Leading the Way: Fostering Fair North-South Research Collaborations.

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Abstract
We investigate recent experiences with North-South research collaborations. Acknowledging that seniority and geography affect the experience, we formulated separate questions for emerging and established Southern researchers and for emerging and established Northern researchers. Within this matrix, our focus falls largely on emerging southern researchers, who are the most vulnerable. The paper summarises insights from twenty-six interviews with researchers who participated in North-South research collaborations. By documenting the positive experiences and frustrations of these researchers, we set the agenda for further research on this topic and highlight some of the shortcomings of existing guidelines and frameworks. We recommend more direct funding for Southern institutions, reduced intermediary roles for Northern research-management organisations, and a commitment to greater autonomy for Southern researchers.

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I. Introduction

North-South collaborations have risen in importance in the past few decades because of the increasingly complex and interdisciplinary nature of global development issues. The group of seventy-seven at the United Nations Conference for Science and Technology in 1979 marked a milestone in which developed countries acknowledged the need to build local capacities in North-South research collaborations, and the conference sparked an idealistic rhetoric about the potential mutual benefit of North-South partnerships (Gaillaird, 1994, 32-33).

In principle, North-South partnerships can advance the understanding of complex international development issues. Partnerships can facilitate the pooling of resources and the building of competencies on both sides. According to this perspective, Southern institutions can gain access to funding and build capacity. In turn, Northern institutions gain exposure to the policy and social context of the region where the development issue is most prevalent. This allows for more context-appropriate research and locally relevant policies (Michel et al., 2013, 1-4).

There has, however, also always been concern about how these expected benefits may be eroded by unequal power dynamics because of the imbalance in funding and research resources. The literature on North-South research collaborations frequently flags the pervasive influence of Northern institutions on the research agenda, which are described by some as scientific colonialism (Gunasekara, 2020, 503-513).

A variety of conceptual models of North-South research collaborations exist.¹ The “‘innovation systems approach’” has gained traction among Northern and Southern researchers. Hall et al.(2001, 72) argued that systems of agricultural research, particularly in the Global South, had not shifted to align with broadened agricultural-research agendas. They thus proposed a “national systems of innovation” approach in which the transmission of knowledge among institutions would be central to innovative progress.

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¹ Bradley (2007) identified four North-South research collaboration typologies: research partnerships (between researchers/teams who joined to address an agreed-upon research question), capacity-building partnerships (without any research agenda), university chairs (held by visiting Southern researchers at Northern institutions on critical development issues), and informal and formal North-South research networks.
The “knowledge-based approach” has also gained prominence, influenced largely by Stiglitz (1999, 1) and his assertion that knowledge is a public good. Tilak (2001, 2) contended that, while Stiglitz necessitated addressing the devaluation of Southern knowledge, collaborative research was key to producing knowledge as a global public good.

A further concept that gained prominence was the “demand-led” approach, which focused exclusively on the Southern ownership of research. In the 1990s, this approach was used by the Directoraat-Generaal Internationale Samenwerking of the Dutch government in an attempt to combat Northern dominance of research on Southern issues. One strategy they employed was to limit the involvement of research funders and Dutch embassies in Southern-led research projects, thus diminishing the funder-recipient power imbalances that tended to accompany research grants. Wiedenhof and Molenaar (2006, 8), however, argued that an approach in which Northern funders merely provide research grants without further involvement in the research process itself can be seen to imply that the North has nothing to learn from Southern researchers, which is patronising. Rather, the North should play an interactive role in the production and sharing of knowledge. Moreover, Bradley (2008, 676) noted that, although this approach allowed for research priorities that were locally relevant, the research questions were not always of interest to Dutch stakeholders, nor were they relevant to Dutch policy concerns, leaving the Dutch research community unsatisfied.

North-South partnerships have often been characterised by power imbalances that skew benefits to the Global North. Rakowski (1993, 79) characterised this by saying that “the U.S. [or Northern] scholar extracts a form of “wealth” from the developing country for the benefit of his or her discipline and career, the funding agency imposes its agenda and standards, and host-country scholars are deprived of data and recognition. Worst of all, outside control inhibits the development of innovative methods and concepts that may be more appropriate to the research setting.” Bradley (2008, 675) argued that power imbalances were most prevalent in the agenda-setting process, largely due to the structure of Northern research-funding systems. That is, funders often established priorities they deemed “policy-relevant,” which were not necessarily locally
relevant. Moreover, funders often mandated the establishment of North-South partnerships as a prerequisite for support. Given the scarcity of funding opportunities available to Southern researchers, they thus tended to enter these types of partnerships out of necessity as opposed to legitimate preference. Bradley recognised that most studies on North-South collaborations had been conducted by Northern researchers or donors, highlighting the need for more literature reflecting Southern experiences.

Nyamnjoh, Mukuna, and Sambaiga (2022, 2) noted that the process of decolonising knowledge was not about vilifying Western knowledge systems nor was it about Africanising them. Rather, it was a challenge to hegemonic tendencies while at the same time acknowledging the value and complementarity of both Northern and Southern knowledge.

While the perspective of the Nyamnjoh group is valid, it may underplay the tensions between Northern and Southern’ approaches to academic research and policymaking. Drawing on debates regarding under-researched topics such as migration in South Africa, Vanyoro (2015, 8-20) challenged the normative assumptions that often underpinned Northern approaches to policymaking, including, for instance, whether a universal definition of “policy impact” existed and whether researchers could assume that the use of policy analysis via models would necessarily translate into real, pragmatic changes.

Vanyoro further highlighted the tendency of Northern funders and researchers to opt for more mechanistic and linear models of production and consumption. Though an evolution toward a more interactive “Theory of Change” model has occurred, that model remains inapt in “resource poor, less institutionalised and highly politicised contexts” (Vanyoro, 2015, 6). This is because the “Theory of Change” model retains a mechanical element by requiring agents to make assumptions that particular policy interventions will lead to specific outcomes; otherwise, the model does not hold. Integrating other models such as the “enlightenment model” and “political model” can allow more sensitivity to the four key variables: 1) the “nature of the policy issue” (awareness must exist that policy issues and their popularity are more often than not influenced by the way the topic is presented in public and political discourse, which inevitably has an impact on research
demand and policy impact); 2) researchers must be cognisant of the “institutional and political context,” which plays a notable role in determining which issues receive attention on the policy agenda; 3) “voice and audience—who is talking and who is being heard,” which are often defined by the political institutions; and 4) “semi-stochastic elements of timing,” which stresses that the extent of policy impact relies on both time and timing. Recognizing the effects of policy change often takes time, but continuous engagement is necessary to leverage opportunities that arise. Ultimately, Vanyoro called for a more holistic research model that was both context- and issue-specific.

Several attempts have been made to establish guidelines for fair and effective North-South research collaborations (see the Appendix for a list of the most widely adopted guidelines). Nevertheless, these seemingly comprehensive guidelines have been criticised by researchers and scholars for their idealistic rhetoric, which often lacks operational and practical grounding. Perhaps the most widely recognised and adopted research guideline, for instance, implemented by the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries, has been criticised by the Commission’s own colleagues. Firstly, they questioned how legitimate and authoritative the guide can declare itself to be. One colleague sought justification for the proposed methodology while another argued that the eleven principles in the guidelines should be inherently clear to researchers and that no need for any reasoning or interpretation should exist beyond what the guide said. The Swiss Commission responded by explaining that they drew on their own experiences of North-South research collaborations in developing the recommendations. Moreover, the guide reflected statements by representatives of countries in the Global South who called not only for local research capacity building, but also for a code of conduct particularly aimed at Northern researchers who participated in collaborations (Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries, 1998, 31).

Secondly, critics argued that, although the principles were ambitious, they were enigmatic and difficult to implement (Kotze & Dymitrow, 2020, 11). The Swiss Commission’s response was that “the aims expressed for each principle are ideals; the decision as to how far they can be lived up to in practice must be left to those actually
involved in projects. The guidelines cannot offer any kind of guarantee; they are intended purely to offer help” (1998, 31).

The more recent Research Fairness Initiative (hereafter, RFI), implemented in Africa in 2017 and on a global scale in 2018 by the Council on Health Research for Development, has had more popular support. The RFI’s mission is to “become the new normal for research organisations…. It is probably the one and only opportunity to look strategically at how your institution creates, manages and exits partnerships. We aim for the RFI to become a global standard, and for the results to become a systematic global learning platform on how to keep getting better.” The document goes on to say that “governance and management of the RFI are essential to its independence and credibility” (Council on Health Research for Development, n.d.).

Lavery and Ijsselmuiden (2018, 1) highlighted the positive early results from the implementation of the RFI. The first RFI report by the Institute of Tropical Hygiene and Medicine in Portugal discussed how the RFI “confirmed for the ministers that their institutions already have policies and practices that address many of the aspects of fairness covered in the RFI. Importantly, however, the RFI provided the process, and created the momentum, to bring the ministers together to consider the nature and quality of research collaborations between their countries from an international perspective” (Lavery & Ijsselmuiden, 2018, 11). They went on to underscore the fact that possible challenges could include, first, the perception that the RFI was bureaucratic although early reports did not emphasise costly administrative burdens. A second challenge was that in reporting truthfully on areas for improvement, institutions could lose their competitiveness. Lavery and Ijsselmuiden (2018, 5) argued, however, that such uncertainty would arise from any measure to combat unfair research, and, moreover, that no such evidence of loss in competitiveness had yet been noted. A final challenge was that the success of the RFI was dependent upon the scale and range of contributions of RFI reports to the evidence base in addition to the rate of adoption.

Despite varying opinions of the success of the RFI guidelines, one key observation is that previous literature seldom reflects the experiences and views of Southern researchers. Authors of reflections on North-South collaborations and of the guidelines
governing them have been predominantly Northern-based.

This paper has two research aims: First, to document the experiences with North-South research collaborations from different vantage points; Second, to extract lessons about failures and successes, impediments, and enablers.

II. Analytical Framework

Our analytical framework for data interpretation encompassed key dimensions of North-South research collaborations. First, we evaluated the impact on researchers’ career development, considering skill acquisition, knowledge enhancement, and professional growth. Second, we explored researchers’ perceptions of their collaboration’s role in policy and development research, assessing alignment with local priorities and contributions to sustainable development goals. Third, we scrutinised the effectiveness of knowledge transfer, identifying acquired skills and their relevance. The framework also investigated how collaboration goals were framed by researchers and funders, examining criteria for success and potential disparities in goal framing. Our questions facilitated a qualitative assessment of program success, encouraging nuanced perspectives. Additionally, we addressed concerns about inferred researcher identities in a case-study approach. This comprehensive framework aims to guide the nuanced interpretation of data from both Northern and Southern perspectives in North-South research collaborations.

III. Methodology

The literature on this topic makes clear that this is a neglected area of research. Based on that literature, we formulated a set of questions to ensure that we could investigate the main findings that emerged from exploratory papers on this topic. In
recognition of their divergent positions and roles on research projects, we decided to conduct separate interviews with emerging and established researchers from the North and the South. Using networks and literature searches, we recruited four established Northern researchers, two emerging Northern researchers, sixteen established Southern researchers, and four emerging Southern researchers. These are divided into two subgroups: Northern collaborations with Africa and Northern collaborations with Asia. The four-way categorisation meant that the sample per category was quite small and did not facilitate any structured analysis. We see this work as exploratory research that will contribute to the emergent and early research on this topic and help to establish the research agenda and funding rationale for this field of inquiry. We hope that, in this way, this research can pave the way for larger samples and more structured studies that focus on understanding each of these research collaboration role quadrants in more depth.

We used a combination of word-of-mouth and a literature review to identify examples of fair and effective research collaborations between Southern and Northern institutions. Through this process we identified the research collaborations between Makerere University and various Swedish universities, funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency since 2000; the Ghanaian-Dutch Health Research for Development Programme (2001-2008; see Kok et al., 2017); the Network for Scientific Support in the Field of Sexual and Reproductive Health (Van der Veken et al., 2017); and the Thanzi La Onse (Health for All) project between York University, Uganda, and Malawi. To examine African experience with North-South research collaborations, we recruited three established Northern researchers, two emerging Northern researchers, three established Southern researchers and one emerging Southern researcher for the Collaborations with Africa subgroup.

We supplemented the African perspective on North-South collaborations with seventeen interviews with Asian researchers. The sample of respondents was carefully

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2 Thanzi La Onse (2023) is funded through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). It is a five-year, £1.5 billion funding stream supporting high quality research into problems faced by developing countries. It is led by the University of York in collaboration with Imperial College London, University College London, the Overseas Development Institute, the Malawi College of Medicine, the University of Malawi, the Public Health Institute of Malawi, the MRC/UVRI Uganda Research Unit on AIDS, and the Center for Global Development (Washington, DC).
selected from diverse sectors, including the public sector, think tanks, and academia. This choice aimed to capture a comprehensive perspective on collaboration dynamics. To examine the Asian experience with North-South research collaborations, we recruited one established Northern researcher, thirteen established Southern researchers and three emerging Southern researchers for the Collaborations with Asia subgroup.

Based on our expanded initial literature review, we recognized the following as priority questions for researchers: how research collaborations had contributed to their research careers, what was their understanding of policy and development research, and how had they acquired their skills. Given the sparse in-depth qualitative research on this question, we included open-ended questions to enrich the qualitative granularity and help us understand how researchers and funders framed goals and thought about the success of their programs.

The researchers obtained ethics permissions from Stellenbosch’s Research Ethics Committee: Social Behavioural and Education Research.

IV. Findings

The findings from our interviews are well-aligned with what is documented in the literature. We highlight a few prominent themes that emerged through our interviews.

4.1. Consensus among Southern Partners on the Benefits of Collaboration

From the Northern side, there was consensus among both senior and junior researchers that collaborating with Southern institutions allowed for greater exposure to the policy and social contexts of the communities in which primary data collection was taking place. In their opinion, this led to more locally relevant research. In addition, our
informants noted that including local researchers and policymakers gave their work added credibility within the academic community. One junior researcher remarked, “It allows you to form connections with policymakers, and when research involves local policymakers there is added credibility. It also gives you exposure to the current, relevant questions and is a good way to prioritise questions that policymakers are interested in and (focus research) on topics of interest, which naturally generates more attention.”

From the Southern side, informants highlighted various benefits, including publication in reputable journals, exposure to new research techniques, involvement in workshops and conferences, joint supervision of PhD students, increased human capital, and overall capacity building. One of the Southern researchers was particularly delighted to have gained access to some of the leading authors in his field. The researcher commented, “Through the collaboration, I had access to top authors at various conferences. The program gave me access to some of those people and their networks.”

The Southern junior researchers were perhaps the most vocal in their recognition of the importance and benefits of such opportunities. They particularly noted how the collaboration served to enhance their academic careers (see also Mabugu et al., 2022 and Burger & Ahmed, 2022). For some, this resulted in their first joint publications in top journals in their field. Others found the collaboration useful in enhancing their research. One junior researcher from the South noted, “The way these projects were carried out, we would go to the Scandinavian countries and do some courses alongside research. So generally, I was able to learn a couple of things regarding my research.”

Southern senior researchers were more vocal about the exposure to new techniques and the policy implications of such collaborations. One of the senior researchers told us, “You know we use sophisticated modelling techniques in our field which are developed there (in advanced countries), so the collaboration helped us (learn most of) those techniques.”

In outlining the benefits of North-South research collaborations, the Asian and African experiences were in alignment. One Asian respondent mentioned that access to superior and expensive modelling software became easier because it was subsidised through research partnerships. Another respondent suggested that having Asian staff in
northern institutions also helped to reduce the costs of networking and of sourcing evidence (from Northern institutions). The respondent noted, “Long lasting research collaborations have (resulted from) Asian research community members working for a high-profile northern institution, possibly as a result of migration, and (later) introducing or making connections with their native country or institutions where they first started their career.”

The insights shared by Hippler and Ahmed (2022) also highlighted the contribution of the Asian diaspora in facilitating research endeavours. Their analysis noted ways in which researchers, often residing in the North, collaborated favourably with their Southern counterparts, leading to reduced costs associated with data acquisition and research collaborations. Consequently, the authors pointed toward advantages and positive outcomes stemming from these collaborations.

4.2. Discordance Regarding Fairness of North-South Research Collaborations

There was, however, less consensus on whether the collaborative process was fair and equal. Northern researchers tended to believe that, although the funder’s research mandate was broad, the funder did not influence the specific agenda. As they saw it, research priorities were established in conjunction with Southern institutions, and the agenda was tailored to the needs of the South. This view was shared by most of the Asian researchers we interviewed. They described decision-making processes as mutual, with many Asian researchers being given managerial positions. Contrary to the African researchers, the Asian researchers tended to describe research collaborations with the North in positive terms, highlighting that they had had adequate opportunity to voice concerns and ideas freely. The Asian researchers also mentioned that there were no significant power imbalances, and they perceived the research process as transparent. They were grateful for the strong professional relationships they established, and they felt that all stakeholders were treated with respect and without prejudice. Overall, Asian researchers described being viewed as equal partners in the collaboration.
This view may be explained by the colonial history of Asia and the North. For example, even after independence, the North remained the largest financer of development in some Asian economies, such as those in South Asia. Due to their colonial past and established networks, many Asian universities, think tanks, and academics have a long history of collaboration and strong partnerships with Northern universities and research institutions which date back to over a century. This has helped to build trust and understanding between researchers from the two regions and fostered the creation of a supportive environment for research collaboration.

Despite these positive relationships, however, Asian institutions have remained reliant on Northern institutions. Additionally, despite their growing importance in the global arena and political landscape, Asian think tanks are not getting visibility at important forums such as the UN’s High Level Political Forum or G7 and G20 meetings (see also Toru & Ahmed, 2020). This may be also attributed to the fact that Asian think tanks often lack strategic direction, which is typically underpinned by a clear “theory of change” and therefore fail to outline longer-and medium-term objectives. As a consequence, they tend to under-invest in communications and only publish their work in local languages. Seen collectively, these factors make it difficult for Asian think tanks to demonstrate their impact and secure extra funding from donors.

Senior African researchers did not share the perspective of their Asian counterparts on the fairness of the North-South research collaborations. Although African researchers participated in writing proposals and were generally satisfied with the research outputs stemming from these collaborations, they were often unhappy with the research process and referred to “window-dressing” efforts. For example, authorship of a journal article would include a fair balance of Southern and Northern co-authors, but the authorships frequently failed to reflect actual contributions. Southern authors were listed to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of the journal article and to ensure that readers saw the work as the result of a fair collaboration. Often, Southern researchers were not given an opportunity to participate in integral aspects of the paper such as data analysis and interpretation of findings. One Northern researcher acknowledged that “they lacked sufficient time to assess analytical writing capabilities in the South due to
tight deadlines. As a result, while Southern counterparts were invited to gather data from the South, the analytical writing aspect of the research remained with the Northern team. This approach aimed to prevent unforeseen delays or issues regarding research quality."

African researchers frequently said they did not feel they were treated as equal partners. They emphasised power asymmetries that inhibited a more equal partnership. One senior African researcher mentioned that “Sometimes it feels as if we are included as an afterthought just to fulfil a requirement. It is as if they start something and then realise at the end that oh, we need to include one or two researchers from Africa.”

Yet another interesting aspect had to do with the inclusiveness of research decision-making. Although Northern researchers described the process as inclusive, Southern researchers noted that it was often the funder who set the agenda. It is not clear whether this discrepancy in the perspectives of the Northern and Southern researchers comes because the Northern researchers were more accepting of the funders playing this role or whether they were less sensitive to inequities that aligned with their own research priorities. There may be other explanations, too: it is likely that Northern donors may in many instances have similar training and backgrounds as Northern researchers. The shared vantage point may mean that Northern donors and researchers may be blind to each other’s biases and ideological assumptions. Understanding this misalignment could be a topic for future research in this field.

It is concerning that some Southern researchers experienced Northern researchers as overly prescriptive and paternalistic. As one senior African researcher put it, “There was that kind of superiority thing that was coming in. Northern partners/counterparts knew that they were coming from the side that was funding the project and assumed a superiority feeling because of that.”

Junior African researchers were often less critical of the research collaboration than their senior team members. It could be that the junior researchers felt that they were not as established in their careers as the seniors and thus felt as if they could not speak out as strongly.
4.3. Funding at the Root of Power Imbalances

Access to funding was the main force found behind Southern researchers’ participation in North-South collaborations; however, this also often meant that they felt they could not voice their concerns for fear of losing funding. Moreover, there was much consensus that their desire to engage in future North-South collaborations was dictated by their need for funding as opposed to positive experiences in previous collaborations. In addition, Southern researchers commented that, because having Southern researchers on the team was often a prerequisite for funding, their inclusion was more a way of “ticking a box” than a valued contribution.

One Southern researcher was unhappy that most of the research budget was allocated to Northern researchers’ travel, leaving only a small amount for core research activities that needed to take place at the Southern site. Southern researchers further complained that Northern researchers were paid more than they were for conducting similar work. A Southern researcher shared that, when he expressed concern about the small relative allocation of funding to the team, the institution responded that funding was coming from Northern taxpayers’ money, implying that the Southern researcher should be grateful and had no right to question the allocation.

There was an asymmetry in the role of junior researchers from the North and South, which may in part reflect the imbalance in power and resources. Northern junior researchers were assigned more important and senior roles than their Southern counterparts (e.g., supervision of a PhD student). In another case, a Northern junior researcher oversaw the collaboration from the Northern institution side. The equivalent role from the Southern side, however, was held by a dean.

A common theme mentioned among Northern researchers, however, was that Southern researchers needed to recognise their worth and credibility as researchers. Moreover, they argued that Southern researchers should articulate their needs, instead of always expecting Northern institutions and researchers to understand them from the outset. The big question, however, is whether there is room for Southern researchers to do so. Northern researchers did, on the other hand, acknowledge that funding imbalances contributed to the feeling on the part of Southern researchers that they had
no leverage and had less ability to speak out. The upshot of all this is a chicken-and-egg debate: To what extent do feelings of being “less-than” emerge from power imbalances and to what extent do such feelings prompt Southern researchers to self-censor and avoid risk-taking, thereby strengthening power imbalances?

4.4. Role of Intermediaries

Collaborations were primarily funded by development agencies in the North. In one extreme example, a Southern-country government was expected to co-fund a project but was ultimately unable to do so. Some Southern researchers experienced the research-management institution\(^3\) as disrespectful and shared stories of unwarranted demands, such as requiring additional uncompensated work. Others expressed dissatisfaction with how the research-management institutions would sometimes be obsessed with cost containment at the expense of convenience. One junior researcher in the South, for example, was particularly unhappy with how the research-management institution preferred cheap and often inconvenient flights despite having allocated sufficient funding for conference travel. Budgets were cut without advance notice, disheartening Southern researchers. Often the institution distributing the funding was inflexible and not willing to entertain the concerns of the Southern researchers about budget allocation.

Many Northern researchers also recognised how the research-management institution perpetuated imbalances in power in North-South research collaborations. They found that “cutting out the middleman”—that is, direct funding of Southern research without the need to channel funding through a Northern research-management institution—served to equalise power imbalances between Northern and Southern partners.

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\(^3\) A research management institution refers to the institution responsible for running the research program, ensuring the funder’s mandates are met and managing the disbursement of grants. This institution may be a separate entity from the Northern research institution/university involved in the collaboration and is thus responsible for coordinating between the Northern and Southern institutions. It may also be an institution linked to the Northern funder. Alternatively, it may be Northern embassies based in the Southern partner country implementing governmental research mandates.
institutions. One view was that cutting out the research-management institution may be a good approach, but competition for resources also led Southern institutions to seek external funding and establish connections outside of the main funder. A possibly more constructive approach mentioned, however, was that the Northern institution could include helping the Southern institution obtain additional funding as part of program strategy. In general, informants agreed that anchoring the coordinating institution in the South would improve these power imbalances.

Northern researchers sometimes recognised that frustrations were rooted in misunderstandings of differing research and work environments. Informants mentioned the importance of considering the abilities of Southern institutions especially in terms of their financial and administrative capacities. Unrealistic expectations on the part of Northern institutions may lead them to make impractical requests of the Southern partners, creating frustration on both sides. One Northern researcher in charge of coordinating the collaboration remarked on issues regarding the time allocated by the research-management institution to produce certain deliverables. This resulted in tensions. The main issue from the Southern side was the feeling that, although capacity was indeed being built within their institution, it was not built at a rate that allowed them to meet the expected deliverables. One researcher noted that it was key to embed the assessment of capacities into the design of the collaboration if expectations were to be realistic and aligned.

4.5. Pluralism and Power Dynamics

Some researchers responded to the question regarding power balances by highlighting other power differentials outside of the North-South split that also affected the dynamics of the research collaboration. Two Northern senior researchers who were women emphasised how they believed gender played a significant, if not more influential, role in creating power imbalances in research projects, compared to that of the North-South divide. Both advocated for gender rights to be addressed in their respective collaborations. One point raised was that women often end up leading North-
South collaborations, and instead of being respected as team leaders, play rather a “mother role.” One example given by the researchers was that if a PI who was a man was requested to report on a project’s progress, he would not do the work but expect her to report for him. In addition, she emphasised that men were seldom asked to write reflective pieces on the collaborations, the task instead being given to women. She mentioned that she advocated for gender rights on an informal basis, noting that she often found herself trying to empower other women by encouraging them to speak more loudly and confidently during team discussions. Most projects mentioned some type of formal ethics or rights training, which often involved educational sessions, especially at the beginning of the project. These typically targeted reconciling cultural differences. One Northern researcher mentioned that she advocated for sexual and reproductive rights as well as gender rights to be addressed in the first training, as she felt that from her experience this issue had not been addressed well in previous collaborations.

In addition, a Northern researcher chose to respond to the question about North-South power differences by highlighting the asymmetries within the Global North, noting that research is dominated by Western Europe, while Eastern Europeans do not always get their fair share. She proposed that seeing issues through the lens of North-South was narrow and oversimplified and negated the much wider inequalities at hand. She additionally mentioned that language barriers also posed a challenge, pointing out that journals were more likely to accept publications in English, an advantage for native speakers of English.

One woman who worked as a researcher in the North highlighted the pervasiveness of power differences rooted in gender in both the Global South and North. She noted instances in which men in senior positions did not comply with all ethical requirements when conducting and reporting research, including adding their names as authors to articles without making any contribution. She also reported that women were burdened with extra duties that were not directly connected to research. “Gender for me (is) much bigger than the North-South problem,” she noted, “including whether you take your job seriously. In certain collaborations, I would say researchers are serious, and you have others where you will not have this seriousness. I think I’m getting more and
more irritated because it makes me feel that I always have to be the big mother, who is caring for everything.”

4.6. Longer Horizons Needed

Respondents highlighted that power imbalances tended to decrease over time as capacity was built. One Northern researcher emphasised that her Southern counterparts had become senior researchers and directors of research institutions over the life of the project. She now considered them colleagues, and this made the partnership more equal, even if other imbalances (funding, for example) remained. However, the researcher stressed, however, that seeing this kind of shift required long-term collaborations. Another interviewee in a long-running North-South collaboration with no time-limit for completion pointed out that the longer-term outlook created the space for relationships and trust to be established.

4.7. Knowledge vs. Lived Experiences

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was essentially whether one needed to be from the South to understand the South. One Northern health-economics researcher argued that, although she was not from the partner country, she understood their health care system better than her home country’s, stating that, “You don’t have to be a local. So my PhD students … very often tell me, ‘You explain my own country to me.’ If you work in a system (or) you work in a certain organisation, it shapes you.”

She thus contended that a researcher did not have to be a local to gain local knowledge. In principle this is true, but the understanding of the context of a country that is needed to provide relevant policy advice also involves a consideration of political forces, social attitudes, and cultural practices. This response reflected Vanyoro’s debate (2015) regarding Northern researchers’ typical use of the Theory of Change model. They tended to assume that specific policy interventions would mechanistically lead to specific
outcomes, negating cultural and political contexts. Further research on the implications of local knowledge, how to obtain it, and in what circumstances it is necessary may contribute to a more holistic approach to policy interventions, as Vanyoro proposed.

One Northern researcher mentioned how his first job as a policy-research intern in a developing country set the tone for the rest of his academic career and shaped his beliefs about how development research should be conducted. The highly selective and reputable fellowship programme in which the researcher participated placed recent economics graduates in civil service positions in low- and middle-income countries for two years. Being “embedded” in a country context may help foster a deeper understanding of local attitudes, perspectives, and ways of doing research, and such longer-term exchanges can be encouraged and incorporated into North-South research collaborations. This also links to the theme of sustained partnerships being more successful.

4.8. Funders Focus on Outputs of Research Collaborations, Not Process

There was a consensus among Southern and Northern researchers that no specific reporting framework on research fairness existed for use in North-South collaborations. It was observed that funders’ reporting on project success was often results-based (number of publications, for instance). Northern researchers commonly acknowledged that reporting on research fairness usually came from a sentiment of goodwill of the individual as opposed to a requirement from the funder.

V. Discussion

The findings from the interviews affirmed much of what has been reflected in the literature, particularly regarding the benefits obtained by both Northern and Southern researchers through collaborations and the ability to create locally relevant policies.
The findings also, however, noted the continued dominance of the North, both within North-South team dynamics and in agenda-setting by funders. The interviews highlighted a consensus regarding the benefits of North-South collaborations, but opinions on the research process differed depending on the cultural and country context. Our findings showed that Asian researchers tended to view the dynamics within the research process as much more equitable and amicable compared to African researchers. The comparison of cross-Southern experiences within the North-South collaboration debate is a matter that is seldom analysed in the literature. We have made preliminary interpretations of this differential; however, further research on why countries in the Global South vary in experiences regarding these types of collaborations would be beneficial.

The interviews additionally revealed that research-management institutions, regardless of whether they are affiliated with funders or not, augmented power imbalances, and a new recommendation was to provide direct funding to Southern institutions or develop strategies to help Southern researchers find external funding.

Our findings add to the literature on power differentials by going beyond the North-South narrative to the imbalances between the quadrant categories (established/emerging researchers from the Global North/South). Further, we highlight the constraints placed on emerging Southern researchers. Their Northern counterparts are often given much more responsibility, and emerging Southern researchers tend to be more hesitant to speak out regarding issues they face. The intersectionality of their position in their research career and in the Global South, combined with funding imbalances, appeared to place them in a precarious position.

It is noteworthy to mention the limitations encountered in contacting potential emerging researcher interviewees, including difficulty in finding email addresses and frequent non-responses. It was mentioned that many have now progressed in their careers (as some of the projects selected ended several years before our research) or may simply not have had time. Yet it would be valuable to question whether there is not some other underlying factor at play, possibly relating to the unwillingness to risk speaking out and tarnishing their careers.
In addition, the findings likewise emphasise the lack of fairness guidelines to govern these collaborations, and reporting on research fairness is often not mandatory. The reporting also tends to be the responsibility of Northern researchers, which reiterates the negation of Southern experiences in collaborations.

A notable shift in research interests in the past three decades has been the transition toward multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary agendas with concomitant adaptations in the assumptions that guide the measurement and evaluation of North-South research collaborations. It is now broadly acknowledged that co-authorship, in particular, is not a sufficient indicator of the success of a North-South partnership and reflects the occurrence rather than the depth of the collaboration (Bradley, 2007, 11).

The issue of “capacity building” can be controversial and contested. Swartz emphasised the importance of personal narratives for accurate knowledge production, implying that the publication of diverse voices was important. Swartz also noted, however, that publishers trying to adhere to traditional (typically Western) standards of what constituted “good” academic practices often extensively revised Southern-produced research. This may possibly negate the nuanced knowledge found in self-expression. He was thus concerned that, in our attempt to build capacity we may silence diverse voices (Swartz, 2018, 123-138).

There is consensus in the literature that sustained North-South research partnerships are more likely to be successful. Long-term collaborations allow both the building of trust among all stakeholders and the reconciliation of differing academic and relational approaches (Michel et al., 2013, 3).

Finally, as Southern authors, we acknowledge that we may ourselves have a particular interest and perspective on this research question and that in our interpretation

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4 Other than research-focused capacity building, some literature has highlighted the role of North-South collaborations in such areas as capacity building for entrepreneurship development. The British Council initiated the District Independent Contract Education Programme across several countries to promote social and creative entrepreneurship and create value chains with partners in the South (Ahmed et al., 2019; see also Aslam et al., 2020).
VI. Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

Our research shows that while there are encouraging signs of improvement in equity, persistent challenges remain. Southern partners acknowledge the benefits of collaboration, including exposure to policy contexts and skills enhancement, highlighting the potential of these initiatives. Disparities in power dynamics can often lead to discordance, however, with African researchers expressing dissatisfaction over unequal authorship contributions and decision-making processes.

The pivotal role given to Northern researchers and research-management organisations via their linkages to Northern funders hamper the ability of Southern researchers to voice their concerns, and this can perpetuate power imbalances. Involvement of intermediaries, notably Northern-funded research-management institutions, introduces challenges, with Southern researchers facing disrespect, inflexibility, and budget constraints.

These findings would suggest the need for a shift toward direct funding for Southern institutions, reducing intermediary roles and fostering autonomy. Long-term collaborations are identified as potential mitigators of power imbalances, allowing for relationship and trust-building. Initiatives addressing gender imbalances, the recognition of cultural factors, and the prioritizing of capacity building should be integrated. Additionally, we recommend that funding agencies develop comprehensive reporting frameworks that focus on fairness in research processes and encourage researchers to prioritize transformative and participatory processes and to recognize diverse voices and cultural factors. The holistic evolution of North-South research collaborations demands sustained efforts for equitable and impactful partnerships. Our findings would suggest that funders may need to reassess metrics and consider longer-term, less-restrictive...
funding to empower local researchers and level playing fields.

Given the exploratory nature of our study, however, we consider these recommendations to be tentative and preliminary and prefer to foreground and emphasise the need for further independent (that is, not internal) research on equity in research with larger samples—and specifically on fairness and effectiveness in North-South collaborations.

The interviews confirm that intersecting vulnerabilities often put junior (emerging) researchers from the South in the worst position in collaborations. Aligned with the concerns identified by some of our respondents, an examination of training, mentoring, and earning opportunities for young policy researchers in low- and middle-income countries would be important. Our preliminary work suggests that little scaffolding and structure exists to develop the expertise and skills of young local researchers; as a result, they are extremely vulnerable. This could be an important contributor to the problems researchers identified in the interviews.

Lastly, the substantial gap in the attitudes of Asian and African researchers was not anticipated by the research team, and therefore it could not be fully explored. We offered preliminary thoughts on why these gaps emerge, but a dedicated study may be required to understand these discrepancies more fully. Such a study should also include Latin American researchers.
References


Appendix

Guidelines for Fair and Effective North-South Collaborations

While there is little explicit incentive for good partnership practice, some guidelines aim to define and promote fairness. The most widely adopted, or at least best known and reported in the literature or mentioned in our interviews, include:

The Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries’ guide for transboundary research partnerships

This guide presented by the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries provides eleven principles that facilitate shared knowledge generation and the establishment of mutual trust when engaging in research collaborations. This guide also presents seven key questions for researchers to consider to better comprehend the nature of their partnerships, identify areas of potential success/failure, and structure collaborations that are mutually beneficial and effective (Stöckli, Wiesmann & Lys, 2018, 2).

The Council on Health Research for Development Research Fairness Initiative

The Council on Health Research for Development (n.d.) developed the Research Fairness Initiative as a tool to promote self-reflection and to operationalise reporting on measures taken to achieve fairness in research partnerships.

The BRIDGE Guidelines

These guidelines were created for global health research. They follow a study chronologically, providing a set of six standards and forty-two accompanying criteria for each stage of a study (Alba et al., 2020, 1-9).

Gaillard’s Checklist

Summing up the work of other authors on principles to guide effective North-South collaborations, Gaillard provided a ‘checklist’ of ingredients for successful North-South research partnerships, which has come to be known as the ‘Charter of North-South Partnerships’. In Gaillard’s view, strong mutual interests were the most important ingredient (Gaillard, 1994, 58).

The Cape Town Statement on Fairness, Equity, and Diversity in Research

This statement was drafted based on discussions by attendees at the 7th World Conference on Research Integrity in Cape Town in the beginning of 2023. This event represented a momentous step forward in addressing the layers of injustice that stem from “a complex mix of racial discrimination, systemic bias and major disparities in funding and resources” (Horn et al., 2023, 791), compromising the integrity and fairness of research and skewing benefits to wealthier countries. The statement’s twenty recommendations provide calls to action to
improve fairness and equity, increase diversity and inclusivity, encourage fair practices in research, provide infrastructure for low- and middle-income countries, recognise indigenous knowledge, and promote global equity for all problems (Horn et al., 2023).

**North-South Collaborations—Interview Questions**

**Senior Established Researcher from the Global North**

1. Did you find that partnering with Southern researchers enhanced the quality of your research?
2. Did partnering with a Southern institution allow you to gain exposure to the policy and social context of the country you partnered with, allowing for more appropriate research?
3. Who would you say were the main actors in establishing research priorities and agendas? Did the funder play any role in shaping the research agenda? Were any strategies used to ensure the needs and priorities of partners in the Global South were understood?
4. Were any power imbalances present? How did you address power dynamics in your partnership, and have you seen any improvements in this area over the years?
5. What tended to be your main role in the research process?
6. What was the main role of the most senior researcher on the Southern side?
7. What guidelines or measures, if any, have you used to ensure fair and mutually beneficial practices? Did any checklists/guidelines prove useful? Did funders require any reporting on research fairness?
8. Would you say that issues such as familiarity with the social context, cultural differences and knowledge of local institutions were handled with sensitivity? Did you have any strategies to ensure this?
9. Have you continued to work with some of the researchers on this team after the project had ended? Who and why?
10. Would you recommend collaborating with Southern researchers to your colleagues? For what reason?

**Junior Emerging Researcher from the Global North**

1. Did any benefits arise from partnering with Southern researchers? Did the resultant research enhance your academic credibility and serve to grow your career as a researcher?
2. What was your approach to building relationships with partners from the Global South?
3. Were any power imbalances present? If so, how were they addressed? What was your role in the research process compared to your partner/s?
4. Were any measures taken to ensure issues such as transparency of roles and results, culture and cultural competence and the recognition of indigenous knowledge were integrated into the research process? Was there any reporting element?
5. What did you learn from this project? How did you benefit? Did you learn anything from your partners in the South?
6. Were any strategies implemented to understand and meet the needs and priorities of partners in the Global South?
7. Based on this experience, would this influence how you approach North-South collaborations in the future?
8. Have you continued to work with some of the researchers on this team after the project had ended? Who and why?
Senior Established Researcher from the Global South

1. What was your main motivation for partnering with an institution from the Global North?
2. What did you gain from this project?
3. What role did you play in the agenda-setting process? Did the funders play any role?
4. What was your role during the rest of the research process compared to that of your Northern counterpart? Were power imbalances present? How did they show up? Did challenges arise, and how were these addressed?
5. What strategies have you found most effective for communicating the needs and priorities of partners in the Global South to partners in the Global North, and how did you create adequate spaces for both voices to be heard?
6. Would you say that the Global North-South partnership was built in a sustainable manner? Was there adequate time for building trust and did funding requirements allow for sufficient time to complete the project?
7. Have you continued to work with some of the researchers on this team after the project had ended? Who and why? (NOTE: A “gatekeeper” of local research is someone with established relationships with local communities, who may control access to these communities for research purposes. During the agenda-setting process with Northern researchers, the Southern researcher may use his/her role as “gatekeeper” as leverage to ensure Southern and locally relevant agendas are set.)
8. To what extent did your source of leverage in the negotiation process stem from your role as “gatekeeper” of local knowledge as opposed to your academic credibility as a researcher?
9. How were Southern inputs and feedback processed into the shared report and who made decisions on how these inputs were processed?
10. Was the final product shared before it was released?
11. What strategies can you suggest for ensuring respectful and legitimate research processes, especially regarding cultural sensitivity and cultural appropriateness of the research considering all stakeholders involved.
12. Was there IP or data generated as part of this project? Who owned the IP or the data? Was there any discussion of this between the Southern and Northern partners?

Junior Emerging Researcher from the Global South (has at least a Master’s degree and 1-2 years of experience)

1. How did you become involved in this study? What did you see as the main benefits of the study (for your career) when you agreed to participate?
2. Did the collaboration benefit you personally? What were the main learnings during the project?
3. Would you be likely to engage in further North-South collaborations in the future? Why?
4. Did you feel the research process was inclusive and participatory?
5. How did you navigate power dynamics in the partnership, especially as an early career researcher?
6. What was your role in the research process?
7. Would you say this project has helped you to grow your career and enhance your networks?
8. Have you continued to work with some of the researchers on this team after the project ended? Why and on what study? Would you recommend that your peers work with (the established researcher)? Would you recommend your peers to work with this team of (institution from North)?
9. Were there instances where you were treated with disrespect?
10. Did you always feel that you knew what your jobs were on the project and what you needed to do next? If not, did you feel that you could ask for clarification?