MITGOV/LAB

How to have difficult conversations

A practical guide for **academic & practitioner** research collaborations

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*This is an update to our initial guide launched in 2019 now includes a learning case from a MIT **GOV/LAB** collaboration. Additional case studies and feedback welcome at mitgovlab@mit.edu.

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Engaged Scholarship Tools

MIT **GOV/LAB** is developing tools to support engaged scholarship by practitioner-academic research teams. This living document is an update to our guide launched in August 2019 and now includes a learning case from a MIT **GOV/LAB** collaboration. Additional case studies and feedback welcome at mitgovlab@mit.edu. Other tools in the series:

- MIT **GOV/LAB** Engaged Scholarship Tools: An interactive website and workbook to facilitate collaborative research with equitable exchange.
- How to Have Difficult Conversations: A practical guide for academic-practitioner research collaborations.
- Risk and Equity Matrix: An exercise to systematically consider potential impacts for the range of actors involved in the research process.
- MIT **GOV/LAB** Learning Cases: Featuring research collaborations on civic pedagogy with Grassroot; access to Information with Twaweza; civic leadership in the Philippines; and, the Learning Collaborative.

Acknowledgements

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Design by Susy Tort & Gabriela Reygadas

Foreword

We know from behavioral science that it's often easier to learn from others' mistakes than our own.

When we put together this guide on “How to have difficult conversations,” we knew that highlighting common pitfalls for academic-practitioner research collaborations, even with concrete ideas on how to navigate those challenges, wouldn’t be sufficient. To illustrate how the guide works in practice, we needed to apply these lessons to our own projects and reflect honestly on what worked, what didn't, and whether or not we achieved our goal of a more equitable exchange.

The updated guide now includes a learning case on MIT **GOV/LAB**'s collaboration with Grassroot, a fast-paced partnership, where we learned the difficulty of balancing project evaluation and broad-based theory testing.

Our hope is that this learning case, warts and all, is useful in thinking reflexively about your own work. Please be in touch with your own case studies (see “how to write a learning case”) and let us know what resonated or what didn’t. **We are all ears.**

Why difficult conversations?

You are entering into a partnership because you have presumably decided that there is enough of an overlap in your interests and actions to pursue a joint agenda. But where do you diverge? Frequently, we start collaborations with different—but unsaid—expectations. An academic might be working towards a peer-reviewed publication or looking to test out a new data collection method. A practitioner might be looking for data to help design a new initiative, or looking to evaluate an existing program's effectiveness.

Bringing academia and practice together to address pressing problems is nothing new. In the last two decades these collaborations have become more common in political science as academics have sought new opportunities to develop innovative research, and for their results to have more real-world relevance. At the same time, new data and technologies combined with more data-driven decision-making have led government as well as non-governmental practitioners to seek more sophisticated ways to measure their impact and to inform their interventions.

These conditions have led to an increased interest in academic-practitioner research collaborations, especially in developing-country contexts where MIT **GOV/LAB** often operates. Partnerships have proliferated but these relationships can be challenging to manage, with different incentives, expectations, needs, and timelines. Some of these challenges are institutional and difficult to change—such as the tenure-track requirements within academia which favor publications in academic journals over the applied nature of collaborations. We think these systemic challenges need to be addressed, but change is likely to be slow. In the meantime, the academic-practitioner collaborations that exist today can be managed better and yield better results for all by creating more functional partnerships.

“ We need to talk ”

This document is meant to highlight and provide guidance on how to have “difficult conversations” that often arise when academic researchers and practitioners decide to collaborate. The focus here on difficult conversations is intentional because we want to hone in on pivotal decision points and issues that are frequently overlooked, or brought up too late.

At MIT **GOV/LAB**, part of our mission is to produce and promote engaged scholarship on how to encourage citizens to voice their needs and engage their governments in productive ways. Our working definition of engaged scholarship is rigorous research that is co-created by practitioner organizations and grounded in field work. This collaborative process increases the likelihood that practitioners will be able to use research results and apply them to their work. Our engaged scholarship model is based on values of equitable exchange between practitioners and academics. For us, equitable exchange starts with outlining potential costs and benefits and acknowledging potential power asymmetries to spread risk out more evenly and maximize learning for both parties.

Over the years, we've collaborated with numerous practitioner partners in diverse geographies on projects small and large—and we've learned a lot along the way. This guide builds on MIT **GOV/LAB**'s deep experience of learning in the field and from many honest conversations with partners reflecting on "what could have gone differently." Based on our experience and the principle of equitable exchange, this guide focuses on research collaborations related to political science, with an emphasis on empirical evidence, and with practitioners who are often based in developing countries. Practitioners can be a diverse set of actors, and MIT **GOV/LAB** tends to partner with groups grounded in local contexts, oftentimes within civil society or local government who have long-standing presence in the communities we seek to engage.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended for academics and practitioners who want to improve the collaborative research process. Equity is an essential guiding principle for most practitioners and academics, but the fact is that power is almost never distributed equally between partners. Decision-making power in a partnership often aligns with funding, and this can feel contrary to the principle of equity. This guide cannot rectify major imbalances, but in our experience, there is significant room for improvement in how partnerships are designed.

For practitioners, this guide sheds light on some of the common motivations and incentives in the academic world that can influence research projects. It should also help practitioners manage their partnerships in a way that boosts learning opportunities for their organizations. For academics interested in engaged scholarship, this guide is one way to start designing and implementing research with values of mutual respect and equity. In particular, we hope early-stage graduate students and staff at practitioner organizations will find something new and useful to apply in their work. Finally, we hope this guide helps both sides manage their partnerships so they can learn from each other's strengths and create lasting skills in their own organizations.

The most difficult conversations

Here are a few of the most common trip-wires we've come across in our experience brokering academic-practitioner collaborations, from both sides of the bench. We offer some of the strategies we use at MIT **GOV/LAB** to try and mediate these challenges. Each pertains to a section in the guide.

Results: what if they're negative or null? Working through different scenarios early on is essential to set expectations about possible research results and what they mean for both academics and practitioners. At MIT **GOV/LAB**, we seek partners who want to learn equally from what works and what doesn't work. Even if the results of our projects are not suitable for academic publishing, we commit to producing non-academic outputs (i.e., summary findings, policy briefs) and to report on collaborations. Talk through possible outcomes at the outset to clarify motivations and deliverables on both sides. More on setting expectations.

Timelines: are we on the same page? Often there is a tension between practitioners eager for results that they can use quickly, and academics who work on multi-year timeframes. To address this challenge, we try to get everyone on the same page about key dates, deadlines, and timetables for scoping, preliminary work, and pilots. Once a project starts, sunk costs and path dependency can prolong a collaboration that is no longer beneficial for both parties. So, after each phase, we take time to reflect on the process and decide together whether it makes sense to move forward. In some cases, the answer is no, and that's okay. More on timelines.

Buy in: how do we work together? Oftentimes collaborative projects have buy-in from leadership, but not from staff who will be implementing the project or research in the field. To the extent possible, including a range of staff from both teams throughout the decision-making process is important to developing a successful project with ownership across both teams. More on collaborative decision-making.

Outputs: what is this all for? Understanding where, and to whom, results will be disseminated is critical to producing something that's useful to target audiences. That's why it's crucial to talk through potential outputs, and clarify when early results might be ready and how they can be used. It's also important to make sure the results are translated or broken down clearly for practitioner audiences, especially if complex, experimental methods are used. More on results and learning.

Power: how do we address equity in research collaborations? Implicit to many of these conversations is the tension over resources and power, and who produces, interprets, uses, and holds knowledge. In writing this guide, we acknowledge that there is a deep body of work examining the production of knowledge and diversity of approaches to engaged scholarship. We don't discuss in detail issues of equity in this guide, but we link to some useful resources on equitable partnerships in the final section[1].

1 More on MIT GOV/LAB's strategic plan and approach to engaged scholarship online: https://mitgovlab.org/updates/whats-next-for-mit-gov-lab/.

How to use this guide

The guide is structured in a series of questions meant to clarify our priorities and spell out assumptions. Each section includes questions that both partners should consider together, with specific lists aimed at academics and practitioners.

First, we suggest reading through the questions posed to your collaborator. Implicit in these questions are some of the common challenges in building partnerships between academics and practitioners.

Second, take some time to answer the questions posed to you. Ask your partner to do the same, and then talk through your answers. We don't expect that workshopping the questions will dissolve differences, but we find that raising these issues can help convert potential tensions into more productive and creative exchanges.

Third, record the outcome of these discussions in a shared document. See guidelines below.

Lastly, based on your project timeline, set up regular check-ins to review what has changed and adjust as necessary. Use this guide as a living check-list to review the various aspects of a partnership which are likely to change and evolve along the way.

How to start the conversation

When do you broach sensitive topics and how do you explain why these questions matter? Two recommendations. First, having these conversations face-to-face is incredibly valuable for relationship-building. To the extent possible, multiple in-person interactions demonstrate commitment and are critical for building trust and understanding. Second, in our experience, starting open conversations early on in the partnership makes for more open and productive decision-making.

Seem simple? Good. Relationship-building takes time and patience, but initial optimism is required. This guide does not attempt to solve the underlying causes of potential challenges, but we do offer suggestions for having open conversations about the motivations, incentives, expectations and restrictions each partner faces. We think these are questions that each party needs to answer for themselves, and then “come clean about” to their partner.

Don't forget to check out the online tool

Nairobi, Kenya

1 Incentives & Expectations

In the desire to agree on the partnership and set it off to a good start, either side may be cautious in revealing too much of their expectations up front. In our experience, revealing more earlier is better. Below we include questions to unpack why each party is interested in the research partnership, and what expectations they have.

We were really interested in doing some sort of experimental research design comparing people's opinions and proposed government policies. The partner had been hoping to use the results to confirm some of their takeaways from their ongoing work with communities in order to advance their political advocacy. Before we decided on the research question, we wanted to clarify early on that this type of study could have inconclusive findings. So, we talked through various scenarios, including the possibility of positive, negative or null results, and worked together to set realistic expectations. I'm really glad we did this early on so the partner could make an informed decision on how to support the project.

— MIT researcher in Nigeria

Ask each other

What do you want out of this collaboration? Ask why five times to better understand who or what is really motivating the research study.[2]

How do you see the roles and responsibilities of your partner? For instance, will the practitioner primarily help facilitate the fieldwork (inroads into communities, translation, etc.)? Will the researcher be integrated into the practitioner organization or act more independently?

Ask your practitioner partner

How do you plan to use the results? Is there a specific decision(s) or donor report(s) that the research results will inform?

What is at stake or how important are the results to your organization? For example, are the results important to the core of the organization (mission critical), are you evaluating a key component of your Theory of Change, or do you want to use the results to re-think or re-design a major component of your implementation?

What kind of results do you need? For example, are you hoping to get statistically significant results or show causal impact? Similarly, are you trying to evaluate more than one initiative bundled together? It's important to discuss early on what level of certainty you need for results, because the answers will directly affect possible research designs and budget.

If you're testing a particular initiative, are there still opportunities to tweak or change it, or must it remain exactly as is? Are you able to pilot or test implementation ideas before taking a project to scale? Getting a clear sense of what's already set in stone will help everyone understand the full range of possibilities for the research design.

How will results be received? For example, how would your team deal with mixed, null, or negative results, especially if you have been hoping to confirm a program's effectiveness? We find it useful to illustrate what the potential outcomes from an experimental study might be, so that the practitioner is very clear on the range of possible results.

Ask your academic partner

Are these data for a dissertation or tenure-track promotion? Are you looking for data that will yield a peer-reviewed paper? Academic milestones often have long-term timelines as well as standards for rigor and method that might dictate the research design. Make sure to ask your academic partner to explain these design elements.

Are there specific methods that are a must for you (e.g. do you need an experiment)? What other characteristics of the study are non-negotiable for you (e.g. sample size, ability to randomize, geography, etc.)? Conversely, what components of the research design are flexible and can be adjusted to fit practitioner needs?

Do you foresee yourself as the primary owner of the data? Of all the data (e.g. including descriptive statistics) or primarily experimental data? What does this mean for the ability of the practitioner to use the data —e.g. can practitioners do their own analysis, or produce their own outputs? Is the release of data for you time-sensitive, and what are those timelines? (More on timelines below).

What do you need the practitioner to provide? For example, do you need recommendations or contacts for government officials, communities, or research assistants?

2 Exploratory Phase & Timelines

During initial conversations, both sides usually try to interpret what the other side says and fit them into particular boxes. That's why, in our experience, it's so important to build some lead time into the project to test the waters, get to know the context, and have time to clarify initial misunderstandings. This process leads to more innovative research questions, and helps avoid some of the common preconceptions and biases that can undermine effective collaboration. Misaligned timelines are another major theme in getting practitioner-academic collaborations to work. The practitioner world tends to work on annual project and donor timelines, which have deadlines for reporting, renewals, and fundraising. Academic timelines tend to revolve around semesters, dissertation or graduation schedules, tenure track progression, the academic calendar, and windows of opportunity to access funding.

Ask each other

What timelines matter most? When do big decisions need to be made? Can you create a common, shared calendar, updated in real time?

Are you able to include a "phase zero" in your plan? Taking time to conduct exploratory research, even for a couple of weeks, and spending time with partners in the field is valuable in identifying innovative research questions together before committing to implementation and study components.

At a minimum, can you design and fund a scoping trip to "ground-truth" in person before setting down major parameters of the research design? We find it useful to discuss what type of research—descriptive, observational, lab-in-the-field—would be ideal and what would be minimal for scoping to inform the next stage of your study, given time and resources.

Can there be a regular check-in time? Can we build pivot or exit points into the partnership? These can be around certain key moments—for example, after the "phase zero" or after the pilot—whereby both parties agree to review the progress, content, and direction of the collaboration, and grant each other the right to re-open discussions on how best to proceed, if at all. These pivots or exit points can be built into a Work Plan or Memoranda of Understanding.

Who is part of the team? Do we have sufficient support for the project? Detail out roles, responsibilities, and time in the field for both teams including project managers, junior researchers, students, and research assistants.

Ask your practitioner partner

Are you bound by project-reporting or grant timelines? What calendar do you follow? Are there any important funding decisions we should know about? In many cases, practitioners are raising money to support projects and team salaries, which makes these deadlines high-stakes.

What level of results do you need by these various timelines? For example, sometimes descriptive information is enough to update a board or advising committee. Other times, donors might expect experimental results in order to fund the next stage. See Section 4 for more on how results need to be presented to be useful as well as the process and responsibility for producing outputs to inform practitioner decision-making.

Ask your academic partner

What academic timeline matters most and what are the key dates when you need results? For graduate students, important dates might include going on the job market, submitting a dissertation, or graduating. For professors, tenure clocks or promotion timelines can drive the need for publication. Articles for academic journals take on average three to five years from data collection to publication.

How much time are you personally planning to spend in-country for this project? Will you be in country for key decision points in the study, for example, piloting or the start of the fieldwork? If there are particular moments in the research when you want the academic partner to be available, be sure to say that up-front.

How much time are you expecting to spend on this research? Will you be conducting other research projects at the same time? Do you have enough people on your team to cover all the required field work, data analysis, and writing or are you expecting the practitioner to provide support?

3

Collaborative Decision Making & Team Buy-in

Being open about where you are coming from is a necessary first step in getting to know your partner. As the relationship develops, equally important is determining how you will make decisions moving forward. At MIT **GOV/LAB**, we work through an engaged scholarship model based on co-design, meaning practitioners actively work with us at each stage of the research ideation, design, piloting, implementation, and dissemination process. Clarifying roles and responsibilities as well as decision-making processes can support productive exchange.

Critical to decision-making is ensuring there is real team buy-in. For example, sometimes there is buy-in from the leadership of the practitioner organization (the Director or CEO), but not necessarily from the team responsible for implementing the program. Or there can be a disconnect between the central office and the field offices. In these cases, buy-in doesn't only refer to being part of the decision-making process, but also having a clear understanding of what the collaboration is about and what is expected of everyone. In our experience, collaborations work better when links between the teams are "thick" and rely on the active collaboration of several people on each side.

Ask each other

How should the research be designed? For example, who should be included in the selection of the core themes to be studied, in the design itself, or in adding items to the data collection tools? Who has the final word on critical components of the intervention design and the research design?

Who are the key decision-makers? What are their roles and responsibilities in the research collaboration? What is the process for decision-making for projects and research? Understanding who sign offs on any implementation changes or resources for research support is important for strengthening cooperation and buy-in. This information would be good to document in a Work Plan.

Have you participated in academic-practitioner research collaborations before? Where was it? Was fieldwork involved? This background information can be helpful for initial planning and onboarding.

Ask your practitioner partner

Are you bound by project-reporting or grant timelines? Who are the main people at the organization who will be communicating with the academics? It's great to have a mix—the leadership, but also others who will be involved directly to help either implement the initiative, the research, or who have a stake in the results. These could be program leads, monitoring and evaluation staff, and procurement.

What is the role of the monitoring and evaluation team in the collaboration, their capacity to participate, and also their interest in gaining practical skills through the collaboration? Monitoring and evaluation teams are in charge of fostering learning in the organization (including use of evidence to inform programming), so their involvement can help ensure that lessons and insights are absorbed in the organizational thinking and decision-making.

Are there stakeholders outside the practitioner organization that should be included in some of the initial discussions? These could be government stakeholders, civil society partners, donors, local academics, or others. Of course, the more people there are to consult and manage, the more likely there will be a communication breakdown at some point, but some carefully-selected outside stakeholders could form a useful advisory group.

Ask your academic partner

Who is on the research team? What roles do they play and who is responsible for key decisions on research questions, designs, and implementation?

Would research managers consider working from the practitioner organization's office for a period of time? Often not more than a desk and wi-fi connection is required, and hosting is a good way for both sides to keep in touch about progress. It makes for easier dialogue with a range of folks in the practitioner organization who may be involved in supporting the project, and it expands the possibilities for learning and skills-sharing.

Who at the university is vested—or at least interested—in the collaborative research? Who might spend time discussing the expectations and interests with the wider group of professors, students, and research staff? Oftentimes universities can provide in-residence or sabbatical opportunities for practitioner teams to learn new skills and collaborate on writing and research projects.

*Hosting PhD researchers as well as research managers from MIT **GOV/LAB** in our offices was helpful for the project, and enhanced learning The arrangement started almost ad-hoc, as a logistical solution to the GOV/LAB team needing a working space. But it quickly became clear that the proximity was beneficial to both sides. Meetings could be frequent, sometimes brief, and even unplanned - over lunch, etc., which facilitated the flow of information. The collaboration was deeper and unexpected; for example, my colleagues in finance and operations were able to engage the MIT team and provide insights on aspects of the fieldwork. The MIT researchers were also very willing to provide impromptu learning sessions for the staff on the design, methodology, and early project results.*

– Learning, monitoring, and evaluation manager in Tanzania

4 Learning & Dissemination

Practitioners and academics often think differently about how to use results. For academics, it's typical to think in long timelines, towards peer-reviewed publications. For practitioners, timelines are often shorter, tied to programmatic or funding decisions. Practitioners' needs can be varied, too. They might need to communicate findings internally in order to adjust a program. They might need to disseminate results in order to influence an ongoing public dialogue. Or they might need evidence to influence specific processes, stakeholders, and government policies. The list goes on. Because of these differences, it helps to sketch out the desired outputs and their uses for both parties ahead of time. How can both sides work together to produce results, in a range of formats that meets everyone's needs?

It was the first time our partner worked on a randomized control trial (RCT) in the field. We worked with them on every step of the research design process, but the results were still pretty complicated to communicate - we had an experiment within an experiment, indexed primary and secondary outcomes... To make sure the findings were interpreted correctly, we put together a number of non-academic outputs, including a slide-deck presentation for government, a policy report, blogs, and more. These pieces helped the partner advocate for future projects and they were able to convene a broad coalition of stakeholders who engaged with project to share the results. The extra outputs took valuable time to produce, but the end result for our partners was worth it.

- MIT researcher in the Philippines

Ask each other

What is the internal review process for each entity before we can share results? Most academics, to preserve academic freedom, will not want to have their findings and conclusions approved, but will welcome reviews, comments and interpretations.

How many iterations or reviews of an output are reasonable? How much lead time does reviewer need? For example, the academic partner should address at least one round of questions and clarifying comments from practitioners before the output is considered final. Good practice is to jointly review sample outputs that you find useful and discuss what it would take to reproduce them.

Does your university or organization have requirements or a process to follow for joint publications, co-branding or using each-others logos? What about sharing news about the collaboration on social or traditional media? Some established organizations may have sophisticated approval processes, so it's important to check ahead of time to avoid complications from any public-facing communications.

How will we spread the word about the results? Dissemination and marketing is almost always an afterthought, so think early about your communications strategy and what would have the biggest impact for your target audience. This might include resources and budget for a meeting, workshop, or webinar as well as expert support for writing for popular audiences, editing, layout and design for print or online multimedia.

Ask your practitioner partner

What are the minimum outputs that you need us to produce from this collaboration? Who is your target audience? Outputs might include descriptive statistics, field reports, final reports, or slide decks. Which are essential? Can you provide examples of what these outputs should or have looked like? Make sure to set expectations for producing outputs written in accessible language and without jargon for target audiences.

What outputs do you want to produce yourself but would like the academics to review? For example, the team may want to produce a "research brief" for policy audiences based on the findings. Best practice is to ask for academic review to ensure accuracy.

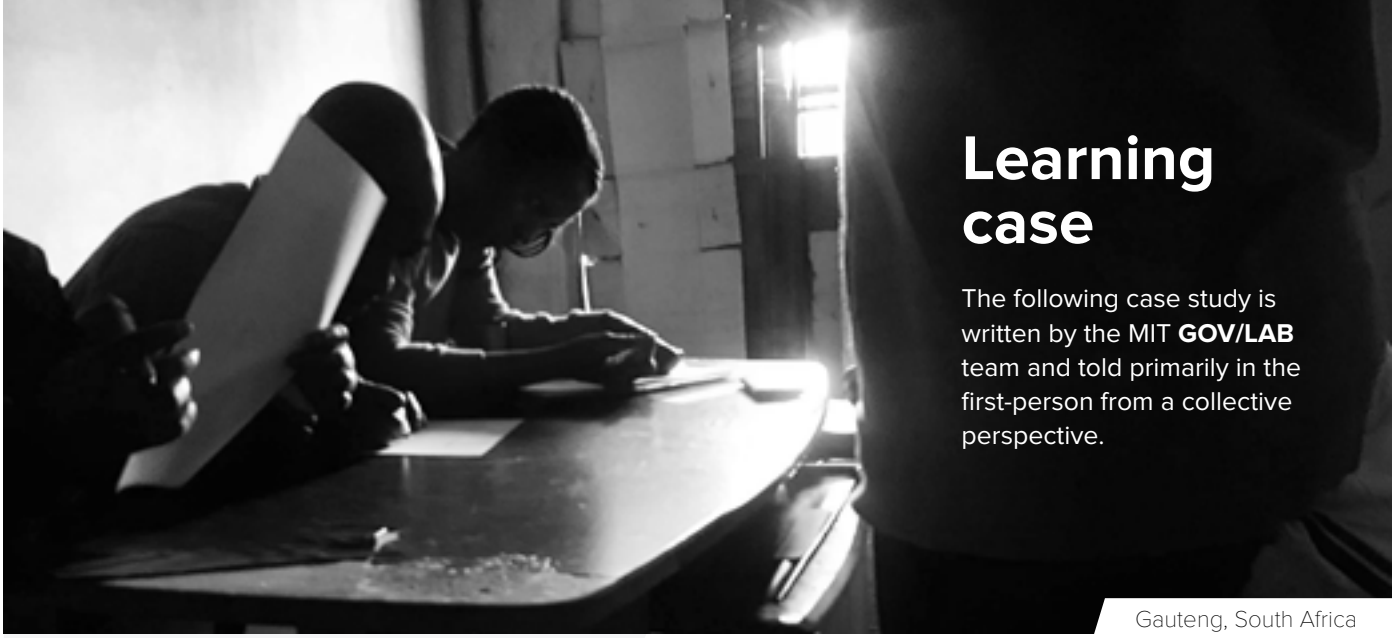
Ask your academic partner

Who owns the data? If academics are conducting quantitative research, it's possible they will be collecting and storing the raw data, which may contain sensitive or personal information. Discuss whether it is useful to share this data, in what format, and what redactions might be needed for sensitive data.

Will experimental results need to be replicated before they can be used for program or policy recommendations? Replications are when someone independently tries to recreate causal results from the raw data, to see if the analysis is correct. Ask more about what this means for interpreting your results and why it might be a good idea to spend the extra time and resources for this.

How much time can you set aside developing non-academic outputs? This includes resources for policy memos and presentations, and support to translate the results from technical academic jargon to more common language for diverse audiences. In our experience, the minimum package includes a summary report (with detailed methodology and results), accompanying slide deck, and descriptive statistics.

Can you offer opportunities for teaching, skills-sharing, and capacity-building for practitioner staff? Explore what would be of interest (e.g., methodological training on sampling, survey tools, piloting, data analysis). Collaboration and skill-sharing that go beyond the immediate research project is a big part of engaged scholarship.



Learning case

The following case study is written by the MIT **GOV/LAB** team and told primarily in the first-person from a collective perspective.

Gauteng, South Africa

Grassroot

By Alisa Zomer (MIT)[3]

A mid-project revelation makes one side wish they'd asked more at the beginning.

MIT GOV/LAB collaborated with Grassroot, a civic technology organization in South Africa, to help them evaluate a new pilot project to train community organizers on the messaging platform WhatsApp. The aim of the collaboration was to demonstrate proof of concept for online training via WhatsApp and to develop a new distance learning tool for community organizers in low-resource settings.

Grassroot's reflective approach and appetite for learning was what initially attracted us to work together. We were excited about the partnership and the chance to contribute knowledge on whether WhatsApp, often criticized for spreading misinformation, could be used for social good.

We entered the partnership thinking the pilot would scale to a larger initiative. Yet after initial engagement, we learned that Grassroot leadership was phasing out and its organizing activities would be ramping down. Prior to our involvement, Grassroot had completed a strategic review and the results led to some deep soul searching about their impact. As a result, they wanted to use the pilot to evaluate not just the WhatsApp course itself, but to test the organization's larger theory of change—that civic technology can build lasting, impactful social movements.

A clearer understanding and discussion of Grassroot's plans and goals earlier on would have helped us better strategize on the research design and outputs. From their perspective, Grassroot was trying to take an honest look at their impact, while testing out a brand new approach, and trying to secure funding. As it was, we ended up spending a lot of time and effort on a study that had value in its own right, but only started to answer their underlying theory-of- change question.

Studying a moving target

One challenge was agreeing on a research design while the course itself was still in development. This required significant back-and-forth with Grassroot to understand what they wanted to test and to assess what level of rigor was possible. The ability to randomize some element of the intervention (to demonstrate causal impact) was a big question that would affect the scope and the methods.

As the pilot took shape, it was hard at times to find a good balance between rapid iteration and thoughtful evaluation. Technology companies are used to this quick flow—try, test, throw away, keep what's left, rinse

3 Thanks to Luke Jordan and Katlego Mohlabane from Grassroot for reviewing this learning case, and their time and honest reflections on our partnership.

and repeat—but academic research is deliberately designed with time to consider, reflect, and refine. We came into the project with a flexible mindset, wanting to contribute useful research to inform the project, but sometimes there was not enough time to absorb what was happening before the two teams made decisions.

Over time, as we realized the pilot wouldn't evolve into a larger project, we questioned whether the resource investment fit the end goal, which was to create learnings and knowledge for the final chapter of the organization. The changing nature of the project presented a challenge to the evaluation, because we were trying to measure the project outcomes as well as Grassroot's bigger theory of change. If we had a clearer sense of the end game from the beginning, we may have been able to sync across the project-level and mission-level objectives.

From Grassroot's perspective, they didn't fully understand how important the scale-up was for MIT's continued engagement. If successful, Grassroot's intention was for the WhatsApp project to become their new core program, supported by rigorous research and a new round of funding. The funding, however, didn't materialize and the organization was exploring alternatives for it's continued future even as the pilot progressed with MIT.

Despite these communication challenges, both sides consider the collaboration to be an overall success: we pioneered a new way of training through a messaging app, which was a first of its kind course, and demonstrated some promising results.[4] Furthermore, we published a how-to guide for teaching on WhatsApp based on the lessons we learned from the pilot, so others could build on our approach.[5]

What we learned

- **Understanding the "big picture" as well as the small details.** Though we had a detailed work plan and spent significant time in-country, it took time to understand how this pilot fit with Grassroot's long-term strategy and the larger state of play for the organization. We could have done more to clarify our own assumptions and expectations around the project's scaling potential.. An open conversation about the big picture may have helped to clarify these points, before we both dived deep into the weeds of the pilot.
- **Managing risks for long-term investments.** Should we have reacted differently when we learned Grassroot leadership was going to transition out, and later found out that their main platform was shutting down? Honestly, by that point we had spent weeks in-country, were invested in the project and committed to seeing it through. The project was linked to GOV/LAB's own strategic planning and we believed the project had potential for broader lessons and knowledge for the field. Building in some decision points along the way, and being upfront with Grassroot about the tradeoffs and costs, could have helped us respond to the new information and maybe set limits in regards to resources and time spent.
- **Getting skin in the game.** In this case, we supported all the research costs from flexible core funding, but never really communicated those costs to Grassroot. Perhaps a more open discussion of costs for the various study elements would have been useful to discuss the research design plan with value for money in mind.
- **Did we bring a cannon to a water balloon fight?** Sometimes it felt our research methods were too rigorous for what Grassroot needed. Despite time constraints, next time we would find more time to talk through whether the big questions were actually answerable by the methods proposed.

In short: This learning case links to clearly laying out incentives and expectations at the beginning of the collaboration. MIT GOV/LAB initially entered the partnership thinking the pilot would scale to a larger initiative, but the project was ultimately meant to create and share knowledge as part of Grassroot's closing chapter. For their part, Grassroot was planning for the pilot to be a test case for a new organizational direction, and despite the project's promising outcomes, shifting donor priorities changed their plans. The project was a success, because both teams were committed and had a good collaborative work style, but we both acknowledge that more communication earlier on our longer-term expectations would have made for better alignment of priorities and outcomes.

4 Zomer, Alisa, Luke Jordan, and Kelly Zhang. 2020. "A Novel Approach to Civic Pedagogy: Training Grassroots Organizers on WhatsApp." Draft Outcome Brief: Grassroot (South Africa) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Governance Lab (United States). Available online.

5 Mohlabane, Katlego and Alisa Zomer. 2020. "Teaching on WhatsApp: Leadership and Storytelling for Grassroots Community Organizers", Grassroot (South Africa) and MIT Governance Lab (United States). Available online.

Resources

Getting this down in writing

What type of documentation would be most useful to track decisions, determine roles and responsibilities, timelines, outputs, and resources committed? The answer depends on institutional requirements as well as organizational capacity:

MIT GOV/LAB Workbook including:

1. **Difficult Conversations Questions Guide**, an easily downloadable and printable format.
2. **Work Plan Template,** a jointly-produced document detailing roles and responsibilities, timelines, and outputs. that serves as an informal agreement and living document that can be updated according to regular check-ins as the study progresses.
3. **Risk and Equity Matrix,** an exercise to outline and consider risks, mitigation strategies, costs, and benefits to all parties, which is one way to build equitable exchange into decision-making for academic-practitioner research collaborations.

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or Data Sharing Agreement might be more appropriate to delineate technical aspects, such as data management and funding that are often tied to research deliverables. Standard templates for MOUs vary by institution and any type of formal documentation should be developed in consultation with your host organization. We find MOUs are most helpful when working with large partner organizations that have technical capacity to negotiate legal terms.

Legal Terms and Conditions for Funds. If funds are being transferred between partners, it's important to consider the legal terms and conditions of the partnership and who holds decision-making power over the money. Depending on institutional arrangements, subawards typically offer more shared intellectual property, which may be beneficial.

Again, check first with your host institution to see their standards for setting up agreements. Consider what type of written document makes most sense to clarify roles, establish trust and build joint-ownership of the research outcomes. At MIT GOV/LAB we almost always start with a simple Work Plan that is held in a shared, accessible (Dropbox, Google Drive, etc.) location to document early conversations and decisions.

Work Plan Template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Workplan Template

Summary

Main activities

Document

MITGOV/LAB

Workplan Template

Roles & Responsibilities

Timelines & Deliverables

Payment schedule & Reporting

Contacts

[Download workbook]

Risk & Equiy Matrix

Download workbook

Resources for building partnerships

Engaged scholarship is part of MIT **GOV/LAB**'s core mission. We don't directly address the issues of power and inequities in this guide, but we want to provide some resources for further context.

- **Chicago Beyond: Why am I Always Being Researched?** A guidebook for community organizations, researchers, and funders to help us get from insufficient understanding to more authentic truth (https://chicagobeyond.org/researchequity/).
- **Silent Voices Manifesto.** New avenues for collaborative research; call for a dialogue on the practice of transnational collaboration in field research (https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-manifesto/).
- **Research 4 impact.** A new evidence-based model for how to build relationships between people with diverse forms of expertise (https://www.r4impact.org/).

How to write a learning case [invitation to contribute]

Because learning cases reflect on partnerships, it is important that all sides have a voice in the narrative. Not surprisingly, this requires an iterative back and forth process. A few suggestions to guide the reflection, writing, and learning process:

1. **Start with a bulleted list of reflections and lessons learned.** Ask yourself: What went well? What was challenging? What were pivotal decision points? What do you wish you had done differently? It's good practice to keep a document where you jot down thoughts throughout the collaboration, so you have ideas and examples to pull from.
2. **Identify one overarching lesson to frame the learning case.** You can't include everything and too many lessons waters down the story, so try to choose one critical point. The “Difficult Conversations” guide may be useful to organize your thoughts.
3. **Draft the narrative and keep it short** (2 pages in a good rule of thumb). Feel free to use our template, which includes a short summary, longer discussion of what happens, lessons learned, and recommendations for next time.
4. **Share a draft with your team and partner for comments.** Set up a meeting or phone call to discuss, rather than rely on written edits. This might take some back and forth.
5. **Get external feedback.** Ask a more neutral third party to review and ask clarifying questions to make sure the narrative and lessons are clear.
6. **Share and prepare for discussion.** The ability to receive friendly critique will be key to moving from a learning case into practice to improve your next collaboration.

Some other writing suggestions. First person narrative (“we” “I”) can be a powerful tool to establish ownership, but you may be more comfortable with third person descriptions. Go with what works best for the partnership. We wanted to include the voice of partners, either as co-authors or in separate response. Again, select the format that fits the context and that serves the best learning purpose. If you want to add a case study to our compendium, let us know (mitgovlab@mit.edu).

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