

# GUIDE FOR RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

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# Guide for Research Partnership Agreements

Using a co-construction approach, this guide was tested through participatory workshops with potential users. Stakeholders from universities, CSOs, funding agencies and community-based research networks in Canada provided inputs. The guide is available on the [NextGen webpage](#).

## The Next Generation program

The Next Generation program is a three-year collaborative research program between the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) and the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development (CASID). The program examines experiences of research partnerships between academics and civil society organization (CSO) practitioners in the Canadian context. Next Generation research has uncovered [challenging aspects of cross-sectoral research collaboration](#). However, tensions and misunderstandings in research partnerships between practitioners and academics can be minimized if key issues are discussed at the outset of partnerships. The program supported the compilation of lessons and approaches to establishing a fair, mutually beneficial research processes. When embarking on a collaborative research project, [reaching a shared understanding of project priorities, approaches, goals and motivations at the outset of the partnership](#) can help ensure that the all partners' needs and expectations are clear.

## Why this guide?

More formal partnership agreements between partners can help build lasting partnerships based on realistic expectations around commitments, roles and responsibilities. A partnership agreement also aims to ensure less powerful and less resourced partners receive fair and equitable benefits and decision-making power within a partnership arrangement. These aspects can be drafted in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU),<sup>1</sup> a voluntary agreement between the research partners. An MOU is a useful reference tool that delineates expectations around a common research goal. MOUs formalize research collaborations and can include a clearly defined research protocol that outlines time commitments for practitioners and protects the independence of academic researchers. Moreover, MOUs can outline/include institutional support of the research collaboration beyond the relationship between individual researchers and practitioners, thereby contributing towards the project's sustainability.

## How to use this guide?

This guide provides a checklist of considerations and questions designed to assist researchers and practitioners in developing an MOU or a partnership agreement. In instances where partners decide not to pursue a formal MOU, discussion of the considerations and questions below remains as an important initial step to clarify expectations around the research process.

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<sup>1</sup>An MOU is also sometimes called a Memorandum of Collaboration, Statement of Cooperation, or a Collaboration Agreement.



## Considerations for choosing or approaching a research partner

Before the outset of the partnership, how do an organization/individual identify, approach and select potential partners.

What is the transformation or change partners are working towards?	
How will partnership help partners' ability to achieve those changes?	
What are the best ways to approach partners and assess the potential for partnership?	
How does a partner withdraw after approaching a potential partner if the partnership or this partner isn't the best option?	
What does an ideal partner look like and what red flags exist when identifying potential partners?	

## Key considerations at the outset of the partnership: Building a healthy relationship<sup>2</sup>

Partners need to be transparent and intentional about their partnership.

Why our organizations should partner together? What our organizations can do together that they couldn't achieve separately?	
What does each partner expect to achieve?	
Understanding partners: What are the strengths and weaknesses of each partner? What does each partner bring to this relationship? What are their capacities (e.g. resources, times, etc.) and limitations? Are there potential institutional differences to keep in mind?	
What are the underpinning values and principles that guide our relationship/partnership?	
How are partners going to continuously assess the quality of the partnership itself with respect to what is working in the partnership and how improvements could be made?	
What are key outcomes of the partnership process itself? What is the theory of change of the partnership itself?	
How are partners going to embed an exit strategy from the beginning?	

<sup>2</sup> A partnership isn't a linear process and the sequencing of this guide could change based on partners perspective's and priorities.



## Management and governance

Agree on management (including budget) and allocation of resources. Define a decision-making process along with a governance structure.

Define funding and resource commitments.	
Identify who will manage the funds and the mechanisms to share financial updates: How does the money flow to different partners? How will resources flow from the funder to non-academic partners? How will expenses be reimbursed, and in a timely fashion? How does partners are going to reimburse/acknowledge people for their time?	
Agree on procedures to modify fund allocations.	
Set up a governance structure with clear roles and responsibilities (coordinator, steering committee, executive committee, etc.) and identify how each partner will be represented in the governance structure.	
Identify a process for transparent and inclusive decision making on key aspects of the project and partnership, such as changes to timelines, recruitment, leadership style, or inclusion of new partners.	
Identify a process to manage disagreement/conflicts between partners.	
Develop a risk management plan and an opt out plan.	

## Project objectives

Clarify expectations and identify shared interests and needs.

What is the purpose of the research?	
What are desired outcomes of the research project? Who are the targeted beneficiaries of the research and how they will be included and prioritized. How will outcomes be monitored and measured?	
What is the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system? Who is leading and implementing MEL?	
What is the theory of change (ToC) of this project? How is the ToC being developed? What are the actual changes sought with the project? What are the assumptions? What does success look like for each partner?	
Discuss level and quality of commitment required from each partner to achieve objectives.	
How does each partner benefit from the research project?	



## Scope of the project

Outline clear research objectives, research questions and anticipated timelines, including milestones. Identify key actors and their roles and responsibilities. Consider how the project's timeline aligns with the timelines of the academic partners and the CSO (consider other major deadlines in the fiscal year).

Specify start/end date of the project along with key milestones.	
Define roles and responsibilities in the research project.	
How decisions are being made between partners on the research project?	
Develop a contingency plan in situation of disagreement regarding the research project.	
Examine capacities and working arrangements: What capacity does each partner have to undertake the research project? Is there interference with day-to-day work? How will staff time/resources be allocated? What is the commitment level required from each partner? What does the time commitment look like for each partner and what will be the pace of work?	
What are the roles and our relations with other stakeholders? Beyond the founding partners signing this agreement, who are the partners (including partners in the communities where the research is taking place)?	
Develop a contingency plan in situation of disagreement regarding the research project.	
Examine capacities.	

## Research protocol and practices

Define the research protocols and practices for this collaboration. Consider any ethical risks and consent issues surrounding the project and whether ethical clearance is required.

Outline research practices and methods	
Identify who is responsible for data collection, analysis, review, and data/metadata storage. Identify any associated maintenance costs.	
Whose research ethics process are partners going through? Which ethical guidelines are partners using (University, Community Research Ethic Office, etc.)?	
Intellectual property: who owns the research, and outputs from it?	
Protocols for accessing to data (data storage): who has access to data and how do they access them. Is there any limitation to partners' access to data?	
Who validates collected data, when and how?	



Research participants: Who is invited to participate? Whose knowledge is value? Confidentiality measures: how are partners protecting participants?	
Addressing power dynamics while designing and implementing the research protocol: How do partners make power and decision-making transparent in designing the research protocol? What are the strategies to address power dynamics while implementing the research protocol (location of meetings, who set agendas, who chair meetings, who has access to knowledge and partners, etc.)?	
Outline the expectations around outputs and the research dissemination.	
Identify other possible terms and conditions (e.g. is there a non-disclosure agreement for data sharing?).	

## Communications

**Strong communication and engagement from all parties is key throughout the research collaboration.**

Identify channels of communications and expectations around these (frequency of meetings, etc.).	
Designate point of contact/contact person from each institution. What is the process if partners don't respond in a timely manner?	
Which language (s) are used for internal and external communication?	
How do partners communicate with participants and communities ("beneficiaries")?	
Clarify use of names and institutional logos (whether expressed permission is required) along with branding for the joint activities.	
Determine a decision-making strategy regarding internal and external communication. Have a process in place for collaborative decision-making for shared areas of concern in terms of communication, and how to explore potential future disagreements.	

## Limitations

To note, an MOU agreement is not suitable if the principal objective is to negotiate around compensation, intellectual property, non-disclosure, or technology transfer as it is not a legally enforceable contract. An MOU is a legally non-binding agreement between two (or more) parties. Also bear in mind that a formal MOU is not always the most appropriate option in all circumstances. The above points were elaborated with the academic-practitioner dynamic in mind. However, the guide can also be adapted towards research undertaken with community partners. Establishing the parameters of research can clarify the research process and define community capacity building measures, in order to ensure a balance of power in research collaborations.



## Resources and Tools

To learn more about community-based research, see following tools and resources.

- Community-Based Research Excellence Tool (CBRET)  
<https://communityresearchcanada.ca/cbret/>
- Community Research Ethics Office (CREO)  
<http://www.communityresearchethics.com/>
- Centre for Community-Based Research  
[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/36eba7\\_d4a281876d6d47da957e7ce5227a964b.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/36eba7_d4a281876d6d47da957e7ce5227a964b.pdf)

To learn more about CSO/academic partnerships in the global development sector, see following tools and resources.

- Rethinking Research Partnership: Discussion Guide and Toolkit  
<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/rethinking-research-partnerships>
- Partnership Assessment Tool  
<https://www.ccgpr.ca/resources/partnerships-and-networking/partnership-assessment-tool/>

MoU template for fair and equitable research partnership

- Memorandum of Understanding for Mutually Beneficial Research  
<https://t.co/PL93ye6YYI?amp=1>