

North-South Research Partnership

Academia Meets Development?

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June 2014

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Executive Summary

The development research landscape is evolving fast. The analytical relevance of traditional dichotomies between ‘developing’ and ‘industrialized’, or between North and South, is waning. Our capacity to conduct relevant research on climate change, migration, global health and other global issues depends ever more on northern and southern institutions joining forces in equitable, effective research partnerships. Novel approaches are required to deal with asymmetric power relations and promote more balanced alliances.

This working paper examines recent experiences in North-South research partnerships, identifying worst and best practices. It draws on work undertaken by the EADI Sub-Committee on Research Partnerships over the past two years including an online survey, face-to-face interviews and roundtable discussions. Our findings confirm that research partnerships are not immune to the typically unequal, biased donor-recipient relations that have plagued international development cooperation for decades. Despite improvements in recent years, entrenched behaviour and enduring practices still affect the quality and effectiveness of research partnerships. Power relations influence the ability to combine capacity-building aspirations with the drive for academic excellence. Mounting pressure to publish research outcomes fast in disciplinary journals edited in the North combined with harsh competition for funding seriously limit the time and scope available to establish equitable partnership frameworks and support institutional capacities. This calls for addressing funding, knowledge and power issues in development research partnerships that involve an ever greater diversity of actors and modalities.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	0
1 Introduction	3
2 North-South Partnerships: Where Development Aid Meets Research?	4
3 Material: Contributions from Researchers	7
4 Findings.....	8
4.1 Learning from Evolving Practices Power: Interests, Knowledge and Funding	9
4.1.1 Worst Practices	10
4.1.2 Best Practices	11
4.2. Power: Interests, Knowledge and Funding.....	13
4.2.1 Whose ‘Excellence’ Counts?.....	13
4.2.2 The Devil is in the Details: Resources and Timelines	14
4.2.3 Addressing Power: Transformational Research and Global Issues	15
5 Conclusion.....	16
Bibliography.....	17

1 Introduction

In today's polycentric world faced with pressing global challenges, effective partnerships between northern and southern research institutions have become critical to support evidence-based collective action. As new international research initiatives such as the Belmont Forum for Future Earth² illustrate, global sustainability challenges involve issues that transcend national borders and epistemic communities. Policy-relevant research requires the participation of a wide array of actors including civil society, business as well as aid and research funding agencies. Research areas typically encompass issues such as climate change, migration, food security, illicit financial flows, water and energy, inequality and exclusion, i.e. global problems that have direct and dire impacts in low- and middle-income countries. Transformational research requires effective research partnerships that move away from the former philanthropic, paternalistic relationships.

The development research environment is rapidly changing. The analytical relevance of traditional dichotomies between 'developing' and 'industrialized', or between North and South is waning. Development agents include a growing myriad of actors beyond those traditionally involved in international development cooperation such as mass media, the security sector, and academics from an expanding range of disciplines. This calls for reconsideration of the principles and modalities underlying North-South research partnerships.

The very notion of *partnership* itself lies at the heart of today's aid effectiveness debate. Beyond an instrumental concern according to which ownership and mutual accountability can enhance partnership outcomes, there is a strong normative discourse in favour of fairer and more transparent relationships in international cooperation in general, and in research partnerships in particular (Upreti et al. 2012). The latter are far from immune to the tensions and conflicts permeating unequal power relations accruing from unequal access to funding, knowledge and expert networks.

This paper examines recent trends practices and challenges related to North-South research partnerships. It draws on a study undertaken by the Sub-Committee for Research Partnerships of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI) in 2012-2014. We present the outcome of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and discussions in seminars and roundtables that dealt with the perceptions of researchers and funding agencies.

The following section discusses the concept of partnership in the context of development cooperation. We then present the study results by focusing on best and worst practices and analyse the most critical issues related to funding, power and knowledge in research partnerships. To conclude, we discuss policy implications for funding agencies and schemes.

² See <http://www.worldsocialscience.org/activities/scientific-programs-and-networks/global-environmental-change/alliancebelmont-forum/> (last accessed on 3 June 2014)

2 North-South Partnerships: Where Development Aid Meets Research?

“I think that most of the contemporary legends on partnerships tend to stress very common sense criteria that the decisions should be made democratically, there should be transparency in the use of money ... This is common sense. It is surprising someone has to write it down.” (Helsinki Roundtable, 14 November 2013)

This excerpt from a roundtable held at the Nordic Development Research Conference 2013 reflects a simple idea: the ingredients of effective North-South research partnerships are obvious and there is no need for long discussion. Scholars in development studies might easily agree since the notion of effective, equal partnerships is by no means novel in development discourse (Robb 2004; Brinkerhoff 2002). Already in 1969, the Report of the Commission on International Development entitled ‘Partners in Development’ (Pearson Report) called for novel ways of structuring the donor-recipient relationship. It suggested framing the relationship as a “new partnership based on an informal understanding expressing the reciprocal rights and obligations of donors and recipients” (Pearson 1969: 127-128). It insisted on a clear division of labour, based on negotiated objectives, to meet the needs of both donors and recipients. Thirty years later, the Development Assistance Committee’s (OECD/DAC) policy document ‘Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation’ (OECD 1996) stressed the centrality of partnerships as a novel development paradigm once more. The policy document argued for a more equal donor-recipient relationship. It underlined the increasingly important role of recipient countries in development whereby “development co-operation does not try to do things for developing countries and their people but with them” (ibid.: 139).

Today, the notion of partnership in North-South relationships remains the backbone of international development cooperation, as reflected in aid effectiveness principles, in the post-2015 debates, and in the global public goods agenda. The very notion of North-South partnership has turned into yet another development buzzword (Cornwall 2007). Virtually everyone seems to agree with it in principle, but actual practice shows that implementing equitable partnerships is difficult: money flows tend to determine decision-making and actual division of labour.

Two main arguments have been put forward to account for the persistence of the partnership paradigm over the past decades (Mancuso Brehm 2004: 18; Brinkerhoff 2002: 17; Fowler 1998). The first, normative or solidarity-based view argues for equal partnerships since such balanced relationships are valuable in and for themselves. The second, functional or pragmatic argument connects partnership with the achievement of development objectives. It states that equal partnerships offer the best means to effectively meet development objectives in a sustainable way and help manage development projects more effectively. We contend that both arguments can be found in the sphere of research partnerships as well. The functionality argument is exemplified in the idea that contemporary research challenges and adequate knowledge production cannot be realised without North-South research partnerships. The normative argument focuses on equal rights, as well as access to and merit from research

even if equal partnerships may sometimes impinge on maximising research efficiency or ‘excellence’ in the short term.

The development literature contrasts partnerships with donor-recipient relationships: partnership is promoted as a shift towards better, more valuable relationship (OECD/DAC 1996; Lewis 1998). Conversely, the donor-recipient relationship is clearly connected with the flows of money and is implicitly embedded in power relations. The donor sets the agenda and provides the funds to the recipient with a set of rules, accountability mechanisms and an oversight right. In a post-colonial context, such relationships are equated with paternalism and patronage (Lewis 1998; Eriksson-Baaz 2005): a weaker partner requires guidance and help from the stronger in a spirit of paternal care. In connexion with a colonial trusteeship, the donor seems to know what is best for the recipient and acts accordingly (Cowen and Shenton 1996; Kontinen 2003; Gould 2005). The idea of trusteeship might be inherent in ‘capacity building’, which echoes the colonial enterprise of ‘civilizing’ the South which has to ‘catch up’ with the North before equal partnerships can be seriously envisaged. Irrespective of where the cursor lies, international development cooperation has consistently been under fire from critics of different ideological leanings, be they neo-liberals, populists or neo-marxists (Carbonnier 2010).

Notwithstanding the frequent uni-directional funding flows, moving towards partnerships implies a change in the North-South power constellations. ‘Genuine partnerships’, called for by some authors, should be based on mutual dependency rather than on the assumption that one party needs support from the other (Fowler 1998; 2000). Trust and network constellations should replace trusteeship, control and hierarchical relations (Ashman 2001; Kontinen 2007). In addition to the notion of trust, partnerships should be based on the principles of equality, mutuality, reciprocity and respect (Fowler 2000; Mancuso-Brehm 2004: 21). Two or more parties enter into a collaboration to meet each other’s needs (Hately 1997: 6–7; Hauck and Land 2000) based on agreed objectives and shared values. Partnerships imply a commitment to long-term interactions (Fowler 2000: 3). The values or principles should include transparency and mutual accountability with due regard to each party’s political, economic, cultural and institutional contexts. This actually applies, in our view, to any partnership, going beyond the case of North-South partnerships. Yet, specific power constellations within the development aid industry mean that this discussion keeps spurring vivid debates.

In North-South research partnerships, academia meets the international development habitus and heritage. Northern and southern research institutions have to deal with the requirements of both the research and development communities (e.g. Hossain and Huagie 1999; Upreti et al. 2012). The emphasis on peer-reviewed papers and publication rankings has increased the pressure on academia, including funding criteria for research institutions that increasingly establish indicators such as the number and impact of publications. This provides an incentive for northern research institutions to seek collaboration with well-established (usually western) foundations rather than to engage in complex partnerships with southern partners involving capacity-building components. The tensions between short-term recognition of academic excellence and longer-term capacity-building objectives lie at the heart of the North-South research partnership debate.

For several decades, the nature of social relationships in research partnerships had not been explicitly addressed. Yet, with increased capacities in and resistance from the South, both researchers and donors have come to pay more attention to the quality of the relationship at different stages, from initial research ideas to negotiating the terms of collaboration, conducting research and disseminating the results (see Box 1 for examples of Dutch

partnership programmes). Since the turn of the Millennium, guidelines and principles for effective and equitable partnerships provided by Western countries such as the Swiss Commission for North-South Research Partnerships³ illustrate such trends. The ‘Appear’ programme of the Austrian Development Cooperation⁴ provides an attempt to reverse the power relationship from the outset: the funding call is open to southern institutions which then have to select suitable northern partners. Dutch programmes also implemented such principles in the 1980s and 1990s, under the inspiration of the then Dutch Minister of International Cooperation, Jan Pronk.

Box 1: Example of Dutch North-South Research Partnership Programmes

The government of the Netherlands has long stimulated North-South research partnership programmes; these have included the Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development (IDPAD) with India (1980-2005), the South Africa Netherlands research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), and four Multi-annual, Multi-disciplinary Research Programmes (MMRP) with partner countries in Asia, Central America and Africa. This box draws out lessons learned from developments in the IDPAD and SANPAD programmes in terms of equality in participation, agenda setting, financial distribution, capacity building and accountability.

The IDPAD built combined Indian-Dutch research partnerships around topics set by a joint academic committee. In each phase main themes were scoped by senior researchers on both sides to set an initial agenda, after which consortia could put in their own proposals which were assessed by combined Indian-Dutch panels. In the course of the programme, societal panels consisting of NGOs and policy makers assessed the societal relevance of each proposal in addition to the scientific assessment made. Although initially this met resistance within the academic community, this model has now been widely introduced in the Dutch National Science Funding organization NWO.

The first phase showed skewed financial distributions related to very different salary levels between both countries; this changed by allocating more equal portions to consortia partners. Bureaucratic difficulties were overcome by separating the budgets between Indian and Dutch institutions so that they could deal with their own bureaucracies effectively.

The SANPAD added supportive measures for researchers putting in proposals to the programme. Proposal writing workshops and a guide for supervising PhD research became integral part of the programme context. The office of SANPAD was also moved to South Africa itself, to ensure greater accessibility and accountability to the academic community in South Africa.

A final lesson learned concerned the necessity for long-term investment in such programmes with partner countries to ensure their legitimacy in the academic community in the countries concerned, the establishment of networks between academics and cohorts of younger researchers over time. Such programmes should preferably run between ten and twenty years to provide this kind of long-term impact.

³ See: <http://www.kfpe.ch/11-Principles/> (accessed on 27 May 2014).

⁴ See: http://www.appear.at/appear_infos/ (accessed on 3 June 2014)

Even if such moves have put the question of equal partnerships firmly on the agenda, research institutions in low and lower-middle-income countries continue to suffer from disadvantages that too often exclude them from the latest scientific production. Lack of resources to subscribe to expensive journals and acquire books are often combined with weaker national and regional scientific foundations and limited possibilities to attend international conferences. Research collaboration can hence be conceived as a way to reduce the exclusion of the South from global knowledge systems (Baud 2002). However, the more northern institutions put an emphasis on publishing numerous articles in renowned journals for their own survival, the weaker the incentive to invest in building effective partnerships that contribute to capacity building and inclusion. Baud (ibid.) suggested to perceive research as a global public good, which should be accessible to everyone. Secondly, southern research institutions should participate in the agenda-setting currently steered by international agencies. The objectives set by northern institutions often pursue a strictly scientific avenue while international aid agencies stress policy relevance and southern institutions practical implications. Thirdly, it is necessary to identify the impact of ‘institutional preconditions’ such as current public debates and overall working environments in the South that shape the relationship. Last but not least, attention must be paid to the partnership structures and processes, including outcomes in terms of knowledge, capacity building and potential brain drain/gain (see also Bradley 2007 for a literature review on research partnerships).

To conclude, North-South research partnerships are located at the intersection between the scholarly and development worlds. Northern research institutions may have to factor into the equation capacity-building objectives and normative issues related to inclusion of southern partners into global knowledge systems. At the same time, the typical challenges of development related to power, paternalism and trusteeship are often novel for researchers, be it at the conceptual level, or with regard to financial management, task performance, decision-making and dealing with different cultural conventions at the practical level. It is also a challenge for bilateral and multilateral development aid agencies to integrate researchers’ requirements related to scientific excellence, research pace and publications.

The next section turns to an enquiry into the current concerns and suggestions of different stakeholders involved in such partnerships, be they northern or southern scholars and researchers, or representatives of aid and research funding agencies.

3 Material: Contributions from Researchers

In exploring the state-of-the-art in North-South research partnerships, we went through an iterative data collection process utilizing a variety of methods. In order to map current practices, we first conducted a web-based survey among members of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI) likely to have gained experiences with such partnerships. In parallel, we reviewed the relevant literature including recent assessments of partnerships by southern researchers themselves (e.g. Upreti et al. 2012). On that basis, we developed a template for in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants having an extensive experience in North-South research partnerships. Last but not least, we organized two roundtable discussions at development research conferences to get further inputs on the basis of initial findings.

More concretely, the survey questionnaire was sent electronically by the EADI Secretariat to approximately 150 institutional members of the network in October 2012, with a response rate

slightly over 20%. Thirty respondents filled in the questionnaire while four more sent specific comments outside the survey template. The respondents cover a very diverse universe of research topics with partnerships sometimes involving development aid organizations in addition to research institutions. There is also a great diversity in the time horizons and intensity of partnerships involved. In order to delve deeper into specific partnership dynamics, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with informants who had been managing North-South research collaborations and reflect the diversity of stakeholders involved (the interviewees were granted anonymity). The questions revolved around experiences of and major changes in framing partnerships over last two decades with examples of good and worst practices as well as emerging principles and guidelines. The interview template dealt with all major partnership phases: partner identification and selection, objective setting, conducting the research, reporting and disseminating the results. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, or recorded on the basis of notes taken during the interviews. Interviewees included southern and northern researchers as well as representatives of funding institutions.

Initial results were presented and debated in the context of two roundtables, first at an EADI Director's meeting held at the University La Sapienza in Rome on 5 November 2013, and then at the Nordic Conference for Development Research in Espoo, Finland, on 14 November 2013. The latter dealt with three lead questions: identifying best and worst practices in North-South research partnerships; combining academic excellence and capacity building; and defining appropriate funding schemes. Two participants represented southern research institutions, a third one a northern institution and a fourth one a funding institution. The discussion was recorded and transcribed, and additional ten conference participants with experience of North-South partnerships filled in a questionnaire with open questions.

4 Findings

“The set-up is still unequal. Competition for funding in the North has become harder and harder. The competition means increasing need to focus on academic results instead of allocating time on capacity building.” (Questionnaire in Nordic conference)

Our findings focus on research partnership practices, funding modalities and, implicitly, on the power relations that permeate such collaborative arrangements. Overall, responses in the survey questionnaire hint at the fact that research partnerships often start right, but tend to end up poorly. When research partners submit a proposal for funding, terms of reference tend to be clearly laid out, with responsibilities relatively clearly allocated. Objectives are often set in a collaborative manner. But as research projects draw to a close, it seems more difficult to get all partners to be equally involved in the publication and dissemination of the outcomes and in seeking policy impact.

The survey shows that the role of the southern partners is often still primarily limited to collecting data in the context of country case studies, and linking up with domestic policy debates. Northern partners, on their part, usually play a leading role in cross-country analysis and synthesizing the outcomes in academic publications. This may partly result from diverging agendas and interests between northern and southern institutions: some interviewees noted that southern institutions remain primarily interested in national and local issues and do not easily take a lead role in addressing global issues. Yet, in-depth interviews suggest that recent collaborations tend to become less 'paternalistic' and southern researchers are being considered as partners for the international research agenda. Changes in the working

environment have also had a major impact. The rapid spread of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) opens opportunities for southern researchers to access information and to maintain frequent, real-time communication with northern partners.

Southern partners have gained instant access to information about funding calls, whereby they can play a more active role on the international scientific research market. There has been an increase in research capabilities in many countries, for example with a growing number of returning post-doctoral students who have the ability to supervise PhD students in their home countries.

Overall, collaborative North-South research projects still tend to favour supporting southern researchers individually, but neglect broader institutional support that would be essential to enhance autonomous research capabilities of southern institutions. This being said, exclusive training in the North is giving place to training in – and support to – universities in the South, including enhanced South-South cooperation. A few donors have taken steps to support southern institutions in taking more of a lead role in programme coordination. Research centres in emerging economies and, more broadly, middle-income countries have built regional champions that set standards for research excellence at regional levels. It was nevertheless conceded that funds were sometimes used by individual researchers even in cases where they were meant to benefit first and foremost institutions.

Equality in partnership is generally considered critical not only from a normative viewpoint, but also more pragmatically with regard to the effectiveness and success of research aiming at addressing global public ‘bads’, i.e. transformational research aimed at power and policy change. Equality is seen as conducive to ensuring contextual relevance and sustainability. From a normative perspective, equality has been stressed as ‘a core principle of sound partnership’ that should be a guiding principle when it comes to development research: “Without equality many northern scholars would be preaching what they don’t practice.”

Yet one interviewee stressed a recent evolution whereby the central argument of ‘fairness’ gave place to other, less paternalistic, principles involving sharing tasks, risks and responsibilities and giving priority to result-oriented, effective and sustainable partnerships. This is however not yet the case in all instances, as reflected by another southern respondent who highlighted: “In my research partnership, I was not able to influence much, the setup was very colonial and unequal and my criticisms towards this created problems for me.” Several interviewees recognized that achieving more equal relations in partnership remains fraught with difficulties because of de facto weaker capacities in the South, or because of the gap between a pressure to rapidly publish results in internationally-recognized journals in the North in English language as opposed to a wish to disseminate and ‘socialize’ the research output in national language(s) at the local, national and regional levels in the South.

4.1 Learning from Evolving Practices Power: Interests, Knowledge and Funding

Talking about best practices has become routine in development circles in the name of organizational learning, benchmarking and effectiveness. Despite being the flipside of best practices, worst practices are too rarely debated, all the more that they arguably provide useful lessons for learning how to avoid them. We thus opt here to start with worst practices before turning to best ones.

4.1.1 Worst Practices

Respondents to the first survey questionnaire did not identify many worst practices. A few of them hinted at the risk of diverting southern partners' research time and energy to focus on the northern partners' thematic concerns and priorities, resulting in low commitment levels from Southern partners. Another risk appears to be that the research agenda ends up being dictated by development aid agencies for their own purposes. Another respondent mentioned that time pressure to wrap up and publish papers may lead to disseminating outcomes while results from field research have not yet been consolidated or properly analysed. A key problem identified is that once southern researchers have experience in international research projects, they end up as consultants for multilateral and bilateral agencies rather than becoming active in strengthening tertiary education and training the next generation of researchers in their home country.

In-depth interviews, roundtable discussions and additional questionnaires provided more light on worst practices. To start with, when defining the research agenda, some respondents mentioned the "unilateral dictation" and "pre-determination" of the research agenda by northern partners and funding agencies that "set the terms of research, the topic to be investigated and the methods to be used." This leads to implementing research activities along "northern perceived quality" with little input from southern partners with regard to research design and implementation. In some instances, only the northern institutions were aware of the funder's guidelines and expectations, de facto excluding southern partners from the planning phase and often leading to southern partners becoming implementers of a northern agenda. The consequence of very unequal planning is that southern researchers are rarely leading authors in international publications. Such practices were considered to reproduce the inequalities in knowledge production. As put by one respondent to the questionnaire administered during the Nordic Conference, this is "extremely frustrating for the southern researchers, and very rude of the northern ones."

In the planning and implementation phases, worst practices may further result from intercultural communication problems and a lack of understanding from Northern researchers for the local context. A speaker at the Nordic Conference roundtable narrated: "We actually had one project where the leader was a well-established professor who had no sense of the context. So, in the end, I had to try to keep people together and say: 'let us try to understand where he is coming from.' Fact was that he did not have much experience in other environments."

Gaps in negotiation styles were seen as hindering the production of shared conclusions and views, in particular when it would require questioning and challenging the pre-defined agendas. According to the above-mentioned narrator, the difficulties with regard to open negotiations were often also results of the "African way of face-saving and tendency to communicate indirectly." The lack of familiarity with different cultural conventions and styles on both sides was thus considered one reason leading to worst practices.

Even if relationships in a partnership are defined formally and are defined to be equal, informal hierarchies tend to be established in the course of projects. Knowledge about informal hierarchies is therefore considered to be very important, as those hierarchies are often critical for the success or failure of a research partnership.

Beyond strategic planning, practical arrangements may further hinder fruitful collaboration. Travelling arrangements, workshop organization, transfers of funds, administrative reporting

and the like form a large part of the collaboration. In regard to administration, worst practices have been identified on both sides. Southern institutes sometime consider the northern university bureaucracy as “a mess which leads to delay in payments and agreements”, and the southern administrative capacity is considered low from a western point of view. Research partnerships are often negotiated by researchers who have strong academic capacity but might lack in-depth understanding of the international standards of financial management, for example. Often, the administrative issues are side-lined from the discussions and occur only at later stages as ‘fixed top-down instructions’ from the donor to the northern and, passed on to the southern institutions. The lack of possibility to adequately budget for administrative support was considered a basis for many worst practices. “If everything, including ordering the plane tickets and booking hotels has to be done by the academic staff, things do not really work very well,” reflected one of the participants at the Nordic Conference roundtable.

The restrictive visa regime of the EU Schengen area was mentioned as a major obstacle, especially for southern students but also sometimes for southern researchers. Additionally, the administrative problems that come along with receiving research funding from different sources were mentioned. If a southern institute partners with a number of northern institutes with funding allocated from a variety of donors, it has to cope with a variety of reporting guidelines and administrative rules. As a potential solution, the representative of the funding agency at the Nordic Conference roundtable suggested that more work should be done in northern and at least in Nordic countries in order to harmonize procedures and coordinate initiatives.

Other worst practices mentioned were connected to the commitment and context of the southern researchers. There were observations how, due to the economic needs, southern academics were involved in too many research and consultancy projects, and it was hard to devote time to and focus on any particular research projects. Additionally, the tendency of the experienced southern researchers and team-leaders to leave in the middle of the projects and undertake new employment in other institutions such as the World Bank, was considered a hindrance to successful implementation of partnership. Finally, double financing (i.e. one project is financed by two or even more donors is an issue because donors are often unaware about the financing activities of other donors).

4.1.2 Best Practices

Many best practices are, obviously, the flip coin of worst practices. In our initial survey, the respondents provided much more information on best than on worst practices, as listed in Box 2.

Box 2: Example of best practices mentioned in the survey

- 6x: Joint scientific works based on common interests and agendas
- 6x: Establish overall mutual acceptance of terms of reference
- 4x: Sufficient funding
- 3x: Clear institutional arrangements
- 3x: Begin project with a training workshop or conference
- 3x: Establish long-term cooperation
- 3x: Ensure that research outcome ownership is shared with stakeholders in the South
- 2x: Avoid reducing southern partners' contribution to data gathering
- 1x: Frequent contacts
- 1x: Work with broad teams of southern partners - not just one individual per organization
- 1x: Work with individuals rather than institutions
- 1x: Trust

In the interviews and roundtable discussions similar sets of best practices were identified. Building joint research agendas and “a shared vision from the start” while being “explicit about the diverging interests expectations and objectives” in order to reach the “joint identification of the research topic” were mentioned as good practices in the planning phase. In practice, seed money for exploratory meetings and joint research design appears critical. This allows researchers to meet several potential partners and seek the best suited ones. It helps to avoid contracting researchers before getting to know them.

Best practice during implementation included frequent visits both ways, including training workshops in the North and South. “I have been involved in a very good project of an international graduate school that included lecture modules in both northern and southern countries, and exchange of researchers for 3 to 6 months, plus co-operation, in order to strengthen responsibility in supervision” (questionnaire at the Nordic Conference). Southern researchers should be given both “responsibilities and credits” and visibility in international platforms.

Several interviewees insisted on the fact that roles and responsibilities should not only be clearly defined, but accompanied by an explicit dispute settlement mechanism: how to disagree knowing that “power and culture” will influence negotiations. Trust and transparency have been highlighted as preconditions. Additionally, intercultural sensitivity is required beyond the sole scientific expertise. One interviewee saw the partnerships as a “Flexibility Lab”, being a space for mutual learning and experimenting. Understanding each other’s research-related social, political and cultural environments has been highlighted as crucial. “Be it a research project or an institutional university partnership involving capacity building, contextual issues matter. Many times we assume that we know the problems, but we do not know the nuances,” reflected one of the participants during the roundtable at the Nordic Conference.

Some funding agencies have sought to empower southern research institutions by giving them the choice to select their northern partners before submitting proposals. Such research agendas also include PhD training programmes such as the so-called sandwich programmes whereby southern PhD candidates have two supervisors from the start – one in the North and one in the South – and spend at least one semester in the northern research institution. The objective is to enhance the critical mass of post-doctoral researchers in southern institutions who can benefit from “full intellectual autonomy from government or private sources” thanks to long-term support and partnerships that can be conducive to shared intellectual affinity. An existence of a common intellectual interest and academic curiosity was also mentioned to be a prerequisite for a successful research partnership.

There seems to be less time and money for research project design and negotiation. The funding available, both in North and South, seems to be more and more tied to the agendas of the funding institutions requiring an increasing number of publications at an increasing pace. Yet there are also positive feedbacks on that account. For example, a Tanzanian representative during the Nordic Conference roundtable mentioned a joint 5-year research project considering natural resource management with the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Sokoine University of Agriculture and the University of Dar es Salaam. The academic results turned out to be far better than expected: “We planned 16 chapters in books, have already published 13 and 9 are in the pipeline; papers in peer reviewed journals: we planned 15 papers in peer reviewed journals, published 8 with 9 in the pipeline, and so on and so forth.”

Another example of successful, equitable partnership is provided by the Ifakara Health Institute in Tanzania and the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute in Basle. Over four decades of dense collaboration, a whole generation of Tanzanian researchers developed cutting-edge research on malaria in particular. They have published and co-authored a whole set of papers in top journals such as *The Lancet*. This has led to a de facto leadership in the production of insecticide-treated bed nets and the development and testing of a new malaria vaccine in Tanzania. In both cases, the recipe involved long-term relationship, common interests leading to high inspiration and mutual benefits.

However, our interviews show that such successful collaborations are unfortunately quite rare today, as discussed below when looking at power relations permeating research partnerships.

4.2. Power: Interests, Knowledge and Funding

“Equality is important, but can it really be realized in Northern-Southern partnerships? The conditions for an equal partnership are not really present today.” (Questionnaire in the Nordic conference)

Reviewing best and worst practices highlights the struggle for more equal and effective North-South research partnerships. Our findings point to a few key issues embedded in unequal but changing power relations, where interviewees recognized that partners from emerging economies tend to be more assertive in negotiations than their peers from low-income countries.

4.2.1 Whose ‘Excellence’ Counts?

While it is easy to affirm that research proposals should be based on common interests and make use of complementary expertise, power dynamics define what counts as expertise and quality. Interviewees indicated the tensions embedded in the conflicting objectives of achieving policy impact in the South, research excellence as measured by different benchmarks, and sustaining individual and institutional capacities.

In practice, the debate on excellence experiences the same power dynamics familiar in development cooperation where the northern actors – already positioned in the space of ‘excellence’ – are expected to assist southern partners in approaching the threshold of excellence. An example from the University of Dar es Salaam exemplified the difficult situation in which PhD students can find themselves when their home university requires a PhD thesis in a form of a lengthy monograph while the northern partners require a set of essay papers published in peer-reviewed journals. One researcher from the South echoed the perception of unequal expertise: as “scientific capacity is low, we usually use northern researchers to provide scientific excellence.”

A representative of an African university at the Nordic Conference roundtable further reflected on the need and opportunity to improve institutional capacity through research partnership: “In the way excellence in universities is explained, African institutions in particular are far from excellent. In my view, the partnerships would have failed if in the end, they would have left universities in the same position.” Another participant however

questioned: “How do you maintain or create space for home-grown academic agendas while pursuing what the northern partners believe to be excellent?”

Representatives of funding agencies argued that combining the pursuit of academic excellence and capacity building requires southern institutions to “define and develop strategic partnerships around their own strengths or areas in which they want to develop their capacity.” This obviously means focusing on issues and sectors that are not only relevant to southern research institutions, but that further meet a criterion of ‘societal relevance’.

Some interviewees argued that, in practice, building capacity AND doing research is too much for one partnership project: either you concentrate on one, or on the other. Moreover, a southern partner argued that projects often have to fit into the curricula of northern partners which create ‘research orphans’ – issues that might be crucial for southern partners but do not fit into northern research agendas. The same interviewee from the South saw a problem with scholarships which may pre-determine the choice of southern students: “They choose those studies and fields according to financing and not according to their (or their countries’) interests.”

4.2.2 The Devil is in the Details: Resources and Timelines

Beyond substantive research issues, partnerships are fraught with administrative hurdles and uneven resource constraints. Lack of resources constrains the building of a research culture in developing countries, where leading researchers easily turn into consultants out of necessity and opportunism. As stated by an African scholar: “because of low salaries, the professors and researchers will not easily have the research culture found in northern institutions. For example, how can we avert moonlighting, which is the apparent focus of professors when they have to earn their living [outside university].”

Poor infrastructure, electricity cuts, slow internet connections are well-known limitations for conducting efficient research collaboration, even if it is true that internet access is improving quickly. Lack of funds to access journals and scientific exclusivity of initiatives such as ISI-Web of Science were mentioned as aspects that hinder the access of southern researchers to the latest academic knowledge production, and is not conducive to valuating outlets and areas in which southern scholars are most likely to publish.

Besides resource constraints in the South, short-term funding cycles and work contracts imposed by northern partners often lead to tight schedules with little or no time for negotiating the terms of collaboration: “I think the main enemy of the collaboration is the clock, the rush we are pushed into, we do not have time to really discuss in the face of tight deadlines,” reflected one of the participants in the Nordic roundtable. This has arguably worsened with the trend to condition funding of northern universities and salaries according to number and types of publications.

Power dynamics in research partnerships are obviously related to the funding relationship: “The North funds and the South receives, the North imposes the research agenda,” stated a member of the audience at the Nordic Conference. There was an urge to move towards more equal relationships in regard to funding: “Local and regional commitments, in-kind and/or cash, is absolutely necessary to speak of.” African representatives suggested that there should be increasing possibilities to generate southern research funding, which now happens in many emerging economies.

Administrative hurdles and financial reporting requirements have also been mentioned as mounting barriers to fruitful collaboration. Several interviewees called for capacity building beyond the substantive research agenda to include administrative and financial management capacities in order to equip southern partners with greater autonomy in managing large research projects.

4.2.3 Addressing Power: Transformational Research and Global Issues

As one of the interviewees argued, there is no such thing as a-political research. Partnerships are embedded in a web of power relations while development-oriented research often implies conflicting and contesting objectives between scholars, aid agencies and development practitioners. The enabling environment for equal research partnerships requires deconstructing the so-called global agenda that currently is largely driven by the North. One of the interviewees suggested a framework of transformational research which focuses on global public goods and calls for fair, integrative partnerships rather than philanthropic ventures. The technical assistance paradigm, which seems to be quite strong in many institutional partnerships, should be left to the past and the real engagement with the joint production of global public goods should be the way to perceive the partnerships.

The very notion of transformation relates to evolving power relations and structures. Improving prevalent North-South research partnerships requires challenging some of the former foundational assumptions. Notions such as the North and the South should be revisited, if not abandoned altogether. As put by a participant in the EADI roundtable in Rome: “The North/South dichotomy and the traditional concept of development are becoming obsolete. They should be replaced by a global move toward addressing issues of inequity and social justice worldwide, combined with a focus on global challenges.”

The trend towards such global research was seen in some of the new funding schemes. For example, the representative of the Academy of Finland described a few new initiatives especially with emerging economies such as Brazil and South Africa where the funding comes both from the North and the South. Consequently, the agendas and rules are better examples of merging the different interests and aims. However, many stated that a lot of the current new initiatives such as *Horizon 2020* seem to be quite Eurocentric and as such are not facilitating new forms of global research.

As in any transformational effort, the first step might be to acknowledge the effects of different historically formed power relations on research partnerships. In order to address changes within such relationships, the academics and funding agencies should be ready to discuss the elephant in the room. This is exactly what the academics participating in the survey, interviews and round-tables have done. However, it should be noted that, for example, the difficulty to report ‘worst practices’ in the open survey questions and some of the ‘no comment’ replies in the interviews to similar questions might reflect exactly the effects of the North-South-funding and agency-academics-development aid nexus where successes rather than challenges are likely to be reported and performed.

5 Conclusion

Our study has highlighted key ingredients of equitable and effective North-South research partnerships: long-term commitments, mutual interests and shared benefits based on a research agenda that is jointly negotiated. This is made particularly challenging in partnerships where funds are typically transferred from northern to southern institutions, often mediated by a third party such as a northern or multilateral donor agency with its own agenda. Modern communication and information technologies allow reducing some of the gaps generated by geographical distance. Yet, they cannot do away with the historical, political, economic and social dimensions of research partnerships. Objectives and administrative arrangements have been set primarily by donors, which often remains standard practice today.

Funding tends to be project-bound, which makes any serious attempt to build long-term relationships difficult. And successful partnerships are first and foremost the product of strong relationships between individuals rather than just between institutions, which is fine as long as it does not endanger the scope and sustainability of institutional capacity building.

Interestingly, successes seem to be more frequent when dealing with applied research geared toward the development of technical ‘solutions’ – for instance in the area of health or civil engineering – than in the case of more fundamental research in social sciences writ large. A few cases in the environmental and health sectors show that success rested on a few key ingredients: mutual interests between northern and southern research institutions in addressing pressing research issues to ‘solve a problem’, long-term institutional relationships and generous funding. Such partnerships produced solid, joint scientific outputs in top journals, suggesting that academic ‘excellence’ needs not to come at the expense of institutional nor individual capacity building. Yet, capacity-building efforts sustained over the long run seem to be key to the academic excellence of joint research outputs. From our limited set of interviews, there were fewer success accounts from less applied, more critical development research. This definitely deserves deeper investigation.

All in all, our findings echo the controversies related to the partnership paradigm in the aid effectiveness literature. There is a broad consensus at the discursive level in favour of more balanced partnerships, both out of a normative and an instrumental concern. Actual practice does not live up to the stated ambitions. Basic contextual issues and cultural sensitivity remain central to the success of North-South research collaboration, as is the need to explicitly address the issue of power relations in development research. Under the drive of global studies and the global public goods agenda, many research institutions that had no previous exposure in North-South collaboration are joining in. As this working paper highlights, past experiences can help new actors to avoid falling into the old bias and traps well-known to those who have been active in this field over the past decades.

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