

Atlantic Fellows

FOR SOCIAL AND  
ECONOMIC EQUITY

# ACADEMIC PRACTITIONER COLLABORATIONS TO ADDRESS INEQUALITIES

How to make it work



**The Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity** (AFSEE) programme is based at the International Inequalities Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The programme's key ethos is that inequality is not inevitable and that a better and more equitable world is possible.

In this respect, AFSEE envisions a future with robust alternatives to our current global economy and believes that equity can be achieved through bold imaginative responses that are forged through collective action and aligned to values of fairness, commitment, curiosity, kindness, and courage. AFSEE's ultimate purpose is to support Fellows who are actively working to bring these alternatives to life. To achieve these aims, AFSEE brings together research, education, and practice, and seeks to create dialogue among a range of different stakeholders, including activists, academics, practitioners, and policymakers.

In December 2021, AFSEE embarked on **a project exploring the potential for academic-practitioner collaborations in addressing inequalities**. This brief guide emerges from that project and is based on interviews and focus groups. As a disclaimer, participants have diverse experiences with collaborations where communities may or may not be a direct partner; with different aims and methodologies. They also have different positionalities and positions of power. The guide tries to extract generalisable lessons and may not capture all the nuances and personal perspectives. It is a first attempt to bring together some of the practical findings and considerations for practitioners and researchers who have an interest in collaborating, learning from each other and increasing the impact of their work. This guide is meant to be a living document, that we update annually and that is part of a wider effort to foster reflection, dialogue, and joint learning on these issues. **You are warmly invited to share additional ideas and feedback on this paper and future efforts through [this link](#).**

For further information about the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity programme and this project, please contact [afsee@lse.ac.uk](mailto:afsee@lse.ac.uk) or visit our [website](#).

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# Academic Practitioner Collaborations to address inequalities – How to make it work

Are you an academic looking for ways to create more impact with your research? Or a social change practitioner who would like to reach new audiences? This brief has been built on the experiences of the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE) community to provide pointers for researchers and practitioners on how to better collaborate with one another to advance social and economic equity. Whilst no one size fits all, we hope this brief guide helps you reflect on why this is relevant for you and what practices and values you would like to uphold.

## ARE YOU PLANNING TO START A PROJECT? HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT WANT TO ASK!

- What is the problem we aim to address and why should we collaborate to do that?
- Who would benefit from solving this problem?
- Who are the key stakeholders and who should be involved in the collaboration?
- What roles can they play in the different stages of the project?
- What does each collaborator need from, and bring to, the partnership?
- Whose voice do we want to amplify?
- What type of collaboration fits these needs best (eg, long- or short term)?
- What values do we want to uphold and how?
- How are decisions made in the collaboration?
- How will the collaboration be financed and how do we allocate resources to accommodate the above considerations?

## WHY COLLABORATE?

Advancing social and economic equity requires transformative changes in policy, practice, norms and beliefs, cultures, and narratives. It is about addressing complex questions and building deep understanding across issues, sectors, and levels. This can only be done by involving the perspectives and knowledge of different actors, including those who are most affected by current inequalities and whose voices are often not heard.

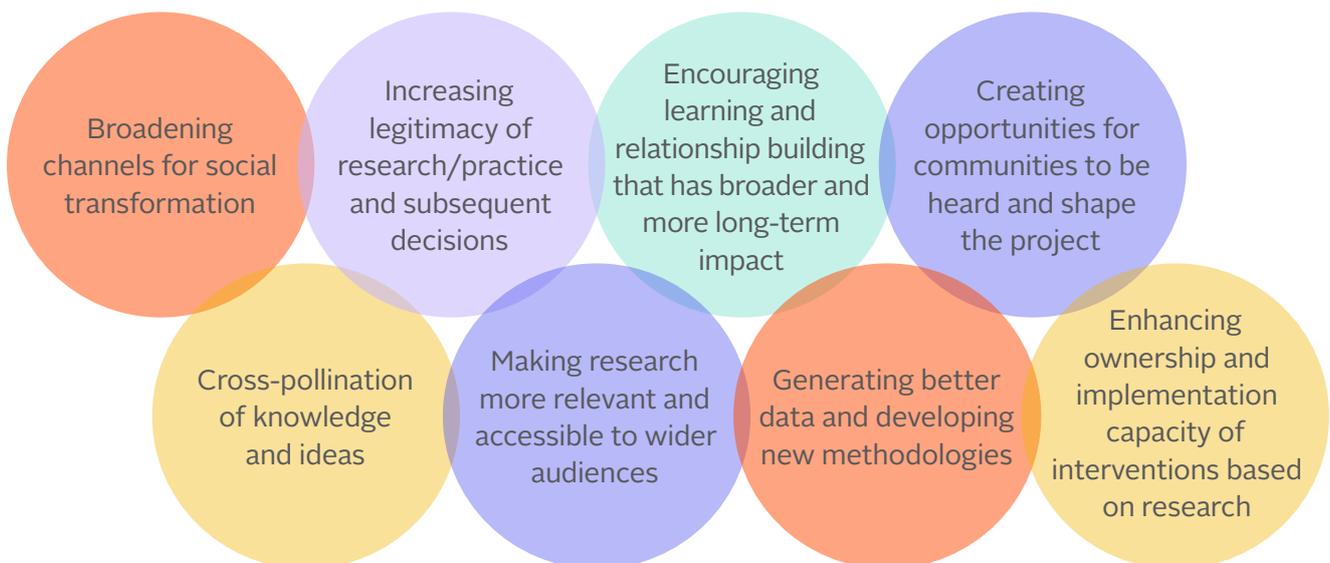
“My motivation is that I don’t think there’s any purpose of studying certain social problems, inequality, poverty, fiscal justice and not to try to make real change about them.”

ACADEMIC-ACTIVIST

“If we all work together, and we combine our viewpoints, we have a richer and more profound response.”

PRACTITIONER-ACADEMIC

## BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION



Not collaborating, on the other hand, or not collaborating in ways that are based on shared values and mutual benefits, can – at best – lead to missed opportunities for social change and – at worst – lead to harm or worsening of inequalities. The latter includes extractive practices, flawed information for policy change, loss of trust with communities, and denied access in the future.

“Someone coming from outside can never develop the amount of information that people long involved have, so collaborating is key.”

**NGO PRACTITIONER**

“Nothing is going to be implemented that people did not feel they were involved in. You see this in big-picture politics and community politics as well. It’s important to collaborate and get their buy-in.”

**POLICY PRACTITIONER**

**Example:** The Atlantic Equity Challenge, which is a funding mechanism launched by AFSEE, supports projects in which academics and practitioners collaborate, allowing them to draw on multiple forms of experience from across different disciplines and sectors and produce academic and non-academic outputs. It provides time and space to reflect on joint objectives and individual or institutional incentives while keeping in mind the communities they are trying to serve by collaborating. Interviews show how it led to innovative thinking, creating methodologies that serve both academia, practice and communities, which in combination can unlock transformative change. In the words of an academic partner:

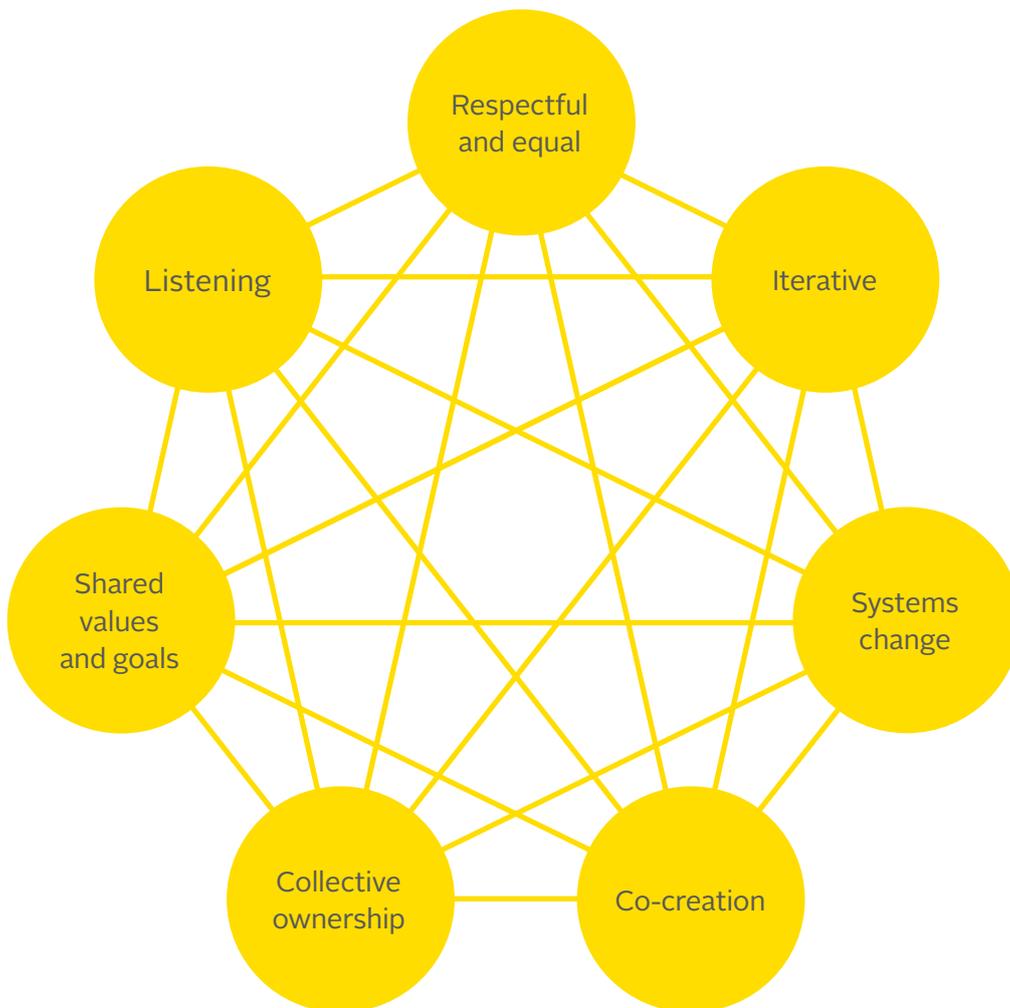
“I wanted our methodologies to become transformative, that the very act of doing research is also an act of transformative act for the community or the people who are working with us, the research participants.”

**ACADEMIC-ACTIVIST**

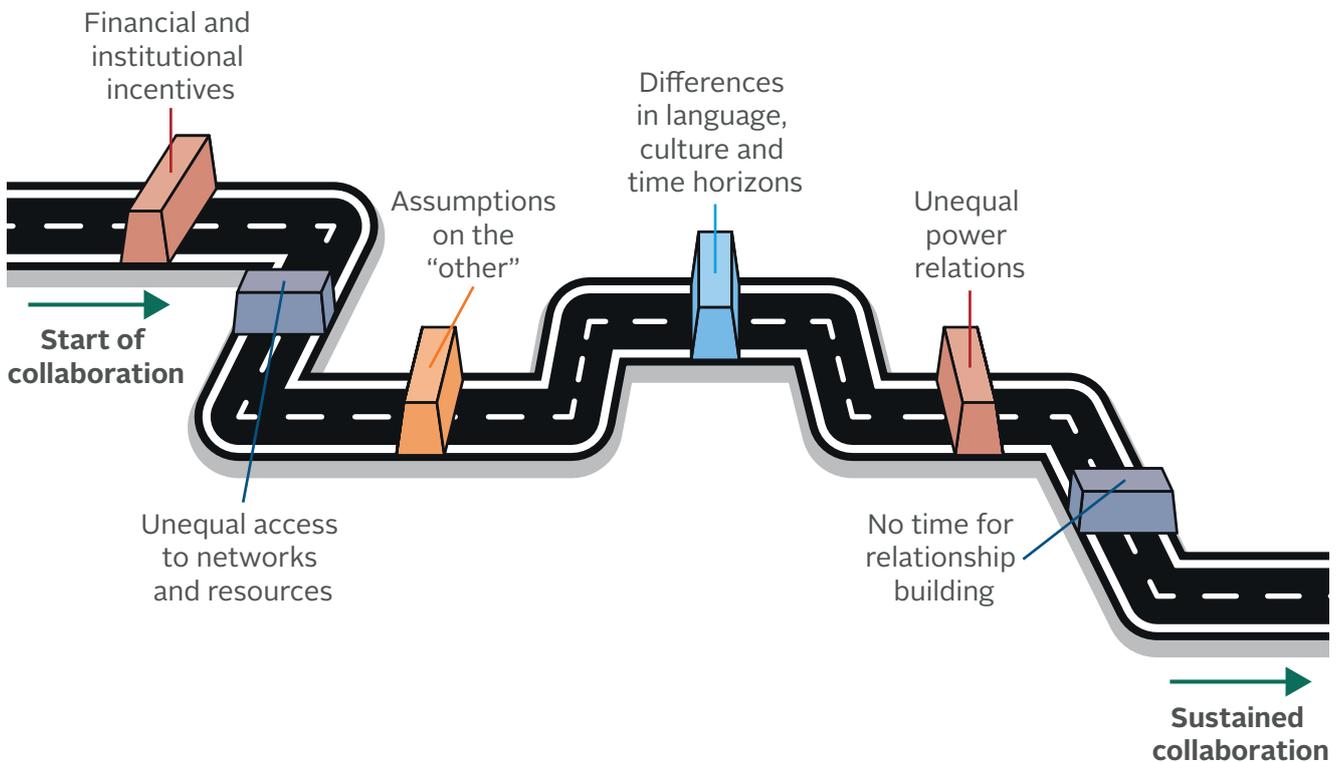
## HOW TO COLLABORATE?

Depending on the identified needs and objectives, collaboration can range from informal knowledge sharing to long-term processes where evidence is co-created to, for example, inform community action or design a policy. The figure below showcases what AFSEE fellows defined as ideal or – as most called it – “genuine collaboration”. Key features include partners being equally involved and listened to in every step of the project, and inequalities – both within the collaboration and in the outside world - being actively discussed and addressed.

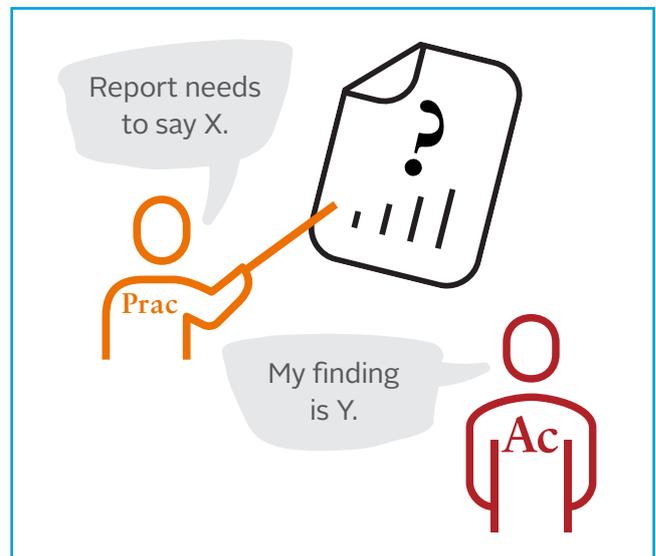
## WHAT IDEAL OR GENUINE COLLABORATION COULD LOOK LIKE



## BARRIERS TO NAVIGATE FOR GENUINE COLLABORATION



## CAUTIONARY TALES



The illustrations above highlight two examples that were mentioned frequently by both academic and practitioner respondents as scenarios that hinder genuine collaboration. The first is a “parachute academic” entering a community to carry out research without considering the community’s needs and agency (extractivist). The second is a practitioner pre-defining outcomes when working with a researcher (instrumentalist), rather than upholding academic integrity and independence.

## GOOD PRACTICES IN THE COLLABORATION PROCESS

During the collaboration, actors with different personalities, topic expertise, methodological knowledge, barriers, and positionalities come together. It is important to be aware of the different needs and backgrounds throughout the collaboration process, and that tensions and disagreements may arise.

### COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- Discuss shared values and develop a common language
- Trust-building exercises
- Develop ways to address differences in an open manner
- Listen and be open to learning and adaptation
- Discuss personal learning journeys and feelings that come up
- Transparency and clear boundaries for all parties.



### SETTING CLEAR AND INCLUSIVE EXPECTATIONS

- Formulate joint goals and objectives
- Clearly define roles and decision making
- Make agreements on funding, outputs, ownership and timelines
- Build in time for regular check-ins and reviewing agreements
- Flexibility in the face of unexpected changes or pressures.



### EQUITY AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

- Value the knowledge, lived experience, and skills of each partner
- Create spaces to discuss and address inequalities in collaboration
- Power and stakeholder analysis at the start of the project
- Openly discuss and align preferred outcomes and incentives
- Provide feedback to communities involved on an ongoing basis.



## ACTION AGENDA TOWARDS BETTER COLLABORATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Creating more genuine collaborations to address inequalities requires action at all levels and from different stakeholders. So, whether you are an academic, university leader, practitioner, activist, policymaker or funder, here are some things you can do.



### Individual practices

- Be reflexive and challenge your own assumptions and positionality. This also means accepting the limits of your knowledge and skills and accepting new perspectives
- Dare to try new ways of working and learn from failure
- Practice patience, listening, and vulnerability
- Learn to set boundaries to avoid burnout and the fraying of institutional relations.



### Institutional adaptations

- Facilitate access to knowledge (eg, journals) and through producing a variety of output formats for different audiences
- Provide physical and digital spaces where collaborators can meet
- Adopt a commitment to cross-collaboration higher up in the organisation
- Provide assistance when navigating institutional barriers
- Shift the work towards a mission-based approach
- Create a space to discuss personal learning journeys
- Value employees who have one foot in academia and practice, and provide academic affiliations to practitioners.



### Systemic adaptations (just a few of the ideas coming out!)

- Jointly bring out the narratives and ideological underpinnings that undermine genuine collaboration, including the push for quick results and dichotomy between academics and practitioners, and challenge these
- Shift funding practices to be trust-based, flexible, and long-term, allowing for collective ownership and diverse bottom-up collaborations
- Jointly reimagine ecosystems in which genuine and equal collaboration thrives, and identify steps towards this.

In December 2021, AFSEE embarked on a project exploring the potential for academic-practitioner collaborations in addressing inequalities. The aim is to draw lessons from AFSEE's five years of work in bringing together research, education, and practice. As part of this learning exercise, we asked our community about their understandings and experiences of academic-practitioner collaboration. We explored the questions of why people collaborate and what people perceive to be the value of collaboration in the joint quest to combat inequalities? What knowledge and outcomes are co-created through academic-practitioner collaborations that could not be created operating in silos? Which factors and practices have facilitated and/or hindered sustained collaboration?

This brief guide is part of the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity project exploring the potential for academic-practitioner collaborations in addressing inequalities. It is a first attempt to bring together some of the practical findings and considerations for practitioners and researchers who have an interest in collaborating, learning from each other and increasing the impact of their work. This guide is meant to be a living document, that we update annually and that is part of a wider effort to foster reflection, dialogue, and joint learning on these issues.

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