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Game play as a safe critical space for exploring research collaboration

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Photo: Jesse Hastings.

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SUMMARY

We draw on the experiences of a particular fair trade-academic research partnership to contribute to building an understanding of how collaborative research can be achieved more effectively. A set of collaborative outputs resulted from the experience, in particular a game called 'Step Into Their Shoes' which we describe and evaluate in this briefing note. We assess the potential of the game to create a safe critical space to recognise and negotiate differences, value what each partner brings and co-create innovative research processes and outputs. In our experience, we find that the game has helped participants to develop empathy (in terms of better understanding the positions and interests that their colleagues negotiate) and to develop an analysis of power dynamics and differences in perspective amongst different people involved in the collaboration. Overall the game emphasises the value of upfront investment in relationship building and the need for reflective practice throughout a collaboration.

Key Messages

- 1. It can be valuable to actively embrace the tensions of collaboration in a playful manner.**
- 2. Games can have both a transformative and a connective potential within collaborations.**
- 3. Upfront investment in relationship building is crucial in certain types of partnership, but resilient research partnerships also need to be embedded into organisational plans.**
- 4. Clear communication upfront and regular reflection throughout the collaboration helps to ensure both flexibility and clarity regarding division of labour.**

The respective agendas of academics and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are pushing them to work together more and more (1). Given emerging targets and pressures for both NGOs and academic institutions, collaboration may be an attractive way of proving and improving impact. There is also an inherent value in combining the different knowledge types embedded within both institutions if research outcomes are to be useful to wider society. However, collaboration is not always straightforward and the often in-built differences in assumptions, goals, approaches and timeframes can be a source of tension, misunderstanding or exasperation (2). While much of the literature on academic-practitioner collaboration focuses on the gaps between the two apparently dichotomous sides, some academics have asked whether we can make something positive out of the tensions, seeing them as an opportunity (3 and 1).

financed a one year project between researchers at the University of Leeds, and Fairtrade International's (FI) Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning unit, to support FI's strategic ambition to become a learning organisation. Following many years of researcher- collaboration, over the past three years in particular, FI has been considering how and when to do it more effectively. The project has served as an action learning seed bed for thinking about collaboration, doing it, tweaking it, and reflecting on it as an integral part of the research process.

A guidance document from NGO Christian Aid and the Open University (2) advises entering into research collaborations with care, and the importance of creating a safe critical space to recognise and negotiate differences, value what each partner brings and co-create innovative research processes and outputs. Through the project we developed a collaborative game called *Step Into Their Shoes* which attempted to create this safe critical space.

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Game-based learning: trials and tweaks

Game based learning is growing in popularity and is increasingly taking place within formal and informal educational settings, NGOs, corporations and governments. However, devising games to provoke thought and learning, which are also fun, intuitive and worthy of the players' time is hard to get right. *Step Into Their Shoes* is a collaborative team game designed to get participants considering and problem-solving dilemmas that hypothetically might crop up in a research collaboration (mostly based on the experiences of the people involved in the project, and on the conversations held during the debriefs after initial trials of the game). Each player takes on one of the four roles of researcher, private sector partner, civil society organization and international NGO. Ideally they play the role of someone other than the one they occupy in their day job (stepping into someone else's shoes, and witnessing someone else step into their own shoes). As the scenario cards come up, the players think about what a person in their role would do and the issues that they would encounter. As a team they try to come up with possible solutions. During the course of the game, players can win paperclips (to symbolise the more formal 'paperwork' components of a collaboration); and relationship 'building blocks' (representing trust and mutual agreement, and other more informal collaborative elements) on behalf of the team. Crucially for the concept of the game, players move as a team rather than as separate actors, but the team can only move on when everyone agrees with the proposed response to each dilemma. This style of play mimics co-operative board games such as *Pandemic*, which was one of the sources of inspiration for developing this game. The strategy of using game to encourage reflection was trialled during one of the project researcher's PhD project with FI and has been used in international development workshops, for example (7).

Step Into Their Shoes was tried out with the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

working group at FI in June 2017 (combining the MEL teams from across the FI system). On this occasion, many participants showed an interest in testing out the game and customising it to various situations as a way to bring a range of actors together in the Fairtrade system. Since then it has been tweaked and played by researchers at the University of Leeds, within two different team meetings at FI, and discussed at Fairtrade Africa and Max Havelaar (a National Fairtrade Organisation) in Switzerland. After our experiences, we then collaboratively developed a new version to play during a workshop at the Fair Trade International Symposium (FTIS) in June 2018. In each situation, it has been vital to clarify the purpose of playing the game, particularly when the suggestion of 'game play' has sometimes been met with initial resistance! In the contexts where the researchers trialled it, the focus has been playing the game for the sake of learning, whereas when FI trialled it with two of their global teams, the focus was 'working as one' and drawing out key principles and stumbling blocks. At the Fair Trade International Symposium that brings together academics researching fair trade, and fair trade practitioners, the aim was to support participants to better prepare for the realities of collaborative working, and to provide an experience of game as a tool for exploring these realities and developing connections.

Players' Experiences and Learning

For some participants, the game gave them a glimpse of critical decisions and negotiation of interests of different stakeholders underpinning research projects. It enabled them to understand the situations that different actors face in this process, including how their institutional environment may shape responses and the procedural steps that are sometimes required. The game helped participants to understand aspects of power dynamics, balancing interests of various stakeholders (i.e. not just with the external research organisations but also internally within the Fairtrade system) in such

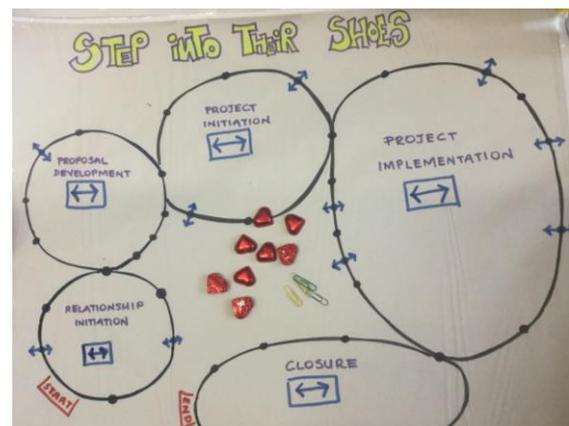
a way that is conducive and agreeable to all, especially when faced with conflicts. For some, this was a physically uncomfortable experience. One player shared in the debrief that in the role they had taken on, they had felt ‘sandwiched’ in the middle, as if they were ‘wearing very tight clothes’- trying to mediate between parties. The people who hold this role in their daily work could relate to the player’s temporary experience and it helped them to relay the challenges of being ‘in the middle’ of the system. The importance of the mediating role of a fair trade organisation between academics and producer organisations came out strongly when we played the game at FTIS. Power imbalances and differences of perspective between academics and NGOs are not necessarily negative – there are clear advantages as well as risks and impediments (4). The key is to be aware of them and to work with them productively.

Game playing also highlighted the importance of one-to-one relationships for the success of partnerships but also the potential fragility of these relationships. This emphasised the need to embed research partnerships into organisational plans. Research on academic-practitioner relationships reiterates the importance of relationships in tackling or engaging with tensions in a generative way (3). Embedding research partnerships into organisational plans could be valuable in acknowledging the different time horizons that are a common source of tension between academics and practitioners. While the time taken to conduct academic research is often perceived as unhelpfully long, the time taken by academics to develop relationships has been demonstrated as a route to making research more insightful and impactful (3).

Policy Implications and Conclusions: Taking the game further

Overall, the ‘lesson’ of the game is that certain types of research (i.e. those that benefit from collaboration, as not all types do) require an alternative division of labour between the various actors. It is important

that both NGOs (and their respective partners) and academics are involved and closely collaborate during design, conduct *and* dissemination of research. This breaks away from the more standard pattern of academics leading on design and conduct, and NGOs supporting data collection and taking responsibility for dissemination (5). The type of collaboration explored in our game requires resource investment upfront that is likely to minimise problems later on. Researchers on academic practitioner relationships draw a similar conclusion that it is important to be clear about the type of research; flexible but clear about the division of labour; and that it is best to commit resources upfront than to rescue a floundering partnership struck by miscommunication and misaligned expectations (1).



Within a research collaboration, the game has potential as an exercise to build a team and share expectations in the early stages. Academic research on collaboration has emphasised the need for honesty and careful discussion of expectations and assumptions (4) particularly from the outset (6), and for a mutual responsibility to learn and understand what suits the other better (6). This can help bridge the institutional and cultural divide between academics and NGOs (6). Within universities, it could be a valuable training tool for researchers contemplating collaborative projects, particularly with NGOs. This could help researchers to be better equipped and able to pre-empt the types of

challenges they might face and to plan for them. There is also scope to take the game to the university and NGO departments that deal with collaborative contracts so that they understand the differences between working with industry and non-profit partners.

Going beyond research collaboration, Fairtrade International staff envisage using the game within the Fairtrade system as a powerful tool for participatory decision making at various critical points where consensus needs to be built with multiple actors with converging but differentiated interests and roles. 'Playing out' different roles within the context of a game is a safe and engaging way of testing or validating views and positions before making final decisions.

Playing the game yourself

The materials for the game consist of a printable sheet with scenario and action

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cards, instructions for a facilitator, including how to draw the game board on a flip chart, a dice and items to collect to symbolise different aspects of collaboration (we used Lego bricks and chocolate hearts in different iterations to symbolise networking and team building and paperclips to symbolise paperwork and more formal communications). We plan to make the game freely available for both research and NGO audiences who are interested in using it to navigate their journey through research collaboration. See contact details below.

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Further Information

Information informing this policy brief is taken from an academic paper presented at the Fairtrade International Symposium in Portsmouth, June 2018

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