

Relationships Are Key to Overcoming Barriers Posed By Election Cycles: A Qualitative Description of Canadian Integrated Knowledge Translation Partners

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Abstract

Community engagement is central to a research process called integrated knowledge translation (IKT), which is characterized by the co-creation of knowledge among various partners. Families First Edmonton used an IKT partnership model to address poverty issues over a 15-year period. The purpose of this study is to describe barriers to the sustainability of this IKT partnership and how these were overcome. We generated interview data with 23 IKT partners who worked with or within municipal and provincial governments; we used qualitative description to frame our data and conventional qualitative content analysis for data analysis. Partners described the ways in which election cycles threatened the sustainability of the IKT partnership and posed barriers to their work. Three barriers were identified by partners: 1) narrowed windows of opportunity, 2) muddled directions and priorities, and 3) changed project partners. According to partners who collaborated across academic, government, and community settings, relationships offset these barriers through various mechanisms, including long-term relationship building, ongoing contact, and a recognition that while success may be subtle, resulting ripple effects can have important impacts over time. Relationships represent an important investment for partners who continue to work in narrow time frames imposed by election cycles. Partners indicated that relationships are a key strategy to ensuring sustainability of the IKT partnership and can have a farther-reaching impact than policy change.

Background

The process of community engagement has long been used as a way to involve those most affected by a problem in collective action to create relevant and meaningful solutions. The World Health Organization (2017) defined community engagement as a “process of developing relationships that enable stakeholders to work together to address health-related issues and promote well-being to achieve positive health impact and outcomes” (p. 12). Community engagement is not a single event; rather, it is a “socially situated phenomenon” that involves iterative and long-term processes that are sustained by a shared concern (Johnston, 2018, p. 30).

Community engagement is enacted in various forms, from community service-learning—enabling learner and community growth (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012)—to community-based participatory research focused on achieving research goals and building community capacity (Mosavel, Winship, Liggins, Cox, Roberts, & Jones, 2019). Regardless of form, community engagement is built on similar principles and common characteristics. Similarities include relationship- and trust-building, collaboration, transparency, and community-capacity building.

Community engagement is also central to a research process called integrated knowledge translation (IKT), which can be better understood by contrasting it with a more familiar term, knowledge translation, which refers to efforts that enhance the uptake of existing research knowledge, such as the use of actionable messaging or accessible language (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2015). IKT is similar and more interactive; it does not privilege research knowledge over other forms of knowledge and is characterized by the co-creation of knowledge among various partners (Kothari, Sibbald, & Wathen, 2014). In IKT, researchers solicit involvement from partners throughout the entire research process so that their work is more relevant to the context of application. The ultimate goal of IKT is change, primarily in the form of bringing research knowledge to action.

In bridging the knowledge-to-action gap (Graham, Logan, Harrison, Straus, Tetroe, Caswell, & Robinson, 2006), researchers and knowledge users have been urged to come together in IKT partnerships. A partnership, as defined by the World Health Organization (2009), is a “relationship between two or more parties based on trust, equality, and mutual understanding

for the achievement of a specified goal” (p. 2). In IKT partnerships, the specified goal is research use or application. Consequently, we use the term IKT partnership to describe a collaborative process wherein researchers work across organizations, disciplines, and levels of government to conduct analyses and develop products that are relevant for decision-makers in the intended context of application.

Further research is needed to understand IKT partnerships, as IKT partnerships often tackle complex issues that require a diversity of perspectives and significant time investments. However, a recent scoping review conducted by Gagilardi and colleagues (2016) found that IKT initiatives were poorly described and seldom guided by any theory. To our knowledge, IKT partnership goals of research uptake are rarely accomplished easily or quickly, and there is no work dedicated to investigating the sustainability of IKT partnerships. Accordingly, scholars have long identified the need to further assess and understand what unique mechanisms contribute to the success of IKT partnerships (Kothari, McCutcheon, & Graham, 2017; Kothari & Wathen, 2017).

A known barrier for making any meaningful progress or change (including research use) is short political terms of leaders. In fact, a recent systematic review found that short political terms often prevent elected governments from tackling long-term objectives, a phenomenon referred to as *political short-termism* (Farrer, Marinetti, Cavaco, & Cosgong, 2015). Since researchers engaged in IKT often work with government leaders and civil servants as IKT partners to tackle seemingly intractable health and social issues, more knowledge is specifically needed on how election cycles pose barriers to the long-term goals and sustainability of an IKT partnership.

Families First Edmonton

The IKT partnership under study created and executed a research project called Families First Edmonton. The original goal of the project was to gather local research data from low-income families in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada that would deepen an understanding of the impact of family poverty locally. The impetus to conduct this project was twofold: First, recent cutbacks to the health and social service sectors created a shared concern among partners for those living in poverty, and second, partners saw an opportunity to work together across sectors and build on existing research that supported needed change.

This partnership worked together for more than 15 years. While the partnership formed at the turn of the century (2002), it took years for the study to be developed (2005), for families to be recruited (2006), for data to be collected in full (2011), for complex analyses to be conducted (2012), for partners to understand and communicate the results within their organizations (2013–2015), and then for the results to be shared beyond the partnership (Drummond, Wiebe, So, Schnirner, Bisanz, Williamson, Mayan, Templeton, Fassbender, 2016). The project charter (Families First Edmonton, 2003) provides further detail about the partners that represented a research team, two levels of government (municipal and provincial), and organizations serving the community.

Following the completion of data collection in 2010 (when the partnership had originally planned to formally conclude meetings), partners recognized the power and potential in the data and re-identified themselves as Putting the Research to Work (PRW). In 2011, partners used IKT as a concept to guide their work further. We intentionally generated interview data during this time to gain further insight into how the PRW partnership sustained and transitioned into the knowledge to action phase of the long-term project. The insights generated during this phase are explicated in this study. During this time of transition that we analyzed, sustainability was often under threat as reorganization and restructuring affected many of the PRW partners.

If IKT partnerships are going to address complex health and social issues over the long term, then the sustainability of IKT partnerships must become a priority. Thus, the research question guiding this inquiry was: What were the greatest barriers to the sustainability of the IKT partnership and how were these overcome? Since there is significant overlap between the concept of IKT and community engagement, we will consider our findings in light of existing research knowledge in the community service-learning and community-based research fields.

Methods

We approached the above stated research question using a qualitative descriptive design as described by Sandelowski (2000; 2010). Qualitative description was chosen as it originates from an interpretive paradigm and entails a comprehensive, coherent, and useful “description and summary of the phenomenon” (Mayan, 2009, p. 53) in the

“everyday language” of the partners (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). Furthermore, qualitative descriptive studies produce “data-near” findings (Sandelowski, 2010, p. 78) while allowing “room for the unanticipated” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336).

Recruitment

Email invitations were sent to 23 key PRW partners inviting them to participate. These individuals were community/funder/service provider (n=6), government (n=8), and research (n=9) partners, who were: 1) a current or previous PRW partner and 2) knowledgeable about PRW and its history. These inclusion criteria allowed us to gather perspectives from diverse partners that crisscross different sectors (community, government, academia), levels of governments (regional, municipal, provincial), and jurisdictions (recreation, transportation, income support, housing).

Sampling

Consistent with qualitative descriptive methods, our sampling approach was purposeful. To deeply understand the phenomenon, 23 partners who were highly involved in PRW were purposively sampled. Four of the partners were interviewed twice. In total, 25 interviews (seven in 2010 and 18 in 2012) were conducted; two dyad interviews took place (one in 2010 and one in 2012). This number is comparable to similar qualitative descriptive studies (Mason, 2010) and considered in light of other factors that affect saturation (Morse, 2000). While partners in this study were heterogeneous in the sense of representing different organizations and sectors, they had a shared interest (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) in using research to improve the health and well-being of families living in poverty. This commonality among partners helped us to understand the phenomena more rapidly and to achieve saturation.

Data Generation

The interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in duration. The wide range in time span occurred due to the varying levels of detail divulged by different partners who were interviewed. Generally, questions moved from obtaining past history with the partnership (e.g., “Can you describe your history with the PRW project?”) to inquiring about current events (e.g., “What are the current system priorities in your organization and the language used to describe them?”) and, “Who

is seen as a credible source of information by your organization?”) and future directions (e.g., “What are the leverage points in your system?”). Two co-authors (Mayan and Lo) were selected to conduct the interviews as they had the longest established rapport with the partners. The interviewers used prompts to clarify responses (e.g., “What needs to be done within your organization to put the research to use, given some of the things you just spoke of?”).

Analysis

We used an inductive, iterative, and abductive process of qualitative content analysis, which is “the analysis strategy of choice in qualitative descriptive studies” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). More specifically, we used the conventional approach delineated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). The entire set of transcripts was read repeatedly to obtain a sense of the dataset as a whole and read again to derive codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Sections of the text/data that were persistent (Mayan, 2009) and key thoughts and concepts were captured (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In addition, memoing was used to document how the analysis was modified according to demands imposed by the data (Mayan, 2009). As is common in qualitative inquiry, the research question was changed based on emerging data and moved from inquiring about barriers, facilitators, or strategies related to IKT partnerships to the sustainability of these partnerships.

Ethics and Rigor

To ensure rigor, we used Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for trustworthiness and Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers’s (2002) verification strategies. Feedback was obtained from central partners early and incrementally to verify our developing preliminary categories. The University of Alberta’s Health Research Ethics Board approved the project. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Findings

In response to the research question, “What were the greatest barriers to the sustainability of the IKT partnership and how were these overcome?” partners identified that election cycles and in particular, three specific barriers associated with election cycles, were the greatest threat to the sustainability of the IKT partnership. Partners also described how relationships helped offset

each of these barriers. In short, barriers created by election cycles narrowed windows of opportunity, muddled directions and priorities, and changed project partners. Relationships among IKT project partners offset these barriers through expedited work, improved strategy and position, and a shifted partnership culture (see Table 1).

Election Cycles Narrowed Windows of Opportunity

Election cycles were described as being disruptive to the progress of IKT partnerships. In particular, partners expressed that election cycles promoted short-term planning for issues that required long-term attention. This structural issue made it difficult for partners from all levels of government to obtain commitment and funding for projects addressing issues that extended beyond their current political lifespan. One civil servant involved in PRW since its inception remarked:

Unfortunately, we still live in a four-year cycle...we're talking about extrapolated savings [in PRW], so generationally, we're gonna see a difference in things or you're gonna see a difference in the amount of emergency care, but it might not be this year. It might be NEXT year... not in that four-year period. We've never been able to sell it in a way that current people are gonna accept it and move on something that they may not reap the benefits from. It might be the NEXT group that gets the glory.

In addition to short-term goals, partners described the need to move quickly to have research on a given priority generated, which contributed to a sense of urgency to produce results faster than researchers had the capacity to do. Failing to demonstrate improvements or cost-savings within these time frames jeopardized potential for future funding—"a catch-22" situation. One researcher explained:

With the new administration, the new Premier...things are moving...[We are] going to have to be extremely timely with [our] analysis if [we want] to at all maximize any of the work...[we] put into this project...now's the time.... The pace is going to be very fast now going forward, partially because government has this new administration and they want to maximize it.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Barriers to Sustainability of the IKT Partnerships	How Relationships Offset Barriers
Narrowed windows of opportunity	Expedited work
Muddled direction and priorities	Improved strategy and positioning
Changed project partners	Transformed partnership culture

Relationships Expedited Succeed

Relationships offset the barriers associated with narrowed windows of opportunity so that the partnership could continue through multiple pathways. By having relationships with partnership members, some of the bureaucracy was removed and partners were able to connect with others informally, such as through a phone call, a coffee, or quick email, whereas, as one civil servant said: "...before...it would have been sending an email to their director to ask for somebody." By going to the people that they know, rather than asking for permission, the partners could begin their work more efficiently. This approach aided partners in creating, identifying, and capitalizing on opportunities faster.

Through ongoing conversations, partners recognized that the final research results, to be determined in five years (from a longitudinal study), were no longer addressing the government's current priorities or answering the most important question. To maintain interest, partners used their collective wisdom and connections to inform the generation of interim results relevant to today's government. Furthermore, government partners recognized that while election cycles narrowed windows of opportunity, relationships allowed researchers to take advantage of these windows of opportunity. As one civil servant explained:

I made sure that I had relationships with the people creating the bigger things that I knew were happening and would talk to them about what we were trying to do.

Through their relationships, governments' partners also shared the internal language and priorities so that research inquires could be generated and positioned accordingly. As one partner put it, "so if you understand the ideology, then you WORK it." Another civil servant in a different level of government advised:

Right now we have huge fiscal problems... we need to frame [our work] in a way that fits into the current economic picture...so that we're making reasonable requests.... If we put [our work] into some perspective of...something we could do in this market. So, it may not be...our full meal deal, but can we actually start and move something without it being huge cost...then we have some hope of moving something forward.

A partner described interim results as a “lever to keep partners involved.” Interim results targeted at current political priorities and within the scope and jurisdiction of decision makers (i.e., things they could influence) were leveraged to justify ongoing partner involvement and sustainability of the partnership.

Election Cycles Muddled Direction and Priorities

Another reason that election cycles disrupted partnership progress was related to uncertainty about upcoming priorities and direction. Given the potential for changes in leadership, project partners working in government did not know what would be upcoming “opportunities” in their respective departments. Partners recognized that priorities shifted and were challenged because what might be right one day might not be the next. A seasoned community partner noted, “Some really neat initiatives have just fallen off the table over the years” because “a minister changes, a CEO changes, a manager changes, or somebody changes and their priorities are all of a sudden, not those priorities.”

During the time leading up to an election, partners working within and close to government noted that it was unlikely that any new changes or projects would be supported. Actual priorities were also unclear for some time following changes in government. One researcher partner discussed this uncertainty:

[The new] government could look good for us.... This could be a pro or con for us. I'm still not clear.... [It] could be an opportunity for us if they...want to partner with us and use our data to help them make decisions.... If they are just using the budgeting profile [as] a means to justify cuts...spitting polish on it. Again, until we see some real action, it's hard to assess whether this is good or bad.

Relationships Improved Strategy and Positioning

Through informal relationships and off the record discussions, IKT partners accessed timely information that informed their work when they felt rudderless. These conversations were sometimes referred to as “meetings after the meeting.” As one research partner put it, “There's nothing too formal about how we work together.” Even when “really busy,” one community partner expressed, “when you need me, you just have to yell loud enough and call often enough that I will always respond...and I will make it important for me.” Similarly, a researcher noted, “Anytime they want to meet and hear about what kind of data we have and what's going on, [we will] meet with them....” Government partners also demonstrated this opportunity even when they were moved off the project. This informal way of working together helped partners access more information, in a timely manner, which was important for mitigating uncertainty and informing their work.

While the timing might be off, partners valued the social capital generated through their relationships. One partner noted that her “world got a little bigger” with “the connections that I've made and the people that I've met,” which permitted work beyond the project. As one community partner explained:

I meet people in this work that I don't know if I ever would have met if I wasn't involved in the work. I don't even know what they are good for until I know what I need them for, you know what I mean?... Sometimes the conversations aren't in the right time or the right place, but just the fact that you made the connection, you can connect dots at a later point; this opportunity helps us to make connections out in the community...that I don't work with on a day-to-day basis.

Similarly, a researcher noted an example of a connection made with a government partner that led to future IKT work:

They are ecstatic about the potential to move forward, not with respect to this [upcoming] deadline. They don't care about that. What they want to do is potentially map out a well-thought-out project where we can talk about what they want, what they need, all of that, and take our time with it.

These ongoing relationships also engaged funders by helping them to see the value in investing in our data and laying the grounds for future work with partners across sectors.

Election Cycles Changed Project Partners

One of the biggest frustrations expressed by the partners was the removal of project partners due to the changing composition of leaders and restructuring departments following elections. This meant reorganization of staff and losing involvement from valuable government partners who could think outside the box, and had a history with or a real passion for the project.

Precious resources were required to orient newcomers to the IKT partnership project, who were also adjusting to their portfolio internally. A civil servant explained:

We are always starting over and trying to bring somebody up to speed and then engage them.... To do that and move forward at the same time, it's a lot of time spent—so if we want this to move, there's got to be some continuity in who some of the people are.... You need some commitment from somebody that actually...lived through it [and can explain it], and at least lived through a piece to get it pulled together.

Furthermore, newcomers posed a risk to the IKT partnership. Partners from all sectors (community, government, and university) recognized that because latecomers may not have as much investment, they also may not have as much commitment. Partners speculated that this lack of interest could be due in part to fulfilling a commitment made by their predecessor, by having less passion about the topic, and/or by a lack of understanding or agreement with previous choices/decisions made by the partnership.

Partners voiced concern for the ongoing need to legitimize their work. Those with a long-standing history were capable of managing questions and speaking well of the project; however, when newcomers joined, partners expressed feeling “fearful, because...it just takes one comment to stop one person, right? Then you are trying to catch up,” which could result in less interest from stakeholders in the project. On the other hand, long-term partners trusted that partners with a shared history could maintain project momentum.

Relationships Transformed Partnership Culture

Relationships helped provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of another's perspective across different professional spheres, instigating a culture shift within the partnership that changed how partners informed and made decisions.

Through involvement with the PRW project, partners from all sectors reported that their work changed in small but significant ways. For instance, government and community partners recognized that one of the biggest things the project did for them was make them realize the importance of research, which led to a realignment of duties and improved funding reports. This culture transformation happened as partners gained respect for each other's expertise or business, which explained, as various ones said, why it takes so much talking, why things don't change fast, and why they hardly ever change the way you thought they should in the beginning.

Conversations that involved critical thought exposed inconsistencies and hidden assumptions underlying the partnership's work. A community partner described how this thinking changed their agency:

We've seen changes within our own agency that I can directly or indirectly attribute to our involvement with Families First...it's gone from just “you deliver the information, we receive it,” next “order of business” to “what about this?” and “how did this impact?” or “what [are] the next steps?” To me, that's really encouraging.

Partners across sectors recognized that small ripples created by relationships may have an impact that is more important and/or much greater than a policy change would. They recognized, according to one, that they were part of a project “trying to build something in the cracks or between the sectors” (e.g., “a policymaker, a provider, an agency, a funder”) in pursuit of a common goal. Following an election, and subsequently stalled progress, one research partner said:

They changed the whole structure of the government again. It is hard but I think those relationships are really important even though the people are going to change. I think we've established an expectation that we speak to each other.

Partners regarded relationships as critical as a policy change for two reasons. First, as one said, since more than one policy was needed to address poverty, partners valued partnership or community conversations because this interaction helped “build capacity to make change” through “taking a common approach, [using a] common language,” and “coming together to use... common sources of data.” As another explained:

It's not like one policy—we just gotta change this policy for income support and everything will be better. No, it's about everybody coming to the same table, you just keep working together.

Similarly, a government partner discussed the need for a multi-pronged approach to poverty:

The [provincial government]...won't fix it [poverty]. Local government won't fix it.... Individual families won't fix it.... Maybe everyone is sort of trying to understand it together and think about how to...start to make steps in the right direction.

Discussion

Our findings described how relationships were critical for sustaining the progress and momentum of a partnership poised to address a social issue within their community. Moreover, the insights about why and how relationships can offset barriers associated with election cycles have implications for the conduct and application of research amidst shifting platforms of stakeholders and ideologies.

Relevance of Findings to Knowledge Translation and Scholarship of Engagement

Our findings respond to Kothari and Wathen's (2013) broader call to highlight the power and process of IKT. Likewise, our findings build on the scholarship of engagement literature, which shares principles and practices common to IKT (Barker, 2004; Denis & Lomas, 2003). Barriers to partnership work exist across both fields. Researchers studying civic engagement (such as service-learning, for example) have long reported that individuals from communities and universities have different—often competing—reward structures, priorities, and timelines (Bingle, Clayton, & Price, 2009;

O'Meara & Jaeger, 2016). Despite these differences, partnership work requires significant investments in time, energy, and funding for seemingly little payout or traditionally defined success (Volchok, 2017). Our findings add to this knowledge by redefining success. That is, our partners explained that while a reduction in the problem being addressed may lead to success in the short term, changing expectations and culture about relationships across sectors and organizations could lead to more long-term and lasting changes.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrate why and how relationships add value to partnership projects. In studying a similar partnership, Bowen and Martens (2005) found that community partners cited their relationships as “the greatest project accomplishment” and necessary for “completion of deliverables or reports” (p. 207). Furthermore, systematic reviews have consistently found that relationships between researchers and policymakers have increased research use (Innvaer, Vist, Trommald, & Oxman, 2002; Lavis, Oxman, Denis, Golden-Biddle, & Ferlie, 2005; Oliver, Innvar, Lorenc, Woodman, & Thomas, 2014). Why? Partners in our study posit that the knowledge and information garnered through the cultivation of relationships, characterized by mutual trust and shared knowledge, allowed partners to move more strategically when windows of opportunities arose.

Last, our findings also support literature on teamwork in a service engagement context. John Gastil (1992) has long theorized that small groups can create ripple effects for social change and civic engagement. The complex mechanisms of these ripples, however, are still being unpacked in his prolific work (Gastil & Xenos, 2010; Gastil, Knobloch, & Kelly, 2012). However, we know that frequent communication is one element that is necessary for high performance in successful teams (Barrick, Bradley, Kristof-Brown, & Colbert, 2007). Interestingly, partners in our study reported tremendous value in informal communication but cited time as a barrier to sustaining their work. One interpretation of our findings may be that time per say is not a barrier; rather, the re-orientation of new partners to the project over a long period of time disrupted their work and shared culture. This interpretation holds unique implications for higher education and service-learning.

Recommendations for Individuals and Organizations

Our findings elucidate the challenge of developing and maintaining a sustainable program of research amidst shifting platforms of stakeholders and ideologies. Nevertheless, they underscore the importance of continuity in the planning and implementation of long-term partnership projects. We present three key take-away messages for readers who practice community engagement:

1. Invest in long-term relationships. Perhaps the most obvious takeaway from our research findings is to recognize how long-term relationships can be leveraged. More specifically, our partners explained how they moved nimbly to accomplish goals through the use of informal interactions (e.g. having “meetings after the meeting”) and mutual availability (e.g. if partners “yell loud enough”). Partners agreed these characteristics (i.e. availability and informality) were supported by a shared history. On the contrary, partners emphasized that the loss of involvement from long-term partners challenged the momentum of their work and we suspect, the group dynamic as a whole. The impact of the lost involvement from key partners leads to our second takeaway point.

2. Continue to connect. We recommend that those working in partnership projects make a concerted effort to maintain existing relationships during times of transition or uncertainty. Our partners who worked with and within government cited that government leaders often had unclear and shifting priorities, which outpaced their analysis and had the potential to render their work less relevant and useful. This threat was neutralized when partners gathered together and used their collective wisdom to generate interim results that would maintain interest among funders and knowledge users of their work. As such, we recommend partners engage in ongoing conversations and meetings throughout shifts at broader organizational and/or political levels.

3. Success is subtle. The majority of researchers well know that traditional metrics of success do not provide a full picture of the reach or impact of their work. As our partners have explained, long-term relationships can create tremendous value through maintaining momentum and circumventing challenges. Therefore, it is important to advocate for faculty and institutional support to cultivate these valuable relationships. Researchers working in collaboration with others can further document and publish the nuanced benefits created through

relationships. Furthermore, individuals who sit on recruitment and evaluation committees could consider how to support the involvement of candidates and/or employees in their community. This redefinition of “success” can create an important culture shift and, more importantly, encourage engagement within local communities.

Areas for Future Work and Strengths/Limitations

The phenomena of relationships within IKT and community-engaged scholarship warrant more attention. Our interview questions were not solely focused on relationships or election cycles. Future studies investigating IKT or other community-based partnerships could (through refined questions) generate more insight about the impact of quality relationships on research use before, during, and after election cycles. For example, researchers could ask more refined questions about how specific characteristics of relationships—such as informality, availability, and history—shaped their work. This questioning could further delineate what Scriven (1999) coined the “black box” of research use in government settings (p. 75). Second, we echo Wiltsey Stirman and colleagues (2012) that more knowledge is needed on other factors that shape sustainability and research use more broadly.

The opportunity to learn from IKT partners, who have extensive experience and a shared history in a large, longitudinal project, is rare. However, we recognize the context and timing of interviews may have influenced our findings. Namely, partners were interviewed in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, a time of fiscal austerity in Canada (Ruckert & Labonté, 2014). This context may have contributed to partner’s feelings of uncertainty, as well as partners’ precarious and inconsistent availability with external projects. Further research could examine relationships among IKT partners during periods of economic growth and prosperity.

Furthermore, our interviews coincided with intense support for a new political party in Alberta—the Wild Rose Alliance. The party’s ideologically distant (Westlake, 2015) platform on the far right of the political spectrum may have influenced the uncertainty and political forecasts of those interviewed, whose careers and clientele in the health and social services would likely have suffered under a Wild Rose Alliance regime. The political and economic turbulence, however influential, may have also led to greater depth and insight about the impact of election cycles.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the significance that relationships hold for IKT partnerships and community-engaged scholarship. Ironically, partners anticipated that relationships—albeit difficult to measure and rarely the sole marker of a successful IKT project—are a key strategy to ensuring sustainability of the IKT partnership, and can have greater impact than policy change alone. Relationships represent an important investment for partners who continue to work in narrow time frames imposed by election cycles. While our findings do not indicate that relationships are equivalent to success (e.g., reducing poverty or even the impact of poverty on health), they explain how relationships can sustain partnerships and enhance research use in the government sphere. We found relationships made possible through IKT partnerships provide a platform where ongoing dialogue serves to cultivate research use throughout turbulent election cycles. As such, we suggest that relationships within and across organizations should be viewed as an investment, and deliberately nurtured and embraced in plans for IKT, so that partners can continue to make incremental strides toward a shared goal.

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