MEETING THE CHALLENGES
Interdisciplinary research for global development

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

dsa Development Studies Association

**DSA-ESRC Workshop series 2018-19**

Towards More Equitable Interdisciplinary Partnership

*School of Oriental and African Studies*

*25 April 2019*

*Convened by Laura Hammond and Heleen Tummers*

*Summary Report, Sarah White, 6 June 2019*

How to make research partnerships more equitable is an issue that has recurred throughout this series of workshops, so it was fitting that the last of the series was dedicated to this issue alone.  Key issues included: building scope for deviation within research design; the shifting patterns of research management, including a growing role for private sector consultancies, and the growing burden of administration that running research can involve; the balance between individual and institutional practices and ways of viewing the world; and how to foster plurality and difference, without entrenching inequality.  In and through these issues deeper questions emerge, of the nature of research as a process of production, and what it produces in terms of forms of knowledge, relationships, and modes of the self.

Most of the participants shared a background in research on international migration. There were 23 participants in all, including 5 from the global South.

1.  Room for deviation?

It was generally agreed that the research agenda is still set by Northern researchers or funders. This was described as Northern partners being the 'owners'; while Southern partners were invited to 'join in' with a proposal already underway; being constructed as the 'juniors' or 'locals'; and as the managers of fieldwork. In the worst cases, both research questions and methodology were set from the start, with little scope to reflect local conditions or respond to local priorities.

He who pays the piper….

Some participants attributed inflexible research design to the structure of funding: the need to provide strict accountability to 'the tax-payer ' by sticking closely to the original research

proposal. While some amongst the Northern researchers saw this reference to 'the tax-payer' as a burden or diversion, others felt it was a legitimate concern when research was publicly funded. One of the checks in the research councils is, 'Is the title Daily Mailable?' A poor title can be used to undermine not just that project but development research funding more generally. One person pointed out that only 3% of DFID funds go to research, and the de-colonisation agenda doesn't help make the case for research funding!

Funders with a direct interest in the findings may keep a particularly tight rein on research, requiring frequent updates and making it very difficult to make any deviation from the initial plan. However, it was pointed out that keeping research within its original frame does not necessarily lead to the best quality output. Rather, it was suggested that there should be scope for 'deviation', or possibly even 'deviance', within the research design, to allow genuinely surprising findings to emerge. For example, the Kolkata Declaration 2018: Protection of Refugees and Migrants (http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_Migration/Kolkata_Declaration_2018.pdf) was not initially seen as important by funders but they came around to it once they saw how it was appreciated by others. In development practice, there were big debates about giving cash directly to the poor. Now this is seen as more beneficial than resources being tied to a programme, as it produces innovation which was not anticipated. Novels and auto ethnography may provide more depth and be more effective ways of communicating than conventional academic outputs (see appendix for some suggestions). The question is: How much deviation are we psychologically prepared to allow?

A question of mindset?

Resistance to Southern partners setting or shifting the agenda was also seen as reflecting a Northern mindset:

> 'The whole academic project when working in Africa is still tinged with a superiority complex: "We know your situation best".'

There was some disagreement about this – some African participants thought the problem was not between researchers themselves, but rather the structural context, while others thought you could not rely on the 'good heart' of individuals. It was also recognised that Northern researchers too have to respond to the agenda imposed by research funders, who may in turn have to follow the priorities set by the government.

African academics can also collude with the promotion of Northern 'expertise'. An example from Nigeria was given, where national actors will not use particular texts by a well known global North author as they do not think they capture the national situation. However, they do not write a rebuttal. This may be because they have good relations with that author at a personal level, or because they may be dependent on him/her for access to future funding. Another African participant observed that even when the funding agenda is open, Southern institutions may also be slow to come forward with their own project because of ingrained habits of thought and behaviour. Also, while in the global North scholars are pushed and to some extent supported to seek funding, this is not the same in the South, where academics may find themselves in full time teaching.

How to shift these familiar observations? As in other workshops, emphasis was laid on the importance of time to put proposals together, the value of seed funding to enable

networking, the importance of co-creation and collaboration throughout the research process, and the value of long-term relationships that outlast particular grants. Research funders pointed out that they also get money with short turnaround times and it was unlikely that they would be able to award seed funding. If significant change is to occur, it will require a whole eco-system approach.

A dissenting voice pointed out how quickly consultancy companies put together teams just on the basis of CVs, without any prior relationship with or between the people involved. Does this work, and what are its strengths and limitations?

In terms of funding, it was thought that private foundations may be more flexible than government. Increasingly, these may themselves originate in the global South. Participants also suggested that it is important to look for opportunities to 'shift the gaze' and exercise 'counter ethnography', including with researchers from the South coming to do research on the North. 'The local' should simply mean where people are, not be used as code to for the global South. In addition, it is important to recognise that: 'Those who are assigned as local may want to go global.' Ultimately, one should aim to work with partners with whom it is possible to develop the 'spiritual capacity to do exciting things.'

Civil Society Partners

It is important to recognise that you are never the first person in 'the field' and that important research may be done by CSOs, rather than universities. Where CSOs are partners there may be tensions over outputs, as CSOs often have a more direct political agenda. So the question arises, how can the outputs be used politically in ways that funders or researchers may not be comfortable with but people on the ground are crying out for?'

2. Operational issues

*Accountability systems*

A key structural issue is that legal teams in UK universities claim all intellectual property in their contracts with partners. This needs to be addressed collectively.

Reporting systems tend to be designed by the North, with Northern partners setting and require Southern partners to meet deadlines. Demands of ethics protocols can also be a problem – in sensitive research, e.g. with brokers, it can be hard to comply with the demand that people's consent to being interviewed should be recorded. National research infrastructures also vary greatly. In Kenya these are very strong, by comparison Nigeria is like the Wild West, with researchers flouting ethical conventions because they know they can get away with it.

An important practical dimension of structural inequalities is the different institutional contexts of universities in the north and south regarding research infrastructure, reporting, and finance. As one African participant said: – 'I usually spend my time in the finance office fighting with colleagues over finance.' Transferring money presents particular challenges. The mistrust is not just of the universities, but also the banking system. Lack of institutional capacity can lead to lead researchers giving advances for research teams from their own accounts. This also happens in the North!

The complexities of Southern university bureaucracies and sometimes politics, lead southern researchers to prefer to take contracts as individual consultants.  Funders and Northern research managers may also prefer this, and some programmes that used to fund collaborating institutions will now only appoint individual researchers.  This means no support to build research capacity at an institutional level, but rather reproducing the same underdevelopment of Southern research infrastructure.  Differential overheads and limits on fees for 'local' researchers also reinforce this.

*Holding budgets: power or burden?*

For UK government grants, it is required currently to have a UK institution as the recipient of funding as they are accountable to government/taxpayers.  However, being Principal Investigator can be an administrative function, it need not be the research director.  An international Co-Investigator can be the person with the stronger research voice. However, this requires UK institutions to take on more of the risk with less control over outputs.  In practical terms, who is the PI tends to be who is going to play the best to get funding.

Southern institutions becoming the budget holders appears one way of shifting structural power relations but can impose considerable burdens.  As DFID requirements become more demanding consultancy companies are increasingly taking the role of lead institution, with researchers only holding responsibility for intellectual leadership.  This means the programme management and risk are held by private consultancies. This is also supported by DFID, who see UK universities as too expensive.  However, some consultancies now no longer want to do development research because of the high costs associated with it.

In the UKRI GCRF South South Migration, Inequality and Development Hub (https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2019/ukri-gcrf-south/), budgets are owned by the countries involved.  Northern researchers are contract researchers, brought in when useful or needed in practice.  This is a new pattern which no-one is used to: first instinct that Southern researchers will keep all the money themselves and don't need Northern partners at all!

3.  'Don't build networks and partnerships, build friendships'

Partnerships are becoming commodified- it is important to recognise the different institutional interests at play.  Building networks with (former) students etc enables Northern researchers to gain access to research funding.

Outsiders can play a useful role in bringing regional partners together.  Silos can also happen between London institutions! It may be that forging links between networks is now more important rather than forging new networks.

*The danger of exclusivity*

For those on the edge or outside, international networks may be quite inequitable. There is a tendency to invest in same partnerships over and over, especially circling around the very few who have studied in North..In a workshop in Ethiopia, for example, everyone had been to Europe, but no-one to Makerere (Uganda). How do you extend beyond?  There have

been some attempts to explore existing researchers in Africa who not 'known' and do not know each other.

One participant from a science background asked why there are so much single authored books/articles in social science.  Isn't all research ultimately a team effort? She was also concerned at the lack of attention in funding proposals to research that was already happening in-country.  She posed the question: is there still a place for lone anthropologists in a research context concerned with decolonisation?

One person criticised the mentality of the brilliant individual.  With some funders all the best funding goes to a big star, and then there is the pressure to have that person's name on everything. Another participant questioned the value of networks altogether, and why they are so in vogue in sociology. In his view, there was no evidence that networks were necessary to grow research, but 'If you don't build networks you don't get money.' What good is a network in itself, without a particular purpose or topic for discussion? He urged exploring other approaches, such as the use of public spaces, and platform research.  This can involve bringing together diverse kinds of research event, such as workshops, films and games, leading to multi-modality in publication.

4. How do we foster plurality and difference in outputs, without entrenching inequality?

*'It is always the privileged who write.'*

While discussing papers is often relatively collaborative, writing is often less so.  We need to find creative ways of working which enable different people to get more involved.

The pattern of Northern researchers taking the lead in peer review publication was widely observed. In part this reflects the fact that such publications are important for academic careers in the North, and not necessarily elsewhere. Writing also tends to happen at the end, often when the funding has already run out, and only people on contracts that have some built in research time (and are ready and able to self-exploit!) can make the time for it. In addition, Northern academics may be ignorant of national level publications but these may be highly relevant to southern Scholars.  They may also be preferred to international journals, because of their shorter turnaround between submission and publication.

It is important to recognise that different kinds of potential output reflect the different kinds of interest people have in research.  Making all the data available to all research partners to write what they would like from it is an important first step and it is critical that this access is maintained even after the project is formally ended. Academic journal papers are only one kind of output and a fairly weird one at that, as they involve spending a lot of time writing something that few people read.  It is important to recognize and value diverse forms of writing and visual outputs, including blogs, vod and podcasts, op-ed's in newspapers and so on.  Writing and other forms of communication should happen while the research is ongoing, rather than waiting for the end. It is also important to go beyond writing and use the arts and culture to communicate more broadly.

There is, however, need for caution.  Alternative outputs may have relatively high initial impact but ultimately a limited life span. A peer reviewed article or book will still be available five years later, meaning in the long run inequalities are likely to re-emerge. While

'preferences' do indeed vary, they are not power neutral, when publications in international journals commands so much higher prestige.

A similar dilemma arises in relation to the location of workshops. Holding conferences exclusively in the South means including those who can't travel or cannot get visas. But it also reinforces acceptance of this situation as the status quo, and may trap people within 'the local'.

*'How can I leave something here?'*

This should be the mindset of researchers as they interact with the researched community. Papers can be shared locally, or exhibitions of findings held. One researcher described how people encouraged her to give training in oral history research to their children.

*What's in a Name?*

What kinds of contribution should be recognized in authorship? There was a general view that those who generate data should be acknowledged as authors, even if they do not actually write. But they might not agree with what is written in their name! And how far should this go – should every research assistant or data manager have their names on every paper, or does it extend only to Co-Investigator or main research officer level? We weren't able to come to firm conclusions on this, but all agreed that it is critical that such issues be raised and agreed in the very early stages of a project.

A further issue was the access Southern researchers have to journal articles behind a pay wall. Sometimes they are not even able to access papers they have themselves written! Journals are also a form of monopoly. Some participants advocated universal open access, while others cautioned that this could merely shift the costs of publication back onto researchers, and result in new exclusions. Other models may need to be sought. For example, publication of the IDS Bulletin is now totally in-house, funded through different research projects.

*Research and the production of selves*

For the pool of people gaining funding and producing papers for international journals to increase, what forms of support need to be in place? Different models exist. Some universities have fellowship programmes for visiting Southern scholars. IDS Sussex hosted the Matasa Fellows Network April 2016-January 2017 (https://www.ids.ac.uk/projects/matasa-fellows-network/). EADI (European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes) has provided mentorship in academic writing. There are also mentoring schemes located in the South, such as AWARD (African Women in Agricultural Research and Development). Some projects also hold writing workshops in the countries where research takes place.

Such schemes may have great value in supporting individual career progression and making the work of researchers from the South more accessible on the global stage. But they also raise uncomfortable questions about who controls definitions of 'quality' or 'value', patterns of North-South tutelage, and whether a price of entry for Southern voices is to become standardised in Northern terms. This leads to a broader set of questions,

about the kinds of knowledge that global partnerships produce and the kinds of selves and identifications that are forged in their production. In this global era, clearly there is no question, for any of us, of a pristine primordial identity. Even the notion of Southern or Northern voices is problematic. All forms of identification emerge relationally and involve a composite, amalgam, or assemblage of elements forged in different kinds of interaction. But there still remains a nagging sense that relationality does not take place on equal terms, that some are needing to shift and accommodate new aspects of self more than others. What kinds of structure or terms of engagement could support Northern based researchers to encounter in international partnerships significant challenges to their personal and professional identifications, default ways of being, and modes of practice?

*A linguistic prison?*

One specific instance of this issue is the question of language. One speaker reminded the group of Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's (1986) Decolonising the Mind, which argues that when you produce knowledge in a language that is not yours you place that knowledge in a linguistic prison. Research collaborators are asked to produce data in English or French, which are then used to produce cross-country findings. The speaker shared her experience of receiving two write-ups from research collaborators, one from Ghana which conformed to international standards, and the other from Cote d'Ivoire which did not. When she asked the collaborator from Cote d'Ivoire to revise, he refused. English was his 5th language! For her this was a real moment of learning, that she had become implicated in reproducing those same colonizing relationships. He was a senior scholar and yet she as a junior researcher felt entitled to criticise his work. Her question: How do we use the language of the Mosi, before it is translated into French, and then into English?

Another African scholar queried this conclusion. He felt the Cote-d'Ivoire scholar should have met the same quality standard. He faces a lot of frustration that he is making a lot of effort to produce high quality outputs while his colleagues do not bother. People who are used to high earning consultancy contracts may not be motivated by more fundamental academic research. Some southern institutions don't want to lose funding so they are not ready to invest too much intellectual labour in developing challenging perspectives. Many agreed that there are divisions within the south, including both good and bad practice. So big questions remain about how value, quality and contribution are to be judged and managed. When might 'different' equal less, and when more? How do the ways judgments are framed constrain the forms of insight we are able to learn from?

## Appendix

A number of networks and partnerships were referred to or presented.  These include:

- The Rethinking Research Collaborative, https://rethinkingresearchcollaborative.com/, 'an informal international network of academics, civil society organisations and social movements, international NGOs, and research support providers who are committed to working together to explore the politics of evidence and participation in knowledge for international development'
- Worldwide Universities Network https://www.wun.ac.uk/
- African Research Universities Alliance http://arua.org.za/
- UKRI GCRF South South Migration, Inequality and Development Hub https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2019/ukri-gcrf-south/
- Migration Leadership Team https://ahrc.ukri.org/newsevents/news/new-migration-leadership-team-will-help-speak-to-community/. This engaged 'in a series of 'Global Migration Conversations', workshops, one-to-one interviews, and panel discussions with researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, migrants associations and arts organisations.'

Other resources include:

- Building Partnerships of Equals: The role of funders in equitable and effective  international development collaborations. Jennie Dodson UKCDS, 2017,  https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Building-Partnerships-of-Equals_-REPORT-2.pdf
- A Guide for Transboundary Research Partnerships 11 Principles. 3rd edition. Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE), Swiss Academy of Sciences.  https://naturalsciences.ch/uuid/564b67b9-c39d-5184-9a94-e0b129244761?r=20190205110021_1549338276_8ef687bc-7b14-5a4f-ad9e-bf494cddc1d7
- IDS Bulletin, July 2019, *Exploring Research-Policy Partnerships in International Development*

### Alternative ways of presenting research recommended by participants:

Yordanos Almaz Seifu, Wayfarers: Travel Journal, translated from the Amheric by HiwotTadesse, published with help of Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (Addis Ababa, 2018)

Shahram Khosravi, 'Illegal' Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010)

W.G. Sebald, The Emigrants, translated from the German by Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1996)