

Striving for Excellence in Collaborative Research in North-South Contexts

A Reflection Paper for the IDRC / Coady 2013 Canadian Learning Forum

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Research Project Title	Youth Social Capital Formation: A comparative inquiry into formal and informal systems of support for youth in low-income neighbourhoods
Location of research	Managua (Nicaragua); San Salvador (El Salvador); Ottawa (Canada)
Dates research conducted	2009 – 2012
Partner(s)	El Salvador: Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP) -- Marlon Carranza (lead investigator) Nicaragua: Centro de Prevención de la Violencia (CEPREV) -- Melvin Sotelo (lead investigator) Ottawa: Britannia Woods Community Centre
Funder(s)	International Development Research Centre
Types of research methods used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quantitative surveys of neighbourhood youth, household heads, and students in school; ▪ focus group interviews with youth; ▪ one-to-one interviews with service providers; ▪ document analysis of urban social policy initiatives and youth assistance organizations; ▪ ethnographic observations in neighbourhood sites
E-Links	Pending.
Did or will your research project lead to a second phase?	Yes: A second follow-up phase, which begins in Fall 2013, will be centered primarily on dissemination activities that will consist of: a) meetings and workshops with stakeholders working with youth in two of the project cities (Ottawa and Managua); b) production of a video that highlights project findings and subsequent program and policy updates concerning support for youth social capital; and c) production of a co-edited book.

Introduction

This reflection paper draws upon my academic background in social anthropology, policy analysis, and international development education, and my experiences in conducting collaborative research with colleagues in sub-Saharan Africa and in Central America, including the following three research projects that I have coordinated with colleagues in the South:

1. An evaluation of an emergency-education program for displaced children in war-torn Sierra Leone that entailed the participation of school principals and staff from Plan International (Maclure, 2001).ⁱ
2. A research project that focused on youth participation in NGO-sponsored community development activities, and conducted by myself and an NGO/university research team in Senegal (Maclure & Diagne, 2010).ⁱⁱ
3. A comparative study of youth social capital formation in three low-income neighbourhoods in the capital cities of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Canada (Maclure, 2012a; 2012b).ⁱⁱⁱ

Besides involving Northern and Southern researchers, each of these projects involved a partnership between university researchers and the staff of one or more NGOs.

I am not presumptuous enough to claim that these research projects are models of excellence.^{iv} In fact, the lessons we learned were as frequently from the misplaced assumptions and pitfalls of conducting long-distance collaborative research as they were from the small triumphs and pleasures associated with collegiality and shared discovery. Rather, my interest in this paper is to discuss how they were *striving* for excellence and to illustrate what I consider to be key indicators of research excellence in collaborative research, with specific reference to North – South partnership arrangements, but also for South-South collaborative research.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I briefly define what I consider to be common fundamental criteria of research excellence in relation to the parameters of North-South collaboration. I then review three modes of research effectiveness that I have gleaned from these research projects, following which I review several of the difficulties and challenges that emerged in conducting these projects.

Defining ‘Research Excellence’

The concept of research excellence varies across as well as within broad fields of study and scientific disciplines. Aspects of research excellence in the natural sciences differ from tenets of research excellence in the social sciences and in the humanities. Similarly, indicators of excellence in research may differ within disciplines and across different methodologies used and types of data accumulated.

Nevertheless, there are some fundamental criteria of research excellence that cut across all disciplines. These include:

- a solid grounding in the current state of the art of the relevant research discipline;
- rigorous research design and corresponding methodology;
- data analysis that adheres to epistemological principles such as validity, reliability, and authenticity;
- eliciting findings that are relevant for both advancing scientific knowledge and for the public good; and
- effective communication of research results among scientific peers (through peer reviewed publications), specialists such as policy-makers and practitioners, and the general public for whom access to scientific knowledge is an important basis of civic awareness and responsibility.

Beyond these common criteria, there are six additional considerations that underlie research excellence with respect to social science projects that involve North-South and South-South research teams working together in the context of diverse institutional parameters.

1. Grounding in theory and previous empirical studies.

Excellence in social science research requires a conceptual framework that is grounded in an established theoretical and/or empirical knowledge base. Concepts derived from theory are the building blocks of the hypotheses or key assumptions that allow the articulation of research objectives and the formulation of the research design. Likewise, a conceptual framework that is built upon previous empirical studies can serve as a guidepost for data collection and analysis, and the necessary rigour of these processes.

2. Research design and methodology.

Research excellence is highly contingent on the research design and the methodology used to collect and analyze data obtained from diverse sources. The design must be clearly connected to the conceptual framework and serve as the methodological “blueprint” that will ensure that the principal research questions, objectives, or

hypotheses are effectively addressed through the research. The design must explicitly account for the imperatives of validity and reliability -- especially if quantitative methods are to be used -- and/or the principles of trustworthiness and authenticity in the case of a qualitative approach (Cresswell, 2013). When a mixed methods approach is adopted, research excellence will relate closely to the effectiveness of data triangulation.

3. Fidelity to high ethical standards.

Knowledge generation should inherently aim to benefit society as a whole. From this perspective research should be an ethical endeavour, and excellent research should adhere to the highest ethical principles, both in the methods that are used and in the benefits of the knowledge produced. While this has been reinforced through the creation of ethical guidelines and research ethics boards in universities and other centres of research, researchers should also be aware of the inherent power dynamics that are often associated with data collection and analysis, and should therefore strive to ensure that scientific inquiry addresses these inequities.

4. Inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives.

Increasingly, given the complexities and multiple dimensions of social phenomena, research excellence ideally encompasses inter-disciplinary perspectives that allow for a breadth of understanding and insights. Inter-disciplinary research often entails a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research design that can greatly enhance data triangulation and generate diverse or comparative insights that might not otherwise be possible. Likewise, in research projects that require fieldwork in more than one social setting, a cross-cultural dimension can enhance methods of data collection and analysis, and the authenticity of research results. Where research is collaborative, ideally the research team will consist of participants who have diverse disciplinary expertise and cultural knowledge and experience. In the realm of applied research, participatory action research that engages other stakeholders in the data collection and analysis can likewise contribute to the quality of research, especially when it is oriented specifically towards stakeholder learning and application (Maclure, 2006; 1990).

5. *Relevance of analysis for policy and practice.*

Although not all social science research is designed to directly influence or contribute to policies and practices that enhance societal welfare, excellent research should generate knowledge that, at the very least, can inform decisions and actions that affect the wellbeing of citizens. Where research centres on specific social problems, a

precept of excellence should be the extent to which research findings enlighten the formulation and application of social policies and programs.

6. *Dissemination of research results.*

Excellence in research also entails effectively communicating research results not only to the community of scholars (e.g. through peer reviewed publications), but also to different audiences through a variety of forums – academic conferences, meetings and workshops, professional and popular publications, books (hard copy and electronic), and interviews and audio-visual media.

Three Factors of Effective North-South Research Collaboration

Three common factors contributed substantially to the success of the three research projects.

1. Conceptual Frameworks Support Cohesive Data Collection and Analysis

The explicit elaboration of common conceptual frameworks by all partners at the outset of these research projects ensured consensus on the parameters, objectives, and underlying themes for analysis throughout each project. All three projects were qualitative and entailed elements of a participatory approach (i.e., involvement of research participants in aspects of data collection and analysis). Having a pre-established conceptual framework served facilitated collaboration and common perspectives even while dealing with the inevitable contingencies of working at a distance.

Youth Participation in Senegal

As outlined in the *Convention of the Rights of the Child*, and substantiated by extensive research on children and adolescents, the guiding theoretical premise of this project was that children possess both the capacity and the right to participate in the decisions and the actions that directly affect their development and well-being. When availed of adequate information and opportunity to participate, young people



Youth Participation in Senegal

are generally “capable of making well-informed and responsible judgments” (Bessant, 2004, p. 394).

From this perspective, the participation of young people in decisions and actions that directly affect their own welfare is widely seen as pragmatic and just (Bessant, 2004; Cashmore, 2002; Hart, 1997; Theis, 2007). Following upon this premise regarding the agency and inherent capacity of children (Massart, 2006; World Youth Report, 2005), the focus of inquiry centered on an assessment of youth participation both as a means as well as an end of development interventions.

This conceptual starting point served as the core of an investigation into the variations and complex dynamics of child and adolescent participation in contexts where cultural norms and practices have tended to impede the articulation of children’s voices in public discourse and decision-making. The study’s methodology was qualitative, but sufficiently flexible for a cohort of youth to participate in the research. With the dynamics of youth participation as the focal point of the study, the research team gained insights into the notion of youth participation as a *learning-by-doing* process – one that requires not only adult mentorship and effective pedagogy, but that also entails a learning process for adults and organizations that promote a child-rights approach to international development. These findings revealed the interconnectedness of education and participation and its implications for the *modus operandi* of child-centered development activities.

Emergency Education in Sierra Leone

As noted above, this project was designed as a participatory evaluation of an NGO-sponsored emergency education program. In contrast to the two other projects outlined here, a theoretical framework was not as essential since this project evaluation was conducted for applied purposes with stakeholders who were fully engaged in humanitarian assistance and educational administration in a country still in civil war.

Two broad questions informed the terms of reference for the sponsoring organization:

- a) To what extent had the project enhanced the basic education of children, particularly in terms of literacy and numeracy achievements?
- b) What lessons could be gleaned from the pilot project to facilitate developing a more extensive emergency-education program in districts where the NGO was intending to help reconstruct shattered school systems?

Because four directors of Internally Displaced People (IDP) schools participated in the data collection and analysis, they shared an understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of participatory research – specifically shared ownership, learning, and action – which allowed them to respond to contingencies and extend the scope of findings and recommendations (Maclure 1990).

In addition, the interest of the school principals – and by extension that of teachers, parents, and the children – in securing support for the schools following the end of the NGOs involvement became a key focus of analysis and subsequent recommendations. Again, the flexibility of the participatory approach permitted them to expand the evaluation scope without generating problems.

Youth Social Capital Formation in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Canada

Although a topic of widespread scholarly interest, social capital is often shrouded in ambiguity, in part because it refers broadly to different social dynamics in different contexts, and it is difficult to assess or measure empirically (Atria, ed., 2004; Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001; Portes & Landolt, 2000; Putnam, 1993). Consequently, by



Youth Research Meeting in Nicaragua

drawing upon a common body of scholarship on social capital, with particular relevance to urban youth in Canada and Central America, the researchers designed a framework for the three case studies in three different urban sites that ensured comparable methodological and analytical rigour (Catts, 2007; Forter, 2006; Helve & Bynner, eds., 2007; Holland et al., 2007; Koniordos, 2008; Maclure & Sotelo, 2004).^v

Throughout the project, the researchers developed and maintained this shared theoretical framework through a series of scheduled interactions:

1. Meeting for the first time to develop a project design centering on the situations of youth living in low-income urban communities, the research teams from each country agreed on social capital formation as the central topic of analysis common to all three case studies.
2. During the course of the project, the research team leaders met three times in Nicaragua, Canada, and El Salvador to discuss data collection and analysis. These

discussions were always framed by the focus on social capital and the challenges of identifying and analyzing indicators of youth social capital.

3. At the *Latin American Studies Association Conference* of 2011, the team leaders presented papers related to their country studies on a panel that highlighted the common theoretical framework of the project.
4. The research leaders maintained regular communication via e-mail and Skype, and referred frequently to youth social capital formation as the unifying theme of the project. As well, they often circulated articles and bibliographical lists on scholarship on social capital.

As the project drew to a close, the shared conceptual grounding facilitated interpreting the empirical findings (e.g. understanding the significance of family and school connections for youth in low-income circumstances), and provided a basis for developing policy recommendations (e.g., the need for strengthening communication and collaboration among local youth services).

2. Communication and Coordination

Collaborative research, particularly when undertaken in different countries by multiple research teams, is often a challenging enterprise. In all three projects, frequent communication among the research teams to coordinate fieldwork, data analysis, and reporting was imperative to ensure a high standard of collaborative research. They communicated via:

- regular electronic interchanges via e-mail and, more recently, Skype;
- coordinated dissemination through workshops and presentations in the sites of data collection with as many stakeholders as possible in attendance; and
- exchanging related published research and periodical draft reports for purposes of collegial feedback.

Coordination is a challenging endeavour when conducted internationally over a two-to-three year period. It requires an *esprit de corps* among research team members and a shared commitment to ensuring that all aspects of the research are conducted effectively and – as far as possible – within the commonly accepted time frame.

3. Shared Ownership & Stakeholder Participation

Each project was oriented towards participatory research. The engagement of “research subjects” as participants in some aspects of data collection and analysis facilitated two important benefits.

First, the participation of local people expanded the collaborative scope of the research, fostered a shared sense of researcher/practitioner ownership, reinforced the researchers' entry into the fieldwork sites, and built trust with the research participants. This was especially significant in Senegal and in Canada where cohorts of youth were invited to participate in data collection and preliminary analysis. By enabling youth to participate in the research process, the project offered a form of hands-on learning for young people. And in the case of the Ottawa neighbourhood study, this proved to be an element of youth social capital formation in its own right.^{vi}

Second, these partnerships fostered a mutual learning process for researchers and for local research participants. NGO staff and local people, most notably youth, were able to contribute to critical reflections on issues that were pertinent to them, while researchers were able to gain insights that enhanced interpretations of data and contributed to research conclusions and implicit policy recommendations. From this perspective, research was regarded not only a process of knowledge acquisition (or *extraction* as some critics bluntly state), but also as a process involving the exchange of experiences, ideas, expertise, and perspectives.

In summary, all three of the projects incorporated an ethos of social inclusion and democratic practice. The abiding assumption of this approach to research is that all stakeholders – researchers, policy makers, CSOs, and the public at large (including children and youth when relevant) – gain from the processes of inquiry and knowledge accumulation. In effect, through shared ownership of the research process, the roles of educator and learner become interchangeable.

Three Challenges Encountered

Although successful, these three research projects were not without difficulties. As with many complex human activities, stakeholders in social science research stakeholders tend to have different priorities and agendas:

- For academics and editors, issues of research design, methodology, and the validity and reliability of results are singularly important;
- For NGOs and policy-makers, interest lies in the clarity and coherence of research reports, and in the practical feasibility of research findings;
- For funding organizations, while all of these criteria are important, so too is the cost-effectiveness of research and adherence to established time frames and reporting schedules.

In addition, these stakeholders are generally more interested in disseminating research results that are particularly-suited to their professional perspectives. Collaborative research involving different stakeholders working in different social and professional contexts, therefore, is fraught

with challenges. Many of these challenges are often not visible or made explicit in research reports, and researchers may even view them as burdensome -- particularly among those who are seeking promotion and feel pressured to publish quickly.

In these three projects, several common problems appeared during different phases of data collection, analysis and report writing. For example, synchronizing data collection and analysis and circulating interim reports was sometimes challenging because of the distances, differing agendas and shifting priorities between researchers, and with local stakeholders. As a result, the research participants were not always “on the same page” when conducting fieldwork and data analysis.

A second, occasional difficulty in all three projects was the departure of one or more colleagues and participants during the course of the research. The individuals who replaced them midway were often unable to attain the same level of personal connection to their colleagues in other countries as those who had participated in the initial phases of project. While formal agreements and funding arrangements guaranteed the project’s leadership and completion, the institutional commitments to these collaborative research projects were not as dynamic as the collegiality and personal commitment of the individual researchers, which was a key factor contributing to research excellence. Unfortunately, contingencies of this kind often reduce the efficacy of North-South and South-South collaboration.

A third challenge arose on occasion when researchers and stakeholders articulated different assumptions and expectations about the research purpose midway through the research activities. These differing and sometimes competing priorities often required time for the research teams and their local CSO partners to sort out. Fortunately, however, in all three projects these problems were resolved through regular communication among all sides and by making adjustments to accommodate their differences.

In hindsight, these challenges for North-South and South-South research collaboration highlight the value of informal personal communication. The personal engagement of researchers, and the informal relationships they establish via collaborative research are as essential as the formal institutional arrangements and affiliation. While independent researchers may lack the cachet of being formally affiliated to a research institution, they often have a proven track record as researchers with the experience and professional networks needed to collaborate effectively with other research colleagues. Likewise, while different institutional agendas between research institutions and community-based NGOs can clearly lead to tensions and misunderstandings, in other instances these institutional differences can be a source of mutual discovery and appreciation that is essential for influencing policy and practice.

When problems in collaborative research arise, the likelihood of effective North-South and South-South research collaboration is usually reinforced by prior consultation and ongoing communication and transparency. Trust-building and the sustainability of connections throughout the course of a research project can obviously be enhanced through face-to-face meetings. However, when distances and costs are prohibitive, research partners can undertake additional short-term collaborative activities to reinforce partner relations. These include: short co-authored publications, collaboratively-filmed lectures posted on the Internet, linking with collaborators' students, and inviting them to participate as members of the thesis committees

Conclusions

Despite the challenges and pitfalls, conducting collaborative North-South research offers real possibilities to strive for research excellence. Underlying North-South collaborative research is an acknowledgment that the cross-fertilization of knowledge and experience (i.e. across cultures, languages, and national boundaries, and across disciplines and professional domains) can greatly enrich the processes of knowledge accumulation and understanding. From my own more perspective, cross-national research that actively engages practitioners and young people as research participants provides a mutually-enriching learning process and contributes findings that have both scholarly and applied import.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Although the evaluation was financed by Plan International, it also formally involved representatives of Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education in an advisory capacity.

ⁱⁱ Funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and Plan Sénégal, the project's Senegalese partners included two researchers affiliated with the research unit of Plan International's West African Regional Office (WARO) and l'Université Cheikh Anta Diop.

ⁱⁱⁱ This project was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Although the author coordinated the project, each case study was conducted by a separate national team.

^{iv} A list of these projects and links to reports and publications is provided in the Appendix.

^v The notion of youth social capital as the conceptual focal point of the project was first suggested by the researchers from El Salvador at a preliminary meeting held to draft the research proposal. Their suggestion was readily accepted by the participants from Nicaragua and Canada.

^{vi} One of the youth assistants was invited to present a paper at an academic conference. Her paper was subsequently published in the conference proceedings (Al-Katta, 2009).