

Relational Research as Practice: Policy-relevant lessons from a partnership in South Africa

Summary

Across global development policy and practice, there is growing recognition that sustainable change depends on relationships: between institutions and communities, between people and the systems they rely on, and between research and practice. Yet policy processes often struggle to account for the relational work required to make interventions effective, including the time, coordination, and trust-building needed to sustain change.

Drawing on a partnership in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (facilitated through the Open University's Open Societal Challenges initiative), this policy brief argues that relational research – i.e. approaches that prioritise sustained engagement, trust-building, and shared sense-making with those closest to a problem – offers practical lessons for policymakers and practitioners working in complex social systems. Rather than treating relationships as a by-product of research, deliberately investing in relational work can improve problem definition, strengthen implementation, and support more durable policy responses. The brief outlines why this matters now and sets out actionable recommendations for policy actors, funders, and implementing organisations.

Why relationships matter in policy and practice

In fields such as health, social protection, and community development, policy success is rarely determined by technical design alone. Interventions often falter because they fail to engage with the relational conditions in which they are implemented: caregiving burdens, trust in institutions, histories of exclusion, and the everyday labour required to sustain care.

Policy actors increasingly acknowledge the importance of partnership, participation, and co-production. However, these commitments are frequently operationalised through short consultations, discrete engagement activities, or time-limited projects. As a result, relational work is often under-analysed, under-resourced, and treated as supplementary to 'core' policy activity, rather than as a central determinant of whether policies take root.



In complex and politically charged systems, this gap matters. When relationships are weak, power is unevenly distributed, or uncertainty is denied rather than managed, even well-designed policies can struggle to gain traction. Relational research offers a way to surface these dynamics early, enabling policymakers and practitioners to better understand how authority, trust, and capacity are organised in practice, and where policy efforts are likely to encounter resistance or fragility.

Case context: paediatric HIV care in KwaZulu-Natal

KwaZulu-Natal has one of the highest burdens of paediatric HIV globally. While antiretroviral therapy (ART) is highly effective, sustaining the levels of adherence required for viral suppression remains a persistent challenge. This is not simply a medical issue. Adherence is shaped by caregiving responsibilities, poverty, stigma, fragmented services, and the emotional labour involved in supporting children over time.

“Treatment adherence is not just a medical issue. It is shaped by the relationships that make care possible.”

In this context, a partnership between the Open University, CHIVA Africa, Citizens UK, health workers, and community actors sought to explore how caregivers – parents, grandparents, and other family members responsible for day-to-day care – of children living with HIV might be better supported. The partnership emerged through the Open University’s Challenge Us! Initiative (as part of the wider Open Societal Challenges initiative), which invited external organisations to pose research questions they were struggling to answer in practice. This meant the initial focus of the work was shaped by challenges identified by those working closest to paediatric HIV care, rather than being defined externally. While the original request was for research support around treatment adherence, the process of working relationally with partners broadened the scope of the work, shifting attention towards the relationships, systems, and conditions shaping care. This set the foundation for a more relational approach to research and collaboration from the outset.

Rather than beginning with a fixed intervention, the project prioritised listening, relationship-building, and collective sense-making. Participatory methods and community organising tools were used to map power, surface constraints, and strengthen connections within and across



institutions. Through this process, it became clear that many of the barriers to adherence lay not in individual behaviour but in relational and systemic gaps. Addressing these required working differently, not simply collecting more data.

What relational research looks like in practice

The experiences from this partnership highlight several practices that are directly relevant for policy design and implementation.

“Relational work is not a soft add-on. It is central to whether policies succeed or fail.”

1. Investing time in problem definition

Relational research allows policy-relevant problems to be reframed through sustained engagement with those closest to them. In practice, this involved bringing together actors working at different levels of the paediatric HIV system, including local, provincial, and national government representatives, faith-based organisations, clinical staff, and caregivers. Rather than focusing on solutions, participants were invited to collectively map the systems, organisations, and relationships shaping care for children living with HIV. This process made visible where relationships were strong, weak, intermittent, or absent, and helped participants identify where trust needed to be rebuilt, coordination strengthened, or collaboration rethought. For many, this shifted the focus from individual responsibility to shared relational and institutional conditions shaping care. In this case, spending time with caregivers and frontline workers shifted attention away from compliance-focused narratives towards the everyday conditions that make care possible or impossible. This process also made visible whose perspectives carried influence, whose did not, and how power shaped what could be named as a policy problem.

2. Working with, not around, existing relationships

Rather than creating parallel structures, the project worked through existing networks of care, advocacy, and service delivery. This strengthened local capacity and avoided undermining already fragile systems. Crucially, it also recognised that policy implementation is mediated through institutions and actors with their own interests, histories, and constraints, which must be engaged rather than bypassed.



3. Using institutional capital relationally

Academic institutions often hold political and symbolic capital. In this partnership, that capital was used to convene actors, open dialogue, and amplify local concerns, rather than to dominate decision-making. This involved conscious choices about when to step forward and when to step back, and about how to support ‘power with’ approaches rather than reproducing ‘power over’ dynamics.

4. Allowing approaches to adapt under conditions of uncertainty

Relational work does not follow a linear project trajectory. Methods, questions, and priorities evolved in response to relationships as they developed and as external conditions shifted. Rather than treating uncertainty as a failure of planning, the project treated it as an inherent feature of working in complex systems, requiring ongoing reflection, negotiation, and recalibration.

Why this matters for policy actors

For policymakers and practitioners, the implications are practical rather than philosophical. Policies that depend on sustained behaviour change, caregiving, or community trust are unlikely to succeed without attention to relational conditions. By embedding learning, trust, and coordination within existing institutions, relational approaches increase the likelihood that policy responses endure beyond individual projects or funding cycles. In this sense, sustainable change depends not only on delivery, but on how institutions engage with partners, communities, and frontline actors over time.

Relational research can:

- Improve the fit between policy design and lived realities.
- Surface implementation barriers early, before scale-up.
- Strengthen legitimacy and trust in institutions.
- Support longer-term sustainability beyond project cycles.

These benefits are particularly important in under-resourced systems where policy failure carries high social costs.



Policy recommendation

1. Resource relational work explicitly

Policy programmes should allocate time and funding for relationship-building, facilitation, and trust-building as core activities, not optional extras. This may include dedicated budget lines for facilitation and coordination, recognition of relational labour within job roles, and commissioning criteria that value partnership quality alongside delivery outputs. This includes recognising the relational labour of frontline workers and community actors.

2. Build flexibility into policy timelines

Rigid implementation schedules can undermine relational approaches. Policymakers should allow for adaptive timelines that enable learning, recalibration, and sustained engagement, particularly in complex social contexts.

3. Support intermediary and facilitative roles

Relational work often depends on actors who can bridge institutions, sectors, and communities. Policy frameworks should recognise and support these roles, rather than assuming coordination will emerge spontaneously.

4. Use research partnerships to inform implementation, not just evaluation

Relational research partnerships can provide real-time insights into how policies are experienced on the ground, for example through ongoing feedback loops, reflective sessions with implementers, or rapid sense-making workshops that surface emerging barriers. Policymakers should engage with such partnerships throughout the policy cycle, not only at the evaluation stage.

5. Redefine evidence for relational interventions

Standard metrics may fail to capture relational change. Policymakers and funders should be open to mixed and qualitative evidence that reflects changes in trust, coordination, and caregiving capacity.

“Sustainable change depends on how institutions exercise their roles and relationships, not just on what they deliver.”



Further reading

Dauncey, E. (2025) Staying with the trouble: rethinking care, research and collaboration in paediatric HIV. Open Societal Challenges blog. <https://societal-challenges.open.ac.uk/blog/staying-with-the-trouble-rethinking-care-research-and-collaboration-in-paediatric-hiv/65>

Tattersall, A. (2024). Organising Together Across Difference: Relational experiments in community organising. Citizens UK.

Hopper N. (2025). Relational conversations: what is possible. Open Societal Challenges blog. <https://societal-challenges.open.ac.uk/blog/relational-conversations-what-is-possible/68>

Credits

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