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Research partnerships across international contexts: a practice of unity or plurality?

Mia Perry 📵, Jo Sharp 📵, Kevin Aanyu, Jude Robinson 📵, Vanessa Duclos 📵, and Raihana Ferdous 📵

ABSTRACT
Partnership is not a benign practice; it is culturally and ethically loaded. The way in which partnerships are construed in international research determines its design, ethics and impacts. Despite this, and the growing assumption of partnership practice in our field, the concept has become increasingly abstract and the practice under-analysed. This article provides critical perspectives of current understandings of partnership in international development research from three angles: the motivations behind partnership working; an epistemological perspective in relation to epistemic justice and the agency of language; and finally, the systems that mediate partnerships, and the range of resources that guide them.

Introduction

Recognising the complexity and urgency of global challenges, and in response to calls to enhance the impact and efficacy of their research, academics have sought to work with a range of individuals, groups, and organisations, including government, communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and industry. These collaborations are often termed "partnerships", with connotations of sharing, trust, equality, reciprocity, ownership, and respect (Prescott and Stibbe 2020). In terms of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), *Partnerships for the Goals* (SDG 17) binds the other 16 goals together and is recognised as a necessary and desirable element of global working. The United Nations (UN) in conjunction with The Partnering Initiative, propose that the 2030 Agenda, including the 17 SDGs, encapsulate "a call for a new collaborative way of working" (Stibbe and Prescott 2020, 10). However, within that framework, and indeed within the goal targets and indicators, the role of academic research is opaque. With a focus on global trade, policy cohesion, technologies, and public–private partnerships, the implied assumption within the targets of that goal is that partnerships within academic research practice are taken for granted or benign.

Across disciplines, funders, and geographies in academia, partnership has *implied* the real-world relevance of a research project, the capacity to address complexity, the opportunity for inclusion of diverse perspectives, and most of all, the potential for impact. This situation is perhaps most relevant in international development research (Bradley, 2007; Georgalakis and Rose 2019). This paper emerges from a wider project, Participatory Futures (EP/T025034/1), funded by the UKRI GCRF Cluster development programme. The work sought to evaluate different models of partnership that had emerged through interdisciplinary, international research projects. We engage herein with converging aspects of partnership in academic research and practice to inform a critical and conceptual study of the field. The fundamental supposition behind this work is that partnerships

underpin and determine the design, ethics, impacts, and sustainability of our research. Despite this, and the persistent assumption of partnership in international development academic research, the concept of partnership has become increasingly abstract. Hence, this inquiry is guided by the question: *How is partnership currently understood and practiced in the context of international development-related academic research?*

Inequalities in partnership-based research are increasingly hard to overlook and concerns about the nature and practice of partnerships have been made explicit through critique by researchers across the globe (Grieve and Mitchell 2020; Gunasekara 2020). Fransman and Newman (2019) recognise that resources and guidelines attempting a redirection into effective and equitable partnerships often adopt a simplistic view of partnership as "a balanced relationship between two coherent and static entities engaged in a discrete and short-term collaboration framed by specific grants and projects, rather than as dynamic/emergent research relationships" (525). Georgalakis and Rose (2019) propose an analytical framework to consider research-policy partnerships in international development consisting of the qualities of bounded mutuality; sustained interactivity; and policy adaptability. However, global economic and geopolitical power is dominated by the Global North, by Northern value systems and priorities; and the vast majority of academic frameworks, critiques, and models of partnership originate in these same contexts. As history clearly shows, without a strong emphasis on critical, reflexive, and decolonial practice; the frameworks and "guides" become well-trodden paths and practices that inevitably serve the interests and satisfy the perspectives of those that conceived them. When taken up without the tools of critical reflection, decolonial perspectives, or an awareness of the partiality of our epistemological positions; such documents quickly become another tool of upholding exceptionalism and a sense of a universal ontology. Assuming "universal" values of sectors and vocations; assuming common languages of relation; supports a "white-washing", or the erasure of the plurality and the complexity of global, socio-ecological systems, within which partnerships materialise (Huxham and Vangen 2005).

As the term "partnership" is culturally, politically, and ethically constructed, here, we seek to explore how partnership is currently understood and practiced in the context of international development-related academic research. Accepting the pivotal role of partnership in academic research and knowledge production in international development, we consider how failures to address the challenges known to negatively impact on partnership working may perpetuate enduring social, environmental, and economic inequalities. In the development of this critical examination, we draw on academic literature that spans particular methodological and conceptual aspects of partnership practice. Specifically, we focus on *motivations of partnership* including transcending disciplinary structures, and augmenting research impact. We then explore the *nature* of partnership to foreground a decolonial perspective and interrogate the role of linguistic language in this terrain. These institutional and theoretical aspects have been identified in our review as particularly influential in the realisation of partnership practices, and particularly complex when considered across diverse socio-cultural and geographical contexts. Finally, we consider research partnerships in *practice* by considering the systems and infrastructures that mediate, and a range of recommendations that emerge from them. We conclude with critical reflections on the concept of partnership and propose a conceptual lens responsive to the current research context.

Motivations for partnership

Interdisciplinarity

In recognition of the limitations and injustice of traditional disciplinary approaches to global challenges, partnership practice has become entangled with notions of working across diverse places, sectors, and disciplines (Reich and Reich 2006). The movement to expand or connect domains of knowledge has led to the formation of myriad partnerships, variously termed "interdisciplinary", "multidisciplinary", "cross-disciplinary", or "transdisciplinary" to describe the working relationships

between people from different academic disciplines and in other sectors. Interdisciplinary research describes the engagement by one or more disciplines or sectors in a collective research endeavour that requires the sharing of ideas, data, evidence, or other working practices. While the concept of academic disciplines is held by many to be archaic and restrictive and denies the discursive and hybrid nature of academic thought and practice (Becher and Trowler, 1989), others uphold the concept of disciplinary expertise. They argue that disciplines instill specialist knowledge, skills, and perspectives, and it is this distinctiveness that creates alternative ways of doing or seeing that can help resolve complexity and overcome barriers (Bruhn 2000).

Shared visions, agendas, and priorities are also critical components for successful global interdisciplinary partnerships (Halbreich et al. 2019; Locke et al. 2019). However, a critical review of interdisciplinary working suggests that many research projects are unable to overcome the challenges of contrasting working practices, and that organisations and disciplines still pursue their own agendas with no real interdisciplinary practice (e.g. Jacobs and Frickel 2009; Woelert and Millar 2013). There are also concerns that the requirement to find common practices and goals may lead to narrow or normative research agendas, "driven by the same bland establishment consensus" (Adams 2012, 336). Rather than assuming teams assembled from different disciplines have the necessary knowledge and skills to work together, support is growing for targeted training in partnership practice to ensure that people understand one another's working practices, contributions and have opportunities to build effective teams (Satterwhite et al. 2020; Thapa 2019).

Research impact

As a conceptual driving force behind international development research, the notion of impact motivates but also complicates the practice of partnership. Research impact has many definitions: according to UKRI-ESRC, research impact is the demonstrable contribution that is made to the economy, society, environment, and culture, beyond the contribution to academic research. This can be instrumental: influencing the development of policy, practice, or service provision, shaping legislation, or altering behaviour; conceptual: contributing to the understanding of policy issues, reframing debates; and capacity building: through technical and personal skill development. The singular linearity implied by the concept of "impact" has been critiqued as undermining the concept of equal partnerships (Olssen, 2016; Pain, Kesby, and Askins 2011; Laing, Mazzoli Smith, and Todd 2018). The pressures of research funding, institutional agendas, and the geopolitics of knowledge, may mean that the researchers awarded with funding (the Principal Investigator) tend to claim project impacts as produced by them, which reinforces inequalities between the partners (Morton, 2015; Zingerli 2010). Scholars have expressed their concern of the process of impact evaluation and metrics as a means to produce instrumental, typecast knowledge production, and note that these metrics favour particular types of researchers, typically those from Western elite academic contexts (Laing, Mazzoli Smith, and Todd 2018; Smith and Stewart 2017).

Sustained partnership working and network-building projects support researchers to develop impacts related to future funding and the strengthening of international research relations (Fransman and Newman 2019). A decolonial lens unsettles the notion of any universal value system that can demarcate positive from negative, or welcome from unwelcome impacts. Machen (2020) adopts a proactive stance towards reclaiming research impact in ways that advance critical research agendas by challenging policy; empowering resistances; platforming voices; nurturing new critical publics; and envisioning alternatives. The human motivational dimensions for engaging in development research partnerships include the possibility of learning and personal stimulation, a sense of intellectual and personal development, through new understandings, intercultural exchange, and experiences in new places. If partnerships facilitate the co-creation of knowledges together with others, then the process of impact could entail a joint process of identification and resolution; the contributions of the work and the conceptions of impact would reflect the plurality of knowledges, value systems, and logics that the partnership draws together.

The nature of partnerships

Over the last two decades, the language of much international development has celebrated partnership, implying that this represents an ethical and progressive political agenda that counteracts the (neo)colonialism of previous western-centric approaches where "expertise" was exported to stimulate the development of the majority world following the model from Europe. Partnership has become mainstreamed in development, even tyrannical (Cooke and Kothari 2001), and this ubiquity empties the concept of meaning. While modernisation theory did come to dominate the optimistic initial years of postwar international development policy and practice, it was not uncontested. Many post-colonial countries sought to follow alternative, non-aligned paths which refused to see the West (or the Soviet Block) as providing the blueprint for their futures. In Tanzania, for instance, Julius Nyerere sought to follow a model of a distinctly African socialism. This attracted academics and civil society activists who did not seek to bring development to Tanzania, but instead to learn from this new approach (see Sharp 2019). Such approaches to partnership and mutual learning could be regarded as considerably more radical and transformative than the more professionalised "participatory programmes" advocated by contemporary international development policy. Indeed, Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani has written angrily about the inequitable relations at the heart of much development partnership, accusing African academics of avoiding their responsibility to set the research agenda and giving up the theoretical ground to the west – while western academics and NGOs set the research and policy agenda, he argues, African academics have effectively become academics for hire (Mamdani 2011).

Recently then, "partnership" has become a highly contested political, philosophical, and cultural engagement. Expertise, it can be argued, has colonised not just empires and governance, but knowledges and ways of understanding life and this planet (Singh 2018). An academic response, although far from a prevailing one, has been to attempt to counter this past epistemic violence caused by the dominance of western knowledge by "decolonising" their research and teaching, but with limited success (Spivak 1988; Thiong'o 1981). Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith insists that indigenous peoples have been oppressed by theory, in that any consideration, "of the ways our origins have been examined, our histories recounted, our arts analysed, our cultures dissected, measured, torn apart and distorted back to us will suggest that theories have not looked sympathetically or ethically at us" (Smith 2013, np). Similarly, Hokowhitu (2010, np) fears that dominant understandings of the indigenous as resistance to the colonial colonisation of the mind, " … may be alluring within a mentality of guilt, however, the assertion of indigenous self-determination in constant referral to the colonising Other merely serves to re-establish the power structures themselves".

There are concerns that this vulnerability to co-optation by "neoliberal diversity agendas" can result in the simplification of the complex and multiple meanings and subsequent actions of decolonisation (Sultana 2019, 41). Instead of recognising the "devastating violence of colonisation and interrelated systems of violence, there is an understandable impulse to suppress these contradictions and conflicts to collapse decolonisation into coherent, normative formulas with seemingly unambiguous agendas" (Oliveira Andreotti et al. 2015, 22). These authors point to the need for decolonisation to be a material and institutional transformation, and one not simply confined to intellectual analysis. Without attention to the first three aspects of what Mignolo (2010) has termed the "colonial matrix of power", namely the Western control of subjectivities, political power, and the economy, attention to the fourth, "knowledge", could lead to the conditions where "decolonial theory itself can be invoked and deployed to perpetuate colonialist power centres within the global university system" (Noxolo 2017, 318; see also Sultana 2019, 34).

Even with intentions of more equal and empowered partnerships in development research, the limitations of language and the materialities of entrenched systems can cause vicious cycles of unequal power relations. Zingerli (2010) voices the widely shared observation that, "the parameters and rules of development research tend to reflect the epistemological traditions of science at 'Western' universities of the global North" (217). Most partnerships as a result tend to only

embrace a *rhetoric* of partnership (Schaaf 2015); even calls for new ways of working and thinking, such as the "New Partnership for Africa's Development" (NEPAD) policy, with a call to increased aid, investment, and debt relief, are already positioned in a dependent and unequal footing with "developed country" partners (Mashiri, Njenga, and Odero (2004, 1).

It is evident that this epistemological decolonisation only becomes meaningful when yoked with other material forms of decolonisation, and this has significant implications for partnerships in interdisciplinary research. Many research partnerships in international development are working relationships between unequal partners, with the inevitable emergence of asymmetric and unbalanced power relations (Zingerli 2010). A failure to acknowledge and address existing institutional structures through a critical analysis of power will inevitably lead to a replication of colonial relations cutting across partnerships by geographical location, race, discipline, gender, class, sexuality, and academic seniority.

Language

How and what we use to communicate and make meaning affects us and, subsequently, our understanding of reality and experience, and our conceptual apparatus (Campano and Damico 2007). Put another way, communication modes and systems express meaning, but also influence how meaning is constructed. Consequently, those who speak different languages and engage in the world through different modalities and semiotic systems perceive the world differently (van Nes et al. 2010). Print and spoken language is typically the dominant medium of communication in academic research, and in awareness of the limitations and epistemic injustice of this "textocentric" engagement (Conquergood 2009). In addition to a heavy dependence on language, the English language tends to override others in terms of choice and functionality of use (Crystal 2012). In international contexts, even working in a first or indigenous language, the history and power dynamics of the research sector have resulted in many terms simply being included in their English form. This dynamic results in one of two things: Either "partnership" is used in its English form in other linguistic contexts and thus takes on meaning based on the way partnerships materialise in practice (language *takes on* meaning through use); or "partnership" is translated and thereby takes on contextual connotations embedded in the logic and ontology constructed through a language.

Whether through learned meaning or through translation, language has a substantive impact on how people engage in terms of their expectations, actions, agency, and impacts. Without an awareness of this, researchers risk launching into relations with multiple actors, stakeholders, influencers, and beneficiaries without a real understanding of the grounds of that engagement. The term partnership translates into অংশীদারিত্ব *Anśīdāritba* in Bengali, which generally refers to a pre-conditioned, pre-established relationship commonly understood where parties agree to cooperate to advance their mutual interests, most typically, commercial. Close synonyms for partnership are fellowship or tie-up, where all parties hold equal power that is predefined legally. In contrast, the term collaboration translates to সহযোগিতা Sahayōgitā, literally translated to co-operation or assistance. Collaboration (সহযোগিতা) often denotes help or aid and is typically used for voluntary activities where all parties involved may not have equal power or responsibilities. In Ateso, a language indigenous to Northeastern Uganda, partnership is best translated as *arucokina* (from root word "airuc"). This can be literally translated to "entangled" or "entanglement", such as in a thread or rope looped and knotted, or several ropes entangled together. It can also be used to mean "connected" or "connection" or "tied together". This word in Ateso has physical and interdependent connotations that add weight and responsibility to the practice of partnership.

Cross-cultural studies and international research highlight the use of translators and the associated challenges for researchers with regard to cultural and linguistic issues when working across language contexts. The specific challenges and implications of assuming English as the Lingua Franca, or using translators, are frequently overlooked in the research literature and the interpretation processes omitted from the research methodology and discussion (Root-Bernstein and Ladle

2014; van Nes et al. 2010). And yet, the Ateso and Bengali examples of translation above remind us that our vocabularies delimit our capacities to understand our encounters with research (Phipps 2019). We align with the position of Cornwall and Brock (2005), that language matters and influences what happens on the ground in development practice. Without awareness and a concerted effort to address inequities (of knowledge, ownership, and agency) within research, the inevitable outcome is a replication of existing dynamics of power and privilege. That is the "default", or what our systems, our language, and our infrastructures are set up to ensure.

The practice of partnership

The practices of partnership emerge from a confluence of contexts, from geographical to cultural, from individual to community, from discursive to linguistic, from institutional to political. The extent to which these contextual factors influence research partnerships may vary depending on the focus of the work (Fransman and Newman 2019). The following section of the article considers firstly project management and governance – a common factor that pervades international development research; and secondly, tools and resources of practice that increasingly permeate our field in the form of guidebooks and frameworks.

Project management and governance

Zingerli (2010) contends that the very " … globalised research market and the allocation of resources of its political economy have implications for what is being studied in development research" where " … the power of the partnership discourse is directly linked to the material power exercised by funding agencies" (219–221). The growing body of literature on inequalities within international development research partnerships has included a focus on projects' governance and management practices in diverse research areas such as Global Health, Renewable Energy, Education, Agriculture, and in the context of interdisciplinary projects funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund of the UK Research and Innovation (Grieve and Mitchell 2020). International development projects are complex to coordinate and manage, and restrictions and requirements necessarily shape how partnerships are practiced (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020; White 2020). Munro and Ika (2020) acknowledge similarities with non-international development, in terms of the factors that lead to mismanagement (for example, poor initiation, and insufficient understanding of project contexts). However, additional factors, such as the influence of cultural differences and their respective and sometimes competing requirements, and the diffuse nature of expected outcomes within multiple socio-environmental contexts, particularly affect the success of international development projects.

Project management practices in the private sector and international development aid projects are guided by norms and standards (PMBOK, PM4DEV, etc.) developed in the Global North. However, international development research projects don't have specific management standards, and the practices and their influence on the partnerships at play will depend on the management skills of the individuals in leadership positions as well as processes and procedures in place in their home institutions. These management skills can be influenced by the individuals' research sector and their research approach. For instance, academics in natural sciences and engineering might have a management style regulated by rationality resulting in a generic approach compared to academics in social sciences who may be more sensitive to project contexts and settings and adopt a context-specific approach (Ika and Hodgson 2014).

Partnership toolkits

Research partnership tools and frameworks have been elaborated to address this lack of guiding management standards in international development research. Here we consider *who* they support, and what they imply, in partnership-based research in International Development. In

addition to the myriad theoretical, institutional, and ethical foundations and motivations for engaging with partnership practices in international development research, a growing number of handbooks, toolkits, and resources are publicly available. This final section highlights a range that represents a broader practice of consolidation and knowledge exchange undertaken by research and development networks, organisations, and institutions.

Some guides and tools focus on development and third sector organisations, business and governmental sector partnerships. The Agenda Partnership Accelerator's "Guidebook" (2003), is designed as a practical resource to help build high impact multi-stakeholder partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (Stibbe et al. 2020). The underlying priorities, values, and attributes, as well as the nature of a relationship with development are summarised for Government, Civil Society, Business, the UN, Foundations and Development Cooperation, or Donors. The approach is rooted in an aspiration to "transformational" rather than "traditional development" and sets a course for partnerships to, " … tackle the underlying causes and leave behind a self-sustaining, resilient legacy where little or no further action, and no ongoing external inputs, are necessary" (13), rather than create dependent relationships that require ongoing sources of aid. Similarly, the Scotland Malawi Partnership (SMP) has curated a living resource of "Partnership Principles" guided by an ambition for "dignified partnerships". Each principle includes references to academic articles, research reports, or template project tools to support further reflection and enquiry. Nesta, the UK based innovation foundation have produced a "tool" for building partnerships inspired by the Partnering Toolbook (2011), and considers how knowledge is constructed, translated, and spread to create a discourse of partnership practice for multiple audiences. With a more critical approach, the Power Awareness Tool (The Spindle 2020) developed by Partos, a Dutch NGO network, proposes a partnership tool with a focus on analysing (and supposedly equalising) the power dynamics in partnerships across geo-political and sector contexts.

The *11 Principles and 7 Questions*, is aimed at academic audiences and opens with statement: "Transboundary and intercultural research in partnership is challenging"; to recognise the epistemological, contextual, and plural factors involved in any partnership-based work (KFPE 2014). Using links to animations and further references this resource offers a much more inclusive and plural perspective on partnerships and has been cited frequently in UKRI GCRF Funding Calls as a resource to support the development of funding proposals. In the context of Global Health Research, Afsana et al. (2009) propose a *Partnership Assessment Toolkit* that is explicitly co-created by collaborators across the Global South as well as the North (Murphy et al. 2015). Within the Social Sciences, Participatory Action Research, Participatory Rural Appraisal, and Community-Based Research, provide examples as to how academic researchers have grappled with the practices, power relations, and implications of working in partnership with those traditionally understood as "participants". Predominantly developed in technical and engineering sciences, substantial analysis has been carried out in relation to the affordances and obstacles to academic and industry partnerships (Bstieler, Hemmert, and Barczak 2017; Kaklauskas et al. 2018).

Proposing a less linear or methodical outcome than many guides or toolkits, Patnaik et al. (2020) draw on a project based on partnerships that include research institutions, a global health organisation, and a major pharmaceutical company to describe the complex interplay between partners with competing agendas (13). This study aligns with a range of research that suggests that trust, established through long-term, interpersonal relationships, represents a vital component of successful partnership working (Bachmann 2001; Vieira, Winklhofer, and Ennew 2008). The *Critical Resource for Ethical International Partnerships* (SFA 2019); takes a broader view of partnerships, blurring the boundaries between the academic and non-academic partners, and between the practices and underlying assumptions of partnership-based research. As much a series of provocations as it is a guide, this resource is based on long-standing partnerships that enabled trusting and reflexive debate across disciplinary as well as sector and geographical contexts.

Conclusion – partnerships as disruptive of the "unity of science"

Rather than restating or settling critique in this concluding section, we lend a focus to the ways in which the tensions and complexities raised in the critical review offer opportunities to act, react, and engage productively and ethically in partnership work. In the contentious space of international development research, it is often easier to identify and analyse problems, insufficiencies, and contradictions, than to propose practices that align with our learning and the contingency of our knowledge. We offer a proposition with three parts for future practice in partnership work, based on the findings of this review in conjunction with the collective experience of its international authorship. The proposition is not a model of practice, as the idea that one model can be appropriate for more than one partnership is the root of many of the issues explored throughout this paper. Rather, this is a proposition of perspective, it revolves around a conceptual approach that can inform and apply to practice – as it must emerge differently in different contexts.

Practicing disruption

As this paper demonstrates, partnerships of any description cannot by their nature dismantle the structural inequalities and geopolitics of knowledge upon which they are based (Zingerli 2010). However, partnerships can expose these structural inequalities at pivotal points, and in doing so, can also shift or disrupt them. New types of relations – new kinships – across organisations can unleash new hierarchies and even fields of knowledge. Unlike discourses of "wholeness" or "reach" that promote partnerships to support research to achieve a more comprehensive, balanced, or informed set of outcomes, we argue that on the contrary, partnerships don't bring us closer to a "truth", but to the complexity and intra-activity of the world in which we work. Reaching outside of echo chambers and silos, partnerships can allow new types of affiliation and praxis, presenting radical opportunities to disrupt the status quo of knowledge production and development. Indeed, it is this practice that can best respond to the work of decolonial activists and theorists such as Harding (2018) and Chakrabarty (2000), that calls for the acceptance of contradictions and of new types of alliances and relations across peoples, traditions, ways of knowing, and knowledge.

Material and more-than-human conditions

In particular, we propose an expansive view on partnerships that extends beyond a humanist and situational conception. In other words, the work and outcomes of partnerships does not reside only in the individuals engaged and their locations. Partnerships are mediated by discourses, faith and cultural customs, research facilities, and increasingly by technologies. By taking these material and more-than-human conditions into account in the practices, guides, and tools of partnership, we propose that many of the elusive and influential components of collaboration such as geography, material security, communication methods, become tangible. In other words, practices of partnerships should include explicit awareness of the material conditions through which partners are working, including but not limited to digital access, physical and financial security, working conditions, faith and cultural practices. Made explicit, these elements (and their balance of presence) are more likely to be addressed, understood for the roles they play, and taken up in relation to issues and decisions around equity. This level of awareness requires acknowledging layers of difference and overlaps of condition that inform and influence practice. The implication of this level of transparency in International Research is that difference will not be overlooked, but engaged with; that dominant or "lead partner" practices will not be adopted as "normal"; and that decisions, activities, and priorities reflect the positions of the partners and not an imagined common ground that rarely exists.

Positioning within the broader system

Partnerships materialise in the literature reviewed here as pragmatically focused within one, two, and very occasionally, three sectors. Partnerships within the academic sector, but traversing discipline or geography are frequently explored (e.g. Fransman and Newman 2019; Grieve and Mitchell 2020), particularly relating to the challenges of interdisciplinary research or power dynamics embedded in North–South collaborations. Partnerships that traverse research and policy contexts, and research and industry contexts are also explored at length (e.g. Georgalakis and Rose 2019; Kaklauskas et al. 2018). Finally, partnerships between academic researchers and communities are supported by a wealth of methodological and anthropological literature (e.g. White 2020). In each area, rich resources can be found offering commentary, critique, and proposition. But these segmented investigations create a skewed picture of where problems and their solutions lie. Thus, this review reveals the need for partnership practices to actively locate within a systems approach to global challenges. Put another way, not every project can engage with partnerships that include all scales or spheres of influence, from the policy maker to the community member, but every partnership can be positioned to acknowledge the contingencies and limitations of its knowledge, and in this way, its interdependency on related systems of practice.

Wicked problems don't have linear fixes; the best toolkit in the world cannot predict or settle the uncertainties, whims, and unpredictability within the complexity of intra-acting systems of humans, environments, and institutions. So why take up partnership, why put it at the top of priority lists? Partnerships, we argue, enable us to better see and understand the partiality of our own viewpoints, knowledge, and action; the imperfections of our own endeavours; and the pathways of continual learning and development that are required on all levels and scales of activity. Partnerships can propel certain activity, correct certain trajectories, protect certain stakeholders, and disrupt narrow or singular points of view. But this requires true dialogue across perspectives and logics. Despite the global scale of the issues we face in international development, partnerships, in this light, may be better started with the basic ways in which we interact with the individual sitting across the table (or the screen): the decision to start with prayer or an agenda; to offer tea or a business card; to fly or to zoom.

Disclosure statement

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