are unable to leave Syria.

Given the unique challenges facing the development of national research capacity in FCAS, participants also suggested more top-down capacity building activities designed to support

national researchers. In Mali, participants noted specifically that more training in English language skills would be highly beneficial to national research actors that would like to conduct research for international programs. In Juba, the focus was on the need for grant writing and general fundraising training for local and national researchers to increase the possibility of finding direct funding from international organizations, rather than solely relying on working through international NGOs or companies hired by donors to implement research.

## 2 Increased opportunities for research networking between international development actors and national research actors

The lack of networking opportunities was identified as a significant barrier to utilizing national research capacity to inform international programming due to the fact that international actors are often unaware of what resources and institutions exist. To tackle this challenge, participants in Bamako suggested the creation of “a center dedicated to meetings and exchanges between national researchers and the international community.” Similarly in Juba, participants recommended setting up working groups to discuss research outputs in order to improve perceptions of research capacity for both international and national actors. A complementary suggestion was to create a national research database to highlight existing research capacity that international actors may turn to when beginning to design or implement their programming. The need for greater networking opportunities was also highlighted in Beirut, however lack of access presents an added challenge. A proposed solution was to encourage peer-to-peer communication via social media channels (to the extent that access to these platforms is open), possibly linking this with the mentoring scheme mentioned above.

Increasing both the number and type of opportunities for national and international development actors to connect over the production of research could lead to increased opportunities for engaging national research capacity. Additionally, by creating greater visibility for national research actors, international actors are more likely to have an accurate picture of actual research capacity in different areas, rather than relying on pre-conceived notions. International actors may be able to further understand the many constraints faced by national researchers working in unstable or civil war contexts. For instance, in Mali participants noted that internationals would be able to better understand cases when researchers need the freedom to not publish research publicly when the findings are deemed too sensitive and may put them at risk. One suggestion was to “create a formal framework for relations between local/national and international researchers” to codify these interactions.

## 3 National research actors given more opportunities to work with international development actors in designing research for programming

In order to work more closely with national research actors, international development actors can work to involve researchers or research institutions in all stages of the research cycle, from design and implementation to analysis and programming. In the Bamako workshop, participants suggested that donors reserve a significant period of time at the beginning of any project to understand the Malian context and work with national researchers to do so. Beirut participants highlighted the importance of “involving local research at all stages of the

programming, from design to implementation to M&E” in order to allow national research actors to input into the type of research that is being conducted and ensure it is relevant to their specific community context. Juba participants suggested the creation of “better research coordination and dissemination events for young researchers” that would similarly encourage greater alignment by increasing awareness of what is being done.

#### 4 More structural support provided for research capacity by government at the national level

In order for national research actors to collaborate more effectively with the international development community, they need more home-grown support in developing their skills. National governments should invest in research through universities and other institutions in order to have greater ownership over capacity building. In Mali, participants noted the importance of “respecting the status of researchers” in order to encourage more people, especially the youth, to pursue a career in research. This will require improving training opportunities and offering more attractive salaries. In Juba, participants suggested strengthening research within government ministries by engaging youth in research training, providing capacity building for local researchers and increasing the interest of government bodies in supporting them.

### 2.3 Using national research capacity to better understand youth employment

Research commissioned by the international development community in FCAS can encompass a number of different themes. We selected youth employment to bring focus to this series, drawing on expertise from SPARK, an NGO that develops higher education and entrepreneurship opportunities for young people in post-conflict societies. International development actors are particularly interested in this topic with regard to exploring whether research on youth employment can also help address issues related to youth participation in violence and violent groups.<sup>6</sup>

SPARK has first-hand experience of the need to engage with national research capacity to generate evidence to inform their programming. Academic and policy studies have shown there is a general lack of empirical evidence that supports the relationship between youth employment and stability, reinforcing the need to collect data at the local and national level.<sup>7</sup> A recent study from the Working Group Employment for Stability of the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law specifically explores the subject of research updates on employment issues in post-conflict contexts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Marije Balt, “Youth unemployment in Mali: a magnet for criminals and terrorists,” 23 April 2015 <http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/Blogs/Sahel-Watch-a-living-analysis-of-the-conflict-in-Mali/Youth-unemployment-in-Mali-a-magnet-for-criminals-and-terrorists>

<sup>7</sup> Overseas Development Institute, “What is the evidence on the impact of employment creation on stability and poverty reduction in fragile states: A systematic review,” Rebecca Holmes, Anna McCord and Jessica Hagen-Zanker with Gina Bergh and Franzisca Zanker May 2013

<sup>8</sup> Johan te Velde, “Research uptake for employment and stability in postconflict contexts” <http://www.kpsrl.org/browse/browse-item/t/research-uptake-for-employment-and-stability-in-postconflict-contexts>

Building on the momentum of the “New Deal”<sup>9</sup> for engagement in fragile states, and country-led fragility assessments, there is scope to create a leading role for national researchers, especially when it comes to understanding youth employment and its impact on combatting fragility. SPARK utilizes national research capacity to inform both program design and adjustments throughout implementation, for example through baseline studies and impact evaluations. Working with national researchers, especially at the local level, allows SPARK to build networks and a support base for envisaged activities.

In SPARK’s experience, the failure to work with national researchers can lead to false conclusions about youth employment programming due to incorrect assumptions when designing research questionnaires. For example, inquiring whether someone is unemployed in many fragile contexts will lead the respondent to say ‘no,’ given the negative connotation of the term. National researchers are able to suggest alternative phrasing based on the specific context where the study will be conducted, for example asking if the respondent is ‘seeking a job’ and probing further from there. They also provide input on how to define the term ‘youth’ in a given context, which can include a specific age range, the ability to do physical labor, or the possession of land. National researchers bring an understanding of these nuances and often have the best sense of how certain questions should be phrased, and in what manner they should be asked.

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<sup>9</sup> New Deal for Building Peace, <http://www.newdeal4peace.org/wp-content/themes/newdeal/docs/new-deal-for-engagement-in-fragile-states-en.pdf>



## Chapter 3

# Preliminary best practices

Through this workshop series, we have uncovered emerging best practices in bridging the gap between international development actors and national research capacity. This list is not exhaustive; it has been derived from examples uncovered through the workshops and consultations with both international and national actors, rather than a comprehensive review of existing programming. These examples were selected as they respond directly to specific barriers uncovered through the workshops.

- Twinning arrangements between national and international research institutions or individuals

Twinning arrangements work by encouraging equal partnership between internationals and nationals in undertaking research. This may occur on a project basis, for instance with the youth unemployment study conducted jointly by a Malian researcher and the University of

Copenhagen<sup>10</sup>, or institutionally, as with the Cambridge-Africa program. The latter pairs African Fellows with Cambridge researchers and “aims to strengthen Africa’s own capacity for a sustainable research and mentoring culture, by cultivating the talented individuals who will make this long-term goal a reality.”<sup>11</sup> Twinning can help in tackling several of the barriers above by providing ongoing, formal opportunities for networking, as well as increasing both the understanding of and access to funding opportunities by national research actors.

- International investments in long-term partnerships with national researchers

Building strong networks between international actors and national researchers in fragile contexts is a long-term project that requires a significant investment of time and resources. The NGO International Alert has a specific approach to developing research capacity by working with teams of local researchers on a regular basis, coaching them to upgrade their skills in order to be ready to work with other international organizations and donor agencies. Another example is the organization Swisscontact, which reserves a percentage of its budget for nationally-led research and monitoring & evaluation activities. Adopting a long-term approach to capacity building specifically addresses barrier 3 by encouraging international actors to invest in capacity that already exists, rather than always looking to other internationals first. Long-term partnerships also foster more sustainable capacity-building for national actors, allowing them to practice their skills across multiple different projects.

- Participatory approaches to national research conducted for international programming

Another way to engage meaningfully with national research capacity is to utilize participatory approaches to conducting research in FCAS. The aim of participatory research is to allow participants, often communities, to actively contribute to the research process, taking into account their local priorities. Adopting participatory approaches can encourage international development actors to work more pro-actively with national research actors, as they are central to the successful design and facilitation of this research methodology. This approach is already gaining momentum within the international development community, organized through the Participatory Research Group.<sup>12</sup> The Life and Peace Institute utilizes “Participatory Action Research” to understand the dynamics of conflict at the local level in eastern DRC, and works closely with Congolese partners based on the ground. The Everyday Peace Indicators project, implemented in four African countries, is another example of a bottom-up, locally-driven approach to conducting research.”<sup>13</sup> These approaches respond specifically to barrier 2 by altering the top-down approach that many international actors adopt when designing the research components of their programs, allowing research to be driven by the contextual understanding of national and local actors.

- Involve national actors at multiple stages of the research cycle, rather than just data collection

<sup>10</sup> Dougnon, Isaïe et al. *L’entrepreneuriat jeune au Mali - Etude de cas: Bamako, Segou, Konobougou et Niono* www: L’Ambassade Royale du Danemark au Mali: Ministère des Affaires Étrangères du Danemark . 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Cambridge-Africa Programme: <http://www.cambridge-africa.cam.ac.uk/about/about-2/>

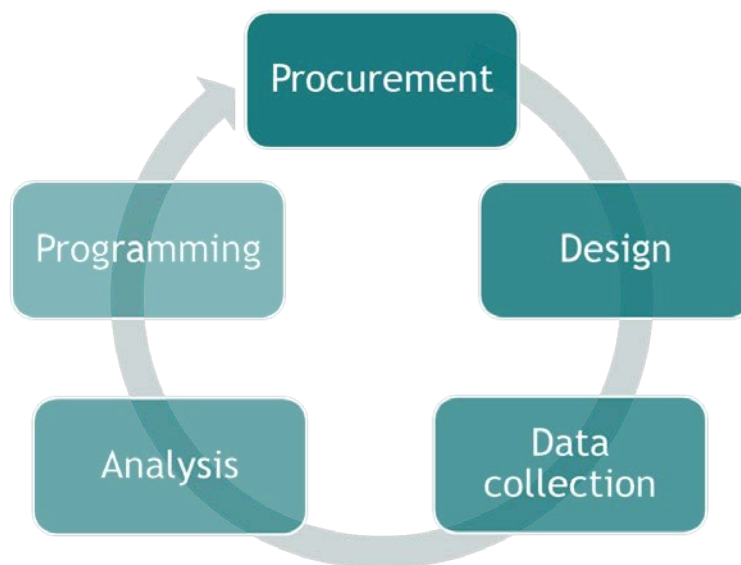
<sup>12</sup> Participatory Research Group: <http://participate2015.org/prg/>

<sup>13</sup> Everyday Peace Indicators <http://everydaypeaceindicators.org/about/>



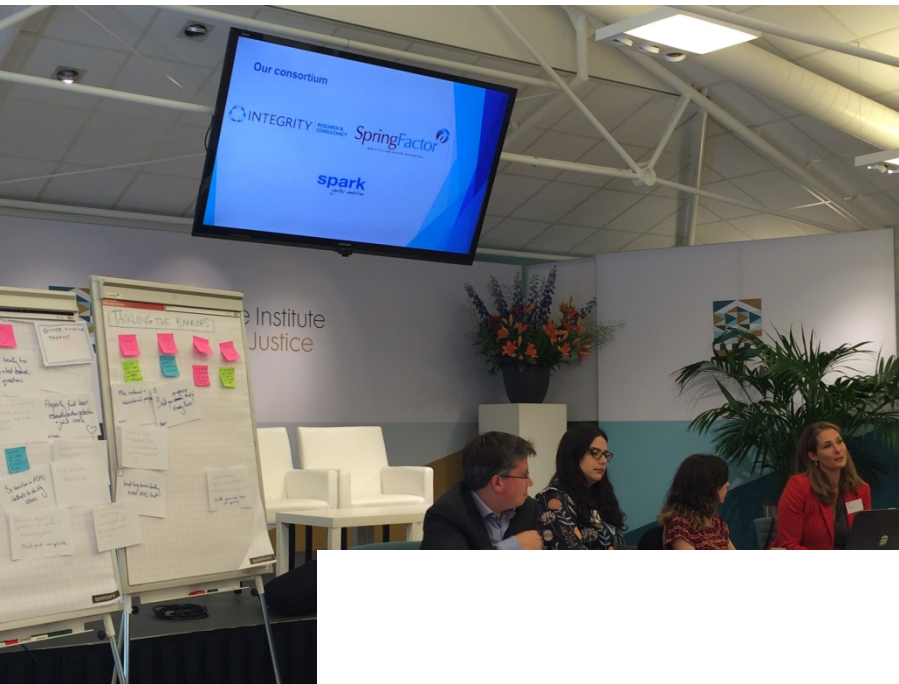
All three examples outlined above feed into a best practice that focuses on adopting a more inclusive approach to working with national research actors. Based on our own experience of providing research services to international development organizations, we find the quality of research conducted in conflict-affected contexts improves when the national and local perspective is taken into account at the design, data collection and analysis phases of a research project, as highlighted in Diagram 2. The analysis then feeds directly back into future programming by international actors. This can be challenging to do when budgets are squeezed and timeframes are pressing, however adopting this approach where possible may contribute to a better utilization of national research capacity in difficult environments. This viewpoint was advocated particularly during The Hague consultation, and in a further meeting held at the Dutch Embassy in London in June 2015.

### Stages of the research cycle - international



*Diagram 2.* Entry points for national actors in the research cycle





## Chapter 4

# Conclusions and next steps

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The findings of the workshop series were presented in The Hague at a consultation attended by a range of international and national actors. The purpose was to begin to disseminate our findings, but also to gather further feedback and views on the subject of research collaboration in FCAS. Participants largely found the barriers recognizable and familiar based on their own experiences. They spoke of the need to recognize and redress “asymmetrical power relations” in research, and to acknowledge that “different kinds of knowledge are used by different kinds of institutions.” Locally-generated knowledge in particular is just as valid as its international counterpart, even though it may be presented in a different form, for instance through story-telling.

Participants also spoke of the need to “invest long-term in building access and trust” with national researchers in fragile contexts, and to “build upon evidence that already exists” at a local level to reinforce national capacity rather than replace it.

#### **4.1 Suggestions for future research**

This workshop series has helped to identify avenues for future research on the topic of research collaboration in FCAS. We provide two specific examples here:

- The Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda adopted in 2005 and 2008 respectively sought to create a framework for encouraging more effective partnerships between international actors and national governments to promote greater aid effectiveness. The key principles put forward were: ownership, harmonization, alignment, results and mutual accountability.<sup>14</sup> Future research could examine and recommend how to apply these principles more explicitly to research for international programming, particularly in FCAS.
- Local First, an initiative of NGO Peace Direct, advocates “a development approach that looks first for the capacity within countries before bringing in external expertise and resources, recognizes that much of this capacity is found outside central government, and understands that local people need to lead their own development.”<sup>15</sup> According to this approach, international development projects can be placed along a spectrum from lesser to greater ownership: “locally developed, locally owned, locally led.” Future research could explore how the analytical framework presented by Local First can be applied to encourage the development of ‘locally-led’ approaches to research needs within international programming.

Future work could also focus on the development of training methodologies and tools to allow international actors to connect with national research actors in a more meaningful way to overcome some of the barriers identified during these workshops.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/parisdeclarationandaccraagendaforaction.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Local First: Development for the twenty-first century, edited by Kate McGuinness, Peace Direct, 2012, p.13

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## Annex A: List of workshop participants

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### Bamako

- Jeune Chambre International (2 representatives)
- Collective Plus Jamais Ca (2 representatives)
- Association pour la culture et le developpement du civisme en Afrique (ACDC)
- Association pour la Promotion de la culture Songhai
- University of Bamako (2 representatives)
- University of Ségou
- 4E Conform
- Representative of youth employment government ministry
- Association Jeunesse Action Mali
- Fair & Sustainable
- SNV
- Oxfam International
- Agriprofocus
- Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2 representatives)

### Beirut

- Basmeh Zeitooneh
- Independent Lebanese consultant
- CRH Lebanon
- Chatham House
- Mercy Corps
- International Crisis Group – 2 representatives
- UNESCO
- International Alert

- Embassy of Denmark
- International Labor Organizations
- IFC/World Bank
- USAID
- Toastmasters Mali

### Juba

- Forcier Consulting
- University of Juba
- Catholic University
- Altai Consulting
- Independent National Researcher
- Management Systems International (2 representatives)
- International Rescue Committee
- Adam Smith International
- University of California/ Independent International Researcher
- ACCORD
- Saferworld
- Independent National Researcher
- Lakes State coordination office

### The Hague

- Centre for Collective Learning and Action
- Durham University
- Hivos
- Institute for Social Studies
- NWO-WOTRO
- Oxfam Novib
- The Broker
- Utrecht University
- Vu University Amsterdam





## Annex B: Stakeholder interview guide

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### *B1 Representative of international donors/ implementing agencies*

- 1 What is your main role in relation to procuring or using local/national research within your organization or work?
  - a. Procurement of international organizations to conduct the research
  - b. Procurement of national organizations to conduct the research
  - c. Directly supervising data collection
  - d. Conducting analysis of collected data
  - e. Using research and analysis already produced
  - f. Other - describe
- 2 Why does your organization work with local/national researchers or organizations?
- 3 What are the benefits and challenges you face in working with national researchers or using national research?
- 4 How does your organization/agency utilize research that has been produced by national actors, both quantitative and qualitative?
- 5 Do you have specific examples of an instance where research produced by national researchers/organizations directly informed or changed programming around youth employment, or other areas?
- 6 Have you ever worked directly with youth as researchers? How did this process work?
- 7 Do you see value in working directly with national researchers in order to inform international programming?
  - a. If so, what would be your key recommendation to your colleagues or peer organizations to improve the use of national research to inform your organization's ongoing or future programming?

*If the individual attended the workshop:*

- 8 Were there any points or comments you wanted to raise in the workshop, but felt you weren't able to because they were too sensitive or difficult?

- 9 Did the presence of national research actors hinder or enable your full participation? In what ways?

*B2 National research actor*

- 1 What is your affiliation as a researcher working with or for international organizations?
  - a. Independent researcher/consultant
  - b. Part of a research organization (private, public, university)
  - c. Both a. and b.
  - d. Other - describe
- 2 Which phases of conducting research are you generally involved in?
  - a. Data collection - qualitative
  - b. Data collection - quantitative
  - c. Data analysis - qualitative
  - d. Data analysis - quantitative
  - e. Supervision of data collection
  - f. Community mobilization
- 3 How much contact do you have with international actors in these organizations when conducting research? For example, is there a large degree of supervision, or are you free to act relatively independently?
- 4 Do you often participate in the design of the research that you are conducting, whether quantitative or qualitative? Do you participate in the analysis of the data once collected?
- 5 What are the key challenges you face in conducting research for international organizations, including consulting firms, NGOs and donors?
- 6 In the research assignments you have undertaken, are opportunities for training or capacity-building often provided? How do you assess these opportunities?
- 7
- 8 Do you feel as though the research you produce is ultimately used by international actors to design and implement their programs? Do you have any concrete examples of when this has happened?

*If the individual attended the workshop:*

- 9 Were there any points or comments you wanted to raise in the workshop, but felt you weren't able to because they were too sensitive or difficult?
- 10 Did the presence of international actors hinder or enable your full participation? In what ways?



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