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Challenges of creating alliances across borders: midterm reflections from the Alliance for African partnership

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to share cross-border (geographic, disciplinary and cultural) challenges in the ethical design, establishment, implementation, and evaluation of the performance of alliances and partnerships. The paper reviews the Alliance for African Partnership's two-year experience stressing lessons learned and shows how it has benefitted philosophically on the subject from recent linkage with the International Development Ethics Association. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need to be patient as alliances and partnerships go through the learning curve before maturity in embracing the ethical values that come to bear. Strategies for nurturing, upkeep, and sustainability of these values are outlined.

Introduction

Two years ago in May 2016, Michigan State University (MSU) invited 14 leaders from African research institutions to join us in creating a new approach to partnership (AAP 2017). During our two-day convening, we exchanged ideas and came up with a blueprint for a new initiative that could bring like-minded institutions together to address shared global challenges through research and practice. We called our new initiative the Alliance for African Partnership (AAP). Our primary focus in the conception stage was to identify best practices for partnership in the African context: equity, transparency, mutual respect, and sustainability were among them. Our founding mission statement incorporated these principles of partnership, and we noted that they were consistent with Michigan State University's historic commitment to ethical partnership for research in Africa, drafted in the 1980s (Wiley and Monson 2017).

The AAP was founded in large part on a collective agreement among our stakeholders that the global landscape of development – especially for Africa – has fundamentally changed. No longer will the powerful institutions of the west – like MSU – be the recipients of funding and the centers for research and dissemination. There is a decentering of support for higher education research and practice today that aims to shift the center of gravity to African governments, universities, think tanks, and other institutions. Our

questions have been, 'what productive role can MSU play in this changing environment, given our institutional strengths and commitments? Can MSU work alongside African institutions and share our resources and expertise without claiming our old position of the "lead" in development initiatives?' We might as well have asked, 'Can MSU be an ally in Africa?'

We named our initiative an 'alliance' because we considered ourselves to be like-minded institutions working together for change. But while we reflected at length from the beginning about the ethics of African partnership, we did not initially consider the ethics of alliance – it was only when we were invited to participate in the 2018 meeting of the International Development Ethics Association that we began to focus on the meaning of 'ally' in the context of partnership (Monson and Minde 2018). The alliance plays a critical function for the AAP as it forms the organizing structure and defines the relationships among the members. Therefore, the alliance is the entity through which governance, management, resource allocation, and other key functions are organized. For the AAP to fully live up to our ethical principles, we have realized, it is not enough to consider the ethics of partnerships. We must also reflect carefully on the ethics of alliance.[1]

Scholars have long recognized that cooperation through alliances, networks, and partnerships is essential in today's world – whether we are talking about business, economic development, or public affairs.[2] Collaboration is necessary both within and across sectors of society in order to bring about effective change; it allows us to 'achieve things that might be inconceivable or impossible for individual organizations' (Kaats and Opheij 2012, 1). Yet despite widespread recognition of this reality, many alliances fall apart in practice or fail to achieve their goals. There are many causes for this breakdown or rupture in alliances – there may be a conflict between the need for organizational autonomy, on the one hand, and promised benefits of cooperation, on the other. In all cases, there will be differences in background, expectations, perceptions, and culture within the alliance framework. How can partnerships and networks work to resolve these inherent tensions, and sustain cooperation? Kaats and Opheij have developed a coherent approach for integrating the complex challenges of cooperation into a framework or 'lens' that can facilitate, diagnose and manage cooperative partnerships (37–66).

In their view, cooperation is a process through which partners with diverse views and interests reduce misunderstanding and strengthen mutual agreements over time. This could be seen as an iterative process, through which tensions are identified and discussed, and agreements revised, in a series of consultations. Within this process, partners need to recognize the diverse and often competing interests at stage, individual, collective, and organizational levels. In other words, some compromise in individual autonomy will be needed not only to align with collective interests but to be sure that organizations run smoothly and institutions are strengthened.

What this processual approach to successful cooperation emphasizes is the importance of ongoing revision of the alliance framework, a revision that is necessitated and spurred by the tensions within the cooperative relationship itself. Their recommendations resemble an approach to working alliances from the field of psychotherapy, one that recognizes the beneficial nature of alliance rupture – provided that the rupture is attended to through listening, empathy, and repair. Safran et al. found that when the superficial agreement was replaced by a genuine expression of conflicting views and agendas in a

constructive environment, alliance partnerships could move forward, becoming more sustainable and developing deeper trust (Safran, Muran, and Proskurov 2009). Our AAP story provides an example of an alliance across multiple boundaries across individuals, institutions, languages, cultures, and social groups. In what follows, we use the case study of the AAP to raise questions about the potentials and pitfalls we have encountered. We believe that, in line with the literature on successful alliances, by confronting the divergent perspectives as well as the ruptures in our partnership practice, we are learning and at the same strengthening our work together.

The AAP story

The AAP is founded on the premise that for development challenges to be met, we must come together as partners among MSU, African universities and institutions, and stakeholder communities. Implicitly, then, the AAP model requires boundary crossing. Our activities must cross boundaries of geography, scale, disciplines, institutional organizations, gender, age, language, culture, and more. In retrospect, we could have made 'crossing boundaries' a more explicit practice of the AAP – bringing intentionality to the process. Successful interdisciplinary and cross-cultural work does not happen by itself. Looking forward we need to think critically about what it takes to have diverse methodologies and diverse teams of researchers and practitioners in AAP. We often think of interdisciplinarity as team members approaching a problem from different perspectives – but how? Will the individuals work in tandem to do parallel work, or will they work in an integrative manner so that they influence one another and are open to practicing differently? In other words, will interdisciplinarity be represented by a collection of diverse research outcomes, or will it be an integrated community practice at the level of the research conception, framing of the questions, and method?

In this essay, we provide our midstream reflections – two years following our initial convening – on the meaning and institutional practice of alliance in the AAP. We have pledged our commitment to doing our work differently – to respond to a changing landscape of north–south and south-south engagement in research for development. How will this work manifest in practice? We offer our reflections here on creating alliances across borders – geographical as well as disciplinary – from our experience in the Alliance for African Partnership as we chart the way forward.

Allies and governance

There are many different alliances for African university collaboration out there. What makes ours different has been our articulation of the core principles and values of partnership, and our declaration that these are primary. Our model emphasizes principles of equity and co-creation among members of the AAP. What also makes ours different is that it is at the same time a north–south alliance and a south-south alliance – MSU is engaging in north–south cooperation with African partners while at the same time the AAP encourages and facilitates south-south cooperation among the African partners. In the context of development ethics and the question of allies, therefore, the AAP offers much opportunity for midstream reflection: What is partnership? What is an ally?

Questioning the partnership

When we held our first convening to co-create the Alliance for African Partnership in May 2016, we accepted the premise that today's global challenges require a shared, cooperative effort – the complexity and scale of such challenges as climate change, youth unemployment, food security, and more cannot be understood or resolved by any one actor alone. Our premise is that our AAP partners, including African research universities, pan-African organizations, and NGOs, can work together productively to carry out research that will transform lives in Africa.

Yet while we recognized the imperative of cooperation through partnership, including interdisciplinary cooperation, we had not yet fully considered the ethical questions our initiative would raise. Michigan State University played the convening role in launching the AAP in May 2016. MSU also provided a significant contribution of seed funding at the outset and established a management team with an Africa-based secretariat. What are the implications of this MSU investment for partner equity and shared responsibility going forward? Is there a danger of the AAP being too 'MSU-centric' and what ethical challenges might this raise? What structure and what kinds of relationships within that structure will ensure that the AAP remains equitable, transparent, and sustainable as declared in our mission statement? To answer these questions, we need to ask another, different question that specifically addresses relationships and their contexts: What is an ally?

What is an ally?

This simple question is a useful starting point. There are two commonly understood definitions of an ally. The first is a military one – an ally is an entity (individual, collective, or institutional) that joins together with another in opposition to a common enemy. Well-known examples of military alliances, of course, include the Allied Forces during World War II; the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); and African coalitions such as ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) that carry out security missions. The second meaning of ally is social and political: an ally joins together with others to work towards a shared purpose, especially by sharing resources to address a common goal or challenge. Frequently 'alliance' has a sense of urgency or the feeling of a campaign, especially in social justice movements or labor union organizing. For example, the International HIV/AIDS Alliance is a global effort that includes national and regional alliances among its members, thereby extending its connectedness and impact. This second meaning of ally certainly fits well with the AAP premise that global challenges need to be met through cooperative engagement among partners.

In north–south relationships, the question of alliance has particular relevance given structural imbalances of resources in the global context of higher education and research for development. The premise of the AAP is that an alliance can make a difference – that together we can challenge business as usual. But how will this take place in practice? How can an alliance for partnership that includes north–south partnership transcend the global structural inequalities that continue in development research today? Further, given the AAP focus on research for impact, what qualities characterize ethical alliances among researchers and the communities that provide the data and information (including perhaps human research subjects) and can gauge how they will be impacted by their research?

To answer these questions, we propose considering a third meaning of 'ally' that specifically addresses inequality: the concept of an ally as 'a member of a dominant group in society who works to dismantle any form of oppression from which she or he receives the benefit'. The ally in this case is not a member of the oppressed group, but a person or institution that is in a position of relative privilege. The ally makes a commitment to work towards the dismantling of privilege and to end the oppression of others. In the United States, this concept has been used by straight allies of the Lesbian, Gay, Transsexual and Queer (LGBTQ) community; white allies of people of color; men who advocate for gender equity; and more.

This third concept of ally has been productively challenged by critics. When allies seek to 'help' without practicing respect – for example by not listening to those they seek to stand with, or by speaking on behalf of those groups – they enact their privilege within the very context of 'helping' and thus perpetuate inequality. A proposed 'best practice' therefore is to use the term ally as a verb: an ally is not a fixed identity but rather an action that requires repeated practice and ongoing reflection (Ostrove and Brown 2018). The term 'accomplice' is another useful concept, used as an alternative to 'ally' when the work focuses on changing the structures of decision-making agency:

> An ally will mostly engage in activism by standing with an individual or group in a marginalized community. An accomplice will focus more on dismantling the structures that oppress that individual or group—and such work will be directed by the stakeholders in the marginalized group. Simply, ally work focuses on individuals, and accomplice work focuses on the structures of decision-making agency. (Clemens 2017)

In a new book on teaching and activism, Laura A. Roy explains further that the term 'accomplice' openly recognizes the power dynamic – not only the power dynamic of the social hierarchical context but also the place of the ally within it. Roy explains, 'To be an accomplice you must position yourself as a co-learner and co-conspirator who is in a perpetual state of learning and becoming', privileging the knowledge and practices of the community or organization that you seek to serve (2018, 149).

So where does this critical reflection on ally-ship leave us in terms of the Alliance for African Partnership? We propose that the AAP embrace the concept of the alliance as a verb rather than a noun – as a practice rather than an institutional form. (This approach matches the recommendations of Kaats and Ophaij, above, that cooperation be approached as a process that is continually reshaped over time.) As we explore the spaces of intersection among north–south and south-south partnership for development research, we must continue to be conscious not only of ways we are constructively co-creating new paradigms but also of ways our interventions may perpetuate existing inequalities. This process of learning will be valuable not only for the AAP but for other organizations that share our values. Bordin (1979) quoted by Safran, Muran, and Proskurov (2009) provides a meticulous analogy of 'alliance' in the psychotherapy field between the patient and the analyst when he states that 'alliance' consists of three interdependent components: tasks, goals, and bonding. Whenever there are misunderstandings among the three we often get 'alliance ruptures'.

To ensure that our alliance remains a practice rather than a static structure will require ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and learning (M, E, and L). We must continually ask ourselves how we are doing, not only in terms of more traditional development outcomes but

also in terms of the paradigm shift that we seek to enact related to partnership. To this end, we propose a partnership tracking tool that will allow us to monitor and evaluate our progress and to make mid-course corrections where necessary. Our tool should also allow us to demonstrate our premise that equitable partnerships, through the practice of alliance, will lead to stronger and more sustainable outcomes. This is taken up in the final section.

What this reflection teaches us is that it is not enough to make a commitment to partnership – we must also interrogate the structures through which a partnership is conceptualized and enacted in practice. This is where the concept of ally comes in as a useful tool, as it has helped us to consider how we wish to engage across north–south, south-south disciplinary and institutional boundaries. In the sections that follow we will provide examples from our experience with research teams, and a consortium model of partnership.

Alliance in practice: the AAP research experience

Background

The competitive research grants scheme was one of the startup activities of AAP. The scheme had two principal goals – first, to experiment and demonstrate the ability to apply the principles of good partnerships and ethics that were co-created at AAP commencement and, second, to begin to contribute towards the six priority thematic themes, i.e. agri-food system; water, energy, and environment; youth employment; education; cultural heritage and preservation; and health and nutrition. Subsequently, outcomes from these themes would then feed into the three pillars of AAP, namely; building bridges, transforming institutions, and transforming lives. The AAP management team strived to 'walk the talk' by focusing on innovative, sustainable, and equity-oriented research project proposals while at the same time ensuring that both in the proposal and in the implementation the principles of good partnership were reflected. These principles are: mutual respect [listening carefully and with a positive mental attitude to the ideas of others in the partnership and having a sense of constructively building on ideas of others (Lough 2017)]; mutual trust [partners have to endeavor to always dismiss the sense of suspicion as they look at or listen to one another in the business they do. Cook, Yamagishi, and Cheshire (2005) argue that a series of risk-taking behaviors is indispensable to building a trust relation. It is risky because at first instance the partners may not know each other]; accountability and responsibility [for any partnership, rules of the game are set at project commencement – e.g. reporting frequency, transferring money for research on time, organizing project implementation towards impact, etc. Too often, some individuals understand partnership as a free ride and doing what he/she wants (Cornwall, Lucas, and Pasteur 2000; Nikitina 2009)]; co-creation [defining the problem together, developing solutions, detecting practice changes, aligning organizational supports, and nurturing shared responsibility, accountability, and ownership for implementation]; mutual benefit and reciprocity [benefits and losses are shared equally across members in the partnership]; transparency [achieved through dialog (on equal footing), with an emphasis on early consultations and early sharing of information. Communication and transparency, including financial transparency, increase the level of trust among organizations]; flexibility [working on social impact means that change is constant. Roles and responsibilities

shift often. Funding changes, team members move on and some fall sick for a long time (Putnam 2013)]; and multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity [reflect a phenomenon of individuals from a diversity of disciplines who have agreed to join forces to work on a common problem of interest to the entire team (Choi and Pak 2006)]. But as one would anticipate gathering different disciplines (multi-disciplinarity) does not necessarily mean working together because each one within the team members may still be working only within his or her disciplinary boundaries. It is for this reason that inter-disciplinarity becomes a very valuable addition. This is characterized by integrating knowledge and methods from different disciplines, using a real synthesis of approaches.

These principles were applied to the extent possible in all stages of the process as we prepared for the research projects to take off. These processes were: ideation of the call for concept notes, concept note review, selection of winning teams, review of proposals, selection of winners, award of grants, preparation of research reporting guidelines, research budget and management, progress reporting, feedback on review of progress, dissemination of research results, assessment of impact, and learning. Each of the 15 teams was comprised of a co-principal investigator from MSU and his/her counterpart in Africa. Each team had a minimum of three individuals but some teams stretched up to six active members. The seed grant program, therefore, created a community of practice with a total of about 80 members spanning a total of 12 countries in Africa. This group of researchers was envisaged in part to be a champion group aiming to translate the vision of AAP into action. Each research grant team was a mixed team in the sense that there was a high degree of gender, disciplinary, and experience mix. The latter is important because AAP believes that capacity building is a *sine qua non* of sustaining and bolstering the initiative.

Objective

In this section, we pose two questions– 'to what extent were the desired partnership principles and ethics in research adhered to in practice?' and 'what feasible mechanisms can be put in place to elevate the research teams to better conform to ethical and partnership principles?' Through time and up to the end of the 18-month long seed research grants, we found that there were countless 'violations' or compromises made on the partnership-ethical principles.

Realities during implementation

In retrospect, even management itself did not persistently and consciously practice these principles as it went through the various stages of the research administration. And this is not to say that there was any deliberate action not to do it. Issues like transparency in providing the right information at the right time to applicants for them to know whether their concept notes and/or proposals were selected and, if not selected, what were the main reasons, etc., were not done on time. In the execution of the project: for some few projects, funds to proceed with research were grossly delayed because of lengthy procedures in the accounting offices, leading to teams not being able to meet deadlines, etc. Thus, there was some compromise on principles like co-creation, transparency, respect, accountability, and responsibility. On the part of the researchers, things were not perfect either. Researchers

were given a guide for reporting that emphasized the need to report against set indicators. Only about a third did as instructed. Reporting by using indicators would better inform on progress and on the difference between targets and actual for everything planned. This meant that some researchers did not remain accountable and responsible to the extent expected. Non-conformity was also expressed in the delay of submission of technical progress and financial reports –some grantees using negative tone while communicating with management and expressing things like 'we are very busy people' and 'we should send you progress reports when we feel we are ready – leave us alone – the project is ours, respect us,' etc. All this was said forgetting that at project inception there was a clear and mutual understanding and signing off on roles and responsibilities of the parties as well as an elaborate set of deliverables against time. The dissemination or outreach component, which means in part sharing of research results with the communities that participated in the data and information collection, is an important way of showing respect and winning continued trust from communities. Only a few have been able to comply despite a very heavy dose of information on this point at project commencement – including providing a dedicated budget line item for this purpose.

On a positive note and despite the foregoing shortfalls, over the past 16–18 months, these 15 seed grant projects have achieved a great deal in generating exciting and innovative outcomes that show great promise for sustainability beyond the life of the competitive grant project. Notably, this has been in the areas of peacebuilding for youth in conflict-torn areas in Africa, building entrepreneur spirit among youth through sports and gathering evidence, analyzing successful youth entrepreneurship outcomes, and sharing the skills across countries to set a springboard for increased gainful employment among youth. Others have been (a university) developing new models of engaging with communities (attempting to mirror the land grant system in the USA) with the aim of setting up deliberate mechanisms to learn from communities by way of getting a sense of the problems at hand and working with them to develop socially, economically, culturally acceptable, and sustainable solutions in line with their specific environments.

Lessons learned

Most of this section borrows heavily from earlier work by Minde and Jayne (2017) which started articulating the potential difficulties facing our partnership at that time.

(1) Embracing ethically sound and true partnership dimensions in design, implementation, and dissemination of research results do not occur instantaneously – ideas, values, and principles take time to sink through people's minds. The fact that both management and the researchers did not fully stick to the principles was not deliberate but shows that they needed more time to embrace them.
(2) Conforming to an agreed set of ethics takes time. A partner may be slower than expected to conform to agreed ethics given his or her initial endowment in the ethics bank. A lesson learned here is that some of the partners we work with may not have been really ready in their mindsets to work with us.
(3) Many of these researchers are seasoned researchers used to doing research in a conventional way. Bringing them to new ways of doing business such as subjecting them

to adhere to things like ethics, partnership principles, orienting their work towards impact, etc. is not necessarily easy.

(4) The role of mindsets in nurturing partnerships is an important factor that potentially influences relationships in conforming to ethics. Mindset has been variously defined as established attitudes held by someone, beliefs about oneself and one's most basic qualities (Simmons 2017). It involves things like intelligence, talents, personality, etc. How we respond to challenges and setbacks is often determined by our mindsets. According to Argyris (2004), there are two dominant mindsets in organizations: the productive mindset and the defensive mindset. The productive mindset seeks out valid knowledge that is testable. The productive reasoning mindset creates informed choices and makes reasoning transparent. The defensive mindset, on the other hand, is self-protective and self-deceptive. When this mindset is active, people or organizations only seek out information that will protect them. Truth can be shut out when it is seen as threatening. While elements of our personality – such as sensitivity to mistakes and setbacks – can make us predisposed towards holding a certain mindset, we are able to develop and reshape our mindset through our interactions.

Dweck (2006) provides another category which is important in understanding and nurturing partnerships. According to her, there are two categories – growth mindset versus fixed mindset – that can group individuals based on their behavior, specifically their reaction to failure. Those with a 'fixed mindset' believe that abilities are mostly innate and interpret failure as the lack of necessary basic abilities, while those with a 'growth mindset' believe that they can acquire any given ability provided they invest effort or study. Based on the above classifications, it is clear that promoting true partnerships would favor productive and growth mindsets as opposed to defensive and fixed mindsets. Similarly, when we encounter a problem in partnerships, we should not immediately begin blaming the other side – as in the case of AAP management and the research grantees. Patterson et al. (2013) caution that we must work on ourselves first because the problem may well be on our side. In the case of AAP again, it could be that management did not engage researchers enough or instructions were not adequately shared. Partnerships take time to develop because we are dealing with human beings whose mindsets may take some time to evolve. Partnerships must be realistic and aim for what can be achieved. They should not be too ambitious. Partnerships if successful, can achieve more than individual agencies working alone.

Conforming to research ethics does not simply happen. There should be a deliberate effort to cultivate this attitude over time with sincere commitment, dedication, and determination. Putting a mechanism in place to assist the monitoring of the extent to which these principles are put into practice and providing space for mid-course corrections (probably inbuilt in the project monitoring and evaluation framework) as project implementation forges ahead would be extremely useful.

AAP consortium model and looking ahead

After several months of reflection and intensive strategic planning, the AAP is now moving into Phase Two with a new model for structuring the alliance so that our governance and management structures will be more intentionally aligned with our

principles. In a search for ways to create an alliance that best reflects the vision and mission, AAP went further to conceptualize, design, develop, and operationalize a consortium model of operation. This is still in its nascent stage and it is very much a work in progress. It has the following objectives, features, and aspirations: the members in the consortium will provide local knowledge and contextual expertise, seek joint funding, and co-create and carry out joint programming and events that model the AAP approach to partnerships. Most importantly, the consortium will share best practice on partnerships, advocate for research for impact, and strengthen the next generation of researchers and administrators in Africa.

The consortium will collectively drive the overall AAP agenda and will be comprised of a broad sector of members including African and U.S. universities and university networks, governments and pan-African organizations, civil society, private sector, funding agencies. and the community. Nine universities are now serving as the founding members of the AAP consortium and will jointly plan and develop the program of engagement. It is expected that in the short-to-medium term, the members of the consortium will grow to encompass other organizations in Africa and the wider international community. The criteria for membership are based on: (1) commitment to the AAP guiding principles; (2) demonstrated long-term commitment to African transformation agenda; (3) Africa-centered focus of operation; (4) sector of operation (e.g. university, civil society, private sector, government); and (5) an institutional governance structure that is transparent and ethical.

The nine founding members (universities) of the consortium have signed a Memorandum of Understanding–October 2018, which is essentially a handshake memorandum formalizing the acceptance to be in the consortium. It is envisaged that letters of agreement on specific undertakings between or among members of the consortium will be necessary when such specific joint activities become necessary. The consortium being just four months old, members are already seeking clarification and asking several questions that have some ethics relevance. For example, how exactly will the consortium be managed? how will funds be raised to do what is desired? and what exactly are the positive mutual benefits of the consortium?

How do we know how we are doing along the way?

A tool for tracking conformity to ethics in AAP work

A realistic, efficient, and effective implementation of the AAP strategic plan will require a sound monitoring, evaluation, and learning plan. The M, E, and L being referred to here will guide the implementation of the entire portfolio of AAP. Monitoring in this respect refers to tracking the alliance progress to determine the extent to which it is moving toward reaching its objectives for the process guide management in decision-making and to determine whether there are any mid-course corrections needed. Evaluation, on the other hand, refers to appraising data and information that will inform strategic decisions, thus improving the activity/project or program in the future.

Evaluation will help to make observations on issues such as relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. Learning is a deliberate process aimed at providing an opportunity to implementers and management to comprehend and apply the knowledge from

the M and E results. Lessons learned will be used to make corrections to improve outcomes.

M, E, and L will be an integral component of every activity carried out by members of the consortium be they management, researchers, trainers, communication champions, etc. Each activity lead person will be expected to have in place an M, E, and L plan for each activity and will be reporting quarterly to the AAP M, E, and L person. The latter will be preparing a portfolio-wide quarterly report that will take into account all the reports from all activities of AAP. M, E, and L will, therefore, be expected to serve the following functions: to learn from experiences to improve practices and activities in the future; to have internal and external accountability of the resources used and the results obtained; and to make informed decisions on the future of the initiative.

As a subset of this M, E, and L plan, AAP will have detailed ethics and partnership principles application indicators that will be tracking the extent to which AAP activities are adhering to and addressing ethical concerns. Thus, we will set up indicators for mutual respect, mutual trust, accountability and responsibility, co-creation, mutual benefit and reciprocity, transparency, flexibility, multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity, sustainability, and equity and decide on the type of data and information to collect on each of these for every project undertaken. AAP was established principally to ensure that ethical concerns are taken into account. Hence failure to achieve this objective will mean failure to AAP.

Conclusion

At major research universities including at MSU, the concept of return on investment has become a prominent indicator in the evaluation of success. Any university investments in research are meant to produce quantitative outcomes, especially in monetary terms. In the AAP we seek to document our progress towards doing business differently – towards strengthening ethical partnerships as we address common challenges through research and practice. Our intention is to be accountable to our own vision as a community of allied institutions that have committed us to honoring a specific set of principles.

We have already come a long way since convening in 2016 – by responding to our midstream challenges in creating a consortium model and by rigorously reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of our governance structures. We have used the monitoring and evaluation of our 15 grantee teams not only to assess their research outputs but also their adherence to principles of partnership. Where these can be demonstrated to have some causality – in other words, where we are able to show that ethical partnerships will strengthen research quality and impact – we will have learned something valuable for our own work and for the future work of others. If we consider the term 'ally' to be a verb, and 'alliance' to be a process, then our failures will also be of value, for it is through honest stock-taking like this that we will prevent stasis.

Notes

1. Charles Wilber and Amitava Dutt identify the ends, the means, and the processes of development to be the most critical for ethical development (Wilber and Dutt 2010, 1).

2. Much of the earlier literature on alliances and networks came from the field of strategic management; more recently, the field has expanded to include information technology networks. These scholars draw on social network theory and knowledge sharing networks (Gulati 1998, 293; Dong and Yang 2015).

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