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The power of trust: A cornerstone for success in fragile contexts

Building strong relationships and fostering trust is often key for achieving meaningful and sustainable impact in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS).

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As SPARC draws to an end, in the second of two blogs, we discuss how our adaptive [procurement](#) has helped us to deliver meaningful results challenging contexts, and what lessons donors and practitioners can carry forward.

Trust in fragile contexts: A prerequisite, not a perk

Operating in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS) presents a unique set of challenges for international actors. The landscape is often marked by a scarcity of reliable partners, weak institutions that limit confidence in legal and financial recourse, and security risks that raise concerns about the safety of personnel and communities. Additionally, complex legal frameworks around funding flows require careful navigation to ensure risks are fully mitigated, such as potential liabilities related to counter-terrorism. In such environments, establishing trust with local partners is not just beneficial - it is essential.

SPARC's procurement success has been deeply rooted in its relationships with local partners, built on mutual respect, transparency, and a shared sense of purpose. By investing in trust and collaboration, we have shown that adaptive procurement can thrive even in the most challenging contexts.

From the outset, we invested time in understanding partner contexts, listening to their concerns, and co-creating solutions. This enabled open communication during crises, such as budget shortfalls or security disruptions, and fostered a collaborative spirit that turned challenges into opportunities. This relational capital allowed us to move quickly, adapt confidently, and deliver impact where others might have stalled.



Dar al-Manasir farmer, northern Sudan - Image by David Haberlah - CC BY-SA 3.0 - Wikicommons media

Trust in action: How relationships enabled continuity in the face of financial barriers

In FCAS, financial and legal constraints can derail even the most well-planned initiatives. For international actors, banking restrictions - especially in countries like Sudan - can delay or block essential transfers. This can raise concerns about compliance and the risk of inadvertently breaching counter-terrorism regulations. These hurdles often leave donors uncertain about how to support local partners safely and effectively.

A striking example of trust in action emerged when banking controls delayed SPARC's financial transfers to a partner in Darfur. Despite the risk of not being paid on time, our partner chose to underwrite project costs and continue implementation. This decision was not made lightly - it was rooted in a foundation of trust built over time.

SPARC's relationship with this partner was strengthened by several key factors. First, both organisations were part of a shared network that included trusted actors, which helped to establish mutual credibility. Second, SPARC demonstrated consistent concern and transparency, keeping the partner in Darfur informed as it explored multiple solutions to the banking issue. Third, SPARC's fund manager invested time in cultivating a personal relationship with the partner's research lead, fostering mutual respect and open communication.

These trust-building efforts were a key reason why the project did not stall or fail altogether, especially given tight delivery timelines and severe risks for researchers on the ground.



Working camel, Yemen – Image by Rod Waddington from Kergunyah Australia - CC BY-SA 2.0 – Wikimedia Commons

Navigating economic volatility: Building mutual trust

SPARC supported the Centre for Population and Environmental Development ([CPED](#)), one of its International Development Research Centre (IDRC)-funded partners in Nigeria, to navigate the severe impacts of inflation and currency shocks on project finances. These economic disruptions threatened to derail timelines and compromise the quality of research delivery. However, as Job Eronmhonsele, Executive Director at CPED, said: “...transparency, flexibility, and timely feedback turned a potential derailment into a learning moment.”

Deliberate and consistent actions, regular communication, and transparency were key. SPARC worked closely with CPED to reforecast budgets in response to shifting exchange rates, facilitated timely approvals for budget adjustments, and kept CPED informed at every step, demonstrating concern and commitment to problem-solving.

At the same time, CPED earned SPARC’s trust through its proactive engagement, clear communication, and unwavering commitment to maintaining research quality despite financial uncertainty. CPED's willingness to collaborate openly and adapt to new processes

reinforced a sense of shared purpose and reliability. In a volatile economic environment, where delays or misalignment could have led to donor disengagement or project failure, the strength of the relationship between SPARC and CPED enabled continuity, resilience, and successful delivery.



Hauran man in Daraa, Syria - Image by Mahmoud Sulaiman on Unsplash

Bridging borders: Building trust and security for research

Trust is powerful, but it relies on *both parties feeling secure enough to be open to trust*. SPARC's emphasis on security and risk management was a practical necessity, but we think it also contributed to good research in other ways.

With IDRC funding, SPARC supported a team from Nairobi's Kenyatta University to work in South Sudan. It would go on to build partnerships with local research partners, including an ongoing collaboration with a South Sudanese university. However, the Kenyan researchers initially felt some trepidation due to cultural unfamiliarity and security concerns.

SPARC support provided the team with Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT), access to real-time security alerts and emergency support through Crisis 24, and practical

guidance from Cowater's Security Managers on Security Risk Management (SRM). Thomas Kibutu, Kenyatta University's Principal Investigator, said: "We were able to change our attitude, through SPARC's support, and today we are confident that it is indeed possible to do research in foreign fragile contexts."

This suggests that by engendering a sense of safety, security risk management can in turn help teams form effective relationships with partners and deliver successful work.

Trust and shared purpose: Foundations for resilient research partnerships

SPARC's experience is that trust between partners is essential to success in FCAS. A shared understanding of goals and values is a vital source of resilience for the partnership to draw on when situations change quickly, uncertainty increases, and decisions need to be made quickly.

Trust is reciprocal. SPARC needed to learn to trust its partners. And investing time in relationship building and demonstrating our willingness to listen, learn, and adapt also increased our partners' trust so that they could share issues with us and believe that we would collaborate in problem-solving. Despite challenges that might have led these research interventions to fail, this confidence between SPARC and its partners ultimately enabled our joint successes.

Read the first blog in this series '[Challenges and adaptive strategies: Turning procurement and grant making into possibility](#)', where we discuss some of the challenges to procurement and grantmaking in fragile settings, how we adapted, and lessons learned.

- Procurement and grantmaking are used interchangeably in this blog.

This blog forms part of a wider series of SPARC's learnings about how to conduct research more effectively in fragile contexts. Please see our accompanying blogs on: the [need to reframe aid narratives in protracted crises](#); [learning while working in fragile and conflict contexts](#); [how to conduct meaningful research in fragile contexts](#); and our [three lessons for effective procurement in fragile settings](#).

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