NGO–academia research co-production in humanitarian settings: opportunities and challenges

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The term 'co-production' is increasingly used to describe varied forms of research partnerships, expanding from its application within the health sector to other areas. In humanitarian settings, alongside more calls for localisation and decolonising aid, research co-production is emerging as a means of tackling power dynamics within NGO (non-governmental organisation)–academia research partnerships. Based on semi-structured interviews with practitioners and academics with experience of co-producing research and participating in research partnerships, this paper presents the opportunities and challenges associated with co-producing research in humanitarian settings. The findings suggest that similar to other buzzwords in the humanitarian sector, the label of 'co-production' is sometimes uncritically applied to any kind of research partnership. The study emphasises the importance of centring power within co-produced research in humanitarian settings and suggests that while the term co-production is sometimes misappropriated, the principles underlying this concept remain essential to unravelling power hierarchies within the humanitarian sector.

Introduction

The term 'co-production' has become somewhat of a 'catch-all' for varied forms of collaborative research (Facer and Enright, 2016). Scholars have critiqued the colloquial use of co-production within research and public service provision, suggesting that the term is sometimes used without recognition of what co-production involves (Boyle et al., 2010; Verschuere, Brandsen, and Pestoff, 2012; Rose and Kalathil, 2019; Williams et al., 2020). Such casual usage has resulted in co-production acquiring 'buzzword' status (Flinders, Wood, and Cunningham, 2016) or being used in instrumentalist ways (Paylor and McKevitt, 2019).

The term co-production originated in the work of economist Elinor Ostrom (1996), who developed the concept to describe more equitable partnerships between communities and the public sector to improve services. Boyle et al. (2010, p. 6) state that co-production is 'a key to transforming public services', underlining that 'people's needs are better met when they are involved in an equal and reciprocal relationship with professionals and others, working together to get things done'. Since the work of Ostrom,

efforts to 'co-produce' service delivery as well as research have been made across various sectors and disciplines. For example, the Government of the United Kingdom has encouraged co-production alongside promoting 'patient and public involvement' (PPI), out of recognition of the shortcomings of the latter (Paylor and McKevitt, 2019). In work on urban planning, co-production has been identified as enabling 'bottom-up' approaches that may unravel Northern theories (Watson, 2014). Within work on disaster risk reduction (DRR), knowledge co-production is grounded in indigenous ways of knowing, requiring fundamental changes in whose narratives are prioritised within a topic typically seen as technical (Lejano, Haque, and Berkes, 2021). Knowledge production thus moves from being individual to a collective, social practice (Armitage et al., 2011). Use of the term co-production has also become more common outside of academia, including in the humanitarian sector where power hierarchies associated with delivering aid and conducting research may be particularly pertinent.

Co-production itself is defined in varied ways. In earlier work focused on humanitarian settings, we defined co-production in research as 'a horizontal partnership between researchers (both academic and non-academic) and active research participants to undertake research that can inform action' (Lokot and Wake, 2021, p. 9). We proposed that co-produced research 'tackles unequal power dynamics, challenges existing knowledge production hierarchies, ensures more equal partnerships and shared decision making, emphasises reciprocity, promotes mutual capacity strengthening, ensures greater reflexivity and enables flexible ways of interacting and working across the research cycle' (Lokot and Wake, 2021, p. 9). Echoing Carter et al. (2019), we presented co-production as an aspirational process rather than as an outcome. We suggest that shifting power hierarchies is critical and cuts across all of the principles of co-production, responding to criticism (Turnhout et al., 2020) that the co-production literature has not always included a sufficient focus on power.

Some scholars and practitioners emphasise the importance of distinguishing co-production from other kinds of collaboration or participatory approaches. Reflecting on the health sector, Filipe, Renedo, and Marston (2017) state that co-production involves challenging common assumptions about 'authority, capability, credibility, and productivity'. Similarly, Flinders, Wood, and Cunningham (2016) observe that co-production may be at odds with traditional hierarchies within research and policymaking, challenging norms about who does what and how power is shared. Although some place consultation on a spectrum of co-production (Carter et al., 2019), others argue that co-production is different to consultation: 'Co-production is not consultation: Co-production depends on a fundamental shift in the balance of power between public service professionals and users' (Boyle and Harris, 2009, p. 17). In addition, scholars draw attention to the need to recognise co-production 'as both a knowledge-making and a political practice which is inevitably imbued with unequal power relations that need to be acknowledged but cannot be managed away' (Turnhout et al., 2020, p. 18). More recently, Beran et al. (2021) even indicate the need to reconceptualise co-production so that it concentrates on longer-term relationships between different stakeholders instead of being framed solely in terms of short-term projects.

Linked to considering power, there is, within the literature on co-production, an increasing focus on the political dimensions of co-production. Facer and Enright (2016) suggest that co-production is a discourse in itself with often political consequences because it involves determinations of what practices and methodologies are acceptable and not acceptable. The concept has become more contested as practices ranging from consultation, user involvement, and partnerships have become subsumed under the label of co-production (Gallagher and Dineen, 2016). Researchers emphasise, however, that unless co-production is positioned as a political project that explicitly tackles unequal power dynamics, it may not be meaningful (Turnhout et al., 2020). In making the distinction between co-production and other kinds of collaborative research, scholars underscore that co-production is 'time-consuming, ethically complex, emotionally demanding, inherently unstable, vulnerable to external shocks, subject to competing demands and expectation' (Flinders, Wood, and Cunningham, 2016, p. 266). These challenges associated with fundamentally shifting how power is shared and allocated have particular implications for humanitarian settings where power hierarchies are already amplified.

In humanitarian crises, research plays a vital role in informing effective responses. In the past five years, there has been significant discourse on the localisation of the humanitarian sector, catalysed by the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and the 'Grand Bargain' agreement launched during the gathering (Barakat and Milton, 2020), and more recently the importance of decolonising aid. While there is no agreed definition of localisation (and indeed the concept is contested, as discussed below), the ethos can broadly be framed as 'the need to recognise, respect, strengthen, rebalance, recalibrate, reinforce or return some type of ownership or place to local and national actors' (Barbelet, 2018, p. 5). The notion is not limited to direct humanitarian response, but rather, encompasses the broader humanitarian system (not least funding), partnerships, and research.

There are clear drivers of localisation, including longstanding and recent criticism of the current, Northern-driven humanitarian system (Barakat and Milton, 2020) and increasing recognition of the significant and unique contributions of local stakeholders to humanitarian response. Similarly, there are clear drivers of more global research partnerships, including those between academics and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Fransman and Newman, 2019). Yet, challenges often emerge within NGO–academia research. Barakat and Milton (2020, p. 148) identify four key challenges to localising humanitarian response: 'defining the local, valuing local capacities, maintaining political will, and multi-scalar conflict response'. Roepstorff (2020, p. 284) argues that the debate around localisation lacks a critical discussion of how 'local' is conceptualised, noting the problems with a 'binary' framing of local versus international organisations, which 'risks perpetuating the very issues it wants to redress'. Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria (2021), in their analysis of localisation in relation to refugee-led organisations, contend that an effective localisation agenda necessitates greater attention to the role of local interests and power. Similar to localisation, Olivier, Hunt, and Ridde's (2016) review of the literature on global NGO research partnerships also identified a number of key challenges, including asymmetric power relations, divergent goals and approaches, a lack of recognition of the contributions made by each partner, and impediments to respect within partnerships.

It is within this context that the relevance of co-production becomes clear. In the humanitarian sector, an assortment of drivers are prompting global NGO–academia partnerships and shifts towards the localisation of humanitarian assistance, yet the challenges related to defining key terms and relationships, power, capacity, and partnership threaten to undermine their success. Co-production provides an impetus, language, and tools to explore and address issues such as power, equitable partnerships, reciprocity, and capacity-strengthening in NGO–academia research partnerships in humanitarian settings. Our study is situated within these debates and discussions on the relevance of co-production. In this paper, we investigate the challenges and opportunities associated with co-producing research in humanitarian settings. Our findings show how co-production has become part of the humanitarian lexicon, and underline that the use of co-production language must be accompanied by comprehensive understanding of and efforts to address unequal power dynamics within research processes in humanitarian settings.

Methods

We used a qualitative methodology to undertake this research. We began by completing a comprehensive literature review, which involved searching a range of academic databases (Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, Scopus, Social Policy & Practice, and Web of Science) for works with 'co-production' in the title. Google and Google Scholar were also scoured for 'co-production' and 'research'. We screened the first 60 results from both the academic databases and Google/Google Scholar searches, and read the articles that referenced research, capacity-building, or service delivery, which reflect principal co-production issues. Additional articles were identified by reviewing the reference lists of the literature read as part of our initial evaluation. In total, we read and took detailed notes on 128 articles and reports. We coded our notes using Nvivo software based on key themes identified in the literature.

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who had co-produced research, and/or who had been involved in some form of academic–NGO–community research partnership. The primary sampling criterion was having co-produced research in humanitarian or non-humanitarian settings. We recruited a diverse group of respondents, ensuring gender, professional background (such as academics or practitioners), and geographic representation (as detailed in Table 1). Some participants held different professional roles in the past (for example, academics who had worked for NGOs and vice versa), and thus were able to reflect on multiple positions during the interviews. Table 1 outlines the geographical location of the individual's current institution, although the individuals themselves did not necessarily possess the same geographical identity as their institutions.

We conducted 32 semi-structured interviews with participants, based on a topic guide that included themes related to how co-production is defined, the motivations for co-producing research, the challenges and benefits associated with co-producing research,

Table 1. Research participants

Type of interview participant	Europe	North America	Africa	Middle East	Asia	Australia
Academic	9	2	1	2	1	0
International NGO	1	0	1	0	0	0
Local/national NGO	1	0	5	2	2	0
Other (research institutes, social enterprises, independent researchers)	2	1	1	0	0	1

Source: authors.

power hierarchies within research, and approaches to strengthening capacity. The interviews were conducted remotely using Skype or Zoom; they were audio recorded and then transcribed. The data were jointly coded inductively by both authors based on key themes, using Nvivo, to identify any differing or additional codes.

Ethical approval to conduct the interviews was received from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (reference: 21789) on 1 May 2020. All respondents provided informed consent and their interview data were anonymised.

It is important to note, too, that the study is limited by three main factors. First, the number of interview participants is small and is restricted to academic/NGO actors due to limited resources and availability to be interviewed in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Populations in humanitarian settings were not interviewed, so the perspectives on co-production are limited to academic/NGO actors who are themselves influenced by neoliberal and other power dynamics operating in the humanitarian sector and academia. Second, owing to co-production being a relatively new concept in the humanitarian sector, it was challenging to identify literature from humanitarian settings on co-production and practitioners who had co-produced research in humanitarian settings. Consequently, we draw almost entirely on co-production literature from outside of humanitarian settings, and we interviewed practitioners/academics who are not working in humanitarian settings. Third, while we conducted research on co-production, this study was not itself co-produced.

Findings

Our interviews with practitioners and academics produced important findings related to the challenges and opportunities associated with co-production in humanitarian settings. In the subsections that follow, we outline first the challenges to operationalising co-production, drawing attention to the particular barriers in humanitarian settings and how ambiguities in how co-production is understood has led to the term sometimes being invoked to signal a more equitable process without meaningful changes in power hierarchies. Subsequently, we examine the opportunities for co-production within NGO–academia research partnerships.

Challenges to operationalising co-production in humanitarian settings

Operationalising co-production in humanitarian settings may be particularly difficult. We outline below six key challenges to implementing a co-production approach in humanitarian settings: time pressure and insecurity; differing priorities and incentives; risk aversion; assumptions and burdens associated with capacity; power imbalances that may limit co-production; and blurred categories between co-production and other terms.

Time pressure and insecurity in humanitarian settings

Efforts to co-produce research may be complicated by the emergency status of humanitarian crises and competing demands to respond to needs. Emergency responses to disasters and large-scale displacement evolve rapidly, and while co-producing research can be an important way to generate evidence to inform decisions, it may be hard to prioritise it amidst urgent requirements (such as the provision of aid). Indeed, the evidence produced may soon be out of date, as one participant underlined: 'In DR Congo, for example, things can change so quickly that you may get one information today and just a week later, the information is obsolete . . . you can co-produce a report, but once you get to the ground, some of the information or some of the reality has already shifted over' (NGO, male, Africa).

Another participant emphasised the importance of co-produced research being timely and aligned with decision-making processes: 'In your case with the humanitarian, DRR, obviously, it's quite short time frames a lot of the time. When you are co-producing, there's no point in having a lovely process and then you develop something that's only going to be useful after the crisis has ended' (NGO, female, Africa). Stakeholders involved in co-producing research may grapple with balancing the need to provide relevant, timely research and ensuring a robust research methodology that captures the issues facing diverse groups.

The nature of the humanitarian emergency itself can also pose a challenge to co-production. One participant highlighted the power hierarchies that people affected by crises confront, reflecting on multiple layers of difficulties related to access to goods and services, mobility, information flows, and mental health:

> *There [are] hierarchies also of, say, a mental wellness in the sense that people are dealing with certain types of desperation, and frustration, and an existential precarity. They're looking at a short-term survival mode of living, whereas you [academics] have the luxury of long-term perspective, and strategic thinking, which I think in itself, that very temporality is a form of hierarchy. There's also hierarchies that just come from knowledge; that working with refugees, I can walk into UNHCR [United Nations Refugee Agency] and ask them something, whereas a refugee will be locked outside on the street* (Academic, male, Africa).

The harsh realities faced by crisis-affected communities and stark inequities in power between these populations and researchers were seen as creating ethical challenges to

NGO–academia partnerships. One participant noted the complexities of co-producing research with people affected by humanitarian emergencies, highlighting the possible impact of trust/mistrust among populations affected by crises on co-production processes and outcomes. In these settings, a co-production approach within which crisis-affected communities are meaningfully setting the research agenda, may be more difficult because of these 'existential' challenges. The urgent material and medical needs of people affected by humanitarian crises may have a direct bearing on their willingness to participate in or co-produce research. As one participant said of communities affected by conflict:

> *They need to be supported: house building, water, school for children, and health caring and other needs. When we are researchers, we arrive in the affected community, we say, 'We can't help you with something. We come only to do a research and our report can't help you'. . . . [S]ome person said, 'We can't contribute to your research. We need humanitarian organisation here, not research organisation'* (NGO, male, Africa).

Conducting research slowly and intentionally in adherence to an aspirational co-production approach may be at odds with being more responsive to immediate needs in humanitarian settings. The ongoing precarity faced by crisis-affected communities, pressures to deliver relevant research, and differing priorities and incentives among research stakeholders raise important ethical questions about how co-production can be best used in humanitarian settings, and indeed if co-production is even possible. Co-production, as existing literature highlights, may not always be possible within institutional, relational, and contextual constraints (Clarke et al., 2017; Beckett et al., 2018; Roper, Grey, and Cadogan, 2018; Aabe et al., 2019).

Differing priorities and incentives

While academics, NGOs, and communities affected by crises may share values and research interests, it is important to acknowledge that each of these stakeholders has fundamentally different resource and incentive structures that they bring to the co-production relationship. Academics might be motivated to concentrate on a particular topic due to funding priorities and to publish outputs in academic journals. NGOs may be focused on producing evidence to inform policy and decision-making and prefer to disseminate findings at events, on social media, or in reports. One participant said:

> *I think it's so important to recognise that everyone is coming to the table with vested interests. The NGOs might want programming, maybe funding out of it. Everyone has a bias. I think everyone has a bias and I think we just need to acknowledge that, or whoever is convening the process, it's recognised. Everyone's coming to the table with a certain set of interests* (Social enterprise, female, United States).

At times, power hierarchies between academics and NGOs can result in the contributions of local actors not being recognised. One practitioner noted how despite working

closely with communities to gather data and prepare reports, local NGOs may not reap some of the benefits: '[I]in many cases, you will find that in the final report, you are not recognised. Then you will see, oh, you have frustration. Oh, they are using only their name' (NGO, male, Asia). Another reflected on the '[j]ust give us the data and don't worry' attitude that local NGOs encounter, describing it as an 'impolite approach' (NGO, male, Middle East).

Creating equitable practices from the outset is part of ensuring that research makes a difference to the lives of members of crisis-affected communities, who do not always have a say in the way in which research about their lives is framed. Yet, neoliberal forces operating within the humanitarian sector and academia, where funding most often flows from international actors towards the 'field', can make it challenging to operationalise this principle. Disrupting these traditional ways of managing research partnerships requires significant commitment and flexibility. Participants discussed how communities affected by crises also may have different needs, anticipating that research will translate into changes in their day-to-day circumstances, such as greater access to goods and services. In humanitarian settings, the diverse priorities and incentives of academics, NGOs, and crisis-affected communities may create barriers to co-production.

Risk aversion within the humanitarian sector

Participants identified how hierarchies and risk aversion within the humanitarian system pose a challenge to NGO–academia co-production partnerships. One participant reflected on the challenges of localisation among humanitarian actors, commenting on 'the tendency to be risk-averse', which prevents Northern-based organisations from partnering with smaller NGOs (NGO, male, Asia). He pointed out that local actors that 'lack sophistication' or 'flashy websites' are not contracted. The local organisations that are contracted are never given power to hold budgets, and merely do the 'labour' associated with the research. These entrenched patterns of working sit at odds with a co-production approach where stakeholders involved in the research have an equal stake in it.

A lack of awareness of how power hierarchies shape the humanitarian sector may also make co-production difficult. One participant reflected:

> I think there needs to be space for the group to collectively engage in a process of political education about the social hierarchies that are present in the humanitarian context. . . . I think being able to show the issues that we often are concerned within humanitarian settings, the access to basic rights and needs, and those things, cannot be divorced from these broader structural issues that involve the role and the system of humanitarian organisations (Academic, male, North America).

Assumptions and burdens associated with capacity

Within NGO–academia co-production, assumptions about who has capacity and who does not may shape relationships and research outcomes in negative ways. Participants

discussed how the historical legacy and current reality of how partnerships and capacity-strengthening are structured perpetuates one-way capacity-strengthening and can prevent local stakeholders from feeling that they can contribute. One participant said: 'I do feel like a lot of the institutions we deal with in the South also fall into that trap where they're not as forthcoming with their own capacities' (Academic, female, United Kingdom). Another stated: 'I think that the assumption that we need to always build capacity and that there's no capacity, especially in Africa, is very misleading and insulting' (NGO, female, Africa). She added that there are often 'pockets of capacity', but these are over-utilised, resulting in people being stressed and not having time to contribute. This, she felt, was different to a lack of capacity, but this was not always recognised.

Assumptions about capacity and expectations to meet a supposed standard may place an undue burden on local NGOs in particular, which are expected to prove their capacity in order to secure and sustain research partnerships. Assumptions about which actors have capacity and which do not affect how power and budgets are shared. As noted by Fransman and Newman (2019), this can result in certain tasks and decisions being allocated to one stakeholder over another. Placing undue pressure on local actors to prove their capacity—as has sometimes occurred within efforts to 'localise' aid—also has implications for equity in decision-making throughout the research process. Despite prominent discourses on localisation, entrenched assumptions about local actors create significant barriers to meaningful co-production.

Power imbalances that may limit co-production

During the interviews, a number of practitioners and academics discussed the difficulties in tangibly addressing unequal power hierarchies as part of the co-production process. One academic reflected on whether it's possible to co-produce truly within humanitarian settings: 'I think unless the stars align and you have folks who are from the affected population, but who are also ready and have the resources to engage in the process . . . then I don't think it's going to happen. Maybe that's okay. Maybe there are other things that we can do' (Academic, male, US).

Others drew attention to the use of the language of co-production as a performative strategy, without actually addressing power. This raised questions of ethics, regarding whether co-production 'becomes a cover' for 'what is essentially still a hierarchical and often quite exploited set of relationships' (Academic, male, Africa).

Using refugees or marginalised populations to collect data was also identified by a few participants as a surface-level solution. For instance:

> *Researchers think they can get past these problems of research fatigue by recruiting refugees to work on their team, but that is not solving the problem. That's just like this little Band-Aid thing. . . . You're just using refugees to promote your research or to make your research look good. 'Oh yes. We have a team of refugees doing this'. Unless you've addressed some of the gender and power and other issues involved in this, that's nothing. That's not changing. It's not really co-producing* (Academic, female, North America).

By saying we co-produced this with refugees or trans women or whoever your group is, you hide the fact that it's still you who might be setting the agenda. It's still you who brings the resources, and maybe who controls how it's disseminated (Academic, male, Africa).

These examples illustrate how surface-level solutions like having refugees collect data may be positioned as equivalent to co-production, while hierarchical relationships continue. One practitioner discussed how more problems could materialise if certain groups were just 'co-opted' into a co-production process when they were unable to contribute to the level that was required (NGO, female, Africa). Her comment pointed to the need for co-production to involve meaningful connections. An academic similarly remarked: 'Often, we see things like, "We're going to work with a group of young people and we're going to co-produce this". You're not talking in a co-production language from the start' (Academic, female, Europe).

The implications of navigating power hierarchies throughout the process are at the heart of co-producing research. As one participant observed: 'seeing people as human beings' and interacting 'in that very relational way that co-production requires' was challenging, but far better than just treating communities as 'repositories of data' (Independent researcher, female, Europe). Talking openly about power is not necessarily an easy process; our own experiences facilitating reflection on power hierarchies within research suggest that such reflexivity can often be uncomfortable. In humanitarian settings, power imbalances may be particularly stark, as they are shaped by who holds funding and who is accountable for delivering on activities. Participants' reflections reinforce the work of Darby (2017), who articulates the 'messy' process of challenging power, understanding positionality, and surrendering control during the research process. Participants emphasised the importance of valuing relationships over research outcomes, aligning with Beran et al.'s (2021) argument about prioritising the longer-term relationship over outputs generated by a short-term research project.

Blurred categories: consultation, collaboration, stakeholder engagement, subcontracting, or co-production?

Some practitioners and academics discussed the complexities in determining if a particular research component or action counted as 'co-production'. One academic made a distinction between co-production and two common terms: consultation and collaboration. She explained: 'Co-production is used in place of consultation and ends up with a lot of angst by local community or from local communities because they are not part of a co-production process' (Academic, female, Europe). She added: 'They're just being asked their opinion. Often, a decision has already been made and it's already been sorted. They just want an opinion to tick a box to show that people have been consulted but called co-production'. She suggested that 'collaboration doesn't necessarily mean that power and decision-making will be shared' because it was possible to collaborate without being involved in decision-making.

Our interviews revealed a lack of clarity among participants as to whether a particular aspect counted as co-production. A practitioner commented on his own confusion about whether something was co-production: 'we have been conducting research with co-ownership. We did things together, we produced it together, and we audit together. I don't know if that's called co-production in your understanding' (NGO, male, Asia). An academic also reflected: 'Actually we co-produced the articles and we co-produced the report. . . . I don't know whether this experience really fits into the co-production narrow definition' (Academic, male, Europe).

For one practitioner, the challenge was that 'people are using co-production in quite a loose sense' (NGO, female, Africa). She went on to elucidate: 'I think from an academic point of view, co-production has a very particular meaning. I have challenged others who've said, "Oh, this is co-production". I said, "Well, is it really? It sounds like stakeholder engagement to me"'. She distinguished between testing an idea—which is like 'dipping in and out' or co-production with a 'very light touch'—or validating a concept, where the expectations of the project are established and the decisions made jointly. She underlined that the interaction was about more than just asking 'are we on the right track or do you agree with these findings?', which is merely stakeholder engagement or validation rather than co-production.

The way co-production has been co-opted by humanitarian discourses creates challenges for seeing meaningful co-production realised. Our study suggests that in humanitarian settings, co-production has sometimes been caught up in narratives about localisation and used performatively to demonstrate that an organisation is being innovative in challenging power hierarchies.

The distinction between stakeholder engagement and co-production is an important one. During the interviews, the difference between subcontracting and co-production also emerged as relevant to these debates on what constitutes co-production. One practitioner described his organisation's efforts to try to ensure a more equitable research partnership: 'we agreed that we are not going to be like the executor. We wanted that it's become like we are publishing it together' (NGO, male, Africa). Interestingly, his subsequent descriptions of other research processes seemed to point more towards a subcontracting dynamic:

> [W]e collected all the data and we sent it to Dr [name]. She was the one who could say this intelligence is well done, this is not well done. If you want to add more information, we added more information for her. Make sure that she's getting what she wanted to get as the result of the research. . . . Dr [name] was our main focus in everything, drafting the agreement, discussing how we're going to conduct the research, giving us the main question of the research, how we're going to do the interview.

In this account, a researcher in a European country was directing the course of the work, including shaping the research question and explaining how the African NGO would collect data. In the following example, a participant from a country in the 'North' discusses how her organisation approaches co-production:

> *So, whilst we might set the direction, set the strategies, set the research questions, and framework, we really look to our national partners and national consultants in their relevant contextual knowledge to be able to guide us on how we might contextualise research tools, or try different approaches that might be more effective, at obtaining data that we want to in a particular context* (NGO, female, Australia).

Here, the scope and direction of research was also set, but the national partners provided 'contextual knowledge'. The practitioner went on to explain that her organisation develops a 'first cut' of the tools, then 'co-producing' begins when the tools are shared with the national partner. She observed that it can be a time-consuming process 'to get everybody familiar with the tools'.

In contrast, a practitioner in the Middle East articulated the challenge in ensuring his organisation was 'not seen as an outsourcing agency or an outsourcing company' (NGO, male, Middle East). Another practitioner observed that in research processes, one stakeholder can monopolise activities, such that 'they'll just come up with their products and share [with] you for comments' (NGO, female, Africa). Another practitioner said: 'someone coming from [the] UK also asked me, "[name of participant], we need to work with you in research". My answer was that "we don't want to be data collectors for your research . . . we want to be researchers with you, to collaborate with you; not just take [us] because we are in the field"' (NGO, male, Middle East). This kind of dynamic, from the perspective of practitioners who end up collecting data, was identified as not reflecting the principles of co-production.

The ambiguity among research participants about what counted as co-production demonstrates the way this term has been mobilised colloquially without actors always understanding what it involves. The examples above where one actor determines the scope of the research and only allows the local organisation to provide context, fails to recognise the power imbalances underlying such a dynamic, including the resources held by one entity over another (Fast, 2019). These cases illustrate that at times, the co-production label might be applied to a project without the principles of co-production (Beebeejaun et al., 2014) being reflected. Participants echoed existing literature (Boyle et al., 2010; Gallagher and Dineen, 2016; Turnhout et al., 2020) in differentiating co-production from terms such as consultation, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement. Their reflections underscore Hickey et al.'s (2018) recognition that co-production requires 'devolved' rather than top-down decision-making and power-sharing.

Opportunities for co-production within NGO–academia research partnerships

Despite the challenges noted above, our research identified important opportunities and possibilities for co-production to improve NGO–academia research collaborations. The participants discussed how co-production requires that each stakeholder in the research project be engaged from the outset to map jointly a clear approach. Adopting this joint approach is an important way of tackling power imbalances between different stakeholders. One academic emphasised: 'If you know that research is on your agenda as an NGO,

identify partners in advance, establish some common understanding, agree on research priorities, and then look for funding together. That usually works a lot better' (Academic, female, Europe). A practitioner also flagged the key issues for stakeholders to discuss jointly: 'how to design the proposal, how to design my total research methodologies, how to select a strong team for data collection, how to do a finance managing, and what are deadlines for steps' (NGO, male, Africa). These initial conversations represent critical opportunities to discuss power dynamics and incorporate equitable practices from the beginning of the research partnership. As one participant put it:

> We need to sit down with people and say, 'Right. Well, here's the budget. How do we split it out between us, how do we share this and how do we make it work for the research, and how do we make it work for us, and how do we deal [with]: where are the power imbalances in this potential research team that we're beginning to convene and how do we address those?' How do we deal with: what is there around race, what is there around gender, what is there around homophobia, what is there around religion and belief, what is there around all of these things, what is there around childcare? (Independent researcher, female, Europe).

Participants discussed how employing a co-production approach ensures that there is value for all stakeholders. One stated: 'A lot of the time, we expect participants to just give their time for free. We also expect people to be part of something that then has an academic paper as an outcome. That has very little relevance to most of the stakeholders that you're engaging with. There's got to be something in it for them' (NGO, female, Africa). Another suggested that clarifying a shared objectives and focusing on impact can help to mitigate differing incentives, underscoring that: 'even if there's a difference of motivation in terms of why you're doing it, whatever output comes [represents] both or multiple groups' interests, even if they're slightly different. They should all be tied together around impact; what actually makes a difference on the ground' (NGO, male, Europe).

The fact that co-production requires securing the engagement of all stakeholders at the outset helps to centre the relationships within the partnership, facilitating a focus on process over outcome. One participant said:

> [T]he process is more important than the product. If you get the process right, you will get a good product and it will be something that people actually need and want and would use. If you focus only on the product, chances are you're going to miss a lot of the opportunities to really do something a lot more useful and transformational (NGO, female, Africa).

Participants also reflected on how co-production enables valuing of the knowledge of every stakeholder. One practitioner commented:

> Co-production is also good because it's a knowledge-sharing. I know, you know, and we put our knowledge together and what we don't know all of us, we go and search it all together. That's what makes it particular (NGO, male, Africa).

An academic also observed that when co-production is understood and implemented 'authentically', the benefit is real research relevant to the lives of people in communities instead of research occurring 'in isolation in the ivory tower without that connection to the community' (Academic, female, Europe). In this way, co-production can help to address the critique that research may not be relevant to crisis-affected communities.

Conclusion

Our paper outlines the enormous potential for co-production to address longstanding challenges to research collaborations. The findings build on recent literature on the value of co-production for research partnerships (Kagan, 2013; Pain et al., 2015; Rycroft-Malone et al., 2016; Manikam et al., 2017; McConnell et al., 2018). However, our study yields specific insights into co-production in humanitarian settings, articulating the particular contextual issues facing NGO–academia research partnerships in these environments. It plays an important role in outlining the potential and difficulties associated with co-production in the humanitarian sector, where literature on the subject is currently limited. Participants drew attention to the need to respond swiftly to a crisis and how this may pose problems for co-producing research in humanitarian settings. Although the academic and the humanitarian sectors may emphasise the need for more research, it may be far lower on the agenda of affected populations.

Our study, while recognising the significant challenges to operationalising co-production in humanitarian settings, highlights the importance of co-production principles for enabling acknowledgment and tackling power hierarchies within the humanitarian sector. Following Kagan (2013), we position co-production as a political process that requires intentional reflection on power at each stage of the research process. We propose that the principles underpinning co-production are particularly relevant to the humanitarian sector, which has grappled with undoing power hierarchies intrinsic to the humanitarian system more intentionally over the past several years, such as through the concepts of localisation and decolonising aid. We suggest the use of the following reflection questions (see Table 2) at the outset of the research process and at key stages of each process

Table 2. Questions to consider at different stages of research co-production

Stage of research	Questions
Identifying research topics	• Who identified this issue/topic for research?
	• Why is this issue/topic important?
	• To whom is the issue/topic important?
	• How might communities view the importance of this issue/topic? How have their voices/perspectives been captured in identifying this research issue/topic?
	• Who funds the research? How does funding shape the identification of the research issue/topic?
	• How will the findings be shared and who will be the named authors/organisations?
	• What might the practical and psychological impacts be for local researchers/participants who are contributing to co-produced research within a humanitarian emergency?

Stage of research	Questions
Defining research questions	• Who frames the research questions?
	• What are the motivations behind and/or the drivers of the choice of research questions?
	• What disciplines or perspectives are reflected and not reflected in the choice of research questions?
	• Who funds the research? How does funding shape the identification of the research questions?
	• What opportunities exist to include communities during the process of identifying research questions?
	• When are meetings held to discuss the research questions, and do these meetings enable participation of all stakeholders?
Identifying research methods	• Who chooses the research methods?
	• Why might certain research methods be prioritised over others?
	• What disciplines or perspectives are reflected and not reflected in the choice of research methods?
	• Who identifies research participants?
	• Which groups or parts of the community are excluded as research participants?
	• What opportunities exist for using more participatory methods or being more inclusive in the selection of research participants?
	• What power does the field team have to change the research methods based on its experience of conducting research on the ground?
Collecting data	• Which participants are ultimately involved in the research? Who was not included and why?
	• Who manages the fieldwork logistics?
	• Whose capacity is strengthened, by whom?
	• What opportunities exist for more mutual capacity-strengthening processes?
	• Who asks the questions during an interview, survey, or focus-group discussion? What positionalities and power do they hold?
	• What opportunities exist to engage in reciprocity during data collection?
Analysing data	• Who identifies themes and conducts analysis?
	• What positionalities and power are held by people doing data analysis and write-up?
	• How are findings summarised and in what ways does the summarisation process flatten complex experiences of communities?
	• What opportunities exist to diversify the analysis process and include more perspectives?
Sharing findings	• Who publishes/presents findings?
	• Where and how are findings shared?
	• How is the research partnership (including the contributions of all partners) acknowledged in public fora and presentations?
	• Who has access to the final research outputs and who does not?
	• What products are produced and what opportunities exist to develop more accessible and inclusive research products?

Source: authors.

to facilitate discussion among stakeholders seeking to co-produce research in humanitarian settings. For humanitarian and academic actors looking to do just that, deliberating these questions can help to lay a foundation for recognising and tackling unequal power dynamics with more intention.

Co-production holds significant potential for humanitarian settings. However, for co-production principles to be realised, there is a need for greater understanding of what co-production involves and the specific challenges confronting NGO–academia co-production in humanitarian settings. Co-production must go beyond paying lip service to disrupt intentionally power hierarchies at each stage of the research process.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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