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Towards a collaborative approach between practitioners and academics: insights from an academic-Fairtrade collaboration

Abstract

Partnership approaches have been identified as crucial for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. In the context of an emerging literature on cross-sector partnerships, and more specifically reflections on how academic institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) create effective and mutually beneficial research collaborations, this paper draws 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 including best practices for engagement, and a training tool. It has contributed to changes in some of Fairtrade International's ways of working with researchers. We found that we had more in common than what divided us in terms of skills and attitudes to knowledge which is an important factor in the success of our relationship. Rooted in reflective practice, our project highlights the importance of trust and relationship building but also recognition of formal agreements and institutional structures to sustain the relationship.

Key words

Fair Trade, Collaboration, Partnerships, Practitioner, Collaborative Research, Co-production

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Introduction

Partnership approaches are crucial for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals; indeed, SDG 17 is explicitly focused on 'Partnership for the Goals'. However, the processes of building successful cross-sector partnership require further elaboration. This paper seeks to contribute to an emerging literature on cross-sector partnerships, and more specifically reflections on how academic institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) create effective and mutually beneficial research collaborations. We draw on the experiences of a particular NGO-academic research partnership to contribute to building an understanding of how collaborative research may be achieved more effectively.

Working in partnerships is not always as simple as it may first appear; institutional and cultural barriers mean that collaborations can lead to misunderstandings and may even be contentious (Lottholz and Kluczewska, 2017). Nevertheless, there are clear drivers for closer working between NGOs and academia on research projects. Across Europe several higher education institutions have embraced the notion of the 'civic university', which includes strong engagement with civil society and community from the local to the global (Shucksmith, 2016). Similarly, in the USA the role of academic engagement or engaged scholarship is increasingly recognised (O'Meara et al, 2015). More specifically, in the UK the research funding councils require carefully articulated 'pathways to impact', which has led academics to collaborate (Schoen et al., 2017). For NGOs there is an ever-increasing requirement from donors to account for impact, requiring engagement with impact assessment methodologies and theories of change that may require some out-sourcing of effort or collaboration to access cutting-edge theories and techniques (Stevens et al 2013). Moreover, the need to be accountable to the targets of donors often means that there is less space to reflect on longer term issues and the overarching direction of an organization, or the broader theoretical significance of their activities, at the same time as donor funds for such reflection may be shrinking (Kontinen, 2016). Working with external researchers can help provide this perspective. In addition, it provides a third-party independent perspective on aspects that either help in demonstrating impact of the activities and, if not, then it helps in indicating gaps in practice. This independent perspective is critical to facilitate change in a learning driven organization.

In this paper, we (members of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning [MEL] Unit from Fairtrade International [FI] and academics from the University of Leeds) seek to showcase both the opportunities and challenges involved in creating research through a process of academic/NGO

co-production. We do this by drawing on the experiences of our partnership that began in a PhD project and evolved into a one-year 'impact acceleration project' (IAP) launched in the context of Fairtrade International's (FI) strategic ambition to become a learning organization. In this project we investigated varying perspectives on learning and the role of research within FI, and considered the different kinds of relationship between academics and FI, some of which may be conflict-prone but where there may be considerable opportunities for partnership to further SDGs and fair trade principles. Whilst this paper refers to a relationship involving a particularly fair trade organization, i.e. Fairtrade International, it has broader relevance to the broader fair trade movement and to academic-NGO relationships. We reflect particularly on enabling factors for collaboration, and also provide insights into the wider context of fair trade-researcher relationships.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section we reflect on academic and policy literature on collaboration between academics and NGOs. Moving from theory to practice, we then provide more detail on our collaboration generally, and the methodology for the project that provided a focus, and resources for our collaboration. In the fourth section we describe the outcomes from our activities, followed by a discussion of the broader lessons from this experience for NGO-academic collaborations and more specifically implications for Fairtrade ways of working before we conclude.

Academic-NGO collaboration

A collaborative model of research is becoming increasingly recognized (Stevens et al., 2013) particularly in the face of 'wicked problems' requiring cross-disciplinary and cross-sector perspectives and problem-solving approaches (Brewer, 2013), not least climate change and poverty alleviation. This recognition acknowledges that varied kinds of knowledge are embodied in different institutions including universities and NGOs. Regardless of whether the knowledge is explicit, formal, written or embedded in intellectual capacities of individuals, these knowledge types must be combined if research outcomes are to be useful to wider society. Thus, knowledge is exchanged between academia and other parties in a two-way relationship rather than being transferred from academics (often perceived as knowledge generators) to users (Schoen et al., 2017). Some methodologies and disciplines are more amenable to collaborative approaches such as participatory research in development studies or knowledge utilisation research in healthcare (Denis and Lomas, 2003). Whilst collaboration may seem a logical way forward, there are some challenges associated with structures and a need for better understanding of the factors that associated with success also understanding the factors

Collaborative approaches suggest 'greater interaction and sharing between academic and CSO [civil society organization] partners across the stages of a research project' (Schoen et al., 2017: 2). Partnerships between academics and NGOs have frequently been perceived in terms of a distinct division of labour, with academics in charge of design and conducting the research and NGOs perhaps contributing to data collection or validation, but mostly responsible for downstream activities such as dissemination, being involved in the research as a consumer, not a producer (Schoen et al., 2017). There are, however, many different variations as summarised by Shucksmith (2016) who adapted research on interactions between researchers and health system managers and public policy-makers to reflect on NGO-academic division of labour based on the level of involvement of the non-academic partner. Three scenarios are suggested for the NGO: (1) Formal supporter: in which the academic leads, while the NGO partner endorses and provides legitimacy for the evidence; (2) Responsive audience: in which the academic initiates and designs the project, while the NGO partner provides ideas, information and tactical advice; (3) Integral partner: in which both the academic and the NGO partner are engaged significantly in the research and help to shape both implementation and the outcomes. This latter form of high collaboration may be termed 'co-production' in which both the NGO and academic are involved in more stages of the research process (from developing the agenda and getting funding, through to collecting and analysing data, and knowledge exchange activities) (Aniekwe et al., 2012). Importantly there is collaboration in the definition and analysis stage of the project, which had traditionally been the purview of academics. The benefits of a co-productive approach include enhanced relevance of research, with impacts being achieved during the course of the project rather than at the end (Schoen et al 2017). Co-productive research approaches can be usefully contrasted with other forms of interactions between NGOs and academics as set out in Table 1.

However, these procedural and contractual distinctions hide motivations and underlying practices associated with academic-NGO joint working, as highlighted by Anikwe et al. (2012). There is a need to make a distinction between the levels of optimism (collaboration is viewed as the ideal approach), pessimism (collaboration is based on power or resources) or realism (a pragmatic approach that recognises that circumstances may curtail altruistic behaviours or conversely that relationships may evolve in a more supportive manner) argue Anikwe et al. (2012). Their research suggests that it is important to recognise the different motivations of partners and also how the shifting environment may change these, but also the challenges involved. Similarly, Pohl et al. (2010) identify challenges including difficulties in fostering a common understanding, and ensuring

the sustainability of the relationship and uneven power relationships, which can be particularly acute where research relationships involve actors from the global north and south.

Ultimately, the analysis of the literature and investigation of several case studies of NGO-academic interactions in practice undertaken by Anikwe et al. (2012: 6) leads to an argument for a 'realist' perspective' which recognises that motivations may sway between 'altruism' and a desire for 'power and resource'. Such an approach underlines the need for "all collaborative partners to take responsibility in understanding and learning what suits the other better, thus favouring the joint learning type of collaboration that is aimed at bridging the intellectual and cultural divide between academics and NGO practitioners" (ibid: 10). This highlights the need to reflect on changes and promote an approach to collaboration that is adaptive.

Table 1 Models of NGO –academic collaboration

Model	**Summary**	**Mode of collaboration**	**When used by NGOs**
Expert consultant model	NGO commissions academic who identifies and improves 'capacity gaps' in NGO; formal agreement; may be teacher-student relationship despite project being initiated by NGO	Limited collaboration	Usually undertaken to support accountability to donors or to inform strategy development
Expert trainer model			
Joint-learning model	'Focused on long-term interest' and 'sustainability' rather than short-term benefit. Optimistic; shared interest and vision; interdependency; 'normative rules' of expected behaviour	Co-production	Where the academics and NGO have a common interest and work together to identify an issue and mode of addressing this
Best practice model	Academic researcher identifies and documents	Dialogic and mutually supportive	Academic may be commissioned by body

	best practices for sharing and replicating by similar organizations or NGOs	relationship; collaboration likely to be informal and/or broad	other than the NGO – e.g. multilateral donor
Theory-development model	Aims at theory building, drawing on empirical evidence gathered from NGOs, or based on data or field access generated by NGO. Issue of extent to which the interests of the NGO coincide with academic	Arm's length relationship	May be instigated by the academic who is interested in the topic; may not involve the NGO at all, relying on material in the public domain, though may make formal request for information or interview

Source: expanded from Anikwe et al.'s (2012: 6-7) summary of Roper (2002)

Cornish et al (2017) reflect on the challenges of sustaining an organizational link, highlighting that whilst there may be mechanisms in universities to resource and fund links with NGOs, it is in the end inter-personal linkages that sustain them. Conversely, Shucksmith (2016: 28) suggests that NGOs find universities 'impenetrable' - as it is difficult to identify the right person with whom to collaborate, who has time and access to resources, as well as the relevant subject and methodological specialism. Each university is structured differently and may have different polices relating to engagement with external bodies.

The challenge not only relates to the importance of individuals but the differing organizational cultures in which they are embedded. In NGOs, there tends to be more emphasis on working in teams, whereas in academia rewards and incentives are more individual (Green, 2016a), with implications for where ownership of a partnership may lie. It is widely recognised that that the two groups have different attitudes to knowledge as well as differences in underlying values such as trust and forms/styles of communication (Green 2016b) For many NGOs, knowledge is about collecting evidence to back up a plan or strategy, whereas academics may be more interested in the underlying or general theory, which some practitioners may not regard as relevant (Kontinen, 2016). In constructing knowledge, academics and NGOs tend to work to different time-frames: "the focus of academic institutions on the long-term process of developing theory (and its publication in top-tier journals) means that academics are incentivised to be critical, cautious and relatively slow. Development NGOs face a different set of institutional demands – to be action

oriented and accountable to often simplistic Key Performance Indicators" (Stevens et al., 2013:1074). Academics are seen by NGOs and government as irrelevant "because they are risk-averse, use impenetrable jargon, talk mainly to each other; don't adapt their messages to the real world," (Green, in Shucksmith, 2016: 28). Further, their messages are often hidden behind a publisher's paywall in contrast to the more accessible, and often more widely read NGO publications (ibid).

Behind these institutional differences are different capabilities and relative strengths that can optimise a collaboration. For example, NGOs may be strong in looking ahead with respect to the direction of policy debates and in many cases are the key to accessing data. Academics may be more trusted in terms of outputs and can offer theoretical framings and methodological expertise to help make sense of mountains of data (Aniekwe et al., 2012). The literature highlights the importance of trust building and taking time to get to know each other, iterating objectives and reviewing mutual expectations and different understandings of knowledge and evidence, and understanding the nature of the 'intellectual and cultural divide' that may exist between NGO and academic partners (Anikwe et al., 2012: 9). Nevertheless, Stevens et al. (2013: 1073) suggest that the divide between organizations may not be as wide as suggested in the literature. Complementarities between the two types of organizations are especially great where there are academic-practitioners and practitioner-academics (the 'so-called pracademics', i.e. people who have worked on both sides of the divide) in each of the partner organizations, where knowledge generation and dissemination are valued by both, and where there is a shared premise that 'knowledge is generated through the interplay between theory and data' (ibid). Similarly, Hayman et al. argue that in knowledge creation, there is a need for a important dialogue between researcher and (different kinds of) practitioner to enable 'unpacking the logic and values that lie behind the [theoretical] terms and how they are used' (2016: 153).

Although much of the literature discussed above draws on stereotypes or experiences of poor relationships, they point to some underlying challenges that need to be acknowledged in practice. Inevitably, there are power dynamics – inter-personal and organizational- to be considered. Indeed collaborative approaches are vulnerable to the similar critiques to those directed at participatory development practices that do not recognise political dynamics, resource differentials or have unrealistic expectations (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hayman et al. 2016). From another perspective, this approach to research may be regarded as over-exposed to bias and offering limited objectivity. It is important to counter this with a methodology that is highly reflective and considers positionality, as we set out in the next section.

While there is an emerging literature in the area of co-production of research between universities and NGOs, especially in the context of international development and planning, there has been no published work on the specific opportunities and challenges of a collaboration between a university and a fair trade organization. It is within this context that this paper fills a specific gap, and provides a contribution in terms of offering reflective insights into an academic-NGO relationship that is specifically designed to promote learning on how to improve such relationships. More broadly, our experience recounted in this paper offers insights in relation to SDG 17 on partnerships and specific target 17.17 to 'encourage effective partnerships' that calls on organsations to build on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships'. There is much rhetoric about partnership, but whist there are increasing insights into public-private partnerships (Bäckstrand, 2006), it has only been relatively recently that NGO-academic partnerships have received scrutiny in terms of the challenges of shaping and influencing a multi-stakeholder initiative (Anikwe et al., 2012). Partnerships across sectors are crucial for ensuring that learning and knowledge do not remain in silos.

Context of the Fairtrade – University of Leeds Partnership

Fairtrade International has long sought to build a relationship with researchers, especially those in universities that is both more active at an institutional level as well as more explicit on engagements with researchers and/or students who reach out to FI regularly for various types of support. They were particularly keen to better understand university researchers, ie academics, because as noted earlier NGOs often find it difficult to work with academics due to organizational cultural differences (linked to pressures to publish, academic calendars and teaching) and the often impenetrability of universities. Simultaneously, FI has commissioned research and evaluations to understand the impact they make in the world, keen to translate research findings to action and make them easy to access for their stakeholders. Building on these desires as well as preliminary conversations with researchers about its approach to engagement with researchers (presented at the Fair Trade International Symposium, FTIS, by Kirkpatrick in May 2015), FI began developing a policy and procedures for working with PhD students as a first step to developing new systems and approach to universities. The policy recognized that there were different ways that FI had engaged with researchers to date, including contracting researchers directly, providing material for students, and hosting researchers within the organization. In the interim the MEL unit in Fairtrade International developed a strategy for FI to become a 'learning organization', including

asking questions about what kind of knowledge is needed in the organization, in what form and also questioning how the organization interfaces with researchers.

At the same time, researchers have been increasingly keen to work with NGOs, including fair trade movement in general and Fairtrade International in particular. Initially, the engagement between academics at the University of Leeds and FI that is at the heart of this paper was initiated through PhD research on the process of setting the Fairtrade Climate Standard (Howard, 2016). Her request to observe the process successfully resulted in the PhD student becoming embedded in the organization, and drawing on a methodology grounded in reflective practice the thesis became as much about learning about a standard setting process as learning about 'learning' itself. Both the PhD researcher and her supervisor participated in Kirkpatrick's seminar at the 2015 FTIS that sought to explore the potential for enhancing engagement with researchers and over the next year they sought ways to sustain a conversation with FI about university-FI linkages.

Our relationship was cemented through the award of a jointly developed one-year Impact Acceleration Project (IAP) in February 2017 that drew on the experience of a researcher being embedded in FI to help shape a framework for collaboration with university researchers with the aim of enhancing the uptake and usefulness of research within the organization and movement. FI was interested in the project with Leeds precisely because it was about co-production, and because it was not about being observed but a two-way learning process which was particularly important for FI because during that time the organization was building the foundation of becoming a learning organization. We were thus brought together by a shared interest and optimism as well as through an ongoing dialogue based on trust and openness. Being more realist, however, it is important to acknowledge the role played by the availability of a rather flexible funding model that was aimed at 'impact' rather than the examination of specific research questions.

Our over-arching methodology for the project that facilitated the co-production process, was one of reflective practice (Raelin, 2002), including tools such as the 'Design Web' (Macnamara, 2012). It involved creating space for people within the Fairtrade system to think deeply and expansively about learning cultures and organizational culture and dynamics (both current and historic) more generally, and to reflect this insight back to people in an aggregated and thematic manner. This was mostly facilitated in one-to-one conversations, through workshops and sessions during 'Learning Week' in June 2017 and team reflective calls between the academics and the MEL unit.

As the project was based on reflective practice and was highly contingent on context, particularly FI's learning organization strategy, the specific outputs from the project were dependent on the needs assessment. Moreover, as we got to know each other better, an understanding of the potential contributions of each of the members of the team, and indeed the composition of the team itself affected prioritisation. Understanding what being a learning organization might mean and the establishment of framework policies rather than the development of tools for sharing learning became the focus of this project.

Impact Accelerator Project process and co-produced outputs

Our relationship built on shared experiences and joint relationships embodied a move from research *on* fair trade to research *with* Fairtrade. Whilst there were different roles undertaken by different members of the team, with different individuals leading on different aspects, the outputs have been co-produced, with the final versions a process of presentation, iteration, feedback, reflection and negotiation.

Table 2: Collaborative project

Timing	Steps
2014	Agreed that PhD researcher could follow standard setting process; agreement signed
May 2015	Workshop at Fair Trade International Symposium
2016	Workshops at Fairtrade International by PhD researcher on findings regarding learning processes
2016	Collaborative proposal development
February 2017	Success with proposal for Impact Accelerator Project
March-April 2017	Needs assessment conversations and skypes
May 2017	Planning for Learning Week
June 2017	Learning Week at Fairtrade International with sessions on findings from needs assessments, partnership workshops, decision making on tools, among other content topics relevant to FI's strategy
September 2017-January 2018	Prototypes of learning board games developed, tested in university and Fairtrade settings and experiences shared
June 2018	Workshop on "Step into their shoes" & game played at Fair Trade International Symposium, Portsmouth

September 2018	River of Life reflection on relationship during project
October– December 2018-	Joint writing of briefing note on game play, blog post and journal paper

The first phase of the project involved an assessment of learning needs within FI, both in terms of what colleagues within FI understood as learning and the relationship about research and learning between academics and FI. The academics acted as collectors and visualizers of data, drawn from interviews with FI colleagues and interactions with them which were the main inputs into reflective conversations with the whole team, which were key for us to identify what might be of more lasting use to FI and to others.

During (open-ended informal) interviews in the spring of 2017, twelve colleagues in Fairtrade International shared their thoughts on what learning meant to them and why it was relevant to be a learning organization. These included people in the Bonn FI Secretariat, members of National Fairtrade Organizations (NFOs) and of Producer Networks who had a link to the MEL Unit or a responsibility for policy and learning. Depending on their position and role within the system, rationales for learning varied. Some were focused either towards farmers and workers (for example to inform capacity building projects or understand what the system could do better) or towards companies, consumers and policy makers (in terms of proving impacts, or pushing companies to improve). Others had an internal focus (based around understanding, appropriating and being accountable to the 2020 strategy, for example). Learning motives varied from learning for the sake of understanding better (in order to better communicate, for example, and help others to understand how Fairtrade works) to learning in order to make improvements.

Based on the findings from these conversations, the academics in the team developed a learning typology, as illustrated in Figure 1, to stimulate a reflective discussion with the FI team. This presented aspects of learning relevant to different parts of the system. Some focused on learning as understanding; for others it was about improving practice. While ‘understand’ and ‘improve’ appear to be on opposite poles, they are actually on a continuum, continuously informing each other. ‘Understand’ suggests being more inward-looking, taking a step back and making sense of things, but the action that comes with ‘improve’ should always be informed by understanding. When this visual portrayal of learning was presented, Fairtrade colleagues commented that the rationales were distinctly organizational and did not capture what learning meant *personally* to the

individuals who had been interviewed. They suggested a need for more ownership and appropriation of the concept of learning across the system.

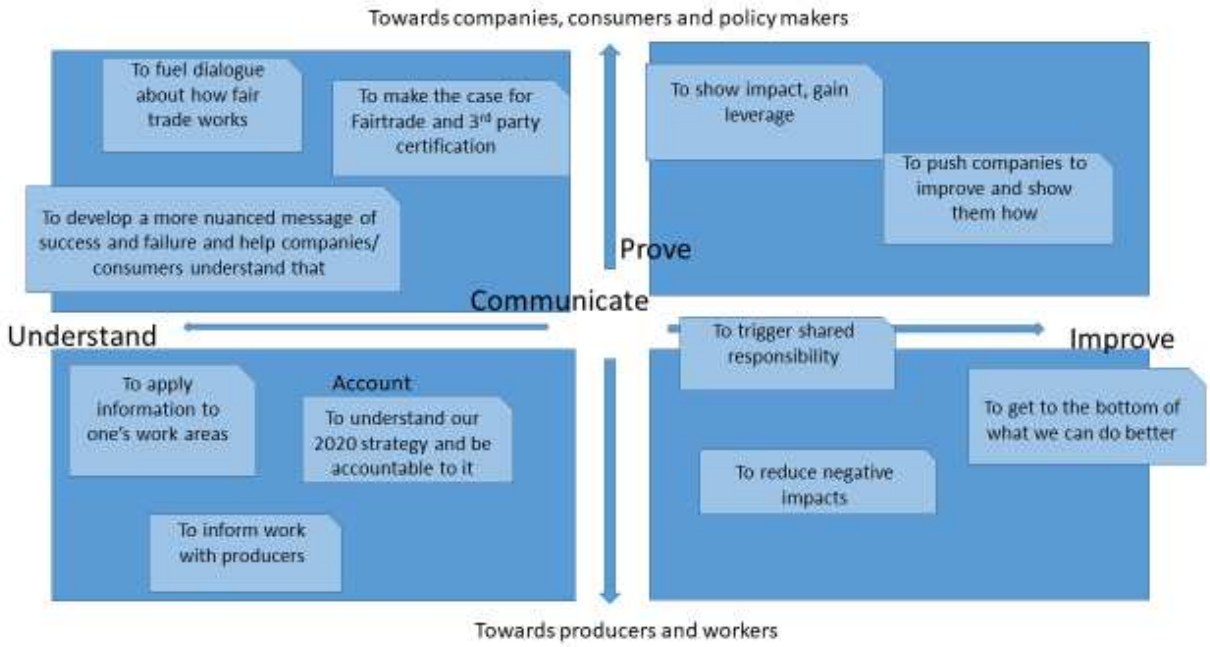

Figure 1: Fairtrade International staff perspectives on learning, from needs analysis conversations

Analysis of the conversations showed that there has been mixed experience within the Fairtrade system of working with academic as opposed to independent researchers. Researchers based in universities were valued for their credibility with externals, often linked to track records of publishing. However, whilst good data and learning might have emerged from university based research, it tended to be expensive and took a long time to complete, and in the meantime issues had moved on. Some Fairtrade practitioners felt that researchers- whether academic or independent- rarely told them things they did not know already, and were not convinced of the added value. Others felt that research conclusions were sometimes expressed 'sharply' in a way that did not necessarily reflect the nuance in the underlying findings or on how things could be improved. There were also observations that producers were over-researched, leading to burdens such as potential exposure to commercial or reputational risk.

This led to a discussion about the different types of academic-FI relationships, drawing on two relationship visualizations. Over the past two decades there has been considerable academic

interest in the fair trade movement, tools and practices. This has been mirrored by an increasing interest among fair trade organizations to understand the impact of their activities and that of the wider movement from a variety of perspectives, e.g. development (e.g. benefits for producers, outcomes on poverty) and business (e.g. how business practices change, or not, as result of fair trade, consumer behaviour). This has led to the publication of a Theory of Change by Fairtrade International in 2015 that has informed a variety of impact assessment studies conducted on behalf of FI, by academics, but also by consultants.

Whilst there have been numerous interactions between academics and fair trade organizations, at times the relationship has been less collaborative, with several academic vocal critics of fair trade (see Smith, 2009 for overview of neo-liberal critiques; Cramer et al 2017 for more recent critical study). Some academic research on fair trade is conducted with limited direct engagement with fair trade organizations, often in the area of consumer or management theory as their analysis can be conducted using publicly available data (e.g. Moxham and Kauppi 2014). However, increasing numbers of researchers have been keen to access data from fair trade organizations, often but not only, students. Figure 2 illustrates how academics and NGOs collaborate together. The left hand side was created by the FI MEL team through internal consultation based on previous engagement with research on different levels and was presented at a workshop at the Milan Fair Trade International Symposium (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

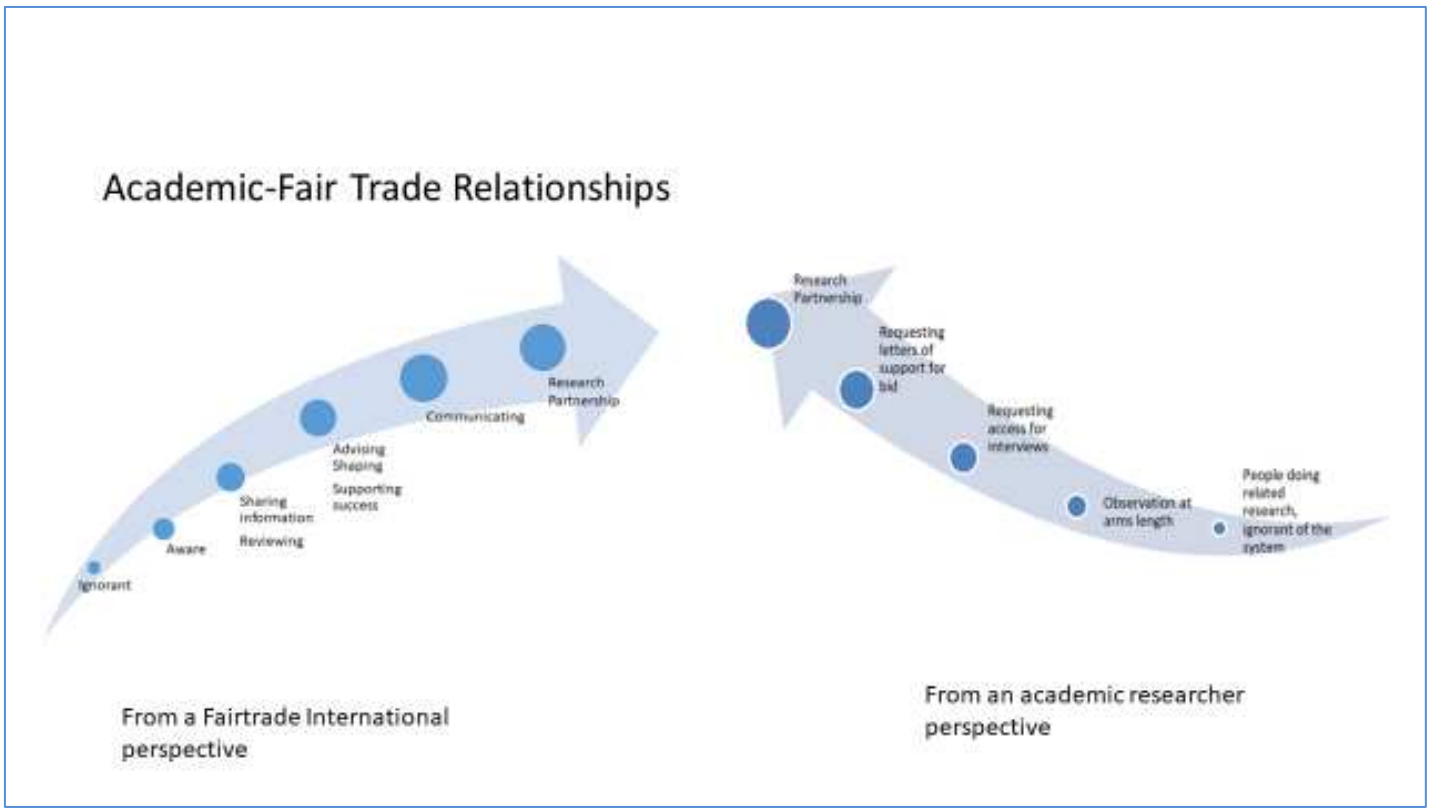

Figure 2: View of research collaboration from the perspective of Fairtrade (originally Kilpatrick 2015) and from academics [note to editor – see JPG uploaded on Editorial Manager]Portrayed as an arc, the diagram suggests an aspiration to move 'up' towards the ultimate goal of research collaboration. However, our reflective discussion highlighted that this stage is not always realistic or desirable. Both parties may encounter barriers to moving 'upwards', as well as limits (in capacity, time, funding, scope of the project etc.) to move beyond the 'lower' stages of the arc. The original visualization was accompanied with text encouraging academics to proactively communicate with Fairtrade at all stages of research, from sharing of results and publications, to identifying and planning opportunities for collaboration. Recognising that there was a lot of research that FI did not know about and might find useful, there was a keenness at the Milan workshop to find ways to collate relevant research reports. We noted that in practice it has not always been obvious *how* to communicate, with *whom*, and whether the staff within the Fairtrade system would practically have time to review results and planned publications, particularly if they had not commissioned the research. The research engagement policies subsequently produced by the MEL unit clarify some of these questions and set the expectations about how researchers should communicate with them and what they can expect in terms of responses. Increasingly, Fairtrade aims to move towards utilizing the research outputs that have not been commissioned by them as independent pieces providing valuable learnings. And at the same time they have begun to

seek to engage directly not only with those researchers who sought to collaborate, but also those who had critiqued fair trade practices and outcomes. A case in point is the relationship to studies produced by the School of Oriental and and African Studies (SOAS). Fairtrade was surprised by and were somewhat defensive to a SOAS study on outcomes for labourers (Cramer et al 2017). In contrast when a study by members of the same team emerged on relative benefits of certification (Oya et al 2018), it undertook pro-active engagement with the authors to derive critical learnings from the process and even wrote a joint blog with the authors on specific issues arising from the study.

As part of this engagement, we developed the right hand side of the diagram to represent varying approaches by academics to researching fair trade in a broad sense, from no contact at all, to requests for information and interviews, through contracted research, to more collaborative and co-productive research. This was created based on the experience of the researchers in this project having engaged at different levels with the Fairtrade system and knowledge of the different types of literature referencing fair trade. There are rationales for staying 'further down' the arc, for example observing at arm's length to maintain critical independence or because the topic is only tangentially about the Fairtrade system. However, we also recognise that energy can be wasted, research resources misspent and fair trade concepts and mechanisms miscommunicated in both traditional and co-production research set-ups. Noting that moving up the arc is not always the aim of one or both sides, we found that clarifying expectations as to the desired shape of collaboration early on is critical.

As a result of these reflective conversations and broader interactions during Learning Week, two outputs were developed in a collaborative manner: one initiated in FI (Best Practices for Engagement) and the other emerging from conversations during Learning Week (the training tools), but both of which were iterated and altered based on inputs from all parties.

Output 1: Best practices for engagement: The collaboration contributed to a set of "best practices" in terms of engagement with University/NGO policies and practices. These included: (1) the signing of non-disclosure agreements, which in this partnership enabled Fairtrade colleagues to feel free to open up to express their experiences and reflections; (2) regular Skype calls and face to face meetings between the core research team members to help in building trust; (3) the development of a research agreement which set out roles and clarified expectations, including on Intellectual Property; and (4) regular feedback, which allowed FI and Producer

Networks to feel invested and able to inform learning tools development. These best practices assisted FI, with University of Leeds providing frank feedback, in creating a full *Academic Engagement Policy*, which is used as an internal document in managing research collaborations.

Our relationship was shaped by documented agreements, negotiated and mediated based on relationships of trust that were sustained through time by regular and open interactions. Some of the documentation was 'tacked' onto the project in hindsight rather than at the outset. For example, the legal agreement was developed at the end of the collaborative process rather than (as is to be expected) at the beginning. While it has had a central role, in our case we struggled to make it fit for purpose and it took many months to agree. This is because the legal tools available to both Fairtrade and the University of Leeds are geared towards specific expected outcomes. These outcomes could sometimes be quite rigid, and in our case - as we were making sense and discovering useful outcomes as we went along - it was not possible to accurately predict outcomes at the beginning.

Output 2: Development of training tools: The experience of collaboration was transformed into a training tool board game named *Step Into Their Shoes*. The game depicts a journey of working jointly on a research project. The game is played by reflecting on and responding to different scenarios that draw on the different perspectives and challenges of each organization involved in a hypothetical collaborative project. These scenarios emerged from reflections on our own experiences, the needs assessment conversations with stakeholders in the FI systems undertaken as part of the IAP, augmented by ideas from debriefs following running prototypes of the game. Many scenarios have relevance to any NGO-academic research relationship but some also explore unique challenges of collaboration in a Fairtrade context – on one hand of engaging with the Producer Networks for directly gathering data from the field to the National Fairtrade Organization (NFO) relationship with the commercial partners or licensees who may want to use results from research in promotional communications.

Reflective conversations between members of the team helped to cement good practice in the development of scenarios for different learning purposes and audiences and to distil instructions for game play so that it could be easily transferred to different contexts, as further explored in our policy brief on learning through game play (Justice et al., 2018).

Implications for partnership practice

Throughout the IAP we have sought to capture our experiences through reflective conversations. Some of these focused on the development stage of different outputs, e.g. presentation of the needs analysis or discussion of game scenarios. Others were more focused reflective conversations, including one towards the end of the IAP that drew on the 'River of Life' tool (Cornish et al 2017). Below we discuss overarching themes that emerged from our reflective conversations.

Different Kinds of Knowledge/Contributions: Contrary to some of the literature that emphasizes a duality between academic and practitioner knowledge, we found within our collaboration that our team was more complementary, and that as a team there were several 'pracademics' (Stevens et al., 2013). Furthermore, the current institutional environment undoubtedly influences perspective, but when embedded and tacit knowledge and experience is taken into account, people may be more diverse and imaginative than allowed for in theories about different kinds of knowledge. Building on the diversity of experiences and skillsets within the team, we found that the academics were able to make a range of contributions not limited to traditional research such as facilitation of training events and coaching, and conversely, FI members of the team had academic research experience. Based on our experience, we suggest that a key enabler to collaboration is having team with some research background in the NGOs, and having experience of the third sector amongst the academics.

Perhaps given the rather short timeframe for the project one challenge was timing with an unusual twist. Rather than the NGO partner pushing for quick results, as anticipated in the literature (Stevens et al., 2013, Green, 2016b), it was the academics who felt time-constrained and were keen to move the process along. In contrast, FI was more able to take time to reflect given that it was engaged in a long and open-ended process of organizational development, in which the academic-FI relationship was just a part. Ultimately, we found that we had more in common than what divided us in terms of skills and attitudes to knowledge, but that challenges arose in terms of dividing roles and responsibilities. Our relationship was sustained by an open and flexible approach, embedded in an ambition from the outset to develop an exchange based on trust and rooted in confidentiality.

Perceptions of Academics: Our exploration of perceptions of academics among Fairtrade practitioners during the Needs Assessment confirmed some of the views in the literature,

especially regarding forms and styles of communication, as noted by Green (2016a and 2016b) for example. Although scientists help practitioners to better interpret the evidence that is available, the perception is that academic research often ends with 'sharp statements', linked to critical analysis and framed in terms of limitations rather than the possibilities of a policy or activity. FI colleagues suggested that this style of communication is likely to close down conversations with NGOs. Whilst recognising that academics connect findings to theory and to make 'contributions to knowledge' for peer-reviewed journals that are vital to career sustainability, it was suggested that an open and learning-focused dialogue aimed at improving practice and building new approaches together with researchers was a more productive way forward. In response to the publication of a critical meta-review of all sustainability certification schemes the FI MEL team actively engaged with the academics to understand the study and use its findings to improve instead of closing the conversation This experience has led FI MEL to reflect on engaging with less-than-positive external studies and influenced its approach towards responding to the same (Mendoza, 2017).

Challenges of moving towards longevity and sustainability: The literature review signposted the challenges of moving from personalized to institutionalized relationships in order to foster more sustainable collaborations (Cornish et al 2017). We faced similar challenges both in terms of staff turnover and with the process of developing formal collaboration agreements. To protect individual identify and reputation organizational reputation and respective rights to intellectual property etc, developing formal agreement was important, but was especially challenging when outputs were identified through an iterative process. Learning thus also needs to involve the contracts departments and legal advisors at NGOs and the university respectively. The development of the Academic Engagement Policy by FI highlighted the importance of getting a legal agreement finalized early in the process, to ensure that all feel free to share and protected in terms of intellectual property.

Our experience highlighted the importance of personal relationships to specific collaborations. However, we were aware of the potential fragility of this given staff turnover in both organizations. For future collaborations, and given the complexity of the development challenges, relationships are also more likely to be sustainable if a wider range of academic units or disciplines are brought into the relationship between parties, supported by some method for tracking the progression of the relationship within FI (e.g. keeping a designated document to record the progression of the relationship, decisions made and when). The need to recognise not only the importance of soft skills and relationship building to ensure the delivery of a collaborative project, but also the administrative and policy processes that underpin effective relationships was strong motivation for

testing and disseminating the game 'Step into their Shoes'. Processes such as developing collaboration agreements, following research ethics protocols, budget approvals, and work prioritisation are likely to be differently resourced and have varying institutional rationales and underpinnings in the partner organizations.

Need for Adaptive Processes and Open Minds: One important aspect that fostered a trusted exchange right from the beginning was that the academics involved applied for funding to support this collaboration, with FI involved from the outset in co-determining the specific objectives and supporting the application with a letter of intent and in-kind co-funding. Based on this, the initial stages of engagement could be quite exploratory, and the specific frameworks came in place afterwards. This was beneficial as the interests matched and there was no project framework restriction, allowing the creation of a fertile ground for innovating the ways of working.

Our regular Skype calls, particularly frequent at the outset of the project, and then at regular intervals were important to sustain the relationship. But even more crucial for developing trust and to take advantage of learning by doing and adapting to mutual skills and needs, were the opportunities to meet face to face, including the annual FI Learning Week June 2017 andduring the MEL working group meeting. Joint attendance at the FTIS in 2018 further cemented the relationship. A crucial learning point from our experience is the need for flexibility in partnerships, keeping an open mind, recognizing areas of rigidity and flexibility, and being prepared for the structure and necessary frameworks to change and grow over the course of the project. We have sought to develop the project together, being quite optimistic, but at same time recognizing differences and complementarities, implicitly drawing on of a combination of the Joint Learning and Best Practice (Roper, 2002). As the project has evolved, a key role of the academics was to hold up a mirror to FI, whilst at the same time considering how their own practices and institution facilitated or hindered collaboration and jointly envisaged outcomes.

Implications for Fairtrade Ways of Working

As FI has learned from the engagement with University of Leeds, it is using new tools to clearly externally communicate knowledge gaps and reach out to academic institutions for work on the same. This has largely taken the form of developing and disseminating a *Fairtrade Research Agenda*, a list of topics that internal Fairtrade stakeholders have identified as crucial (while also using a review of existing Fairtrade research and the Theory of Change as an input) so to inform strategy or better understanding if Fairtrade's interventions are contributing to the expected

outcomes. Available for download at https://www.fairtrade.net/impact-research/evaluation-research.html and disseminated at international conferences and through professional networks, the idea is for the *Agenda* to be the catalyst for collaborations around high-priority research topics with the precise formulations of the research questions and methodological approaches developed with the academic institution, using the *Academic Engagement Policy* as a guide. While in the first year of dissemination, new partnerships based on the *Agenda* has been low, FI hopes to rectify this by making available additional resources, such as 'seed funding' for research pilots. The *Agenda* forms part of FI's strategy to complement (often expensive and time-consuming) commissioned research and move to more of the long-term collaborations that provide greater enduring benefits. Evidently it would be beneficial if donors to Fairtrade recognised the importance of seed funding and funds for relationship building.

Another step FI has taken after the University of Leeds partnership is an internal learning exercise with different parts of the Fairtrade system and external researchers with whom they have worked in the past. Taking the form of an e-mail survey and targeted conversations with key stakeholders, this learning exercise looked to gather perceptions of the strengths and challenges of working on research with Fairtrade (all the way from topic development to dissemination of findings). The findings of this exercise (both the negative and positive) were taken adaptively and with an open mind, being discussed with the MEL team and incorporated into FI's research strategy.

One research challenge for FI remains engagement with (mostly undergraduate or Masters) students whom contact Fairtrade for one-off data requests. These requests often come at late notice and involve access to data that is protected by non-disclosure agreements. Given the documentation and data extraction work involve, the benefit of engaging on these remains low or unclear.

Conclusion

NGO-academic research relationships are becoming more important, especially as both parties seek to demonstrate impact to various parties. In this paper we demonstrate the value of such relationships, beyond what is often measured by those concerned with the 'impact agenda', highlighting the shared learning that has been generated. Our project has been highly influenced by a reflective practice approach, such that whilst there have been specific findings and outputs, it has been effectively a meta-collaboration, a collaboration that explores the nature of collaboration itself. It has been focused on learning about learning, a project not about fair trade,

but with Fairtrade, with academics accompanying the FI MEL team in their ongoing strategy to become a learning organization, including the way in which it related to the process of producing knowledge and producers of knowledge.

Whilst there are many commonalities with NGO-academic partnerships, fair trade-academic partnerships involve different stakeholder perspectives, brought in through both the global membership and market aspects of the Fairtrade system and how research might meet their differing learning and informational needs. The scenarios developed for the collaborative game *Step Into Their Shoes* derived from the needs analysis and our own reflections on the ongoing collaboration highlighted the demands on the time of producer groups, and also the commercial risks they may face from participation in research. We were able to highlight the important mediator role that Fairtrade International plays in research collaborations. We also noted the different kinds of knowledge that differnet partners in fair trade needed, and how this affected the shape of rearch partnerships and that this may differ from other kinds of NGO-academic relationships. In particular we have considered the way in which commercial players, users of the Fairtrade Markrequire data and 'producer stories' to sustain their involvement, which may be counter to the information needs of others who seek to understand challenges and deepen impact. We also noted through our relations on past research collaborations that findings from research may not only be helpful in enhancing direct impacts of activities with producers but also be used to inform development of new Fairtrade standards or revisions of existing ones.

Fairtrade recognizes the need for partnership and alliance with other institutions to deepen its impact on lives of farmers and workers which has a critical link to SDG 17 (Fairtrade International, 2017). From working with local stakeholders in different geographies through the producer networks, as well as through advocacy work, Fairtrade has a strong focus on building partnerships that can enable a ripple effect of its impact on building sustainable livelihoods for producers which have strong linkages with many other SDGs. One form of partnership that is under-researched is knowledge generation partnerships that can feed into other forms of partnership working. This is not always recognized by donors, especially the need for flexibility, longer time frames, seed funding and longer periods between the call for proposals and deadlines, to enable proper collaboration in co-design. However, in the UK at least, some partnership building funds have started to become available through mechanisms such as the Global Challenges Research Fund.

Our experience shows that whilst they are fruitful, fair trade-academic relationships are not straightforward and depend significantly on trust and openness, as well as willingness to invest

significantly in developing mutual understanding. Sustained relationships depend not only on the individuals at the heart of the particular project but on how lessons that generate from this are shared in the organizations of which the individuals are a part, as well as with their peer organizations. Networks of academics and practitioners such as the regular Fair Trade International Symposium also can play a role in sharing good practice and better understanding of the different kinds of mutually beneficial links between academia and fair trade organizations, as well as sharing visions for new topics of research. The outputs from this project, including the *Step Into Their Shoes* game, are a key way in which we envisage sustaining the essence of our partnership both within the university sector (e.g. via training for early career researchers) and in Fairtrade International and the fair trade system more broadly. We hope that this would stimulate further consideration of how effective partnerships can be developed to sustain the SDGs.

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