CSO-academic collaboration: theory and practice

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The Food Research Collaboration has at its heart the bringing together of academics and civil society organisations with a common interest in UK food policy. Over the last three years it has strived to encourage collaboration between organisations on joint ventures including a workshop in October 2016 on CSO-academic collaboration and the potential for pursuing this in the face of increasingly challenging economic and political circumstances. This Briefing Paper stems from this workshop and offers a review of the literature on collaboration as well as a summary of the four case studies presented on the day.

The literature on joint working between academics and civil society suggests that at a time of austerity and reduced financial resources available for research, and given the complexity of current environmental, societal and political difficulties, the most advantageous way forward is to work collaboratively to ensure the best use of scarce resources to achieve positive change. There is not a long history of such co-working, except for, perhaps, in the field of international development, where the literature is more abundant. Current thinking, perhaps driven by the "Impact" element of the university sector REF exercise, is that collaboration should occur throughout the research process, from identification of a research problem through to completion of a final report, contrary to the traditional, linear model where the CSO provides the respondents and the academic provides the expertise.

There is some overlap in the justification for collaboration at the institutional level – for achieving (and demonstrating) impact, for accessing respondents or experience and for filling gaps in expertise – and there are challenges to be overcome if the collaboration is to be a success. Some of these are illustrated in the four case studies presented here (Food Research Collaboration, Brighton and Sussex Universities Food Network, Middlesbrough Environment City, Sustainable Food North West Research Collaboration): the differing time scales which academics and civil society organisations might work to; the availability of funds to work on co-produced projects and the views of other staff and research recipients to the engagement of third parties in the research process. As the case studies make clear, these challenges are less significant when placed alongside the satisfaction that joint working can bring to the individuals involved as well as the benefits to the collaborating organisations and wider community.

Drawing on the work of two cited recent publications, the paper summarises that in order for collaboration between academics and CSOs to become more commonplace, then it is necessary to achieve:

- Greater institutional recognition for the benefits of the collaborative process;
- Establishment of longer-term relationships between organisations rather than ad hoc responses to specific funding rounds;
- Better training provision on the ways of joint working;
- More emphasis in university funding on collaborative working; and,
- More opportunities for secondments and placements for staff and students into civil society organisations.

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1. Scope of the paper

This briefing paper examines the literature on collaboration, co-production and partnership working largely between academics or research organisations and CSOs (civil society organisations). It reviews the literature on CSO-academic collaboration examining the reasons why such collaboration has developed, why it may be beneficial to the participating organisations, and the associated challenges, as well as looking forward to what the opportunities are for successful collaboration and how this might be promoted. It then uses examples from four such collaborations to illustrate the theoretical points made regarding the incentives for collaboration, the challenges faced in collaborating and the opportunities for improving such collaboration.

The FRC has as its own mission to, 'facilitate more effective collaboration between academics and CSOs to encourage the production, sharing and use of knowledge to improve UK food policy'. Its longer-term vision is of 'academic and CSO communities working better together to influence and improve UK food policy to build a healthier, more sustainable food system'. The FRC's remit is the food sector but the potential for collaboration crosses the disciplines and so this paper looks at the principles of collaboration that are as applicable to forensics as they are to food and farming. It is interesting to look at the theoretical justification for such collaboration and the practical issues with implementation.

Much of the literature on collaboration comes from the world of international development where third sector organisations are frequently referred to as NGOs (non-governmental organisations). NGOs are a subset of CSOs, specifically involved in development cooperation(1). CSOs are a much wider collection of organisations – charities, trusts, foundations, advocacy groups, NGOs and national and international non-state associations within civil society(2). This review therefore considers the NGO literature where appropriate but not exhaustively: the conditions under which some NGOs work and the type of work undertaken varies from that of the CSOs that the FRC is used to engaging with.

2. The development of collaboration between academics and non-academics

" …. research organisations (RO) and civil society organisations (CSO) tend to inhabit different worlds. The former strive to generate new knowledge, hoping that society will make the most of it. When CSOs find out about research findings and use them, it is often ad-hoc and random. Public authorities, researchers and civil society organisations increasingly view these casual occurrences as unsatisfactory" (3).

In the introduction to the 2016 Carnegie UK Trust report on academics and the third sector working together to influence policy and practice(4), Evans (CEO) notes that research has shown that third sector organisations' research is less trusted than academic research, but their outputs are more likely to be read than that coming from academia. Importantly, Evans suggests that, "There is clear scope for universities and third-sector organisations to explore working together to influence policy and practice, building on the trust enjoyed by university research, while also capitalising on voluntary and community organisations' apparently greater success in reaching policy and practice" (4).

In the past, NGO-researcher partnerships were frequently characterised by a division of labour between academics and NGO workers and local representatives, with the former group providing access to funding and expertise in design and analysis while the latter conducted data collection and other forms of research fieldwork(5). Opinion has evolved so that now there is increased emphasis on collaboration, and greater interaction and sharing between academic and CSO partners across the stages of a research project(5).

"[The] Cooperative research process encourages partnerships between researchers and non-researchers (policy-makers, CSOs, business, etc.) on issues of common interest. The partners combine their skills, knowledge

and understanding of the issues at stake in order to produce concrete solutions and / or substantiate possible options. These processes entail mutual learning" (3).

Aniekwe et al(6) also note that there has been a move in recent years for academics in international development to demonstrate the relevance of their research outside the academic institution. There is thus an increasing degree of collaboration throughout the research process: the collaboration can occur at different stages of the research process from the onset/inception phase through to the 'consumption' of its outputs. Aniekwe et al note that this type of collaboration throughout the process can also be referred to as 'co-production'.

Co-production produces knowledge that is both rigorous and relevant. This approach means that impact is achieved along the course of the research(7). Research of this sort is a collaborative, iterative process of shared learning, rather than being distanced and linear with the academic presenting the CSO with the polished report on completion of the project. Research takes place *with* people rather than *on* people. The result can be a democratic research process thus invoking socially just change(7).

> "Co-production has emerged as a potential solution to a criticism that research conducted in communities often fails to meaningfully include communities in its design and undertaking. Co-production is now also perceived as a solution to an argued 'relevance gap' …. (it) aims to put principles of empowerment into practice, working 'with' communities and offering communities greater control over the research process and providing opportunities to learn and reflect from their experience". (8)

2.1   Different modes of collaboration

It has been noted that collaboration can occur at different levels of formality. Lewis et al (9) differentiate between collaboration (small 'c') and Collaboration (capital 'C') between university departments. These authors report that much very valuable informal collaboration goes on between colleagues, involving the discussion of research ideas and the provision of feedback on research work and draft papers. In any debate about collaboration between academics and CSOs, this invaluable but casual arrangement should not be forgotten. 'Collaboration', on the other hand, is defined as the more formal process of working together on a research project and publishing results jointly.

The FAO distinguish between "Process-driven outcomes" from collaboration, which "better inform and influence policy discussions and debates", and "Output-driven outcomes" in which the FAO, Member States and CSOs work towards "common outputs" (10). There are parallels here with Lewis et al's (9) collaboration and Collaboration, with process-driven outcomes perhaps approximating the discussion and debate that leads to the generation of ideas (collaboration), whereas output-driven research (Collaboration) refers to the more formal producing of an output that is available to others.

Because of the clear benefits of collaboration (as opposed to Collaboration), Lewis et al suggest that the number of co-authored publications is not necessarily a good measure of collaborative effort (as suggested in the work of Katz and Martin 1997 (11)). It is important that the funding organisations are aware that in the process of allocating scarce resources to research institutions and CSOs, the drive for more formal Collaboration must not eradicate the more fluid collaboration that underpins much research and knowledge creation(9).

3. Justification for CSO-academic collaboration

The reasons stated in the literature for organisations to collaborate are numerous and diverse. They start at the macro, global level and hone in on the individual academic organisation and CSO to examine the benefits each may accrue from partnership. One frequently mentioned justification for collaboration is the complexity of current global issues:

> "If working on global issues such as climate change, inequality and coping with volatility and uncertainty, it will be much easier to do if working with others" (12)

> "Collaborations across countries, sectors and disciplines are becoming increasingly prevalent as the need to join forces is widely accepted as a vital means of addressing critical issues of common concern" (13)

> "The societal challenges we have to face are complex and more collaboration between citizens' organisations and research institutions will help progress towards valid solutions" (3)

> "..... even without the policies of austerity, a 'business as (just about) usual' approach lacks the depth and breadth of scope to respond to pressing concerns such as, community cohesion, individual vulnerability, climatic variability and economic vitality"(7)

The FAO has a formal strategy in place for partnerships with CSOs(10) as it recognizes that, "....eradicating hunger, malnutrition and poverty is a fight that can only be won by joining forces with different stakeholders", of which the FAO sees CSOs as one of the key stakeholders. Such joint working allows the impact of research and assistance to be more relevant to those receiving such aid, as the organisation works with those more familiar with local society.

Participants at a European Commission seminar in Brussels, 2008(3), called for "permanent structures with dedicated staff to bridge the divide between CSOs and academia. These would raise awareness among CSOs and researchers and foster their participation - although it should be recognised that not all CSOs will want to get involved in research, nor academics in CSO partnerships".

Reasons given by participants at the European Commission seminar for creating a CSO-researcher partnership were as follows:

- 'We want to develop a user-led agenda for research, a map of what matters'
- 'Explore alternative scenarios on the use of natural resources'
- 'Give alternative research agendas space and a voice'
- 'Bring results back to civil society and spread knowledge through new channels'
- 'More scientific data and tools for use in advocacy activities'
- 'Learn new methodologies/ways of thinking'
- 'Confer greater credibility on other forms of knowledge'
- 'We would like to clarify the values which underlie normative research'

4. Reasons for academics to collaborate with CSOs

Whilst recognising the altruistic reasons for collaboration, the literature also looks at the justification for individual academics and/or universities or research establishments to seek to collaborate with CSOs. Potential advantages are numerous:

1.   *Impact:* the element of "impact" was introduced to the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise[5]. Research needs to show impact in the wider

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[5] The REF (Research Excellence Framework) is the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. See http://www.ref.ac.uk/ for further details.

society, with impact defined as: 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (14). Pressure has grown to demonstrate research impact to guarantee future research funding(15, 16). This encourages academics to seek collaboration with others. The language has changed from 'knowledge transfer' to 'knowledge exchange', emphasising a two-way exchange between researchers and non-academics. Now with a focus on impact, there is recognition that rather than purely using CSOs to disseminate findings, there is value in bringing in research users right at the start of the project to help identify the research questions and to collaborate in producing the research(17).

> "… university researchers have come under increasing pressure to demonstrate the usefulness of their findings and counter the caricature of the ivory tower, for reasons of practical societal imperative rather than merely narrow utilitarian concern with the return to the national economy of every pound spent on research" (7).

2.   *Access:* academics have benefited from collaborating with CSOs to gain access to the latter's networks both to gather data and information in order to inform the research, as well as for wider dissemination of and greater influence for the results(3, 5, 7, 18). NGOs may act as trusted intermediaries with communities(19) and may help in research design to ensure it meets local needs and assist with community engagement and participation in the development, implementation and uptake of research(5).

3.   *Funding:* combining 1 and 2 above, linking with NGOs gives academic institutions the legitimacy that can help maximise their opportunities for funding(19).

4.   *Application of expertise:* collaboration with CSOs allows academics the opportunity to test ideas and theory, to apply their expertise(20) to shape their research to be relevant to current issues and to engage in the application of research to achieve tangible outcomes and positive change(3, 7, 20, 21).

5. Reasons for CSOs to collaborate with academics

Similar to the impetus behind Section 4, there are reasons espoused in the literature for CSOs to seek collaboration with academics.

1.   *Impact:* similarly as for academics, funders may demand that NGOs provide better evidence and results(15). In international development particularly there is a push to see evidence based research that can be shown to have an impact within the community(5, 17) and funders increasingly asking that the research they fund shows very rigorous results that can be shown to be as a result of the funding provided(12, 17, 19). Donors want proof of attribution to show a direct link between their funds and positive change against a project's baseline.

2.   *In-house multi-discipline availability:* in demonstrating impact over the longer term, an NGO may need to go beyond measuring against specific indicators and bring in a range of academics from different disciplines. Such a multidisciplinary approach can often not be met by the NGO itself that specialises in a particular sector(17).

3.   *Resource availability:* where a CSO is time and resource bound, collaboration with academics can provide perspective and analytical capacity that might not be available in-house(6, 20). Academic input can also strengthen monitoring, evaluation and data collection capacity of NGOs and their staff(19). Universities are often seen as being better resourced than CSOs in terms of having availability of academic and student time and knowledge and use of university facilities(4).

4.   *Academic endorsement:* a CSO may benefit from working with an academic to gain greater authority for their research findings(4, 18) and also to bring neutrality to impact reporting(4, 17).

5.   *Academic expertise:* collaborating with academics may offer the CSO theoretical, methodological and technical expertise in the field of interest (4, 5, 16, 19, 21). In addition, academic institutions can offer access to research ethics expertise (19).

6. Typologies of collaboration

In addition to the distinct modes of collaboration outlined above (process-driven 'collaboration' and outcome-driven 'Collaboration'), different authors have variously described the forms that the collaborative relationship may take. This may be based on the degree to which each party is involved in the collaborative research process.

Ross et al(22) reported in Shucksmith (4) identify three types of collaboration on this basis:

- Low: the academic leads, while the third-sector partner endorses and provides legitimacy for the evidence;

- Medium: the academic initiates and designs the project, while the third-sector partner provides ideas, information and tactical advice;

- High: both the academic and the third-sector partner are engaged significantly in the research and help to shape both the way it is carried out and the outcomes. This may mean dividing up tasks or working together on all aspects of the research.

Roper defines five types of collaboration between academics and NGOs(20):

1. The expert-consultant model: in which the academic expert is invited in to analyse a problem and make recommendations, and the organisation is a consumer of the product.

2. The expert-trainer model: in which the academic helps the NGO to develop organisational skills to deal with a particular set of problems.

3. The joint-learning model: in which research regarding a particular problem is used as a platform for developing skills in conscious or critical inquiry.

4. The 'best practice' model: in which the researcher is documenting organisational practice for the purpose of sharing that experience more broadly in order to improve development practice.

5. The theory-development model: in which the research is meant to contribute to the development of theoretical literature and may be part of a broader intellectual undertaking.

In the first two of these, the NGO is the initiator and is contracting the services of the academic. In the last two, it is the academic who is the initiator of the collaboration and this academic might be working with several NGOs or building on their previous work or that of other researchers.

Aniekwe et al(6) report the work of Sullivan and Skelcher(23) that describes three further perspectives on collaboration that make contrasting assumptions about the motivations of partners:

1.   *The Optimist perspective:* takes a positive and altruistic view of collaboration seeing the stakeholders as altruistic people with less interest in the immediate but more in the ultimate. "It creates a world whereby collaboration is driven by partners' interest to achieve a better society through a shared vision built on sustainable

partnership rather than one-off collaborative partnership". Sustainability and long-term partnerships are the main thrust of the collaboration rather than the project per se.

2. *The Pessimist perspective:* This is driven by a motivation to enhance the power of the stakeholders. "The collaborative relationship entails mutual dependency with a desired motive by each partner to control and influence the behavior and modus operandi of the other", and "Collaboration is dependent not only on the extent to which the outcome will enrich the resources of the organisation but also on how the aftermath will add credibility to their future work". This perspective sees the collaboration as an opportunity-seeking venture that can occur at any stage of the research process.

3. *The Realist perspective:* this is a more pragmatic approach focusing on the influence of change on collaboration, which can sway collaborators between the two earlier perspectives. Collaboration can come in at any part of the research process to meet demands of donors, governments or others in the international development field.
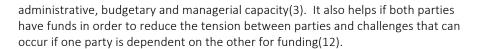
These models are valuable in giving some insights into how various authors have categorised the collaborative process: potential collaborators looking to implement new strategies in their own work may take from this the elements they would like to embody and encourage in their own partnerships.

7. How to ensure successful collaboration

The FAO(10) advises that successful partnerships result from different organisations working together towards shared goals. But, this does not mean that the parties must share the same positions, visions or outlooks. Instead, partnerships with CSOs should be based on mutually accepted principles.

To ensure successful collaboration, the literature suggests the following should apply:

1. *Involve CSOs at the beginning and throughout the project:* CSOs are actively involved in the definition of the research questions rather than acting purely as recipients of research results(18).

2. *Time input:* collaborative projects require investment of time from both sides in order to understand the context in which each is working as well as the cultures surrounding each other's work and the jargon used particularly at the start of a project(18, 19).

3. *Clear project objectives:* each side needs to understand and agree on the objectives of the research. The non-academic party will want to ensure that the research is not overtaken by the pursuit of pure academic interests and agendas and vice versa; the quality of academic outputs should not suffer as a result of any CSO-academic collaboration(15, 20). The NGO needs to be clear in its request to an academic for support to avoid any research becoming diverted by academic interests and agendas(12).

4. *Choosing the research partner:* it is important to choose a research partner carefully and work together on the proposal and budget(24, 25). According to Green(15) individual bilateral relationships between an NGO and an academic can be more lasting and useful. Meeting with the research partner early on in the project will make things easier as the project progresses and perhaps becomes more difficult. (24, 25).

5. *Familiarity with each other's work:* it is important that NGO staff are familiar with the body of academic work on the subject to be investigated and similarly, if academic staff know or have worked for NGOs(12).

6. *Planning the research:* CSO and academic staff should be clear from the start about who is doing what and what each side will bring to the arrangement in terms of

administrative, budgetary and managerial capacity(3). It also helps if both parties have funds in order to reduce the tension between parties and challenges that can occur if one party is dependent on the other for funding(12).

7. *Differences in academic and CSO outputs:* it is worth remembering that CSOs and academics may have very different interests in terms of research outputs. Academics need to publish in peer-reviewed, academic journals, a long process with findings often embargoed until publication. For CSOs, the goal may well be rapid dissemination of findings in easily accessible formats as this is the way to influence policy. Careful planning allows the incorporation of both these priorities(12, 24).

8. *Staying aware of the mutual benefits:* Lastly, academics and practitioners are not traditional partners but there is still much to learn from each other. According to Ferguson(24) research is enhanced if it has a practical application and the practical application can have a greater impact if supported by research.

8. Challenges to CSO-academic collaboration

Despite the apparent benefits to research collaboration, there are challenges that prevent such partnerships from occurring and that make the process more difficult once it is established. Problems can occur during the collaborative process for a number of reasons, many of which stem from the very nature of the collaborating partners themselves.

1. *General rules vs. specific solutions:* the academic may be looking to identify generalizable rules that can then be used for predicting outcomes whereas the practitioner is perhaps more likely to be needing to solve a specific problem in a specific setting(20). Practically, this can be very difficult to resolve and will need much consideration in a funding proposal to bridge the gap between interests so that both parties see benefits from the collaboration.

2. *Timescales:* CSOs and academics work to different timetables and timescales. CSOs may need to react to unpredicted events hence interrupting a research schedule and their research may also need to adapt to policy change or unexpected long-term crises(16, 18). For CSOs, in addition, the results are often needed to feed into a particular action or campaign and are specific to that enquiry: hence if deadlines are not met, the research output has less (if any) value(20). Academics, on the other hand, tend to work to longer-term plans(3, 18). Research is valued for its own sake and may be open ended, iterative and ongoing(20).

3. *Practitioner's view of the academic:* the practitioner may see the academic as the expert who will solve the organisation's problems, and then becomes deferential to the academic and more of an observer rather than a participant in the research process. The practitioner can become dependent on the academic rather than benefiting from the sharing of resources and the transfer of skills. The practitioner may also be sceptical about the credentials and expertise of the academic and thus dismissive of their contribution(20).

4. *Differences in culture:* the academic is used to arguing an opinion based on a wide and deep knowledge of the literature often with a degree of competitiveness. NGOs tend to be more participatory but with high deference to leadership authority. This may lead to cultural clashes when the academic deals in the same way with NGO staff as with other academic colleagues(20).

5. *Prestige:* for academics, CSO-related activities may be perceived as being less prestigious or even negative for a researcher's career, compared to mainstream academic research. While impact for academic institutions remains very much about publishing in the right places, some (most likely those with a more positivist epistemology) see engaging with practitioners as reducing the credibility and independence of their work(3). In addition, NGOs typically have a team-based approach whereas academic institutions incentivise individual career advancement. The 'individualist' pursuit of publications, citations and research funding can limit

time available for developing genuine and long-lasting collaborations. Differing incentives can lead to conflicting personal interests and project outcomes(19).

6. *Research experience and flexibility of roles:* in a longer-term project, a CSO that is newer to research than the academic partner may seek a relatively minor role at the start but seek to take on a more substantial role as the research unfolds. Flexibility and funding needs to be built into the project to allow such a change of role and to prevent the build up of tensions within the project(18).

7. *CSOs conflicting interests as campaigners and researchers:* CSOs use research to support their campaigns. This may lead to the research being seen as biased rather than having the neutral stance that academic research is more likely to be viewed as having(18).

8. *Language:* particularly when considering the results of quantitative analysis, the analytical language used can be daunting to anyone but those equally competent in sophisticated data manipulation and calculation(16, 20). Where the resultant findings differ from the experience and analysis of the practitioner, this can become even more challenging(20).

9. Opportunities for increasing CSO-academic collaboration and improving the experience

Despite the challenges identified above, there are definite advantages to be gained from academic collaboration with civil society and vice versa. It is most likely the case that this will not apply to all research projects or for the full research process, but the benefits outlined above are extensive enough to lead to a consideration of how such collaboration may be encouraged.

Shucksmith(4) writes about a brokering role for an organisation to bring CSOs and academics together. Such an organisation might be a CSO or academic but also might be a funder, media person, policy analyst or advisor, educator, lobby group or think tank. Their role is to encourage knowledge exchange between partners, support the use of the research and strengthen the impact of the research.

The Carnegie UK Trust report makes three suggestions for improving collaboration to influence policy and practice. They are, first, to allow open access to academic publications: many CSOs cannot afford access to journal articles even though the research on which these are based is often publicly funded. Open-access will be a requirement in the 2020 REF.

Second, Carnegie UK recommends the introduction of 'service learning'. This is an educational approach combining formal teaching and learning with the opportunity to serve in the community and learn from the 'real-life' experience.   This enhances CSO capacity as well as creating relationships that may last into the long-term for the benefit of mutual learning.

Third, the report recommends that universities consider investing in an 'embedded gateway' to make it easier for the public to access relevant contacts within the university system. The fact that these establishments are otherwise quite impenetrable to the non-academic makes it very difficult to initiate a collaborative relationship with a relevant researcher.

Summarising the recommendations of both the Carnegie UK Trust(4) report and a complementary report by the N8 Research Partnership(7) that are of most relevance to the work of the FRC membership, the following are suggested:

For universities:

1. Recognise the value of co-produced research and value this in terms of promotion for the researchers concerned

2. Provide training for staff and doctoral students in the skills and methods used for collaborative research

3. Consider the role of, and funding for, knowledge brokers to act as intermediaries between academics, practitioners and policy makers. Such knowledge brokers would need to help boost university funds by, for example, generating impact stories, improving the success of funding applications and increasing student recruitment

4. Support long-term relationships with non-academic partners, including secondment opportunities for academic staff members

5. Carnegie UK Trust(4) recommends "the use of Project Advisory Groups including policy and practice partners relevant to the research project, as a means of informing the research, promoting impact and developing relationships. Representatives from VCOs[6] should be paid for their contribution and valued for their insight as well as their role in dissemination"

For researchers:

1. Engage more deeply in the process of collaborative research than necessitated by pure interest in delivering the final report

2. Develop an awareness of when co-production is suitable

3. Sustain relations with CSOs between research projects

For CSOs:

1. Engage proactively with universities to identify potential opportunities, constraints and perspectives

2. Bring academics into their Boards, Steering Groups or Advisory Panels

3. Offer secondment opportunities to university staff or volunteering opportunities to students

For HEFCE and RCUK:

1. Resource the provision of embedded gateways in order to make it easier for non-academics to access university staff

2. Reward non-linear approaches to research and co-creation

3. Consider funding models for the translation and co-creation of research

4. Continue to encourage access to academic outputs funded from the public purse

10. Case studies

There now follow four examples of academic-CSO collaboration, describing the success of, and difficulties experienced by, the case study examples, as well as a brief summary of lessons learned for future ventures.

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[6] Voluntary and community sector organisations

10.1   The Food Research Collaboration[7]

What is it?
The Food Research Collaboration (FRC) is the only initiative in the UK dedicated to bringing together academics and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working to improve the UK food system. It was established in February 2014 with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for three years and is based at the Centre for Food Policy (CFP) at City, University of London. It employs three part-time members of staff to produce evidence based research outputs, to run events and to maintain a membership and project website.

A steering group and advisory panel consisting of experts drawn from a range of food-related academic departments and civil society organisations oversee the FRC, whilst it is chaired by the Director of the Centre for Food Policy, Professor Corinna Hawkes. Soon after the FRC was established, it was requested at a CSO-academic roundtable meeting that FRC outputs are not 'tablets of stone' handed down from academia to civil society but rather the result of joint working between CSOs and academics from concept selection through to final reporting. This is the model that the FRC has adopted in its working pattern so that all briefing papers, events and other published outputs are the result of co-production.

The FRC also has a membership of food-interested academics and individuals working for food-related CSOs. This currently stands at approximately 550. It is a requirement that those applying for membership are employed as an academic working on food-related issues or by a CSO with interests in the food and farming sectors. Members can use the FRC website to search for other members with similar interests, to suggest topics for FRC outputs and activities, to post 'research wanted' requests and to apply to attend members-only events. Interested parties not meeting the requirements for membership can request to receive the regular FRC newsletters in order to keep up to date with FRC output and events.

The FRC works with other groups involved in food policy, with Sustain, Eating Better, Food Ethics Council and Food Foundation, for example, seeking to ensure that there is no duplication of effort but rather the sharing of knowledge and experience to enhance the common good.

What has worked well?
The FRC was a new venture in 2014 and at the time, it was not clear whether the initiative would be a success as such a cross-disciplinary, cross-sector, CSO-academic, UK food related collaboration, supported by the credibility of the renowned Centre for Food Policy, was a new concept. It was certainly very beneficial to have the experience and reputation of Professor Tim Lang and the CFP supporting the FRC: as founder of the FRC, Chair for its first two years and Director of the CFP (with its established networks and contacts), Professor Lang was able to bring in many academics and CSO representatives who freely gave their time and experience to the FRC, and he was able to advertise its outputs to his wide networks of food experts. Professor Lang continues to work voluntarily for the FRC as a Special Adviser and the organisation has benefitted enormously from his wealth of experience.

Its members and contributors are spread across a very wide range of different sectors and disciplines within agriculture and food, which ensures that it is able to look at issues from a number of different viewpoints.

Through its many contacts, the FRC is able to work collaboratively with a range of CSO and academic organisations as well as to encourage such working between others. Following the co-production model requested at the early CSO-academic roundtable meeting and in order to produce the briefing papers that are available on the FRC webpage, the FRC identifies 'project teams' of CSO and academic representatives working on a particular theme and use these to steer and, often,

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[7] With thanks to Mary Atkinson, FRC Coordinator, for her comments on this section.

write the papers to ensure they are relevant to civil society. In the main, these team members work voluntarily and often establish new connections as a result of the process. Some young academics have benefited from publishing their work on the FRC website and the resultant recognition through Twitter, press coverage and radio interviews has helped their career profiles as well as given them something to contribute as impact to their respective university's REF submissions.

In all, around 320 individuals have freely given of their time to assist with and contribute to FRC activities (writing or co-writing briefing papers and participating in FRC roundtables) over the last three years and the FRC has been very dependent on (and is very appreciative of) this goodwill.

Examples of impact are:

- The FRC's roundtable on food and work and subsequent briefing paper "Agricultural labour in the UK"(26), that provided direction to, and helped gain funding for, Sustain's new campaign "A million better jobs for better farming and land use";

- The highly influential FRC briefing paper on food and beverage taxes contributed (27) to the decision to introduce a sugary drinks tax, as a source of "fiscal evidence" to Public Health England. It helped raise the issue with the public following widespread press coverage in 2016 in national and local newspapers and with the medical professions through citation in The Lancet and BMJ;

- The FRC briefing paper on horticulture(28) raised the need for a UK debate on the status of the horticultural industry - those influenced included EU policy makers and the British Growers Association whose CEO promoted the paper at Westminster; and,

- National attention on the need for UK policy makers to act on excessive energy drinks consumption by children and young people, was raised by an FRC briefing paper on this topic(29) that received coverage with 406 articles in the national and international press (including front page of The Daily Mail).

What has been difficult?
The FRC has received substantial help from its volunteer members and project teams and hence has found the process of encouraging collaboration achievable. However, it has observed some practical difficulties in doing this. Co-production takes time as direction and content of output has to be agreed in project team meetings. Whilst this is a beneficial and enjoyable experience, it does lengthen the time taken to complete briefing papers and to upload blogs and other outputs. In addition, as time and resources are given freely, the FRC has little control over timings as its partners' funded work naturally takes precedence over FRC contributions. The FRC is also led by its membership in terms of the topics it works on: while this results in an interesting diversity of output that meets the needs of its membership, it does mean that the topic range is wide and it is harder to focus and demonstrate impact, so important when applying for funding. Similarly, it has been difficult to construct a mid- to long-term plan for activities. However, it is believed that the benefits of co-production outweigh these negatives.

The FRC itself has a limited staff of three part-time workers and this does limit the number of events and publications that the project is able to work on. Funding is an issue as it is for many organisations: it would be possible to do more if more money were available. It is also an issue in terms of looking at the FRC as a long-term venture rather than a finite project and this is something that the FRC needs to address.

A potential concern is that over time the goodwill of those individuals offering their services to the FRC may dwindle but it is anticipated that as the policy agenda

develops, so the expertise requirement will adapt with the consequence that the FRC is continuously looking for new academic and CSO contacts to work with.

Lessons learned
Through encouraging CSO-academic collaboration, the FRC has seen the benefits of co-working between parties less used to working together. Academics have been able to channel their research output through the FRC to reach a wider, and perhaps new, audience. These co-produced papers have been enriched by the lived experiences of the CSOs on the various project teams that have advised the authors. Such co-production has enabled academics to better demonstrate the impact of their research. A lesson therefore is that although the logistics may be challenging, it is worth considering co-production in the research process – and using this as a methodology for the entire research process rather than as an add on at the data collection or report writing stage.

10.2   Brighton and Sussex Universities Food Network

What is it?
The Brighton and Sussex Universities Food Network (BSUFN) is a local hub for food research, education and activism based in the city of Brighton and Hove. It was established at the start of 2012 when researchers at the University of Sussex and the University of Brighton identified 'missing links' between individuals from across the two campuses working on different food-related topics and the growing number of practitioners working in community food initiatives across the city. Thus, BSUFN started its journey with the aims of fostering new relationships, encouraging the development of collaborative projects, and enhancing the work of local organisations and activists in their attempts to create healthier, greener and fairer food systems. Since then, BSUFN has developed into a genuinely interdisciplinary network of around 200 individuals that includes members from 39 non-academic organisations (mostly local but also national and international in scope).

What has worked well?
Thus far BSUFN has sought to fulfil its mission primarily by bringing its members together at a range of events, including research symposia, public debates, film screenings, photography exhibitions, seminars, workshops, topic groups, field visits, volunteer work days and pub meets. BSUFN also hosts a website and blog that are regularly updated by members and act as a repository of the network's accrued knowledge, as well as an additional forum for members to share ideas and experiences, identify common research goals and develop collaborations. Both of these strategies have been extremely successful in creating a space within which a plethora of informal 'collaborations'(9) have arisen. In turn, these informal collaborations have enabled members to develop a familiarity with each other's work(12) and to gain insights into the context and cultures in which each operates (18, 19). They have also fuelled the work of many members with new energy and inspiration. For some academic members this has been a spur to shaping their research in ways that is more relevant and 'in touch' with practical issues (3, 10, 19, 20), whereas CSO members have valued the chance to think outside the box, reflect on their work, and make new, lateral connections (6, 20).

A noteworthy and enduring collaboration that has been unleashed by the network is between a group of academic members working on local food systems and the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (BHFP), which has been able to act as a trusted intermediary with respect to smaller community-based CSOs and food producers (18). One of the fruits of this ongoing relationship is a research project that the BHFP has been actively involved in both designing and implementing (30). This has been of mutual benefit, as BHFP is able to direct research funding towards issues that it is keen to address (18) whilst the academics involved are able to clearly see the link from their research to tangible outcomes and positive changes(3, 7, 20, 21). Moreover, as the project continues to develop it is catalysing interactions between other members and sparking new funding applications for further research that targets locally-relevant issues.

What has been difficult?

A long-standing ambition of BSUFN has been to attract funding into the network for the dual purpose of carrying out collaborative (co-produced) research and building the capacity of the network and its membership. However, BSUFN has been entirely volunteer-run for the full five years of its existence, despite several attempts to secure funds for its administration and coordination. Though there are advantages of this set-up, the disadvantages have included volunteer burnout and a permanent threat of disintegration. The knock-on effect of this is that BSUFN has struggled to translate informal collaboration into formal Collaborations. The difficulty of aligning CSO and academic interests and navigating their different contexts and timescales (3, 18) makes defining fundable research projects that tick both partners' boxes extremely time-consuming. So perhaps it's no surprise that only a handful of instances have spun out of the network. However, the provision of institutional support from either of the two universities, or an external funder, would undoubtedly have helped to make this more achievable.

Furthermore, it is a particular sore point that the network has not yet been able to fully deliver some of its 'hoped-for' outcomes for CSO members – i.e. better evidence of their impact (15) and greater authority for their own research and project evaluations (4, 18). One way that this could have been achieved is via funded research projects. However, another way that it was envisioned was through the creation of a 'dating service' that would allow CSOs to post questions and 'tender' research problems to academic members (including, importantly, student projects). Other motivations for this initiative were to reduce unnecessary duplication of academic work (particularly student projects), reduce pressure on CSO members who were experiencing participation fatigue, improve the impact of research, and deliver 'service learning' (4). The biggest problem has been that the initial investment and running costs required to set up a dating service are high, and with no guarantee of success.

Lessons learned

BSUFN has a particular interest in finding ways to improve the value of academic research on food for practitioners and policy makers. The 'million dollar question', which is also of central relevance to the FRC, is how to deliver this effectively and efficiently. Like the FRC, BSUFN is still relatively young and therefore has much more to learn in this regard. However, some lessons have been gleaned. Firstly, despite the promise of efficiency, BSUFN has (for the time being) decided that a dating service may not be the most effective model for supporting collaboration. The start-up costs are high, there is a need for ongoing maintenance that the network cannot provide without any staff, and there is the risk that whatever system is developed might ossify, become redundant and turn into another junk artefact littering the web. Instead, the strategy of keeping multiple channels open for people to connect and collaborate (both online and through physical networking) is a more dynamic, opportunistic one that suits the network better at the current time. In this vein, one BSUFN member has established an ongoing and productive relationship with the BHFP through which they set up student placements in an ad hoc way.

Nonetheless, in the future BSUFN hopes to evolve in such a way that it more formally approximates the kind of 'embedded gateway' advocated by the Carnegie report (4). And in order to do so there is growing awareness amongst the steering group that BSUFN needs to 'sell itself' to its most likely underwriters – the two universities – in terms of how it contributes to their bottom lines. Obvious ways to start building this case include generating impact stories from the network's activities, improving and highlighting the success of network-related funding applications (and making the network more visible within applications), and demonstrating contributions towards both student recruitment and achievement. If BSUFN can find ways to do some of these things – and undoubtedly there are other strategies too – then it might become a real beacon for brokering relationships between CSOs and academics in the local area.

What is it?
Middlesbrough Environment City (MEC) is an independent charity (CSO) that promotes healthy and sustainable living using the approach of One Planet Living. Middlesbrough is a unitary authority of 138,000 people, ranked within the ten most disadvantaged local authorities in England. MEC takes a holistic approach to sustainability covering food and nutrition, energy conservation, active travel and environmental education. Increasingly the role of the organisation focuses on practical projects that link environmental sustainability to the prevention and treatment of long-term health conditions.

In recent years MEC has collaborated with four universities on a range of initiatives, typically project evaluation, but also through student placements and volunteering opportunities linked to both research and project delivery.

What has worked well?
MEC has benefitted greatly from collaboration with the various academic institutions. A significant benefit has been additional resources brought by academic partners, particularly in terms of time, which has enabled fuller and wider reaching evaluation than would have been possible through the resources of the CSO alone. Having a thorough external evaluation of pilot projects has added credibility to both end of project reports to funders and funding proposals for further project delivery. In one case, the academic institution was able to fund activities within the community as part of the research project, including the delivery of environment-themed school plays, which built mutual respect with the local community, developing a sense of trust with the institution and ultimately increasing engagement in the research project. As part of the same piece of research, community members had the opportunity to both attend and speak at national events, raising the profile of the project, whilst also providing personal development opportunities for the community members involved.

Particularly close links have been developed with MEC's local academic institution, Teesside University, further enhanced by having one of the institution's senior academics on MEC's Board of Trustees. Student projects have added to the delivery of both strategic plans and individual projects. For example, a group of students was able to develop a balanced scorecard model to measure the impact of Middlesbrough's Food Action Plan and help identify future priorities for the Steering Group as part of their undergraduate study. Graduate internships, funded by the University, have significantly enhanced the quality and robustness of the evaluation of externally funded projects. Through these activities the students have also received valuable insights into the operation of CSOs, including the opportunities and constraints for engagement in research activities. Similarly, a representative from MEC has served as a trustee of the Teesside University Students' Union, developing a greater insight into the academic institution and the needs of students, for example in understanding how graduate internships, volunteering and student projects can be created and adapted to improve graduate employability.

What has been difficult?
Undoubtedly, one of the biggest issues facing the CSO working in a highly disadvantaged area in times of austerity has been resourcing evaluation work where this is not met by the academic institution. In the face of significant and increasing demand for its services, justifying expenditure on research and evaluation to trustees and some funders above resourcing additional front-line delivery to beneficiaries has been challenging.

Issues have also been encountered in terms of timescales. MEC often needs results quickly to support a report to funders or a bid for funding whilst the academic researchers wish to take longer collating and interpreting data. There can also be an issue managing the expectations of communities who similarly tend to work on shorter timescales.

Lessons learned
Both MEC and their partnering academic institutions have benefitted from building relationships over longer time periods, through increasing understanding of each other's needs from the collaboration. This has brought particular benefits in building trust within local communities, improving participation in both project activities and research. For the academic institutions, this has also enabled them to adapt their research methods, language and approach to the culture of the local community.

These longer-term relationships have been enhanced by the provision of student internships, placements and volunteering opportunities, whilst engaging representatives from academic institutions at a Board level has developed relationships at a strategic level.

10.4 Sustainable Food North West Research Collaboration

What is it?
The Sustainable Food North West Research Collaboration (SusFoodNW) was established in 2015 by researchers from the University of Central Lancashire and Manchester Metropolitan University, and has since expanded to include researchers from the University of Salford and Edgehill University. The idea for the collaboration emerged from discussions with members of Sustainable Food Lancashire, an umbrella body bringing together a range of community-based and other stakeholder organisations to support the movement for sustainable food and mobilise collective action. Subsequent discussions revealed strong links between University of Central Lancashire and Manchester Metropolitan University and a wider range of CSOs and confirmed enthusiasm to forge a collaborative approach in the North West, supported by high-level commitment from within the two universities. Following further discussions, it was agreed that the overarching aim should be: "to contribute knowledge and evidence that can increase understanding of food sustainability and support positive change in our region and beyond by achieving tangible social, economic and environmental impacts."

What has worked well?
The two founder member universities each secured internal pump-priming funding to enable SusFoodNW to get off the ground through means of three small-scale research projects, and additionally signed an agreement and developed a website (www.susfoodnorthwest.org.uk). Due in part to the lack of any secure long-term funding, it was decided that core membership of SusFoodNW should be limited to universities, with the goal of facilitating exchange and co-operation between researchers from multiple disciplines. However, the Collaboration is underpinned by a strong commitment to engaging with civil society and other sectors in order to co-produce knowledge and enable action that promotes sustainable, healthy and socially just food systems.

A multi-stakeholder launch event was held in February 2016, which was attended by over 50 people and allowed us to meet and commence a dialogue with CSOs and other stakeholders. Following presentations about the three small-scale projects, table-top discussions focused on key questions raised by the research. These proved enormously valuable in facilitating cross-sector dialogue, securing CSO perspectives and generating further data relating to opportunities, barriers, needs and gaps.

Since coming together through SusFoodNW, one key focus has been collaborative research and evaluation funding bids. One successful bid was catalysed by a call posted on the FRC's 'research wanted forum' calling for researchers to undertake an evaluation of Incredible Edible Todmorden. Discussions were subsequently held, a successful collaborative funding proposal was developed in collaboration with representatives from Incredible Edible Ltd and the research is currently underway utilising a participatory approach and guided by a CSO-based oversight group.

Food Research Collaboration

What has been difficult?

Whilst our decision to secure pump-priming monies helped to get the Collaboration properly established during the first six months, through funding a small amount of dedicated co-ordination/administration time and researcher time to undertake small-scale research projects, it created further challenges down the line. Firstly, its time-limited nature meant that, once the funding ended, it was necessary to find ways to continue to co-ordinate SusFoodNW without an ongoing allocation of funding or staff time. Secondly, the funding was insufficient to enable the research projects to be completed, leading to delays in analysing data and writing up findings without allocated staff resources.

The decision to limit membership of SusFoodNW to academic partners whilst at the same time seeking to engage with CSOs and other stakeholders created some challenges. Specifically, the launch event catalysed an enthusiastic dialogue and highlighted a thirst for further cross-sector collaboration, but we felt the need to be cautious about making too many promises and raising expectations that we would be unable to meet.

The Incredible Edible evaluation has presented a few interesting challenges rooted in the process of working collaboratively. Whilst the evaluation has largely been welcomed, there has been some scepticism about the value added through involving 'academia'. Additionally, it has proved necessary to set clear boundaries about what is achievable within the context of limited funding and staff time and negotiate the fine balance between 'working collaboratively' and producing an external evaluation that is viewed as both 'credible' and 'robust'.

Lessons learned

Looking back on the establishment and development of SusFoodNW over the past two years, there are a number of reflections about lessons learned:

- Harness and build on energy and enthusiasm.

- Appreciate that this type of collaborative work often starts out unfunded and that progress might be slow because tasks are additional to people's main responsibilities.

- In the absence of secure resources, start small and be pragmatic about what is achievable.

- When working collaboratively, build trust through prioritising honesty and transparency.

11. Concluding comments

The advantage of academic-CSO collaboration is well illustrated in the four case studies described above, and in the face of constrained research budgets and global food isssues, the pursuit of such collaboration seems a worthwhile objective. Whatever direction the Food Research Collaboration takes beyond its initial three years, there is evidence available on its website of collaboration in action. Similarly for the three other case studies referred to, documented evidence is available as well as ongoing staff presence. Others may take from this pointers and ideas for establishing similar collaborations on a more regional basis or at a local level.

Less formal arrangements also have merit: the value of staff room collaborative (small 'c') discussions should be recognised as well as the conference or Skype call between organisations to generate ideas and to share experiences. Collaboration can be an approach to working applied across the academic/CSO job remit to the point it becomes less the norm to work in isolation. Where this is not easily done, which for some tasks and disciplines might be the case, then it may be worth considering incremental changes to working attitude. Altruistic working clearly offers benefits different to and beyond those available to the purely independent researcher.

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