



Strategy
Document

Equitable Partnerships

UKRI GCRF South Asian Nitrogen Hub

Making SANH equitable and fair

SANH Co-ordination Team:

Shivani Tripathi
Madison Warwick

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What are equitable partnerships?

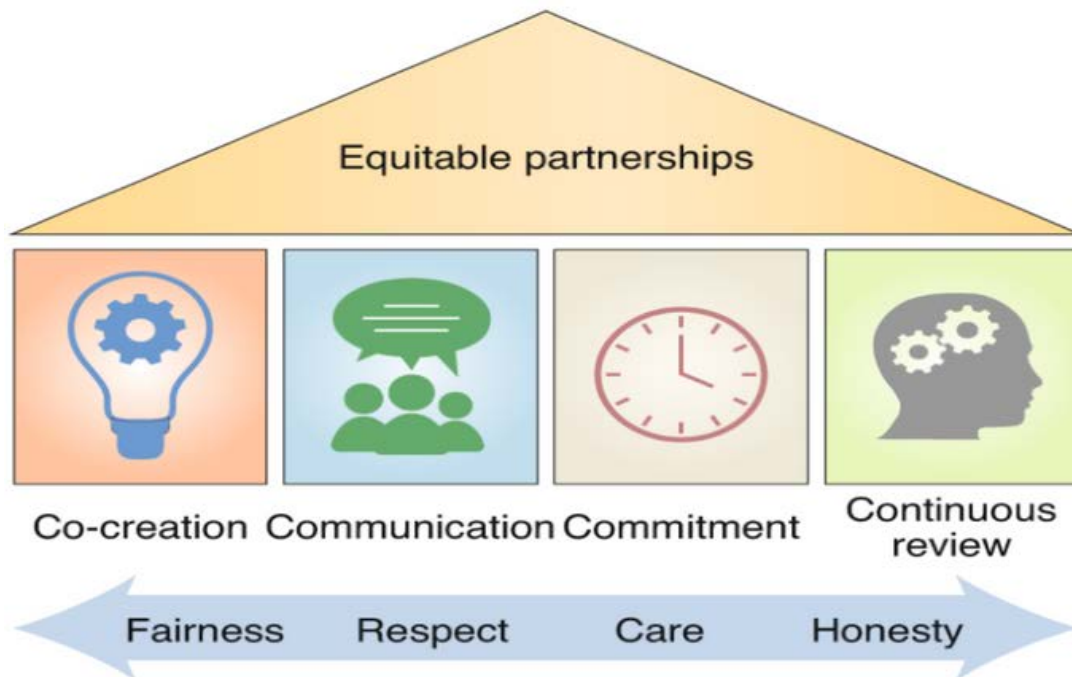
Introduction to equitable partnerships

In recent years, there has been an increase in international partnerships between researchers from different countries and disciplines. In order for this research to be impactful, and to effectively address global challenges, it is important that these partnerships are equitable. Whilst there is no agreed universal definition for equitable partnerships, equitable partnerships are frequently defined as:

“Partnerships in which there is mutual participation, mutual trust and respect, mutual benefit and equal value placed on each partners contribution at all stages of the research process”.

There are a range of principles which help build and maintain fair and equitable partnerships in research (Tomorrow's Cities Hub):

1. Acknowledging the principles of fairness, respect, care and honesty. This incorporates recognising and ensuring a mutual understanding of differences between the partners and how these differences can influence the partnership. This includes differences based on cultural and contextual backgrounds, including varying capacities, priorities, timeframes, organisational incentive structures and other practices.
2. Transparency and accountability are important aspects of building relationships that are based on mutual trust.
3. Providing equitable opportunities for partners to participate in research, data collection, project meetings, paper writing and training opportunities



4. Acknowledging the power differences that exist in partnerships, including those that funding flows affect, creating power asymmetries. Funding and benefits that people get from the research need to be made explicit and equity in decision making can help address power differences. Power also influences which types of evidence and knowledge are valued and consequently how research is designed and implemented and the type of outputs that are produced for which audiences. Equitable partnerships challenge hierarchies of evidence and knowledge and are inclusive of local and Indigenous knowledges.

5. Establishing open, honest and regular communication with all members of a partnership to build trust. Being inclusive and transparent in communication and including all relevant members in emails, meetings and other forms of communication.

6. Co-designing, co-developing, co-implementing and co-evaluating research. Research questions, data collection and conclusions should be made in equal partnership. This also helps ensure research is fit for purpose, reduces bias and incorporate the perspectives of different groups of people, leading to higher quality conclusions and policy/practice recommendations.

7. Supporting partners in building their capacity and providing the resources, training and support to ensure that all members of the partnership can contribute to the best of their ability.

Collaborative Interdisciplinary Research Partnerships

Researchers around the world are working together to resolve some of the globe's most complex issues. To address these global challenges, researchers from different regions and disciplines need to collaborate together to comprehensively tackle these multi-faceted challenges. Interdisciplinary research partnerships are unique and complex research processes that support mutual learning across disciplinary divides and knowledge domains, with the goal of producing shared knowledge around a common problem (Cundill et al., 2019). In these partnerships resources are shared to achieve shared objectives. Both risks and rewards are shared between partners. Although vital, interdisciplinary research partnerships can be complex with misunderstandings due to regional and disciplinary differences. Therefore due to their complexity, collaboration and mindful consideration of making these partnerships equitable is incredibly important.

What do we mean by **equity** in research practice partnerships?

Equity in RPPs means that all partners have shared interest and equal voice in the purpose, conduct, and outcomes of a research. Since partners often come from different institutions with distinct vocabulary, communication structures, and work practices, special attention is needed to ensure that all partners experience the projects as fair & equitable.



What is a **research-practice partnership**?

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are mutually beneficial and open-ended collaborations between educators and researchers seeking to improve educational practices and outcomes.



EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP

- Collaboratively develop shared language and vocabulary regarding research, educational theory and practice
- Create opportunities to share knowledge
- Collaboratively define research questions, purpose and goals
- Respect the pressures, demands, schedules, and resources of partner's professional lives
- Adapt to the changing needs of the collaboration as research strategies shift over



Importance of Equitable Partnerships

Benefits of Equitable Partnerships

Equitable partnerships are key to successful interdisciplinary research. Large interdisciplinary projects like SANH which tackle complex global challenges require a diverse set of researchers to collaborate and work together on common aims. These researchers may come from a range of regions, disciplines, organisations and cultural backgrounds. Although this diversity is vital to be able to look at these global challenges from multiple perspectives, it can also lead to misunderstandings, unequal power dynamics and the ultimate break down of productive partnerships.

Therefore carefully considering what makes a partnership equitable and striving to increase fair, transparency and trust in our project we can ensure that we can address the complex problem of nitrogen pollution. Not only does equitable partnerships ensure that all members are treated fairly and are respected but it also helps us build capacity and produce the highest quality research.

In SANH we don't just work with researchers but a range of stakeholders from policymakers, government representatives, industry professionals and communities. To make sure our research has a positive impact and achieve our aims of reducing nitrogen pollution we also need to make sure our partnerships with stakeholders, research participants and benefactors are also equitable. This helps us effectively work with these groups to achieve our project's aims.

Benefits of Equitable Partnerships

- Project members, research participants, stakeholders and benefactors feel respected and are treated fairly. The wellbeing and dignity of project members, participants, stakeholders and benefactors is protected and maintained.
- Capacity is built where there were gaps and new resources developed.
- Research is of higher quality due to the variety of perspectives included in the design, implementation and analysis of the research.
- Our project and therefore our research is more reputable and follows best practice.
- Policy and practice recommendations are fit for purpose and are more likely to be implementable and successful in the real world.
- Project members are not exploited and research ethics is maintained

- Conflict and misunderstandings are reduced creating a productive work environment
- Knowledge sharing happens more easily allowing different groups to learn from each other and improve their work and approaches.
- Benefit of local knowledge, networks, community and industry buy-in

Equality vs Equity

Equitable partnerships in research are not always the same as equality in research. Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognises that each person/group has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome. In research partnerships, equity is incredible important. Not all members of the partnership may have the same access to resources and training, meaning they may not be able to equally contribute to the research. To combat that, equitable partnerships focus on providing partners with the resources and training they need to be full participants in research and have access to the same opportunities.

Providing access to the same opportunities to participate in research or the same career development opportunities, can often mean that more efforts need to be made to help under-privileged partners have access to these opportunities. This can be through sponsorship, active invitation to opportunities and other kinds of support. Through considering equitable partnerships throughout the entire project, we can help ensure that all SANH members have equitable access to opportunities and can contribute fully to the project.

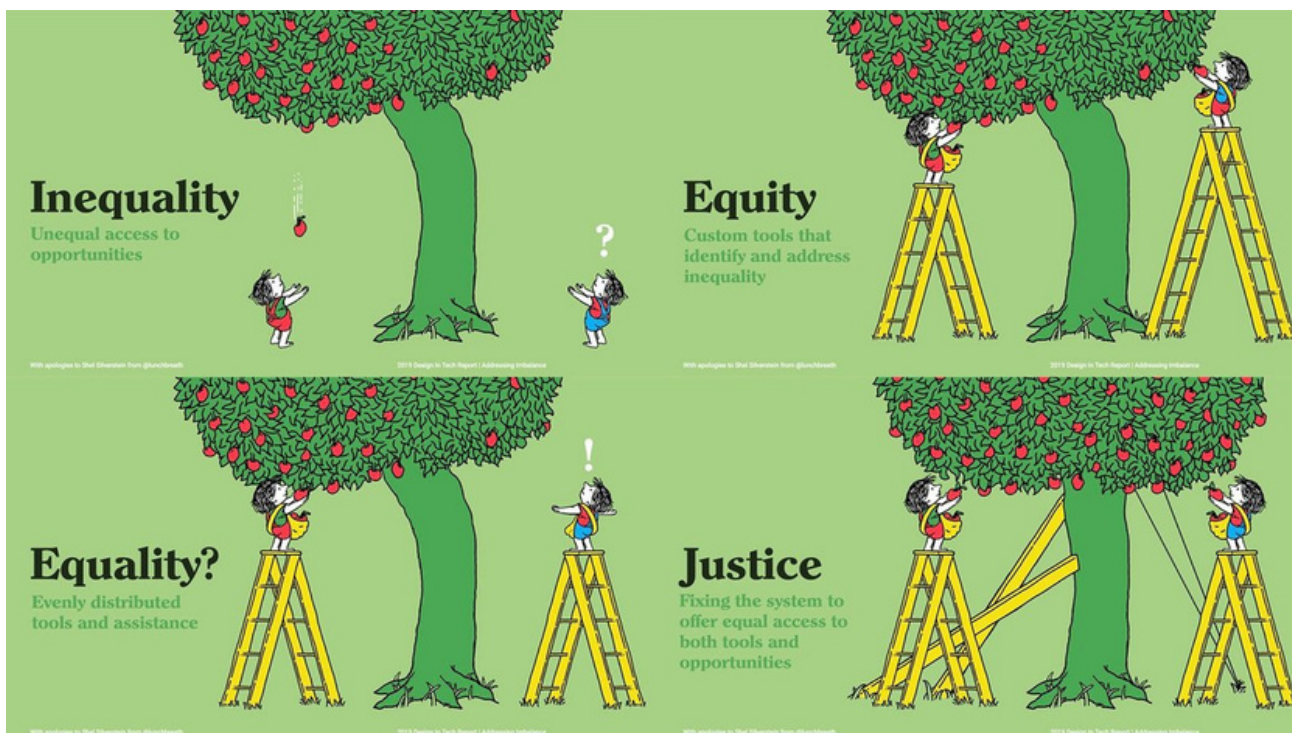


Figure: (Ruth, 2019)

What do equitable partnerships look like?

Equitable research partnerships are as diverse and complex as the partners who are a part of them. Although equitable partnerships can look very different, this section outlines some the things that can make up an equitable partnership:

- Project members, research participants, stakeholders and benefactors feel respected, listened to and able to contribute to the project's aim.
- All members have equitable career development and training opportunities to further their skills and knowledge.
- All project members have the tools and resources they need to contribute fully to the research programme. Capacity is built where there are gaps. This allows research to be conducted quickly and to a high and reputable quality.
- Research is co-designed, co-implemented, data co-collected, co-analysed and co-evaluated with partners have equal voices throughout the research journey.
- The benefits of the research are equitably shared amongst benefactors. For example in SANH, the major benefits of our research should be enjoyed by those in South Asia, the focus region of the project.
- All project member's contributions are fairly acknowledged.
- The boundaries and cultural norms and customs of all project members are equally respected.
- The voice and perspectives of all project members is weighted equally and respected.
- All project members are equally and fairly included in communications, meetings and relevant events. Efforts are made to make meetings, fieldwork and all aspects of the project accessible to all members either through reducing barriers or by providing active support.
- Local and traditional knowledge is included and respected.
- There is a clear understanding among collaborators with regard to their roles, responsibilities and conduct throughout the research process (from planning, implementation, review and dissemination).
- Decisions are collaborative and the various groups of the partnership have equal power over decision-making.
- Financial and governance decision are transparent and made with equity in mind. There are processes for decisions to be challenged.
- Having a shared understanding of the aims and benefits of the research.
- Feedback is taken seriously and actioned upon. Mistakes are learnt from and knowledge shared.

Systems and structures



Values and ways of working



Figures: (UKRI, 2018)

What do equitable partnerships not look like?

When we are thinking equitable partnerships, it's important for us to also consider what equitable partnerships are not. This helps us avoid accidentally creating inequal or unjust partnership structures.

- Lack of respect for different knowledges, cultures, disciplines or approaches.
- One or multiple members of the partnership have power or decision-making control over another.
- Unfair distribution of funds. Use of money and reasons for decisions are unclear and not shared.
- Unequitable or unfair distribution of tasks and responsibilities
- Research benefits disproportionately benefit one group more than another (outside of the focus of the research)
- Research agendas, questions and conclusions determined by one or a select few members.
- Lack of resources, training, career development or capacity building opportunities.
- Meetings, papers, data and other important aspects of the project are inaccessible for some members.
- Time zone of one/multiple partner(s) is consistently considered above others.

Systemic barriers



Weaknesses within partnerships



Figures: (UKRI, 2018)

Unfortunately inequitable partnerships are more common than we often realise. Sometimes partnerships may seem fair and equitable on first glance but if we dig deeper we find consistent and systemic bias, unjust structures or imbalanced power dynamics. Through considering who holds power in a partnership we can often learn more about the fairness and equality in a partnership. If the opinions, agenda and convenience of one group is systematically weighted higher than others, this may point to a power imbalance or an inequitable partnership. It is important that the timeline, outputs and goals of a project are created collaboratively between partners and not set by one group in particular.

Most importantly decision making should be a group affair with all members of the partnership having an equal voice in the outcome without any fear of repercussion or exclusion.

Barriers to equitable partnerships

Overcoming the obstacles to equitable partnerships

Equitable partnerships are key to successful research. However, that does not mean they are always easy. As described previously inequitable partnerships are more common than we may think and there are many obstacles that can get in the way of true equitable partnerships.

- Asymmetric power relations
- Unequal funding issues
- Knowledge hierarchies
- Divergent priorities and incentives
- Differing traditional customs, values and expectations
- Differing perspectives on seniority
- Reputational advantages
- Bureaucratic barriers
- Schedules and capacity
- Colonial histories and cultural precedents
- Different timeframes
- Constraints to participation (language, access)
- Alternate definitions and understandings (language)
- Different timezones (timezones in the centre of the world are more likely to have meetings scheduled in working hours compared to western and eastern countries)

Some ways to overcome these obstacles is by;

- Deciding on the objectives together
- Building up mutual trust
- Sharing information; developing networks
- Sharing responsibility
- Creating transparency
- Disseminating the results
- Sharing benefits equitably
- Increasing research capacity
- Building on the achievements

Unfortunately some of these systematic and entrenched barriers are incredibly difficult and complex to fully overcome. Some are not currently possible to fully overcome. Through actively considering equitable partnerships in our project we can not only improve things for our members but it also helps combat systematic injustices and slowly breaks down these obstacles for future research partnerships.

Equitable Partnerships in SANH

Project Structure

Structure and process in SANH has been designed from the start to support principles of equitable and effective partnerships and global leadership.

The structure is based around co-leadership of work packages and research programmes (at least one co-lead from South Asia, and one from the UK) and inclusion of women as co-leads where possible. The executive group includes representatives from six of the eight South Asian countries (Bhutan and Afghanistan excepted due to size). Financial and strategic decision-making is overseen by the Executive Committee, and all partners are represented directly or indirectly in key decisions. We know that this structure is insufficient to ensure equity in decision-making, mutual respect for disciplinary and other differences. Our approach has been to ensure that perspectives of researchers and participants are included throughout the research process. For example, our IP rights, disputes process, safeguarding and authorship guidance documents have been created through a co-production process involving expertise from across the Hub membership, and then introduced to the rest of the membership through on-line webinars. The ethics and safeguarding webinar was facilitated by a leading Indian specialist in the ethics of research. Partners have clear guidance on how to handle contentious issues in an equitable way, with support from an Ethical Advisory board co-chaired by a UK and a South Asian social scientist. Our authorship policy sets out clearly how we ensure inclusion of junior staff in publications, while also ensuring the contributions of senior staff are appropriately recognised.

There is a clear understanding among collaborators with regard to their roles, responsibilities and conduct, from planning, implementation, review and dissemination. The Hub has engaged in capacity building with South Asian partners on all processes. The hub monitors the progress on equitable partnership, surveying its members annually. Based on the response and suggestions given by the partners, new actions are be added.

Outside of the structure of SANH, this strategy document outlines the actions taken by SANH to foster and support equitable partnerships throughout the project.

Equitable Partnerships Surveys

To learn more about our members knowledge, perception and experience around equitable partnerships, we conducted a survey of all our members on the topic. This survey not only provided us insight into how familiar our members were in regards to equitable partnerships but also highlighted some of the barriers they were facing in implementing fair and equitable partnership. The results and feedback of this survey helped inform this equitable partnerships strategy document and allowed us to take further action to reduce the barriers faced our partners.



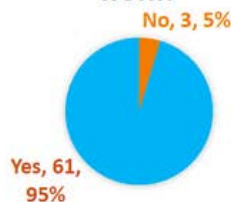
Although the majority of our members have experience in an interdisciplinary work environment, for many the concept conscious equitable partnerships was new. Many members did not feel like that had any tools or guidance to help them implement equitable partnerships. Unfortunately 83% felt that they experienced barriers in implementing or being part of equitable partnerships.

RESULTS

Have you previously been aware of/or engaged in work on equitable research partnerships?



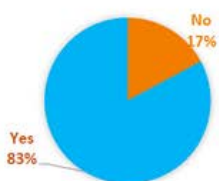
Do you have any experience in interdisciplinary research work?



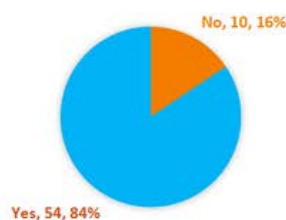
Does your organisation currently use any guidance or tools to support equitable research partnerships?



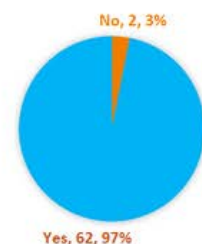
Do you experience barriers in implementing principles, tools or guidance to support equitable partnerships?



Would you like to be contacted over a zoom call to clarify any questions/ share your thoughts on equitable partnership?

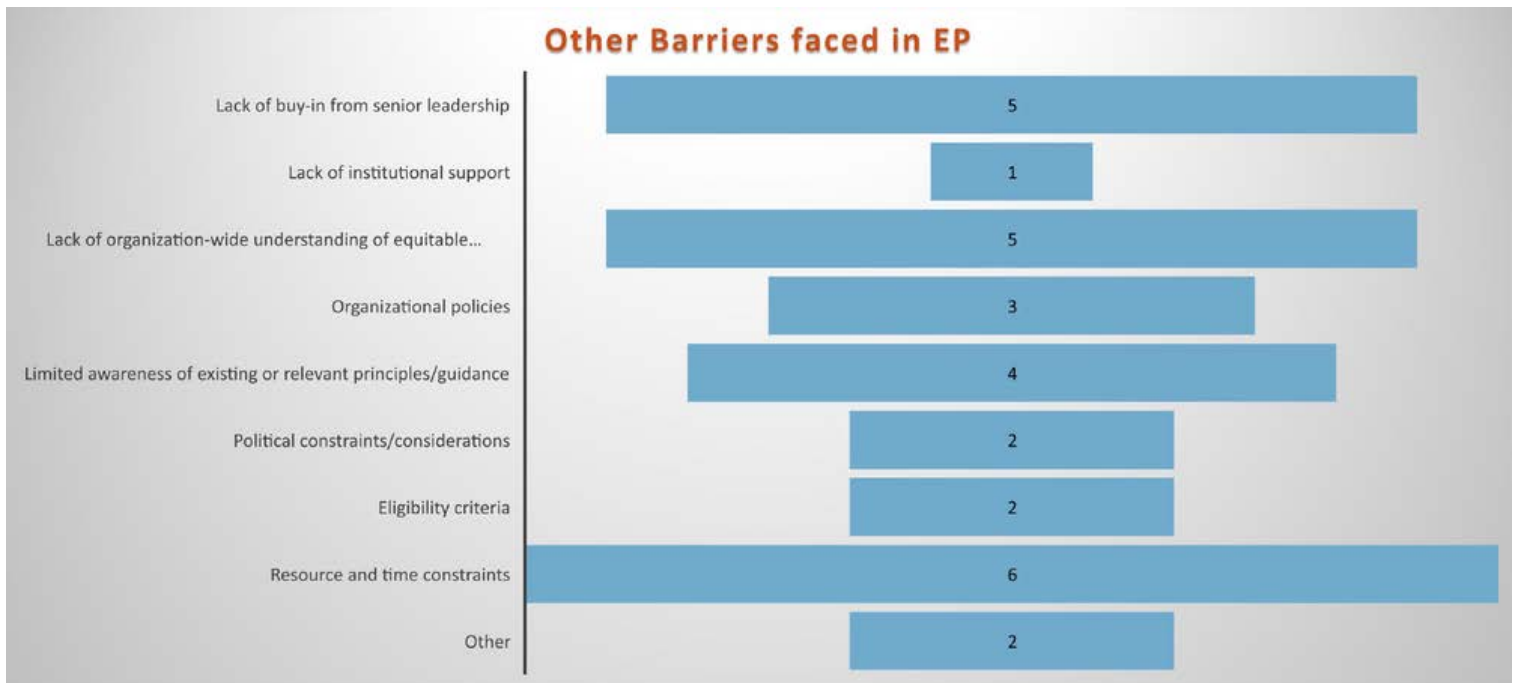


Do you have any suggestions on how to increase equality in the hub?



According to the survey results, 67% of respondents strongly agreed that equitable partnerships improve the quality of research and the productivity of the work packages. Another positive discovery from the survey results is that 64% of respondents strongly agreed that they felt valued for their contribution in SANH. A further 32% on top of that agreed they felt valued.

One of the most insightful and important aspects of the survey were the barriers which our members are facing when either trying to create or participate in equitable partnerships. By far the barrier considered to be the biggest obstacle to equitable partnerships in SANH was resource and time constraints. This was especially the case as large budget cuts in 2020 and 2021 caused significant stress on partners and impacted trust with both the funder and the leading organisation. After resource and time constraints a lack of buy-in from senior leadership and lack of organisational wide understanding of equitable partnerships were seen as equally large and significant barriers to equitable partnerships. Since this survey our equitable partnerships efforts have been focused on awareness raising, education and knowledge sharing on this topic. We have also created a guidance document especially for leadership to help better implement equitable partnerships. More on these initiatives will be outlined later in this document. Lack of organisational policies was also seen as a barrier.



As part of the survey, there was space for members to share their ideas, feedback and suggestions on the topic of equitable partnerships. This feedback was very useful and helped to inform and direct the initiatives outlined in later parts of this document.

Suggestions to increase equality

- More transparent work program, work distribution and ownership on the part of the contributor
- The senior members should listen to my expert advice and let me know their planning. Many times I have been contacted from field without discussing their plans.
- Ensure female researchers in all organizations have an equal voice within the project.
- Ensure people have a say, perhaps regular discussions across the hub, small breakout groups might encourage others to speak up to share thoughts on problem solving, direction forward etc.
- Training programs (on new tools) could enhance research compatibilities and synergies between partners
- Meeting chairs need to be instructed/trained in not letting one or two people dominate the meeting (including themselves!)

Equitable Partnerships Initiatives

Education

Awareness Raising on Equitable Partnerships

- This document is part of our awareness raising efforts to help our members be more informed on equitable partnerships. This document is developed by the SANH co-ordination team and reviewed by the SANH Ethical Advisory Committee.
- This will be complemented with a presentation on equitable partnerships held at the 2022 SANH Plenary event to raise awareness on the topic.

Guidance for leadership

- To help address feedback from SANH members and provide support to our senior scientists, we have developed an easily accessible guidance document on implementing equitable partnerships. The document includes practical ways in which leaders can foster more equitable partnerships in their teams. Due to seniority, more experienced researchers tend to be key decision-makers helping to guide their teams. Therefore they play a major role in implementing and maintaining equitable partnerships.

Ethics, Gender and Equitable Partnerships database

- Often it can be a challenge for our members to access resources on research ethics, gender equality and equitable partnerships. We have developed a wiki base of resources and information our partners can use to learn more about these topics.

Structure

Clearer and fairer processes

- We are strengthening our SANH processes and procedures and increasing awareness about them. We have developed a clear and accessible authorship policy to ensure all SANH members have their work fairly acknowledged. We have also developed a robust safeguarding policy to provide a route for whistleblowing any instances of abuse and provide support to those who need it. This has been rolled out in conjunction with training on the topic. SANH also has an IP rights and disputes process that has been outlined in guidance documents and shared with our members. Our gender equality action plan also helps make our project fairer and is closely linked with equitable partnerships.

Inclusive decision making

- We are fortunate in SANH to have a diverse Ethical Advisory Committee and Gender Equality group. We have been increasingly reaching out to these groups for support in high-level decision making to ensure that topics are being viewed and considered from a broad range of perspectives. The two groups have also been increasingly involved in helping review the important documents and procedure changes to help make sure they are fit for purpose, are ethically sound and support equitable partnerships in the project.

Increased communication

- One of the biggest barriers to effective equitable partnerships is communication. We are re-evaluating how we are communicating and increasing transparency on decision-making processes and provide more regular updates to keep all members informed through email and newsletters.
- We are also reviewing our contact lists and updating them every quarter to ensure that all relevant members are receiving updates and opportunities. In particular we are making sure we have the contact details of students and junior researchers.

Creating space

Increasing balance during meetings

- Feedback that was received from our equitable partnerships survey highlighted the need for meeting chairs to be more trained in how to balance who is speaking and help create space for everyone to be able to contribute. We are developing a short, how to guide for meeting chairs to make their meetings safer places for members to contribute to discussions and promote the voices of underrepresented groups within the Hub so all different perspectives are being considered.

Networking Spaces

- We are creating more opportunities for our members, especially students and junior researchers to meet other researchers they may not have naturally met in their organisation or work package. This allows our members to build their own networks and learn from others. It also helps support the career development of our junior researchers and students and also helps foster further knowledge sharing and inter-workpackage linkages, improving our approaches and research.

Feedback

- Feedback not only helps us improve and develop but also provides a space for our partners to be heard and voice their opinions. Through annual equitable partnerships surveys we are collecting feedback from our partners to make sure they feel valued in the project and to learn ways in which we can improve our partnerships. This process also helps us annual our equitable partnerships strategy, and add new initiatives that help us maintain equitable partnerships and overcome obstacles.

Capacity Building

The right tools and resources

- To be able to fully contribute, our partners need the right tools and resources to be able to conduct their research. This involves making sure our partners have access to the equipment, funds and training support when they need it. The SANH finance team have been working with UKRI and our partners to provide timely funds to our researchers as quickly as possible. Some partners are also sharing capacity and assisting other organisations with tasks. We are also supporting partners in obtaining the right equipment, building capacity in the process.

Career development and training

- We are creating more opportunities for our members, especially students and junior researchers to get the training they need to develop their career and learn new skills needed for their research. We have conducted a survey to discover the training needs of our partners and are starting a suite of training courses on both general and technical skills. In conjunction with the Gender Equality Action plan we are also hosting more events where senior researchers can share their career building experience and share advice with junior researchers at the start of their careers.

External capacity building

- Another important aspect of equitable partnerships is our relationships with external stakeholders including local communities, policymakers, industry and civil society. Through engagement events and multi-stakeholder forums we are making sure that not only are we incorporating the perspectives and suggestions of these groups into our work but also helping share resources and information. Our partners are working with villages across South Asia to share techniques and information on reducing nitrogen pollution and increasing crop yield. We are also working with governments to support them in introducing nitrogen management policy. We are making sure our research has a positive impact on our benefactors.

Transparency

Sharing and Building Trust

- SANH Executive Group and the SANH Co-ordination team are working on improving transparency across the project. Improving transparency on how funds are allocated and how decisions made across the project helps keep our partners informed and able to challenge processes they disagree with. We are also working on using the wiki to make information on work timelines, task allocation and other aspects of the work programme more accessible and working with work package leads to make their research and processes more transparent which also has the added benefit of increasing knowledge sharing and linkages between work packages.



Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Keeping track of our progress

Monitoring

To make sure we are making progress towards increasing equitable partnerships and will be conducting annual surveys with our members to find out more about our members awareness and perspectives on equitable partnerships and to collect their feedback and suggestions on how we can improve. These surveys will be used to monitor our progress and to look at trends on;

- Whether our members are aware of/or engaged in work on equitable research partnerships?
- Do our members feel valued for their contributions?
- Do our members experience barriers in implementing principles, tools or guidance to support equitable partnerships? What are those barriers?

Evaluation

Using the results of the annual equitable partnership surveys, the SANH Co-ordination team, in conjunction with the SANH Ethical Advisory Committee will conduct an annual review of our progress towards our equitable partnership goals as part of our annual reporting process:

- 90% of our members are aware of equitable partnerships and the definition of what they are
- 90% of our members feel valued for their contribution to the project
- The barriers of lack of buy in from senior leadership, lack of organisation awareness of equitable partnerships and resource and time constraints are reduced (change from scoring 6 and 5 to scoring 3)

Learning

As part of our annual equitable partnerships reviews, we will also aim to capture any lessons learnt over the year on how to better improve our partnerships and whether there were any mistakes made that we learn from. This section will also encompass any new initiatives to address continuing barriers to equitable partnerships.

As part of the legacy of the project SANH aims to create a range of tools and resources that can be used by other organisations to promote equitable partnerships.



Lessons Learnt on Equitable Partnerships

During the final evaluation of the project, SANH will create a guidance document outlining lessons learnt throughout the project and outline suggestions of best practice in creating equitable research partnerships. This document will be published and shared not only with our partners/stakeholders, sister GCRF Hubs and UKRI, but also shared more widely using social media and our other communications efforts.



Equitable Partnerships for Leadership

One of our legacy documents on equitable partnerships is our equitable partnerships for leadership document. This document is a simple, concise and easy to use tool which leaders and senior scientists can use to better implement equitable partnerships in their teams and organisations. We are aiming to also have the document translated into as many South Asian languages as possible to be able to share this information more widely.



Equitable Partnerships Resources

Another way we will be sharing our knowledge on equitable partnerships is through widely sharing resources such as our Ethics/ Equitable Partnerships data base which has a great collection of tools and information which can be used to help implement equitable partnerships. Such resources include checklists of hosting accessible meetings and how to co-design research. We will aim to share this database publicly through the SANH website.





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GCRF
Global Challenges
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Asian Nitrogen Hub**

