

## **Building More Robust NGO–University Partnerships in Development: Lessons Learned from Catholic Relief Services\***

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**Abstract:** Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and US-based universities are under increasing pressure to collaborate on international development efforts in order to achieve greater impact and influence. To date, however, most of these project-based collaborations have made only limited strategic investment into achieving longer-term, transformational goals. This article explores an attempt by US-based NGO Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to develop a model for institutional partnerships that goes beyond project-driven collaborations, and the ways in which these collaborations are contributing to achievement of the agency’s strategic priorities. The article describes some of the important internal and external pressures that led CRS to adopt a new approach to university engagement; the processes that evolved to manage its five-year strategy; and some of the key activities that the partnerships supported. Based on this analysis, the paper extrapolates a series of six cross-cutting lessons learned that can help guide other NGOs and universities which are seeking to develop similar types of engagement, including a self-assessment checklist. The authors conclude that while these six-cross-cutting lessons learned are important, their significance will vary as the partnership grows, matures, and diversifies.

**Keywords:** NGO-university partnerships for development; NGO-university operational research; NGO-university engagement; Management/functionality of NGO-university partnerships for development; Non-governmental organizations and development; Universities and development

Since the Second World War, the major United States (US)-based universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have largely worked in their separate spheres on alleviating poverty and improving development outcomes for poor and vulnerable populations in developing countries (Lewis & Kanjii 2009; Tvedt 2006: 341-366; Iriye 1999: 421-435). Each of these key partners has its niche and its role, with

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NGOs focusing on field implementation, capacity strengthening and responding to urgent basic needs, and universities taking a longer view with a focus on research and training.<sup>1</sup> Both are now under pressure from major international donors and their own leadership to collaborate. This is due in part to an increasing number of case studies that show that the two partners can complement one another's expertise, and that this type of complementary expertise can increase the efficacy, impact, transparency, and sustainability of donor investments in development (Office of Technology Assessment 1991; Gibbs, Fumo & Kuby 1999).

While some partnerships forged as a result of this shift in donor priorities and guidance result in positive outcomes, many do not (Bukonya & Hickey 2014; Banks, Hulme, & Edwards 2014: 713). Even a majority of the successful ones only work for the short period of time when the two parties are co-implementing a joint project that has external funding (Aniekwe, Hayman, & Mdee 2012; Roper 2002: 338-345). This is because the motivation and culture of an NGO is very different from that of a university. Most universities have never collaborated with a large NGO, much less developed financial or programmatic relationships with one. As a result, many of these partnerships are focused on specific projects with little forethought about how the relationship will be managed or the partners' longer-term goals (Olivier, Hunt, & Ridde 2016: 444-455; Roussons & Fawcett 2000: 369-402; Aniekwe, Hayman, & Mdee 2012). Thus, there is little incentive to continue the joint collaboration once the project funding and/or contract ends, which limits the transformative impact of these development investments.

To address this issue, many stakeholders from both sides are stressing the need for NGOs and universities to shift from a

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<sup>1</sup> The seminal review of constraints to US universities working in international assistance that was published in 1994 did not include, for example, any discussion of NGO-university linkages (Office of Technology Assessment 1991).

project-focused model to a more broad-based model for collaboration in which both partners are involved in the identification of the partnership priorities and activities (Aniekwe, Hayman, & Mdee 2012; Sullivan & Skelcher 2002; Roper 2002: 338-345). They are also asking the donor community to increase its support for this type of robust, long-term partnership model.

This paper argues that there are real benefits from taking the time to invest in the development of more long-term partnerships that incorporates six overlapping lessons learned:

- Lesson 1: Identify and monitor priorities;
- Lesson 2: Build mutual cultural understanding;
- Lesson 3: Create a value proposition;
- Lesson 4: Involve senior management;
- Lesson 5: Empower a focal point; and
- Lesson 6: Build a knowledge management system and keep it up to date.

The same article argues that while these lessons learned are important, their importance is likely to be different at different stages of a partnership—i.e. when an NGO is looking for potential partners, when it is in the midst of negotiating a partnership, and when the initial partnership is being scaled up.

These recommendations for new and existing NGO-university partnerships are based on an analysis of one of the first attempts by a major US-based NGO—Catholic Relief Services (CRS)—to develop this type of mutually beneficial model of university engagement that goes beyond project-driven relationships. In a typical year, CRS implements over 800 different projects in 100 countries with over 1,200 local partners. As part of its 2014-2018 strategy, CRS decided to invest in a more structured model for engagement with a select number of US-based universities with technical expertise in the program areas where CRS intervenes. This strategy is now in its fourth year and has produced a series of applied-research, evaluation, and training deliverables for

CRS’s field programs.

Section Two of this article describes the internal and external pressures on NGOs and universities to increase their collaboration and to develop a new relationship that goes beyond the conventional model. This is followed in Section Three by a description of how CRS responded to these pressures by pilot testing a new model of collaboration, including some of its early results. Based on this analysis, Section Four contains six cross-cutting lessons and recommendations for NGOs and universities that are seeking to develop similar types of engagement, including a self-assessment checklist (see Appendices), and how these lessons learned and recommendations are likely to evolve at different stages of a partnership.

The data presented in this article comes from three sources: (1) CRS’s internal tracking system for university engagement; (2) internal CRS documents produced in conjunction with the joint activities; and (3) feedback on the case study and the cross-cutting lessons learned and recommendations from two representatives of CRS’s major university partners.

## **Framework**

### **New Pressure on NGOs to Increase University Engagement**

The field of international development has undergone significant evolution over the past 25 years. The commonly held image of Western humanitarian aid workers tending to malnourished children in drought-stricken Ethiopia is perhaps no longer representative of the industry. The number of NGOs has grown considerably during this time, with a large number of niche organizations focused on a particular area of expertise, country, or geography. Many developing-country local NGOs have come into existence, and many donors now fund them directly without passing through international NGOs. Donor aid budgets have

also become more constrained during this time period. Although NGOs have grown overall, growth has been much smaller in recent years, and funding has been scaled back in some countries in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The role of the private sector is also growing proportionately larger.

Institutional donors have also raised their standards. Securing grants has become a highly competitive process requiring a significant investment of resources and deep knowledge of technical subject matter, along with the ability to demonstrate a track record of results. Programs are required to be evidence-based, using rigorous methods to ensure that donor investments and taxpayer dollars will not be wasted. In an era of instant information and real-time communication, individual donors are also demanding more information about the programs they fund beyond heart-warming human-interest stories.

It is no longer enough for NGOs to say that they are doing good work. They need to prove it, and need a credible third party to back this up. These pressures have pointed NGOs toward the need to undertake more rigorous evaluations and applied research with institutions that have strong technical credibility like universities (Table 1).

This trend toward greater university engagement and research is being reinforced by almost all of the major multilateral and bilateral donors, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department for International Development (DFID) (Kinn & McNeil 2013). In 2014, USAID made cross linkages with universities a priority in the creation of its US Global Development Lab (GDL), which seeks to eradicate extreme poverty using breakthrough innovations developed in partnerships between NGOs, academia, and the private sector (USAID 2016). Many of the major US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and USAID programs that provide funding for major NGO programs (e.g. Feed the Future [FtF] and Food for Peace [FFP]) encourage or require a university or other research partner on most of their grants.

Table 1.  
*Key Areas Distinguishing the Culture and Motivation of International NGOs and Universities, and Their Potential Synergies*

Key Areas that Distinguish the Culture of NGOs and Universities	NGOs Working in International Humanitarian Assistance and Development	US-Based Universities Working in International Development	Pressures for Collaboration/Potential Synergies
Global focus	Field implementation and responding to urgent needs	Research and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Donor pressure on universities to scale up lab-based research to the field</li> <li>-Donor pressure on NGOs to better identify and document evidence of results, scale up, and evaluate new innovations in their projects</li> </ul>
Time frame	Generally short term (for research, training, and/or monitoring) and project-driven with external funding	Generally more long term (for research, training, and/or monitoring)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Donor pressure to link shorter term NGO projects to more long-term research initiatives by universities</li> <li>-New opportunities for universities to learn promising methodologies for facilitating research roll out and for NGOs to learn about longer-term research and sharing results through journal publications and conference presentations</li> </ul>
Core resource funding	Mostly external and US government-based with some internal support from endowments, small and large donors	Primarily internal from state funding or endowments with percentage varying between private and state institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-NGOs under pressure to identify new innovations and conduct rigorous external evaluations to maintain their reputation with donors</li> <li>-Universities under pressure to show field-level impact of research to keep/expand their external donor funding and standing as effective international institutions</li> </ul>
Dependence on institutional donor grants for research and development	Budget from grants from private foundations, bilateral, and multilateral donors tends to be a major part of their budget (80-85 percent)	Funding from grants tends to represent a small portion of the total university budget and are usually linked to specific research programs	
Internal and external pressure to be more international	Already international in focus and field presence	Under pressure from state legislatures (for US land grant institutions), alumnae, faculty, and students to develop international curriculum and research programs	
Overseas presence	Decentralized offices throughout the world with staff and equipment on site, agreements with host country governments, as well as local knowledge of how to operate in environment	Few, if any, field offices throughout the world so dependent on faculty and students working with host-country institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Universities under pressure to show field-level impact of donor investment in research</li> <li>-NGOs under pressure to identify and document evidence of results, and scale up and evaluate new innovations</li> </ul>

<p>Key Areas that Distinguish the Culture of NGOs and Universities</p> <p>Training/capacity strengthening</p>	<p>NGOs Working in International Humanitarian Assistance and Development</p> <p>Strong focus on capacity strengthening of local partners; Need for outside institutions like universities to train headquarters and field staff</p>	<p>US-Based Universities Working in International Development</p> <p>Heavy reliance on using international grants to support professors and graduate student training programs</p>	<p>Pressures for Collaboration/Potential Synergies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Use of university-based professors and students for NGO training and research to identify and evaluate new innovations</li> <li>-Linking professors and students to NGO grants improves field safety and reduces the cost of research</li> <li>-Use of NGO experts to lecture university students and interact with professors can keep them abreast of current trends in development policies and donor priorities</li> </ul>
<p>Use/Utilization of Written Products of International Work</p>			
<p>Time sensitive proposals</p>	<p>Extensive experience with the design and preparation of time-sensitive project proposals for donor funding</p>	<p>More limited experience with time-sensitive proposals for donor funding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-NGOs under pressure to build university-level support into short-term humanitarian, transitional, and post-crisis relief and development programs</li> <li>-Universities under pressure to link with NGOs to improve grassroots impact of research</li> </ul>
<p>Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL): Baseline, mid-term, final, and post-impact studies</p>	<p>-Extensive experience with the design and execution of time-sensitive baseline, mid-term, final, and post-project impact studies and evaluations that are required by most bilateral donors</p> <p>-In-house experts on staff to ensure compliance with donor MEAL standards for the design and execution of large development projects</p>	<p>-Extensive experience with the use of statistics for the design and analysis of long-term research studies</p> <p>-In general, no in-house MEAL specialists and less familiar with donor MEAL standards for studies and evaluations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-University-based professors and students can co-publish the research generated by research and evaluations studies in refereed journals, which are looking for field-based studies that examine the impact of development interventions</li> <li>-NGOs can rely on university-based faculty and staff to ensure the quality and objectivity of these required studies and evaluations</li> </ul>
<p>Report writing</p>	<p>Must be accessible to readers without complicated technical jargon and methods</p>	<p>-Limited experience with the design, execution, or analysis of time-sensitive baseline, mid-term, final, and post-impact studies</p> <p>-Dense, full of equations and footnotes; designed for specialist audience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Universities under pressure to prepare more user-friendly reports on their international activities that can be disseminated to different audiences</li> <li>-NGOs under pressure to document the results of the innovations they are including in proposals and to publish rigorous evidence in refereed journal articles</li> </ul>
<p>Academic publication</p>	<p>Limited experience</p>	<p>Principal focus of professors since linked to criteria for promotion and tenure</p>	

Source : The authors.

## **New Pressure on Universities to Engage with NGOs on Development Programs**

Many of the same external and internal pressures that are motivating the NGOs to engage with universities are also motivating the major university-based international centers to link with NGOs. Almost all the major US universities are under pressure to become more global in their teaching, research, and recruitment (Nonnecke et al. 2015). And most of these global programs depend on outside bilateral, multilateral, and foundation funding to support these activities, especially those related to international research in agriculture, livestock, forestry, engineering, business, health and nutrition.

These university-based research programs are under increasing pressure to demonstrate field-level impact. This pressure is leading them to develop more joint programs with NGOs due to their strong field presence and local relationships essential to scaling and sustainability (Table 1). These relationships help facilitate the type of applied research that agricultural and health projects need to adapt their technical approaches to local conditions. NGOs can also facilitate the complementary interventions needed to pilot test and scale up new initiatives (Table 1). Doing joint research projects helps ensure that field input is taken into consideration, while also lowering the unit costs of research projects and increasing field safety for university faculty, students, and any field assistants hired by specific grants.

### **Limitations of the Current NGO–University Partnership Model**

There is a growing literature that demonstrates the many ways that linking NGOs with universities in developing countries can provide new ideas, concepts, and technologies that increase project efficiency and impact (Aniekwe, Hayman, & Mdee 2012; Roper 2002: 338-345; Olivier, Hunt, & Ridde 2016: 444-455; Roussons & Fawcett 2000:

369-402). With a few notable exceptions, however, almost all these partnerships tend to fall apart once the external funding ends, which creates a wide range of institutional challenges for sustainability. To address this issue, many stakeholders from both sides are stressing the need for NGOs and universities to shift from a project-focused model to a more broad-based model for collaboration (Aniekwe, Hayman, & Mdee 2012; Sullivan & Skelcher 2002; Roper 2002: 338-345). They are also asking the donor community to increase its support for this type of robust, long-term partnership model. Aniekwe, Hayman, and Mdee (2012) conclude—based on a comparative study of nine joint NGO-university initiatives—that:

Funders (research councils, foundations and donors) should provide more funding for innovative and long-term collaborative research...[and that] High level discussions are required within academic institutions and NGOs to tackle such issues such as: obstacles to effective and meaningful collaboration in international development; ethics within collaborative research; training needs and skills gaps; access to data and research for academics from NGOs and for NGOs from academics. (p. 17)

To date, however, there is almost no practical guidance that either NGOs or universities can use to develop this type of more long-term partnership model. The principal exception is a recent book that describes Iowa State University's efforts to develop joint programs with Makerere University and the National NGO Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns (VEDCO) (Butler & McMillan 2015), and several edited proceedings volumes that describe different joint initiatives between India's rural universities and that country's rapidly growing NGO sector using students and faculty (Reddy & Reddy 2006).

## Case Study

### **Building CRS’s Internal Capacity for More Robust University Partnerships**

CRS responded to the external pressures and potential synergies by making a new, more comprehensive model of “University Engagement and Research” (UER), one of the key cross-cutting themes in its new five-year strategy (2014–2018) (CRS 2014a). The initial preparation and execution of the strategy followed seven interlocking steps to increase internal capacity for university engagement.

#### *Step 1. Conducting a preliminary review of CRS’s existing university and research linkages*

The initial development of this strategy in 2012 involved tasking an inter-divisional group with conducting a preliminary review of CRS’s earlier university partnerships. This review, which documented collaboration of one sort or another with over 100 different institutions, highlighted the fact that with a few notable exceptions, the vast majority of CRS’s early university engagements were project-based and/or linked to CRS’s relationship with a specific researcher with little connection to the larger institution (CRS 2012). While the end product of the collaborations was sometimes useful, results were mixed, communication with university partners was often challenging, and objectives were not well aligned with either partner’s long-term objectives for their international programs.

This exercise pointed to the need for more of an institutional approach to collaboration—not dissimilar to the approach CRS uses with local partners around the world (CRS 2011). An institutional approach like this presented unique challenges since country programs often negotiated directly with universities, and because CRS lacked a central

representative for university engagement, guidelines on how to engage universities, and a repository of information about university collaboration. Similarly, many universities operate in a siloed fashion in which faculty act as free agents in engaging NGOs to collaborate with them on research. Not all faculty are eager to have administrative oversight of these relationships.

Though the UER strategy related to many components of CRS's overall agency strategy, it was embedded under Strategic Priority (SP) 2, "Deepen Our Expertise in Five Core Competencies Across CRS" (CRS 2014a: 14). This inclusion of the UER strategy in the broader strategy ensured it would be monitored regularly as part of the semi-annual reporting on the strategy to the CRS board and president.

### *Step 2. Creation of a new office of university engagement and research*

To execute the new initiative for university engagement, CRS created the Office of UER with a full-time director, small budget from private internal funds, and system for strategic planning and monitoring that reported to the executive sponsors charged with overseeing the global five-year strategy.

Since its activities and results are being tracked as part of the official five-year strategy, CRS developed a series of indicators to track collaboration with each university partner. These metrics are updated periodically and reported in CRS's internal strategy reporting process, as well as in meetings with university partners. This helps answer questions on both sides about the benefits of NGO-university collaboration. From the university's vantage point, collaboration cannot just be seen as an interesting side activity, but must be core to the mission of an institution of higher education as it relates to scholarship, research, training, and preparing students for professional careers in their fields of study. Faculty collaborating with CRS need to see a concrete contribution to their scholarship, especially if they are still preparing their case for

tenure. For CRS, collaboration must lead to improvement of program quality, beneficiary impact, and wider influence for it to be effective.

*Step 3. Build staff capacity for working with universities*

Since CRS had limited experience working with universities, it needed to first increase its knowledge and skills to successfully cultivate and manage these partnerships. This entailed putting in place systems, guidance, and templates to facilitate UER development, as well as taking an initial baseline of existing UER. These were formulated into a list of three results and expected benchmarks for the coming year, as well as metrics the director could use to measure the initiative's progress toward the achievement of the results.

*Step 4. Baseline assessment of existing university engagement and research*

During the first year of strategy implementation (2013-2014), the director focused on taking stock of existing UER, building relationships with key university faculty and staff, and trying to distill lessons learned from previous experiences. This required constructing a baseline of existing collaboration.<sup>2</sup> Much of this happened through word of mouth and meetings with key stakeholders at the headquarters (HQ) office in Baltimore, overseas, and with university partners, then painstakingly compiling information about each partner and a timeline of various collaborations. This was an essential first step since it helped to determine avenues of collaboration that were working well, others that should be abandoned, and potential new areas that needed further exploration.

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<sup>2</sup> The baseline was more of a process that did not result in a specific document, but rather the compiling of information and various project documents.

In 2014, the director also led a process to inventory existing strategic research underway throughout the agency. In the absence of existing agency systems to track this, the inventory was a laborious, manual process that required contacting regional and country staff throughout the world to obtain basic information about any research underway. Key fields that were tracked included: region, country, description of research topic, program area(s), and source of funding. Overall, in fiscal year (FY) 2014,<sup>3</sup> the agency had 95 different studies underway carried out by 37 different institutions, ranging from US and foreign universities to international research institutes. Twenty-six of these studies were carried out by non-university-affiliated consultants. The majority of the studies (53 percent) were related to the agricultural livelihoods signature program area, while 36 percent were related to the health signature program area (CRS 2014b).

Many stakeholders were surprised at the large number of existing studies. The inventory confirmed the importance of centralized tracking of research engagement in order to maximize the value obtained through these studies. It also pointed to the necessity of tracking research in a more systematic fashion through agency knowledge management systems, as well as creating a central repository for key research documents that could be consulted by anyone in the agency. In 2016, the UER team launched a new research portal in its knowledge management system that allowed any internal user to access information about current research efforts underway throughout the agency, including key documents, datasets, publications, and information about research partners.

#### *Step 5. Creation of a knowledge management system*

Prior to the creation of the Office of UER, there was no centralized

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<sup>3</sup> CRS's fiscal year runs from October 1 to September 30.

communication or repository of information at CRS on this topic. Staff had no way of knowing about any prior engagement with a given institution or faculty member other than word of mouth. When staff turnover occurred, information about these relationships was often no longer available and the relationship lapsed.

Since much of the first year was spent compiling baseline information about existing UER, there was no time to develop a formal knowledge management system. While the information was helpful, the utility of the information was constrained by the fact that it was only available on the director’s hard drive, which meant that it could only be accessed by email request—not a sustainable solution.

Once a staff member was hired to focus on knowledge management during the second year (2014–2015), CRS was able to create a site on its knowledge management system to post internal documents from staff and to share information about:

- **University Engagement and Research**—Where the UER initiative fits in the agency strategy, how CRS engages with universities, and the inventory of strategic research;
- **Key Relationships**—Extensive information about four primary partners (Johns Hopkins University, Purdue University, University of Maryland, and University of Notre Dame) and another page with more limited information about other partners;
- **US Global Development Lab**—Basic information about the GDL, its cornerstone partners (especially universities), and the Feed the Future Innovation Labs led by US universities; and
- **Resources**—Monthly activity reports and other informational documents.

The site was launched midway through the second year of strategy implementation. The initial feedback from staff at all levels of the agency was highly positive, and subsequent efforts to publicize the site have resulted in spikes in traffic. This SharePoint based system was later

augmented by a Customer Relationship Management system (SalesForce) which provided a more permanent and detailed record of specific project level and institutional engagements (see step 7 below).

*Step 6. Creation of standardized materials to promote internal and external communication*

Two documents were developed in the second year to make internal communication involving staff and potential partners easier:

- A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document (CRS 2015a), which contained links to content on the knowledge management system, designed to drive traffic to it. In this way, it served as a just-in-time resource that could be consulted when staff had the need to quickly find information about UER.
- In addition to the FAQ document, another resource that catalogued various opportunities to host student interns was also developed in 2015 and updated in 2016. The creation of this resource contributed to a 40-percent increase in the number of student interns being placed both overseas as well as at HQ, and it streamlined the business process to facilitate this between overseas operations and human resources (CRS 2016a).

Both were designed to serve as a stand-alone document that could be easily forwarded by email upon request.

In 2015, the UER director developed a two-page briefing document on the CRS approach to UER that could be left behind at external meetings with universities, donors, and other stakeholders (CRS 2015b). A standard CRS presentation on UER was also developed to serve as a base for visits to universities, CRS field offices, and external meetings. The UER director also moderated a panel on NGO-university engagement at the 2014 InterAction Forum with two university partners and one other NGO (Interaction 2014). The director also made a presentation on university engagement at a 2015 event organized by the

Association of Public and Land Grant Universities in Washington, D.C. These external communication efforts helped to provide greater visibility to CRS’s approach to UER and inform a wide range of external stakeholders about how they might engage with CRS.

*Step 7. Improved internal processes and systems for university partnership management*

Universities typically have a Negotiated Indirect Cost Recovery Agreement (NICRA) ranging from 50 to 70 percent of costs (Dance 2014; US GAO 2013; US GAO 2010). While this rate is required for US government-funded activities, many universities are willing to accept a lower rate if it is the policy of the donor or collaborator, and it is applied across the board to all universities. As such, CRS researched what would be considered a reasonable rate by the partner institutions and created a policy that would apply this in a standard fashion (CRS 2014c). The policy has been accepted by all university partners to date for projects that are funded by CRS’s private, unrestricted funds. It has resulted in significant savings to CRS, and ensured that the majority of project budgets go toward the direct cost of research. It has also helped ensure good stewardship of scarce resources and helped to convince some field staff that university engagement was not too expensive for them to try.

CRS also developed a new agreements policy that came into effect in October 2015 (CRS 2015c), making explicit the need to take issues such as ownership of data and intellectual property into account in agreements with research partners. Prior to this, there was no standard practice, and both data and intellectual property were not adequately protected. In certain cases, university faculty had published articles based on data from collaboration with CRS without any prior review by CRS staff. The agreements policy has helped to mitigate these concerns, and since it was put in place, issues of data ownership, intellectual property and co-authorship of publications have been handled with

greater care.

Another issue was that prior engagements with universities did not always take into account the importance of institutional review boards (IRB) in getting ethical clearance for research. UER provided guidance to staff on the role of the IRB and how to work with university faculty to ensure IRB approval of all research involving human subjects.

Finally, better systems were needed for tracking university contacts and project-level engagement. To address this, CRS developed a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, including each project record and institutional record which are constantly updated as they evolve. This new CRM system allows staff to be aware of existing contacts and the institutional collaboration history without having to directly ask the UER director. It also provided a permanent record with key documents and detailed information about specific engagements.

### **Developing robust institutional partnerships with a limited number of university partners**

While increasing its internal capacity to engage with university partners, CRS also started to develop specific field projects and regional and HQ-based programs with university partners. As of 2016, CRS's Overseas Operations Division is collaborating with 29 different US-based universities (CRS 2016b). The deepest engagement is with its four key partner institutions—Johns Hopkins University, Purdue University, the University of Maryland, and the University of Notre Dame. There has also been significant engagement with seven other institutions summarized in Table 2. The density of these relationships was affected by various factors, including pre-existing collaboration, geographic proximity, partnership dynamics and programmatic expertise in areas of mutual interest.

The activities with partners included building relationships and submitting joint proposals to donors, as well as agreements for actual

collaborative activities, from research and evaluation to training and innovation. These activities are detailed below.

*Developing and deepening relationships with new and existing university partners*

CRS’s institutional approach to the UER initiative was heavily influenced by its existing model of working with local partners in the countries where it intervenes (CRS 2011). This approach places a high priority on two concepts—relationship development and communication—that relate to 10 cross-cutting partnership principles.<sup>4</sup>

The foundation of CRS’s institutional approach to university partnerships involved building relationships—getting to know key actors in the university, sharing values and expectations transparently, and seeking opportunities for collaboration that provide value for both parties. This approach recognizes that relationship development is almost never a clear-cut, linear process. It is clear, however, that developing a relationship first before embarking on actual collaboration is critical.

This relationship-building process was strongly influenced by the

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<sup>4</sup> CRS’s partnership principles are: (1) Share a vision for addressing people’s immediate needs and the underlying causes of suffering and injustice; (2) Make decisions at a level as close as possible to the people who will be affected by them; (3) Strive for mutuality, recognizing that each partner brings skills, resources, knowledge, and capacities in a spirit of autonomy; (4) Foster equitable partnerships by mutually defining rights and responsibilities; (5) Respect differences and commit to listen and learn from each other; (6) Encourage transparency; (7) Engage with civil society, to help transform unjust structures and systems; (8) Commit to a long-term process of local organizational development; (9) Identify, understand, and strengthen community capacities, which are the primary source of solutions to local problems; and (10) Promote sustainability by reinforcing partners’ capacity to identify their vulnerabilities and build on their strengths (CRS 2011).

culture of the universities, which is different from that of an NGO. CRS found that one of the first hurdles to developing a good understanding of the different cultures is to clarify the key drivers related to funding for both the NGO and university partner. Many NGO staff do not understand that universities are rarely themselves a donor. While some universities are well endowed by their alumni, others rely on increasingly precarious state funding along with student tuition, and must be constantly on the lookout for new federal and foundation grant opportunities. Many universities in turn do not understand that most NGOs rely heavily on external funding to leverage their internal funding for greater impact on the ground and are not usually a source of additional funding unless the partnership secures this from an external funding source.

NGOs must also understand that different universities have their own unique culture and administrative models. Some tend to be relatively centralized, while others are extremely decentralized. A more centralized institution can be somewhat easier to navigate since a central institutional focal point can provide a link to many different stakeholders. A less centralized institution can be more challenging since it may require building many different relationships, often within each school or college, and sometimes even at the center or institute level. This can be a time-consuming process, first just to understand the basic structure, then to figure out who is interested in exploring opportunities. Some universities are extremely siloed, and it can be difficult to get to know the institution aside from individual contacts with faculty in each school. In some cases, especially the more centralized institutions, an institutional memorandum of understanding (MOU) can help to move the partnership process forward. However, in a decentralized environment, this may not actually help much since it is at the level of individual contacts that one can make things happen.

To promote relationship development, CRS staff made regular visits to key partner universities, and university staff also visited CRS HQ and field offices.<sup>5</sup> After each campus visit, a summary of key action points corresponding to the various meetings held on campus is

developed and followed up with accordingly.<sup>6</sup> University faculty and students who have collaborated with CRS often visit CRS HQ to meet with CRS staff and give a webinar on the collaboration.<sup>7</sup>

Since the start of the strategy, the UER director has visited 17 different universities across the US, 11 on multiple occasions. At least 25 CRS staff members have participated in site visits to partner universities, and many more have participated in university visits to CRS. At least one faculty member and/or administrator from each of the 11 most active partners (Table 2) have visited CRS’s headquarters office or field programs. These visits often coincided with CRS-sponsored workshops that increased the CRS staff’s understanding of the deeper mechanics of working with faculty and staff. The visits also helped the university staff to better understand how an NGO works.

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<sup>5</sup> In the case of the University of Notre Dame and Purdue University, a CRS delegation visits each university twice a year—fall and spring—to interact with the university focal point for CRS and a steering committee to review collaboration to-date and explore new opportunities. In addition, one or two thematic areas or schools are chosen for a series of meetings with different faculty members whose interests align with areas in which CRS works, with the objective of getting better acquainted in the event of new opportunities for collaboration and making connections with CRS field staff doing work in those areas. In most cases, the CRS staff also meet with the university administrators who oversee international programs and grants, including offices of sponsored programs and institutional review boards.

<sup>6</sup> Not all meetings resulted in an immediate concrete follow-up, but were often helpful to ensure that when an opportunity arose, CRS knew where to go to find the necessary technical resources. In some cases, the UER director would directly introduce other CRS HQ or field staff to university contacts for more detailed follow-up meetings.

<sup>7</sup> In this way, CRS staff globally gain a greater awareness of the benefits of university collaboration, and can more readily envision what this looks like in practice.

**Table 2.**  
**Collaborative Activities with CRS's Most Active University Partners (2014-2018)**

	Achieve Leadership in Three SPAs (SP1)		Other Program Areas That Support the Three SPAs <sup>8</sup>		Deepen Expertise in Five Core Competencies (SP2)				Strengthen Engagement With the Global Church (SP3)	Reinforce a High Performance Culture (SP4)	Resource Mobilization (SP5)	
	ER & R	Agricultural Health Livelihoods	Education	WASH	Partner Collaboration & Support	Justice and Peacebuilding /Good Governance	MEAL Activities	ICT4D Tools				Global Brand Management <sup>9</sup>
U. of Notre Dame	X <sup>10</sup>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	C	X	X
Purdue U.	X <sup>11</sup>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
U. of Maryland	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Johns Hopkins U.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Boston College	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	C	X	X
Cornell U.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Emory U.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Georgetown U.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	C	X	X
Tufts U.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
U. of Illinois	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Villanova U.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	C	X	X

Note. X=A cluster of collaborative activities since 2014 or earlier. Acronyms: ER&R: emergency response & recovery; U: university; w/: with; SP: strategic priority; HIV/AIDS; Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome; WASH: water, sanitation, and hygiene; OR: operational research; MEAL: monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning; C: universities that are historically related to the Catholic Church. Source: the authors.

<sup>8</sup> Although WASH and education are not SPAs in CRS's current strategy, they are important cross-cutting areas that impact each of the three SPAs —agricultural livelihoods, health, and emergency assistance.

<sup>9</sup> Includes presentations at workshops and conferences, publications, and participation (as co-editors) in the CRS MEAL evidence and practice brief series

<sup>10</sup> Rehabilitation of education programs in Haiti.

<sup>11</sup> Ebola recovery in Sierra Leone, and supply chain management system and earthquake resilient construction materials in Nepal.

Communication is another foundational principle of CRS’s new institutional model for UER. Ideally, this needs to happen at multiple levels in each institution:

- In most cases, an **executive sponsor**<sup>12</sup> was identified at the university, which helped set the tone for the relationship, communicating to staff at all levels that the relationship is important and worthwhile;
- Many partners also identified an **institutional focal point**<sup>13</sup> to keep track of the myriad of relationships and collaborations underway, and, in the event of problems, to help to find appropriate solutions; and
- Once a collaboration opportunity has been identified, both CRS and the new or existing institutional partner would identify an appropriate **project manager**<sup>14</sup> to oversee the activities. Though the institutional focal point needs to be aware of these activities, it is best to have another stakeholder overseeing the actual work, someone with a vested interest in the work product itself.

In this way, a web of links starts to form, growing increasingly dense over time as the relationship progresses.

One strength of the CRS UER system is that most CRS staff closely coordinate their contact with the universities through the UER director. These contacts are also reported and monitored on the knowledge management platform, helping to document communication for other stakeholders. This contributes to building institutional memory that is

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<sup>12</sup> This executive sponsor in a university is often a vice president for research or global partnerships and a vice president for overseas operations at CRS.

<sup>13</sup> The institutional focal point is often a long-time faculty member who understands how to navigate the university and locate the expertise needed by CRS.

<sup>14</sup> The project manager is the person responsible for implementing the specific collaboration with CRS. This can be a faculty member or another university staffer.

not lost when staff turnover occurs.

Given the agency's belief that any good partnership must be mutually beneficial to both partners, CRS encourages its existing and new partners to develop a **value proposition**. This is a concept from the business world that entails laying out the capacities that each side brings to a relationship and the benefits that they hope to achieve through collaboration. CRS has found that developing a value proposition with partners enabled the parties to work together more cohesively. As of July 2016, two of the 11 most active partners (Table 2) have developed formal value propositions with CRS that are reviewed regularly as part of joint planning efforts.

Once joint activities are identified there are **project-specific agreements** developed for each collaboration. These project agreements are usually scopes of work that outline the objectives of the work, who is expected to do what, when, the expected deliverables, as well as provisions for data and intellectual property ownership, publications, confidentiality, etc.

In some cases, CRS has developed a broader **MOU** or **master collaboration agreement**, which includes non-binding statements regarding partnership principles and a value proposition, as well as binding clauses regarding issues relating to intellectual property, data, publications, confidentiality, and use of name and logo.

*Expanding CRS's project-based and other collaboration with new and existing university partners*

Most joint activities have fallen into four areas: research, evaluation, training, and innovation in CRS's three signature program areas of agricultural livelihoods, health, and emergency assistance (Text Box 1).

**Text Box 1. Sample Activities Supported by CRS’s UER Initiative**

*Agricultural Livelihoods.* Since 2007, CRS has collaborated with Purdue University’s International Programs in Agriculture on Purdue Improved Crop Storage (PICS) bags, an innovation in hermetic grain storage developed by Purdue, which has been scaled up in 14 countries with CRS with funding from USAID, the Gates Foundation, and CRS private funds. An interesting crossover with emergency response and recovery occurred in 2014 when PICS was implemented in Sierra Leone at the height of the Ebola crisis. Some Farmer-to-Farmer volunteers have also completed volunteer assignments related to PICS.

*Health.* Since 2004, CRS has collaborated with the Institute of Human Virology of the University of Maryland on its AIDSRelief program to build the capacity of clinical partners for HIV and AIDS care and treatment in 10 countries through the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDSRelief (PEPFAR) funding. The University of Maryland School of Medicine sent medical teams to work with CRS on providing life-saving treatment for victims of the Haiti earthquake in 2010. Since 2012, CRS has collaborated with the School of Social Work to provide internship opportunities for its Masters in Social Work students at HQ. CRS also engaged a School of Social Work faculty member in 2015 to develop a curriculum for its staff on international social work. In 2016, CRS engaged the School of Nursing to provide training to its local partners in Liberia on health systems strengthening.

*Emergency Assistance.* After the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, CRS worked with the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) of the University of Notre Dame to map the Catholic school system, followed by the development of a strategic plan to strengthen school capacity. Subsequent work on education-system strengthening was funded by several foundations and CRS private funds. A randomized control trial is currently underway to evaluate the success of the program in raising early-grade reading capacity. Based on the success of their initial efforts, ACE and CRS/Haiti received funding from several Foundations, and most recently won a prestigious Global Development Alliance award from USAID to expand their work on teacher training and literacy to reach 30,000 children, as well as foster systemic reform with the Ministry of Education. CRS and ACE made a presentation on a panel about their Haiti collaboration in 2016 at the Comparative International Education Society conference and are currently conducting interviews for a more extensive published case study on their approach.

*Source:* Sample activities supported by CRS’s University Engagement and Research (UES) initiative, which is based on the initiative’s records posted on its internal knowledge management system.

## *Research*

CRS seeks to focus applied research on topics that would help CRS programs be better designed and/or executed, as well as contribute to the wider evidence base in the field. These same joint research projects help graduate students and faculty to attain access to field sites and data to test research hypotheses. In many cases, the joint collaborations set in motion partnerships that increase a university's access to funding opportunities and networks of partners, while providing opportunities for joint scholarship, including publications, presentations, and course materials. An important prerequisite that often precedes research is the development of a learning agenda,<sup>15</sup> consisting of a set of research questions about a particular program area designed to address specific evidence gaps in the literature. This helps to focus research in ways that improve organizational effectiveness and influence wider industry

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<sup>15</sup> The CRS five-year strategy (2014-2018) recognizes that learning is a key element in enabling the agency to remain relevant, effective, and competitive, and is central to program performance, innovation, sustainability, and accountability. Although learning is not new to CRS, the inclusion of learning as a core competency (i.e. the "L" in Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning, under Strategic Priority 2, Table 2) suggests a greater level of investment to embed learning needs into programs and projects with commensurate resources. A comprehensive approach to learning requires: (a) leadership support; (b) the development of learning competencies among CRS and partner staff; (c) adaptable learning agendas developed in a participatory manner; (d) knowledge management practices; (e) interactive processes for learning; and (f) an external enabling environment. An intentional approach to learning involves: (a) crafting agendas to address specific questions; (b) designing appropriate learning and research processes to answer these questions; (c) designing or selection of pertinent and relevant indicators; and (d) using effective data collection and analysis methods that generate robust results to support effective learning processes, and acting and innovating based on results and learning (Sharrock, Gottret, & Andretta 2015).

directions and policy. The University of Notre Dame, the University of Florida, Purdue University and Tufts University are working with CRS on the development of learning agendas for research, particularly by conducting literature reviews of the existing evidence base in order to identify gaps.

### *Evaluations*

A related area involves the use of faculty and graduate students to conduct evaluations and some of the special studies that feed into evaluations. In the process of participating in the evaluations, many of the professors and students build relationships that turn into more broad-based collaborations to conduct training or research. CRS has been able to access a complementary pool of labor for baseline surveys, evaluations, and operational research for its projects with nine of the 11 most active partners (Table 2). Three partners—Cornell University, Tufts University, and the University of Illinois—are helping CRS develop and pilot test new tools that should help build the efficiency of the agency’s MEAL systems. The University of Notre Dame has hired an entire team of MEAL experts that are available to complement CRS’s MEAL capacity through the Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD).

### *Training*

Some of the staff and graduate students in the partner institutions help CRS:

- Design training modules and lead training workshops for its field staff, local partner staff, and civil servants from government ministries in the countries where CRS works; and
- Provide staff with access to distance-learning opportunities as well as on-campus sabbaticals and certificate programs.

CRS has also helped universities develop their curricula for new programs related to international development in ways that better prepare

students for a career in this field. There are also a growing number of reciprocal teaching arrangements in which CRS staff visit a partner university as adjunct faculty or guest speakers, sharing field experiences and practitioner knowledge with faculty and students and hosting university staff to perform similar functions at CRS HQ. CRS staff also serve on university program advisory boards.

### *Innovation*

It was anticipated that CRS would seek university partners to test game-changing new approaches that can be scaled up to bring about transformation in the lives of the poor. This can be a product, service, or more efficient approach to service delivery. University faculty are constantly seeking to innovate as part of their scholarship. However, they often lack access to field sites where innovations can be tested and scaled up. Partnering with an NGO gives them greater access to field and beneficiary feedback, and will ultimately make their grant proposals to donors more competitive in light of the need to test new innovations in a real-world setting. Similarly, NGO proposals to donors that incorporate proven innovations developed by universities can have greater credibility for donors seeking to have transformational impact. The collaboration with Purdue University on PICS (see Text Box 1) as well as their Innovation for International Development program falls into this category.

### *Developing innovative financing models for CRS and its new and existing partners to increase access to grant funding, achieve scale, and/or replicate programming*

When USAID created the GDL in 2014, CRS was invited to become a cornerstone or founding partner, along with a select group of other NGOs, universities, foundations, and corporate entities. The GDL was intended to be a platform to foster collaboration to support the most promising science, technology, innovation, and partnership solutions,

and break down barriers to ensure USAID’s success to help end extreme poverty by 2030.

While the GDL was launched with much enthusiasm, there was ultimately only very limited funding available to support its ambitious agenda. While CRS applied for some of these funding opportunities with some university partners, none were successful. Nevertheless, the GDL helped CRS foster new relationships with some universities and private-sector partners, and served as a platform for discussion of important development challenges such as the scaling up of climate-resilient maize varieties. The GDL also co-sponsored CRS’s Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) conference and supplied keynote speakers, including its own executive director. Many of CRS’s university partners have also participated in the annual ICT4D conference.

Finally, CRS co-presented a workshop with three university partners at the GDL’s TechCon in 2016 on NGO-university engagement.<sup>16</sup> The workshop sought to forge a consensus among 50-some academics and practitioners on the ingredients for successful university-implementing organization partnerships. The participants ranked in order of priority common goals, vision, or interest; clearly defined roles and responsibilities; strong, open, and regular communication; and value proposition and clear benefits to both parties as the top four most important characteristics of partnerships between universities and implementing partners. The most common obstacles to partnership included: divergent time scales; bureaucracy, administrative and legal; misalignment of priorities; miscommunication and poor communication; funding and resource constraints; and workloads, time constraints, and limited face-to-face collaboration.

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<sup>16</sup> TechCon is the annual signature event of the GDL’s Higher Education Solutions Network, hosted by one of its partner universities. It creates a space for participants to share cutting edge solutions to development challenges and develop networks for collaboration (Hunt et al. 2016; Higher Education Solutions Network 2016).

### *Resource mobilization*

Although UER is still in an early stage of development, it has clearly increased CRS's access to complementary funds that can be used to improve program quality. CRS has submitted joint grant proposals with eight of its 11 most active partners (Table 2). In some cases, CRS serves as the prime recipient and sub-grants to a university resource partner. In other cases, universities serve as the prime and sub-grants to CRS. In both cases, both need each other to win the grant and implement the program successfully because these grants (and the donors who funded them) recognized the value added by collaboration in scaling up the new methodologies being tested. In six cases, CRS been the recipient of in-kind resources from some of the existing grants held by its university partners or pro bono labor from faculty and/or students (Table 2). In some cases, university partnerships have opened the doors to funding from existing institutional donors to universities that are new to CRS.

### **Lessons: Enhanced Hosting of Successful NGO-University Linkage Agreements**

Based on this analysis, a list of generic lessons learned and recommendations has been developed. In addition, a simple self-assessment tool was developed, consolidating some of the principle lessons learned from this case study into a simple checklist to guide future programs (Appendix A).

#### **Lesson 1: Identify and monitor priorities**

It is critical for both parties to see the partnership as meeting their respective needs. For strong two-way partnerships to work, they have to be built on joint interest and trust, which only evolves over time. It is important to build in a regular process of communication to assess how

each partner’s priorities are shifting and ensure continued alignment.

- Recommendation 1.1. Create opportunities for each partner to discuss its priorities for the partnership.
- Recommendation 1.2. Anticipate that the partners’ willingness to discuss their deep-rooted priorities will increase as the partners get to know and trust one another.
- Recommendation 1.3. Establish a regular process of partnership review in order to stay in touch with how each partner’s needs are evolving.

## **Lesson 2: Build mutual cultural understanding**

Building a win-win partnership requires both partners to understand the other’s institution, values, needs, and opportunities. The university partner needs some rudimentary understanding of what the NGO partner does and how it funds its activities, and the NGO needs a basic understanding of the constraints and opportunities of working with the university’s core faculty and students. Short-term exchange programs like having NGO staff guest lecture to students and faculty and/or participating in the joint design of a grant proposal can help the NGO better understand the university culture and vice-versa. When faculty participate on a design or evaluation team, it helps them to understand how the NGO functions in the field and gets its funding. When programs start with small exchanges such as these, it helps them to build a solid basis for larger partnerships.

- Recommendation 2.1. Pilot test the partnership with a few simple joint activities before embarking on more complex projects.
- Recommendation 2.2. Encourage staff and administrators to visit the partner institution for key events like stand-alone workshops or conferences that will expose the visitors to staff and administrators (at the NGO) and faculty and students (at the university).

### **Lesson 3: Create a value proposition**

To avoid confusion, it is important to articulate each partner's needs, core values, and expectations for the partnership and how it will be managed in a written document. One option is to have a very general value proposition that provides the basis of the annual reporting. This type of global statement should make it easier to develop other types of joint agreements for specific activities, as well as more broad-based memoranda of understanding at a later stage.

- Recommendation 3.1. Develop a general value proposition that describes each partner's expectations for the partnership.
- Recommendation 3.2. Require annual updates of the partnership's activities even when they are quite limited in order to keep track of what has been done for new staff on either side of the partnership.

### **Lesson 4: Involve senior management**

Full partnerships require high-level executive sponsorship and support. Senior administrators can send an important message to faculty that the university values NGO collaboration and respects the scholarship that can result from it. CRS's experience shows how frequent debriefings and site visits by each partner's administration can lock in high-level commitment and insulate the partnerships from changing organizational pressures. Also, staff are often tempted to work with individual faculty members or students because it seems quicker and easier. These ad hoc arrangements can produce good work, but can also lead to problems unless senior management are aware of and involved in these processes.

- Recommendation 4.1. Encourage all staff to have formal approval from their appropriate administrative chief for any joint activities.
- Recommendation 4.2. Encourage administrators to visit the

partners in their headquarters and field locations.

- Recommendation 4.3. If the two partners win a joint grant, develop a written agreement about how the funds will be managed.

### **Lesson 5: Empower a focal point**

Building full partnerships takes time and the leadership of an institutional focal point on both sides who can serve as a bridge between partners. Any NGO or university serious about developing this type of collaboration should have a designated focal person for these activities and have that function made part of the person's level of effort for their job. When the partnerships are limited, it might be possible for this person to combine these activities with other activities within the institution. As the number of formal partnerships grows, have an experienced staff member in a full-time position tasked with this coordination.

- Recommendation 5.1. Designate a focal person to coordinate NGO-university linkage programs and assess the level of effort accorded to these activities by the number of partnerships being managed or considered.

### **Lesson 6: Build a knowledge management system and keep it up to date**

Sustaining institutional commitments requires developing and maintaining a simple system for tracking contacts, relationships, and activities in order to demonstrate value and stay on top of activities. In order to respect each partner's time and resources, develop and maintain a simple documentation system that is flexible enough to track key contacts and all of the formal and informal communication about the partnership activities so that there is a clear record of what was agreed to. The same system needs to be able to house reports documenting any

visits to one another's institution and reports generated about joint activities. Identify a number of simple indicators to track, like the number of faculty and staff involved in key activities by department or the number of presentations and papers that result from a joint activity.

- Recommendation 6.1. Develop a simple knowledge management system for all activities associated with new and potential partnerships and update it regularly.
- Recommendation 6.2. Identify a small number of simple metrics to track the progress of the partnership.
- Recommendation 6.3. Require short reports, which include a list of all people encountered and what was discussed, for any exchange visits or regular phone calls between the partnership's focal persons.
- Recommendation 6.4. Compile monthly and annual reports of university engagement activity to keep track of the evolution of the partnerships.

### **Cross-Cutting Lessons Learned for Different Stages of an NGO-University Partnership**

While these six cross-cutting lessons learned are important, their importance varies depending on the partnership's current stage. That is to say, when an NGO or university is (Table 3):

- Looking for potential partners;
- In the early phase of the partnership; or
- When the partnership has diversified to include a more complex variety of activities including a major joint project funded through a third-party donor.

Table 3.

*Lessons Learned from the CRS University Linkage Program for the Different Stages of Partnership Development*

Lessons	When Looking for Potential Partners	In the Early Phase of the Partnership	When the Partnership Has Diversified
1. Identify and Monitor Priorities	Build on existing relationships of staff and faculty to identify partners with similar values and interests	New areas of collaboration are identified as the partners get to know one another	The partnership priorities diversify and evolve over time as new opportunities emerge
2. Build Mutual Cultural Understanding	Relationships are more personalized, so there is usually a need for exchange visits to build institutional understanding and diversify relationships	Joint activities help determine whether or not the partners are a good match	Partners have a good understanding of one another's culture and have developed good mechanisms for communication to keep them in touch with one another and resolve any misunderstandings
3. Create a Value Proposition	Not enough understanding to do this	Draft value proposition allows for more strategic thinking on potential collaboration	Value proposition strengthened and/or revised as senior administration starts to recognize the value added of the partnership
4. Involve Senior Management	Inform them about the group discussions going on, and introduce any visiting faculty/staff to the appropriate administrators	Involve management in reviewing the value proposition and empowering a designated focal point with an appropriate level of effort, support, and authority	Senior management's knowledge of the partner institution is useful for negotiating joint projects and programs funded by third-party donors
5. Empower a Focal Point	One designated institutional focal point is needed to coordinate and build trust with potential partners and go beyond individual, project-level relationships	One designated focal point is needed to coordinate and build trust with potential partners and manage activities of the partnerships being tested	Focal point's role grows more complex as strings of activities grow and more staff in both institutions develop a web of communication at multiple levels
6. Build a Knowledge Management System and Keep It Up to Date	Set up a simple documentation system that tracks contacts and communication with all potential partners	Once activities start, strengthen the documentation and consider tracking some of the pilot partnerships with a simple indicator system	More complex knowledge managements systems are needed to keep track of the large number of relationships and ongoing collaborations

*Source:* The authors.

## **When looking for potential partners**

Any institution planning a partnership needs to first look inward to identify its priorities before looking outward as CRS did when it conducted its initial assessment of its partnerships before developing its UER initiative (*Lesson 1*). This inward reflection should include:

- Conducting an assessment of existing partnerships and some of the key factors that contributed to or detracted from their success; and
- Finding staff (in the case of the NGO) or faculty and students (in the case of a university) that have some prior connection with the new or existing partner that the institution is hoping to develop.

Most institutions can develop a short list of potential partners based on this type of potential inner reflection. Having an empowered focal point at this stage (as CRS did) who is recognized by the senior management (as CRS's UER director was) helps coordinate the communication with potential partners and key senior management (*Lessons 4 and 5*).

Once a preliminary list of potential or actual partners is developed, the NGO or university should consider developing a set of criteria for selecting new partners. Ideally this should identify which values and benefits that they are most interested in getting from a partner. Once the criteria are developed, they can be used to structure the notes kept on potential partners and eventually—if the partnership starts to gel—provide the basis of a value proposition (*Lesson 3*). These notes should be consolidated and stored in the documentation system (as CRS did in its internal knowledge management system) to keep a record of important contacts and any commitments for follow-up (*Lesson 6*). At this early stage, it is important to encourage exchange visits between potential partners so that they can learn about one another's core business and priorities for the partnership (*Lesson 2*).

### **In the early phase of the partnership**

Start with a few joint activities that pilot test the partnership (as CRS did with all of its new partners). These activities can be as simple as inviting an NGO practitioner to lecture in a class, or having a faculty member participate in one of the NGO's project evaluations. In the course of executing these activities, both partners become more familiar with the other institution's culture (*Lesson 2*). It is at this point that the faculty and focal point are likely to see whether the NGO and the university are a good match, and whether or not they want to work together to expand the partnership. Once this starts happening, the focal points for the two partners should develop a draft value proposition that is reviewed and revised by interested staff and the relevant administrators (*Lessons 3 and 4*). Without a recognized focal point (like the CRS UER director) empowered by the administration, it can be very hard to get any partnership to this point (*Lesson 5*). This empowered focal point should have access to a designated budget for partnership development (like CRS's private, unrestricted funds) and be expected to perform this task as part of his or her job (*Lesson 5*). Many NGOs have access to similar types of unrestricted funds and grant overhead, while most universities have special endowments or grant overhead they use to support new initiatives. As the partnership matures, the two partners' institutional focal points should monitor how each partner's priorities may change or diversify (as CRS did with its 11 most active partners) (*Lesson 1; Table 2*). As in the earlier phase, each partner should have a good documentation system (like CRS's internal knowledge management system) for filing reports that result from the joint training, reports from exchange visits, and any presentations that are made since staff changes are the norm not the exception in most NGOs and universities (*Lesson 6*). This should include monthly and annual reports of activities.

### **When the partnership has diversified**

If the partnership is a good fit, it may diversify into multiple strings of activities with different priorities within the same university and different groups within the same NGO (as happened with CRS's four key partners) (*Lesson 1*; see *Table 2*). This diversification takes time to develop and results from the partners discovering that they share certain core values and priorities for certain types of research and training (*Lessons 2 and 3*). At this point the partners are most likely to collaborate on joint proposals that can be funded by third-party donors (as was the case with CRS's most active 11 partners) (*Table 2*). Once third-party funds are involved, the partnership's activities are subject to each institution's and the donor's policies for administering grants. The earlier investment in building communication between the two partners' administrators and contracting or sponsored research officers begins to pay off in helping to iron out some of the inevitable conflicts over budgets and resources (*Lesson 4*). The focal point's job also become more complex as that person now has to work with a series of empowered project managers that oversee the different third-party funded projects, which often fall under different divisions of the same institution—be it university or NGO-based (*Lesson 5*). Once an NGO or university has multiple partners, it is important to invest in a good knowledge management system that can file all the relevant background documents on grants (e.g. requests for assistance, donor guidance), proposals, reports for third-party-funded joint activities, and the smaller internally funded exchanges that will continue with support from each institution's own funds (*Lesson 6*).

### **Conclusion**

There is a clear need to develop a new model for NGO-university partnership that goes beyond the conventional project-based model. This paper examined one such model by looking at how it was set up and its

early evidence of results. This analysis of the CRS cases suggests that there are real benefits to a large international NGO having this type of long-term model as a basis for bigger, more complex relationships.

More agency-specific case studies and comparative research is needed to identify the key elements that make partnerships work from the perspective of the universities that CRS works with. While there is anecdotal evidence that the early partnerships are likely to have a major impact on certain partners, this needs to be studied in greater detail in order to better understand what internal and external factors make these partnerships work. More comparative analysis is needed of the CRS model with other NGO-university models. This research should help develop capacity indicators to guide the NGOs and universities that work in international development, as well as the bilateral agencies like USAID and private foundations that use these partnerships to execute large grants.

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## Appendix A. NGO–University Self-Assessment Tool (NUASSESS-SA) Instructions

**Context:** This self-assessment checklist is designed to be used in conjunction with the article by Leege and McMillan.<sup>17</sup> This article identifies six cross cutting lessons from CRS’s experience and recommendations for achieving them—and how these are likely to manifest themselves at different stages of a partnership.

The NUASSESS-Self Assessment tool provides a structured framework for assessing where an institution stands in terms of its current NGO–university partnerships for the six cross-cutting lessons learned identified in the article:

- Lesson #1: Identify and Monitor Priorities
- Lesson #2: Build Mutual Cultural Understanding
- Lesson #3: Create a Value Proposition
- Lesson #4: Involve Senior Management
- Lesson #5: Empower a Focal Point for NGO–University Partnerships
- Lesson #6: Build a Documentation System and Keep It Up to Date

**Suggested Methodology:** Identify a small working group of staff/faculty that have experience and/or are interested in building stronger NGO–university partnerships. The composition of the group can be flexible, but all of the participants’ names and positions should be noted at the top of the checklist since this document may be reviewed in later years. All participants should read the article (Leege and McMillan 2016) beforehand and bring a hard copy with them to a group meeting that may last from 2–3 hours. Two participants should serve as facilitators. One should facilitate and a second should project the

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<sup>17</sup> Building More Robust NGO–University Partnerships in Development: Lessons Learned from Catholic Relief Services. *Journal of Poverty Alleviation and International Development* (JPAID), Vol. 7 No. 2, 2016.

matrices (NUASSESS Matrices #1-6) so the participants can conduct an initial participatory ranking of each partner's relationship with the institution.

**Expected Outputs of the Baseline:** The output of the exercise should be a series of six matrices (Appendix B) that can help staff identify key strengths and areas that need strengthening in existing partnerships as well as any partnerships that are under consideration. This initial ranking can serve as a baseline ranking for a participatory tracking system which can be updated annually or bi-annually if the institution chooses to adopt a strategic planning process to encourage stronger NGO-university partnerships.

## Appendix B. NGO-University Self-Assessment Tool (NUASSESS-SA) Instructions

Institution:

Date of Exercise:

Names and Positions of Persons Participating in the Exercise:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

<b>Cross-Cutting Lesson Learned (Table 2, Leege and McMillan) and Key Questions</b>
<b>Lesson #1: Identify and Monitor Priorities (Matrix #1)</b>
1.a. What qualities <sup>18</sup> are you looking for in an NGO-university partner (list)?
1.b. What skills/attributes <sup>19</sup> are you looking for in a partner (list)?
1.c. Make a list of all your current partners and indicate which skills/attributes (identified in 1.b) they exhibit through their collaboration with you (list).
<b>Lesson #2: Build Mutual Cultural Understanding (Matrix #2)</b>
2.a. List how many times your staff have visited the existing/projected partners' headquarters office (n=times). How many times have they visited you (n=times)?
2.b. How familiar are you with the key people/processes needed to negotiate joint initiatives in your respective institutions (rank 0-5) <sup>20</sup> ?
<b>Lesson #3: Create a Value Proposition (Matrix #3)</b>
3.a. Have you already developed or are you ready to consider developing a joint value proposition if the partnership goes forward (rank 0-5)?
3.b. For the institutions that you feel you are ready to develop a value proposition (those ranked 3-5), which values/activities/areas of collaboration do you feel should be highlighted in this value proposition for your institution (list)?
3.c. Do the value statements/agreements you have developed outline a process for inter-partner communication, strategic planning, and reporting as well as for periodic review and updating of the value proposition (rank 0-5)?

<b>Lesson #4: Involve Senior Management (Matrix #4)</b>
4.a. How familiar is the senior management in your institution and in the home offices of your current or project partners with the current/proposed partnership (rank 0-5)?
4.b. Does each partners have an executive that is involved in overseeing the institutional partnership (i.e. an <b>executive sponsor</b> ) (rank 0-5)? <sup>21</sup>
4.c. Is there an institutionally recognized relationship (informal or formal) <sup>22</sup> between the <b>executive sponsor</b> , the <b>institutional focal person</b> (see Lesson #5 below) <sup>23</sup> and the <b>designated project manager</b> <sup>24</sup> who is responsible for the day-to-day supervision of specific types of collaboration (rank 0-5)?
4.d. Is the department charged with international programs (in universities) and university contacts (in NGOs) friendly to inquiries from potential partners? Is there a standard protocol for managing requests for information about joint initiatives or potential partnerships (rank 0-5)?
<b>Lesson #5: Empower a Focal Point for NGO-University Partnerships (Matrix #5)</b>
5.a. Does each prospective partner have a designated <b>institutional focal person</b> for NGO-university partnerships (in general) and/or for the projected project activity (in particular)? How well does that position function (rank 0-5)?
5.b. Are the functions of the NGO-university institutional focal person clearly spelled out in a scope of work or job description (rank 0-5)?
5.c. Does the person designated as the NGO-university institutional focal person allocate an appropriate level of level of effort (LOE) to do this job correctly (rank 0-5)?
5.d. Is there a user-friendly system for this person to track key contacts and communications with current and potential partners (rank 0-5)?
5.e. Does the institution have a clear protocol under which key communication with current/potential partners is coordinated through the focal person in order to avoid confusion and build trust (rank 0-5)?
<b>Lesson #6: Build a Documentation System and Keep It Up to Date (Matrix #6)</b>
6.a. Does the institution have a user-friendly system for tracking current or potential partners (rank 0-5)?
6.b. Is this system updated regularly (rank 0-5)?
6.c. Do relevant staff have easy access to the information stored on the partnership (rank 0-5)?
6.d. Does the system have a process for tracking certain key indicators in situations where the institution is involved in multiple NGO-university partnerships (past or

present) (rank 0-5)?<sup>25</sup>

6.e. Does the partnership have a functional drop box repository for documentation that is accessible to staff from both institutions (rank 0-5)?

Source: Building More Robust NGO-University Partnerships in Development: Lessons Learned from Catholic Relief Services. *Journal of Poverty Alleviation and International Development* (JPAID), Vol. 7 No. 2, 2016.

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- <sup>18</sup> Qualities could refer to certain core values of the institutions such as: *open communication, long-term relationships, ethical commitment to overseas involvement, and community outreach.*
- <sup>19</sup> Sample skills that partners are often looking for include: *technical skills, monitoring and evaluation, statistical analysis, survey design, staff training opportunities?* Attributes can include factors like: *field presence in developing countries, size of the institution, presence of alumnae/former staff, and geographical proximity.*
- <sup>20</sup> Suggested Ranking: 5=Very Strong; 4=Strong (not perfect); 3=Average/passable; 2=Weak; 1=Very Weak; 0=Non-existent.
- <sup>21</sup> The executive sponsor in a university is often a vice president for research or global partnerships and a vice president for overseas operations in an NGO.
- <sup>22</sup> Does not have to be formal; can be informal as long as it works.
- <sup>23</sup> The institutional focal point is often a long-time faculty member who understands how to navigate the university and locate the expertise needed by CRS.
- <sup>24</sup> The project manager is the person responsible for implementing the specific collaboration with CRS. This can be a faculty member or other university staff.
- <sup>25</sup> Suggested Ranking: 5=Very Strong system in place and used for strategic planning; 4=Strong in place and occasionally used for strategic planning; 3=Strong system in place but not used for strategic planning; 2=Average system in place not used for strategic planning; 1=Very Weak system in place; 0=Non-existent.



**Matrix #2 NGO-University Self-Assessment Tool (NUASSESS-SA)**

**Lesson #2: Build Mutual Cultural Understanding**

New and Existing Partners <sup>27</sup>	2.a. List how many times your staff have visited the existing/projected partners' headquarters office (n=times)? How many times have they visited you (n=times)?	2.b. How familiar are you with the key people/processes needed to negotiate joint initiatives in your respective institutions (rank 0-5) <sup>28</sup> ?
Partner 1		
Partner 2		
Partner 3		
Partner 4		
Partner 5		
Partner 6		
Partner 7		
Partner 8		
Partner 9		
Partner 10		

<sup>27</sup> Same list as on Matrix #1.

<sup>28</sup> Suggested Ranking: 5=Very Strong; 4=Strong (not perfect); 3=Average/passable; 2=Weak; 1=Very Weak; 0=Non-existent.

**Matrix #3 NGO-University Self-Assessment Tool (NUASSESS-SA)**

**Lesson #3: Create a Value Proposition**

New and Existing Partners <sup>29</sup>	3.a. Have you already developed or are you ready to consider developing a joint value proposition if the partnership goes forward (rank 0-5)?	3.b. For the institutions that you feel you are ready to develop a value proposition (those ranked 3-5), which values/activities/areas of collaboration do you feel should be highlighted in this value proposition for you institution (list)?	3.c. Do the value statements/agreements you have developed outline a process for inter-partner communication, strategic planning, and reporting as well as for periodic review and updating of the value proposition (rank 0-5)?
<b>Partner 1</b>			
<b>Partner 2</b>			
<b>Partner 3</b>			
<b>Partner 4</b>			
<b>Partner 5</b>			
<b>Partner 6</b>			
<b>Partner 7</b>			
<b>Partner 8</b>			
<b>Partner 9</b>			
<b>Partner 10</b>			

<sup>29</sup> Same list as on Matrix #1.

**Matrix #4 NGO-University Self-Assessment Tool (NUASSESS-SA)**

**Lesson #4: Involve Senior Management**

4.a. How familiar is the senior management in your institution and in the home offices of your current or project partners with the current/proposed partnership (rank 0-5)?	4.b. Does each partner have an executive that is involved in overseeing the institutional partnership (i.e. an <b>executive sponsor</b> ) (rank 0-5)? <sup>31</sup>	4.c. Is there an institutionally recognized relationship (informal or formal) <sup>32</sup> between the <b>executive sponsor</b> , the <b>institutional focal person</b> (see Lesson #5 below) <sup>33</sup> and the <b>designated project manager</b> <sup>34</sup> who is responsible for the day-to-day supervision of specific types of collaboration (rank 0-5)?	4.d. Is the department charged with international programs (in universities) and university contacts (in NGOs) friendly to inquiries from potential partners? Is there a standard protocol for managing requests for information about joint initiatives or potential partnerships (rank 0-5)?
<b>Partner 1</b>			
<b>Partner 2</b>			
<b>Partner 3</b>			
<b>Partner 4</b>			
<b>Partner 5</b>			
<b>Partner 6</b>			
<b>Partner 7</b>			
<b>Partner 8</b>			
<b>Partner 9</b>			
<b>Partner 10</b>			

<sup>31</sup> Same list as on Matrix #1.

<sup>32</sup> The executive sponsor in a university is often a vice president for research or global partnerships and a vice president for overseas operations in an NGO.

<sup>33</sup> Does not have to be formal; can be informal as long as it works.

<sup>34</sup> The institutional focal point is often a long-time faculty member who understands how to navigate the university and locate the expertise needed by CRS.

<sup>35</sup> The project manager is the person responsible for implementing the specific collaboration with CRS. This can be a faculty member or another university staff.

**Matrix #5 NGO-University Self-Assessment Tool (NUASSESS-SA)**

**Lesson #5: Empower a Focal Point for NGO-University Partnerships**

New and Existing Partners <sup>35</sup>	5.a. Does each prospective partner have a designated <b>institutional focal person</b> <sup>36</sup> for NGO-university partnerships (in general) and/or for the projected project activity (in particular)? How well does that position function (rank 0-5)?	5.b. Are the functions of the NGO-institutional focal person clearly spelled out in a scope of work or job description (rank 0-5)?	5.c. Does the person designated as the NGO-university institutional focal person allocate an appropriate level of level of effort (LOE) to do this job correctly (rank 0-5)?	5.d. Is there a user-friendly system for this person to track key contacts and communications with current and potential partners (rank 0-5)?	5.e. Does the institution have a clear protocol under which key communication partners is coordinated through the focal person in order to avoid confusion and build trust (rank 0-5)?
<b>Partner 1</b>					
<b>Partner 2</b>					
<b>Partner 3</b>					
<b>Partner 4</b>					
<b>Partner 5</b>					
<b>Partner 6</b>					
<b>Partner 7</b>					
<b>Partner 8</b>					
<b>Partner 9</b>					
<b>Partner 10</b>					

<sup>35</sup> Same list as on Matrix #1.

<sup>36</sup> The project manager is the person responsible for implementing the specific collaboration with CRS. This can be a faculty member or another university staff.

**Matrix #6 NGO-University Self-Assessment Tool (NUASSESS-SA)**

**Lesson #6: Build a Documentation System and Keep It Up to Date**

<b>New and Existing Partners<sup>37</sup></b>	<b>6.a. Does the institution have a user-friendly system for tracking current or potential partners (rank 0-5)?</b>	<b>6.b. Is this system updated regularly (rank 0-5)?</b>	<b>6.c. Do relevant staff have easy access to the information stored on the partnership (rank 0-5)?</b>	<b>6.d. Does the system have a process for tracking certain key indicators in situations where the institution is involved in multiple NGO-university partnerships (past or present)? Is this information used for strategic planning (rank 0-5)?</b>	<b>6.e. Does the partnership have a functional drop box repository for documentation that is accessible to staff from both institutions (rank 0-5)?</b>
<b>Partner 1</b>					
<b>Partner 2</b>					
<b>Partner 3</b>					
<b>Partner 4</b>					
<b>Partner 5</b>					
<b>Partner 6</b>					
<b>Partner 7</b>					
<b>Partner 8</b>					
<b>Partner 9</b>					
<b>Partner 10</b>					

<sup>37</sup> Same list as on Matrix #1.