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Promoting meaningful and equitable relationships? Exploring the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) funding criteria from the perspectives of African partners

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Against a backdrop of historic inequities between Northern and Southern scholars, the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) calls for "meaningful and equitable" research partnerships between UK-based academics and partners in the Global South. This paper draws on qualitative data from three workshops in the Ethiopia, Rwanda and the UK to interrogate GCRF funding criteria from the perspectives of African-based research partners. The GCRF criteria are considered with respect to African partners' experiences of, and aspirations from, such international research partnerships in order to enrich and extend ongoing debates about power relations in development research. The study finds that GCRF criteria do address many of the familiar historic concerns of African partners, while also identifying ways in which this and similar funding schemes may unintentionally reproduce structural inequities within the South. In highlighting these less visible equity concerns, the paper draws lessons for funders, academics and others concerned with establishing genuinely equitable research partnerships.

Keywords: capacity development; equity; Global Challenges Research Fund; International development; research collaborations; research partnerships

1. Introduction

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) is a UK Government initiative established in 2015 which directs £1.5 billion towards research which addresses "the most significant and complex problems faced by the developing world" (GCRF 2017, p.1). One criterion for GCRF funding – from which we draw the title of this paper – is that funded work "*promotes meaningful and equitable relationships between UK research institutions and developing country partners*" (ibid., our italics). To someone unfamiliar with the historical pattern of South-North research partnerships, such a requirement may sound strange – "Why does this need stating? Who would advocate for relationships which are meaningless or inequitable?" Yet evidence from recent decades indicates that GCRF is right to make this an explicit requirement of funded projects (Bradley 2017; Hall & Tandon 2017; Hayman 2018; Fransman et al. 2018; Fransman & Newman 2019). The question is, are GCRF funding criteria likely to yield partnerships which are meaningful and equitable? To explore this issue, this paper draws on data from workshops with African-based stakeholder groups, including academics, practitioners and policy actors with experience of South-North research partnerships.

Box 1 summarises GCRF (2017) funding criteria which indicate the essential characteristics of research which will be funded, including its focus (i.e. grounded in the SDGs and local priorities), its nature (i.e. interdisciplinary, solutions-focused), the ways in which it should be conducted (i.e. through South-North partnerships involving non-academic stakeholders), and the centrality of capacity development to all funded projects. In these respects, GCRF shares commonalities with many other South-North

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research partnerships over the past two decades. As noted elsewhere, Northern partners tend to hold the finance for these projects and establish the parameters of work to be funded (Mlambo and Baxter 2018; Mitchell et al. 2020); priority is given to applied and interdisciplinary research (Bradley 2017; Tabulawa 2017); and there is generally a requirement that activities develop Southern research capacity (Barrett et al. 2011; Ishengoma 2017). In the following sections we draw on empirical data to consider whether these criteria are likely to engender meaningful and equitable research partnerships from the perspective of African partners. We find that GCRF criteria do address many of the familiar historic concerns of African partners, while also potentially reproducing structural inequities within the South. The conclusion highlights these equity concerns, and draws lessons for funders, academics and others concerned with establishing genuinely equitable research partnerships.

Box 1 Characteristics of GCRF-funded research

Nature of research

- Based on global challenges, the SDGs
- Reflects local priorities; Southern partners play a leading role in problem identification
- Comprehensive, recognising complexity between different sectors/goals/challenges
- Instrumental, solution-focused research
- Interdisciplinary, innovative – brings new and valuable insights
- Transformative
- Produces knowledge for decision-making, policy and practice

How research is conducted

- Conducted in partnership between UK and ‘developing country researchers’
- Southern partners play a leading role in problem identification
- Research reflects local priorities; Southern partners play a leading role in research design and development
- Works through networks – sustainable networks
- Non-academic stakeholders (including policy actors, practitioners, CSO and private sector) engaged in research design, implementation & uptake
- Long-term (rather than project-based) partnerships
- Includes indicators showing measurable progress towards knowledge production

Capacity development

- Two-way/mutual research capacity development
- Fosters new and strengthens existing connections & networks
- Long-term (rather than project-based) partnerships
- Southern partners play a leading role in research uptake – research must be feasible based on local capacity to implement solutions

Source: Developed by the authors from GCRF (2017)

2. Methods

This paper draws on the evidence collected in three participatory workshops organised by Tigist which focused on international research collaboration and partnerships (see Appendix for details). The workshops, held in Ethiopia, Rwanda and the UK over the period of 2016 – 2019, brought together academics, NGOs and policymakers to share their perspectives on research collaboration and

partnerships. The workshops aimed at identifying the challenges and opportunities relevant to research funders, academic institutions, researchers and development practitioners as well as the conditions that enable and advance productive research spaces. Across the three workshops there were 82 participants, including 69 UK and East African-based academics and 13 representatives from UK and East African-based I/NGOs, thinktanks, and the policy sector. Permission to record, analyse and report participants' contributions was secured from the individuals concerned as well as our own institution's ethical review board, on the condition of anonymising sources.

The workshops included roundtable discussions and other structured opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences of research collaboration and partnership relevant to the field of global development. Attendance was based on an invitation with the aim of including representatives from key stakeholder groups (academia, research institutes, NGOs and the policy sector), and reflect diversity in terms of experience, disciplinary background, gender and geographical region. All participants were working in Africa in areas relevant to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Prior to the workshops a concept note was prepared drawing on Aniekwe et al. (2012).² The outline of key findings from a short research project carried out by INTRAC was distributed to our workshop participants as a starting point for conversations based on reflections and experience-sharing. This was important as participants' degree of insight into collaboration and partnership varied based on their career stage and exposure to research partnerships.

The material generated in these sessions included discussion notes, transcripts of presentations, and participants' written reflections. For the purpose of this study, the discussion notes, written reflections and presentations were analysed deductively according to the GCRF funding criteria. In this way participants' accounts were brought into dialogue with the GCRF funding criteria, with a view of understanding whether the latter are likely to engender meaningful and equitable research partnerships from the perspective of potential African-based partners.

In the following section we highlight areas of agreement and tension within and between the different stakeholder groups. While we find a common desire to engage in North-South collaborations, there is less agreement over what meaningful and equitable relationships entails for these different groups, and the extent to which these are feasible within South-North research partnerships.

3. Findings

This section is structured according to the three elements of GCRF research identified in the funding criteria (Box 1), namely: the *nature of research*; *how research is conducted*; and *capacity development*.

3.1 Nature of Research

Commitment to solutions-focused research

GCRF calls for research which is transformative, interdisciplinary and focused on implementable solutions – producing knowledge which is relevant to stakeholders for policy and practice. Across the workshop data we found that the principles outlined above were consistent with the views of participants, who tended to express the desirability of solution-based research partnerships with emphasis on good research as purposeful and of value to the research subjects. This corresponds with the GCRF funding stipulation that research reflects 'local priorities'.

² Briefing note documents and workshop materials associated with the 'Cracking collaboration' project (Stevens et al. 2013) were shared by Rachel Hayman from INTRAC. The briefing note captures *key findings, learning and recommendations from a project funded by the Development Studies Association from 9 case studies*.

While research partnership and collaboration are considered appealing by all stakeholders, the imagined or specific gains from this, and the obstacles they faced, depended on the nature of the sector they represented, either as academics, NGO practitioners or policy actors, and the national contexts in which they operated. For example, at the time of data collection, NGOs in Ethiopia were working in a policy environment which stipulated the proportion of funding that could legitimately be allocated to different activities: “Any charity or society shall allocate not less than 70 percent of the expenses in the budget year for the implementation of its purposes and an amount not exceeding 30 percent for its administrative activities” (Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 Article 88:1, 2009). In this context, partnership activities including research were expected to come under the administrative budget³. This meant that, to participate in research, NGOs needed to have a large budget to include research within the allowable limit of 30% set for administration. In this climate, representatives from NGOs working in the areas of health and education, for whom research is vital to their change objectives, particularly welcomed the opportunity to delegate research activities to external parties (Berhanu & Getachew 2013; Daniel 2014; Dupuy et al 2015; Yntiso, 2016; Verschuuren, 2018). These organisations sought for changes in the law to recognise research activities and partnerships as a core part of their work; and if the policy environment allowed it, they welcomed involvement in action research projects as part of an interdisciplinary team, as a flexible approach for the ongoing improvement of their programmes.

NGOs in the UK also stressed the value of instrumental, solution-focused research through partnerships with academic institutes. However, they explained that they are increasingly being approached by academics who are looking for collaboration within the bidding process. They raised three key challenges in relation to this. First, this requires NGOs to spend time on bidding processes that have a low success rate. Second, the documents are expected to be turned around within a very short time. Third, there is a mismatch between the timeframes of academics and NGOs, with the latter generally required to develop and implement interventions over a much shorter period (see also Aniekwe et al. 2012).

Problematising local priorities

Participants welcomed the idea that international research collaborations focus on local priorities. However, evidence from workshop participants also indicated that this could be problematic. One key issue is that local priorities are not homogenous but vary according to perspectives and responsibilities of a particular group. For NGOs, priorities derive from their explicit areas of intervention, such as health, education or street children. We have insufficient evidence to draw conclusions about the research priorities of junior academics, but the experiences of senior academics are noted in the two examples below. These suggest that underlying political agendas are a salient factor in shaping the kinds of research that are valued, which has implications for whose ‘local priorities’ are deemed a research priority and by whom.

To appreciate this point, it is important to recognise that African academics have to manage the delicate space between a research agenda developed with or by collaborators and the political appetite for that research. This limits their influence over setting the research priorities. The example below explains how what is considered a local priority is contested:

If you are interested in doing research in areas where the government says “this is a no go area[...] because it’s sensitive.” Sometimes there’s a tug of war [...] The government would say: “That’s not a priority for us[...] If you want to do research in this area, go somewhere

³ What administration constituted was unclear but, core staff salary, research, training, office rent, vehicle running cost were some of the items considered as administrative expenses.

else!... Why are you [North based collaborators/ NGOs] deciding for us what research priorities should be?" (Senior academic, male, Tanzania)

The notion of local priorities was further problematised by one participant who highlighted differences between global priorities and local realities. Aspects of global priority such as human rights and what these encompass may conflict with the reality on the ground. For example, a senior Kenyan researcher explained that, although researching sexuality and human rights are regarded as important priorities by Northern academics, the emphasis given to these topics may be contested locally in relation to other issues which are perceived as more urgent. Local sensitivities and political realities are other important issues. For example, a senior Tanzanian academic gave the example of pregnant girls' experiences in school – even if research in this area might seem desirable, it is impossible due to laws which prevent pregnant students coming to school⁴.

The lack of time academics have at early stage of projects is highlighted as another challenge to basing research on local priorities. In this regard, the considerable preparation senior academics needed to do in navigating through highly bureaucratic processes within their own institution is given as one of the reasons for their inability to devote sufficient time on the research topic. Senior academics reported that they had been invited to collaborate with Northern-based academics with a view of including their intellectual contribution into setting up the research design. However, in practice, such opportunities often come with a short deadline. Moreover, despite their view that focus on local priority is critical to meeting global challenges, in reality, all the time they might spend on engaging intellectually with the substance of the research agenda is taken by the complexity of negotiating the processes within their institutions as stated below.

Transformative for whom?

In line with GCRF criteria, the workshop participants repeatedly expressed the desirability of transformative research. The question arises, however, as to how transformation is understood by different stakeholders. The key point raised by African academic participants in this respect is the challenge for Global South researchers doing community-based research and their sense of value to research subjects. Researchers expressed concerns that they were perceived by the subjects of research as 'extracting' their views, rather than contributing anything of benefit. While these relationships could be productive in terms of collecting data necessary for academic outputs, there were real challenges in managing people's expectations from the research. Researchers found this frustrating, and a challenge to their own sense of values, finding it a real difficulty to be unable to reciprocate the willingness and cooperation they gained from the research subjects and local gate keepers in the way these stakeholder communities imagined solutions. The communities perceive the local researcher as resourceful and having a powerbase to act upon the challenges they witness than mere data collection. One of the senior academic participants spoke for many, as she described the sense of professional shame she felt that her work had not led to meaningful change in communities in which she worked for a long period.

I collected data from this village since the children were babies, and [they're] now adults but there is no improvement that came about to them and they do question why I keep coming to pester them with no good change. (Senior academic, female, Ethiopia)

⁴ The education policy in Tanzania until recently stated that girls who became pregnant in school were to be expelled and not allowed to return following their pregnancy. In 2009, the "Law of the Child" Act, 351 was passed by the Tanzanian parliament, which amends this policy and allows girls to return to school. However, it is still unclear whether it will actually be enforced. (Pfeiffer et al. 2017:7)

Another senior academic reinforced the dilemma many experience when confronted with the ideals of transformative research:

Communities wonder why you come and go away again. They remember people who come and walk around here to see how the poor live, but research doesn't result in change. (Senior academic, female, Kenya)

The view was that, although engaging in a collaborative community-based research can be highly useful to understand the challenge from the communities themselves, the moral, ethical, social implications arising from such long term engaged work for the Global South based researchers are substantial. Ethical procedures which focus on informed consent completely bypass this greater moral issue, that research raises expectations and the community puts its trust in the local researcher who in practice has limited power to act on what he/she learns about the challenges they face. While this should be an issue for the whole research partnership, in practice it is those members of the team who engage directly with the community who feel this tension, and are generally left to manage this sense of the contradictions of their position as best they can.

3.2 How research is conducted

The value of interdisciplinary, multi-stakeholder partnerships

GCRF stipulates that all research should be conducted through partnerships between researchers based in the UK, the Global South and non-academic stakeholders. Workshop participants endorsed the idea of such multi-stakeholder partnerships as having potential for meeting global challenges of development. However, participants also highlighted the challenges of successfully running diverse teams in the context of complex institutional and political environments.

Workshop participants reported limited research collaboration with local and global academics, and their desire for long-term research partnerships along the lines of those proposed in the GCRF funding criteria. Ethiopian-based NGOs in particular highlighted that research partnerships were filling an important gap arising from the lack of in-house research capacity (discussed above). In their experience, engagement in research partnerships generally happened through their own active search for expert knowledge, which often takes the form of monitoring and evaluation or report writing on a consultancy basis.

Academic participants in these workshops also recognised the potential of interdisciplinary research teams and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Much of the emphasis remained on the learning opportunities to be gained from collaborations with non-academic stakeholders. Junior academics in particular stated that they viewed this as a space for professional development (discussed in section 3.3).

In terms of interdisciplinarity, workshop participants identified the mutual advantage of partnerships involving different perspectives on a problem. For example, one noted:

When you have a partner [...] interested to work with research or practical problems that helps your institute, it is like having an extra pair of eyes. You see problems in new ways and the opportunity can be an eye opener.' (Senior academic, female, Ethiopia).

Resources emerged as a valued aspect of international research partnerships in the context of the lack of research funding available locally. While research funding was seen generally to flow from North to South, it was noted the South based collaborators also made significant intellectual, labour and time contributions. While unfunded research is also possible, people noted that funded research brings a considerable advantage. Explaining the added value of funded research, one academic put it this way:

We might know what the problem is and we might imagine the solutions but, when you collaborate in a funded way you get opportunity to test your ideas, you gain fresh perspectives and you can also develop solutions. (Senior academic, female, Ethiopia)

Funding for multi-stakeholder collaborative research can enable people to address challenges that they have long recognised, but not had the resources to address. Reflecting on her participation in a multi-stakeholder partnership between a local NGO, teacher training institution and rural schools a senior academic stated:

We knew it was a necessary aspect of training to enhance the knowledge of our trainee teachers, but we haven't done it because of other demands and lack of resources [...] until we had an opportunity for partnership and collaboration. (Senior academic, female, Ethiopia)

Mutually-compatible timeframe

As indicated in section 3.1 with regards to the lack of time academics have to devote to identifying local priorities, among all of the participating stakeholders research bid timescales are again raised as an important condition for equitable partnerships. The need for a mutually compatible timeframe was a point raised across the workshops. In their experience regardless of the sector participants represented at the workshops, the short time frame within which they were expected to prepare bids was regarded as impediment to building an equitably engaged multi stakeholder team.

3.3 Capacity development

Varied demands for capacity development across stakeholder groups

The GCRF criteria identify 'capacity development' as a key component of all funded work, with the stipulation that it should be long-term and mutually beneficial, supporting new and existing collaborations and networks. Workshop participants had differing attitudes to the value of capacity development in line with their professional identities.

NGOs stated they appreciated the capacity development aspects of research partnership, but they also highlighted how this sat in tension with the demanding nature of doing research against project-based intervention work. In the participating NGOs' experience, more emphasis was put on setting up an agreed objective with research collaborators from the start and mutually looking to deliver on an agreed objective than intentionally looking to build capacity of the NGO staff or academics. The NGOs based in Ethiopia valued the collaboration as an opportunity to delegate research to partners as a way of navigating through the budgetary restrictions. However, all of the NGOs also acknowledged the process of collaboration and partnership itself results in capacity development as a result of learning about each other's systems and the different priorities.

Academic researchers participating in the workshops, regardless of their career stage, actively sought capacity development opportunities. They also emphasised the learning that collaborators stand to gain from research partnerships. For instance, an early-career academic in Ethiopia explained,

Spending my time in collaborative thinking is morale boosting. You feel inspired and energised to take things on board and do things better than before. (Junior academic, female, Ethiopia)

Similarly, a senior academic viewed his collaboration as having a trickle effect,

Comparative advantages the northern researchers have is undeniable and my advantage in collaboration is beneficial to me, my institute and for early career researchers in my institutes. (Senior academic, male, Tanzania)

As the comment above indicates, engaging in interdisciplinary partnerships is a means of developing research capacity where it provides new and valued perspectives or intellectual resources. However, researchers' experience and status inform the way they characterised the advantages and challenges of capacity development. For example, senior academics suggested capacity development is a ground for mutual learning. With this regard, understanding each other's context and pressures are identified as a key mechanism to avoid misunderstanding if, for example, delays arise during the collaboration period. As one academic participant explained:

Projects gets delayed, you feel embarrassed, but you don't want to tell your partners because you don't want to shame your university or even your country. Your partner can blame you for non-delivery and I may be considered not a good collaborator from then on. (Senior academic, male, Ethiopia)

Mutual capacity development - a long term view

Senior academics at the workshop put nuanced understanding of each other's institutional and political operating landscapes as crucial for a meaningful and equitable research partnership. In particular they highlighted that appreciating the infrastructural inequality between them and their collaborators in the Global North was an important aspect of capacity development. For example, appreciating the disparity in software and the human capital was identified critical to ensure a meaningful equitable research partnership and ensure realistic expectations. One senior academic in Ethiopia noted, understanding the challenge from time consuming accounting system that requires a trained accountant in their institutions as an important aspect of capacity development exercise. For example while managing financial resource was noted as desirable and that lack of it as a clear manifestation of inequality, it was noted:

[The key] interest is not just about how much and where the fund is held, if it is a long term relationship it may be more appropriate to hold it with the North-based collaborator but eventually we too have a capacity to manage complex financial transactions and we can work intentionally towards that eventuality through capacity building. (Senior academic, female, Ethiopia)

The key point with regards to budget management, was that there are clear challenges in managing complex and large grants and it demands both the human and accountancy systems to be put in place at some of the southern institutions. However, if the commitment is to enact equitable and meaningful partnership, there should be movement through capacity development towards the southern institutions also being able to take this on in the longer term.

In discussing how to make collaboration effective for both sides, participants agreed that there is a varying degree of institutional capacity across and within African countries both in terms of resources and systems. Participants from Tanzania and Ethiopia discussed how their effectiveness was impeded by the institutional bureaucracy which does not correspond well with the time bound research-based capacity development opportunities. For example, Tanzanian academics need to gain a travel permit for international travel, and this can limit their ability to take advantage of capacity development opportunities from research collaboration and partnerships.

Expanding opportunities for partnership beyond the usual suspects

In relation to capacity development in and through research partnership, academic participants agreed that its application must be context specific. One difficulty for many of the Africa based institutes is that they have a long tradition of doing unfunded research which has very low external visibility. Collaborating with academics based in the Global North is a way of gaining recognition for the important research done in their universities and for their own academic global prominence.

One issue that came to the fore in the workshops is the variability between different African universities in terms of their ability to access international research funding. For example, a director of research in an emerging university spoke directly about his experience of his university's exclusion and location on the periphery of research partnership opportunities. This speaks directly to the GCRF commitment to 'fostering new and strengthening existing connections and networks.' The reality, unfortunately, is often elite capture and institutional marginalisation:

For reasons that we don't know the capturing of research partnership and funder attraction is very predictable. It is managed by few people on top and sits in specific universities or departments time and time again. The reality may be that the most suited department to explore the research problem is actually not considered. (Senior academic and research centre manager, male, Ethiopia)

The participants speculated whether their lack of opportunity was the result of their relative inexperience with Global North partnerships. Many felt they were caught in a no-win situation. As a senior female researcher in an emerging university put it, how can emerging institutions build the track record they need to attract Global North research partners without having the opportunity to engage in such partnerships in the first place? Many share puzzlement as to what might encourage partnerships beyond the usual suspects.

Discussion and conclusion

The first point to note is the extent to which GCRF funding criteria are consistent with African stakeholders' views about meaningful and equitable international research partnerships. There is a clear appetite for interdisciplinary, solutions-focused research to address issues of immediate local concern (Bradley 2017; Mitchell et al. forthcoming). This resonates with An-Na'im's (2006) observation about the

"urgent need for socially engaged scholarship...It is unacceptable for an African scholar to devote her or his whole attention to detached academic analysis without attempting to respond to the urgent needs..." (p. viii)

It is in the light of this ethical imperative, perhaps, that we should understand the sense of professional shame articulated by some researchers about the slow pace of change resulting from their work.

Although the GCRF framework is largely endorsed by participants' accounts, the evidence considered here also flags some key tensions and challenges in relation to equity.

Firstly, given the different position-based priorities and timeframes of the key stakeholders groups – practitioners, policy actors and researchers – there are clear equity implications for the ways in which these are negotiated and resolved in any particular partnership. Commenting on these tensions, Georgalakis and Rose (2019) identify the need for "bounded mutuality", which entails "a common understanding of the policy problem and set of values underpinning the collaboration, even if partners are mandated differently" (p. 11). Significant effort has gone into developing strategies for equitable decision-making within such multi-stakeholder partnerships (Brouwer & Woodhill 2016; Cornish et al. 2017) – however, the extent to which these principles are realised in GCRF projects remains to be seen.

Secondly, given the value which African institutions evidently attach to international research partnerships, how can opportunities to participate be extended to those without an existing track record? Recent studies in the African education space show clear winners and losers at the national level when it comes to participation in international research collaborations (Mitchell et al. 2018; Rose et al. 2019). Evidence from the present study further highlights the challenges faced by 'emerging'

African institutions which lack an international profile in terms of gaining access to valued international partnerships. The extent to which GCRF opens up new opportunities beyond existing national and institutional partnerships will be a measure of equity for this research programme.

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N.B. In line with efforts to standardise Ethiopian names in the scientific literature (Mesfin 2010), Ethiopian authors are listed by their first names.

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Appendix - Workshop details

Location, date & funder	Focus	Activities	Participants	Participants field of study
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (3 days, 2016-17) Funded by University of Bristol	Academic-NGO research collaborations	Round table & group discussions; presentations & responses from different sectors.	17 academics (13 Ethiopian, 4 UK); 7 NGOs; 1 thinktank; 1 policy	Education Int Development Economics Anthropology Gender studies Population studies Health Psychology
Kigali, Rwanda (1 day, 2019) Funded by University of Bristol	Global research partnership and collaboration.	Round table & group discussions; presentations.	34 academics (19 Rwandan, 7 Tanzanian, 5 Ethiopian, 3 UK)	Education Int Development
Bristol, UK (2 days, 2019) Funded by Development Studies Association (DSA), Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), University of Bristol	Interdisciplinary research collaboration and partnership	Round table & small group discussions; presentations & responses from different stakeholder groups.	26 academics (2 Kenyan, 2 Tanzanian, 2 Ethiopian, 20 UK); 1 INGO; 1 thinktank	Education Policy Int Development Economics Anthropology Health
Data sources: Workshop notes, participant small group reflection notes and presentations. Note: Some participants attended more than one workshop; three invited academic participants were denied a UK visa, and one was unable to obtain official permission for travel from his government.				