North-South* research collaborations:

The quest for equitable partnerships.

Introduction

International research collaborations have increased significantly, mainly in the context of programs funded by Northern governments, educational institutions, and other organizations dedicated to humanitarian action and emergency responses. While significant to knowledge production, the collaborations have raised concerns and criticisms regarding the real meaning of "partnerships" and complex power dynamics.

To further advance this discussion, the **Humanitarian Governance: Accountability, Advocacy, and Alternatives** team, and the **Research Ethics Committee** of the **International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA)**, organized a series of regional webinars around research collaborations between partners, institutions, and organizations from different regions, emphasising the voices and experiences of the researchers from the Global South. As a result, during August, October, and November 2021, four regional webinars were organized in Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), India, and Latin America.

The discussions invited researchers, scholars, and consultants to share their lived experiences as part of such partnerships with institutions and organizations from the Global North while also attempting to outline commonalities and differences among the different regions. Questions around the definition of research agendas, terms of the agreements, publications, and role of partners were raised to the panellists. At first glance, the findings were unsurprising but reaffirmed that inequalities and asymmetries are persistent despite significant efforts to bridge the gap. Notably, the discussion also prompted the team to reflect on "a possible way forward."

The team presented the findings and concluding remarks in this briefing in the context of the roundtable "Towards equitable research collaborations" during the <u>6th IHSA Conference on Humanitarian Studies</u> held in November 2021 in Paris.

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* While we are critical in using the categories "Global South" and "Global North", we do it to refer to geopolitics and power distribution, although geographically, this is not the case. This replaces other categories such as "developed countries", "developing countries", "least developed countries", among others. Alternatively, we could use the categories minority and majority world, but these are still less known, so we use global south and north to facilitate the conversations.
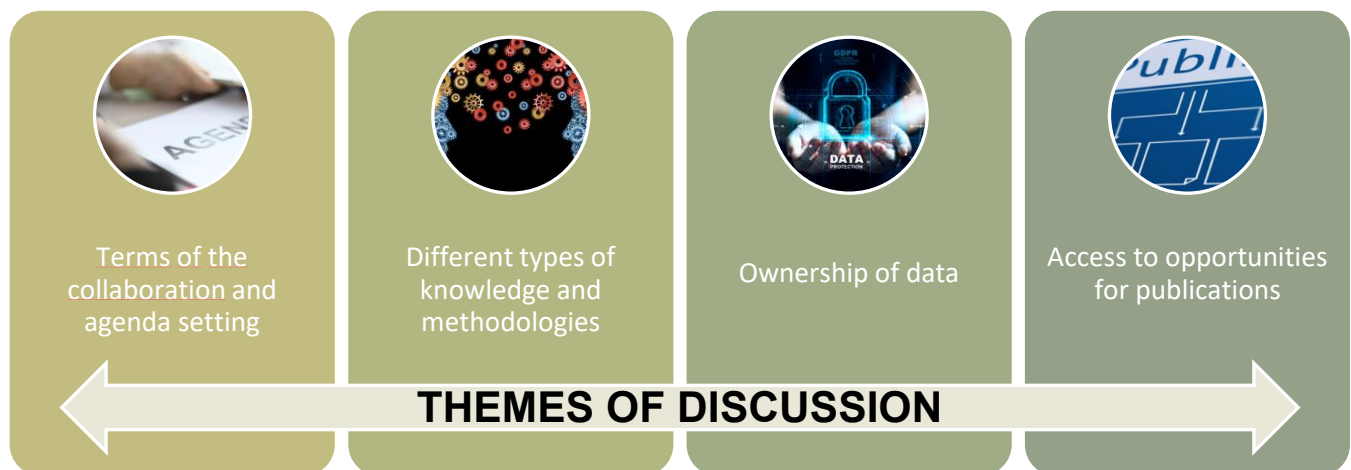
Main discussion

"Humanitarian studies are promoted in an environment that pays little respect to local researchers and participants - despite their potentials – and southern researchers are often labelled as junior partners, assistants, or data collectors. Even worse, it appears that no comprehensive pathway or methodology has been endorsed."

Tadesse Kassa Woldetsadik (PhD), panellist

Although each of the regional webinars was organized in different formats (from expert panels to roundtables), all of them were centred around four main themes for the discussion:

| Terms of the collaboration and agenda setting | Different types of knowledge and methodologies | Ownership of data | Access to opportunities for publications |

THEMES OF DISCUSSION

Despite particularities in the different regions, we found important commonalities that the participants raised:

| I. | **Terms of collaboration and agenda-setting.** |

- *Unequal power relations*: Across the webinars, participants indicated that partnerships and research are generally 'political' and characterized by complex power relations, institutional structures, and processes. In other words, collaborations are still very asymmetrical, which is usually a disadvantage for local/national researchers.
- *Imposition of agendas:* Partners do not participate in the design of proposals, and often decision-making processes are not inclusive. Approved and finalized project proposals are ultimately "shared" with the partners that will further work in the implementation. Likewise,

participants manifested that this results in the impositions of dominant views and -theoretical/methodological- frameworks.

- *Role of partners:* A common feeling is that researchers from the South do not feel like partners but "data collectors," "assistants," or "facilitators." For example, Indian researcher Vagisha Gunasekara used the phrase 'data-mules' to characterize this phenomenon. Participants raised the concern that such practice hinders the adequate utilization of the transformative potential of the researchers in the partnerships. Moreover, while having to work directly in complex contexts, exposition to risks is higher for the partners in the South.

2. Different types of knowledge and methodologies

- *Relevance of local knowledge:* Again, participants feel that their partnership role is limited due to resource constraints, experience, local/national or international networks, and awareness of capacity. It was agreed that some research processes silence the knowledge of local experts and researchers.
- *"Partial" alternative approaches:* Despite the efforts to do research differently, like adopting participatory approaches and ambitions for co-creation, research agendas and guiding conceptual frameworks are generally designed by Northern researchers. Collaborative research claims tend to be nicely framed in proposals but fail to be authentic in practice. Such a problem goes beyond partnerships, as it may be replicating towards other actors, especially research participants and communities.
- *Dominant theories and concepts:* Theories have been mainly produced in Northern universities. Alternatives to dominant knowledge are produced and exist, as there are other ways of doing research. Unfortunately, those remain unacknowledged.
- *Research projects are often narrow in scope*, and do not provide space to recognize the larger (global) political economy.

3. Ownership of data

- *Data often belong to the Northern partners*: This is closely related to funding considerations. In most cases, specific clauses in collaboration contracts stipulate that the collected data cannot be divulged or shared with third-party institutions/persons.
- There are also issues with data that *private actors or governments monopolize.*
- *Lack of involvement in research outputs:* Researchers are involved in data collection, but they never have access to the results and output after completing the research assignment. Some do not even know what has happened to the study results.
- Despite having ownership of the data collected from the field, researchers mentioned that it was difficult to be included as co-authors or even recognized for their role.

4. Access to opportunities for publications

- *Language barriers:* An obvious but still problematic concern is the dominance of English in academia and research. While other knowledge is produced locally, usually, it is not disseminated. This goes along with a lack of credibility in publications not produced in dominant languages or journals.

- *"Geopolitics" of knowledge*: Researchers problematized the lack of funding for publishing, which is paired with the pressure to publish in spaces developed and owned by the North. Conversely, the "culture" of scientific writing is limited or not encouraged in some contexts - privileging teaching or professional activities-.

What about particularities?

While commonalities were easily traced, the team also identified context-specific aspects:

➢ **In Ethiopia:** participants recommended that government and research institutions take a leading role in developing partnership frameworks, mechanisms, tools, or ethical guidelines on how research partnerships should be administered at different levels (federal, regional, district, academic institutions, etc.). Moreover, they underscored the need to take "more extreme" positions such as rejecting partnerships, developing own forms of knowledge, methods, and methodologies, and establishing locally/nationally appropriate/relevant publications. It is also proposed that partnership agreements give due attention to data ownership with precise details on how data is shared or disseminated. Moreover, data management expectations and the country's legal frameworks should be adequately and exhaustively reviewed to avoid any complications. As such, the government should be able to fund and strengthen the capacity of these institutions and provide adequate legal, material, and other forms of protection. On the other hand, they also proposed exchanges and experience sharing with the North will help to avoid duplication of effort and learning from the rest of the world. Hence, a win-win solution, dialogues, and debates are ideal solutions.

➢ During the discussion in **DRC**, participants criticized the way senior researchers are problematizing research in DRC. As assistant researchers live in DRC, they know more about the country's context and have field experience there. They should be the ones to problematize the research based on their knowledge of the context and their field experience. While much research is initiated to improve or change policies in many countries, in the DRC, this is not the case. People conduct research either to get a degree or to get a position of professor or lecturer. Since research is designed outside the country, without associating research from DRC and the DRC government, the country does not appropriate the results; therefore, they lose their relevance and importance. For research to produce knowledge, many activities need to be conducted (research design, methodology, data collection, report writing), and all these activities are essential. However, how assistant researchers involved in the data collection process in DRC are treated and remunerated reveals that senior researchers from the global North do not consider this activity like other activities in the research cycle. They are poorly paid, and they are not insured during fieldwork.

> ➢ **In Latin America,** participants pointed out the "extractivist" approaches to research that they consider have been one of the problematic aspects of research collaborations in the region. Using the Colombian case as an example, the concern about how ideas and knowledge of those participating are often invisibilized/modified/adapted was exposed. In the end, the results of the research remain unknown. Moreover, participants admitted that joint research projects could be problematic if they are collaborative because they require time and effort. To authentically research with other academic staff and communities demand time. In this sense, there are different levels of collaboration: i) With institutions and universities in the Global North and ii) With the communities. The second one is more complicated as; occasionally, communities are at the center of the collaboration.

> ➢ **In India** participants largely came from internationally recognized and well-established institutions. While the problems of data-muling, differential access to resources and opportunities raised were similar to those in other countries, participants were furthermore strongly concerned with implications of these inequalities in blocking or retarding the development of true co-creativity.

Concluding remarks and a way forward

"Collaborations are positive, but they have to be situated to understand the transformative approach of different knowledges."

Dr. Diana Gomez, panelist

1. **The discussion needs to avoid essentialisms.** To move the discussion from the problem to a possible way forward, it is first vital to detach it from the "North-South dichotomy", as the objective is not to idealize the South and point out the North as the "evil". In the South, there are also problematic relations and perspectives. Why is it necessary to collaborate between the North and the South? Besides the financial resources, we can also value the external perspective, the different perspective. But to enrich the collaborations, existing asymmetries between partners must be acknowledged. Reversing this trend does not mean rejecting existing ideas. On the contrary, it will be necessary to encourage researchers from the South to question the validity of these theories in their research and the production of local knowledge.

2. **Availability of resources in the South.** While there is an agreement on the complex epistemological issues involved and the role of positionality, power, and agency, it is essential to develop own forms of knowledge and methodologies. This means that partners from the South,

governments, the private sector, and academic institutions need to invest resources in knowledge production in their own contexts.

3. **The South is not homogenous.** The South itself is not a single entity but has varied interests and priorities. Hence, issues such as hierarchies and impediments against partnerships should be constantly reviewed and renegotiated based on clear and agreed indicators that suit the context of the partners. As such, this requires adaptation, documentation, and dissemination of lessons learned and good or 'best' practices in this field. This also demands continuous learning and communication between partners and actors.

4. **Sustainability and long-term collaborations.** More than a research project, scholars and consultants would prefer to engage with a critical conversation between different actors, academia, communities, local governments, on how to tackle the existing asymmetries and appreciate the diversity of knowledge.

5. **Authentic collaborations.** To reduce these inequalities, to reverse the dominance that characterizes the research and make local researchers more visible, all of those who contribute should be involved in every research cycle phase, "from the design to publication", and receive fair "remuneration", recognition, and solid security.

Acknowledgments

and Ph.D. researchers in the development and humanitarian fields. This webinar was co-organized between ISS and IHSA.

➢ The webinar in India was held in on October 27, 2021. The event was organized by the All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI), ISS and IHSA. The panellists were: D. Parthasarathy, IIT Bombay, India; Mahbuba Nasreen, Bangladesh Open University; University of Dhaka, Bangladesh; Maj Gen M K. Bindal, National Institute of Disaster Management, India; Mariam Chughtai, National Curriculum Council, Pakistan; Mihir R. Bhatt, All India Disaster Mitigation Institute, India; Rejina Maskey Byanju, Central Department of Environmental Science, Tribhuvan University, Nepal; and, Vagisha Gunasekara, American Institute for Lankan Studies (AILS), Sri Lanka.

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