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RETHINKING INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION, RESEARCH FUNDING AND EPISTEMIC PLURALITY IN NORTH-SOUTH ENGAGEMENTS

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Abstract

International research collaboration between the Global North and the Global South has expanded significantly in recent decades, particularly within African Studies and the Humanities and Social Sciences, largely as a response to declining public funding, infrastructural constraints, and capacity challenges within African higher education. While such collaborations are often presented as mutually beneficial and capacity enhancing, existing literature has insufficiently interrogated how funding structures shape intellectual freedom, epistemic authority, and everyday research practice from the perspective of Global South scholars. This study addresses this gap by examining how power relations embedded in international research funding influence agenda-setting, methodology, disciplinary hierarchies, language use, gender frameworks, and knowledge ownership in North-South engagements. The study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on ten in-depth interviews with senior academics and research fellows based in Nigerian universities and research institutes across the humanities and social sciences. Participants were purposively selected based on their extensive experience with externally funded research and North-South collaborations. Data were analysed thematically to capture lived experiences, perceptions of autonomy, and strategies of negotiation within donor-driven research environments. Findings reveal that although Global South researchers often enjoy nominal intellectual freedom, this autonomy is frequently circumscribed by donor expectations, externally defined priorities, and control over funding, data, and publication. Asymmetries were found to operate through intersecting dimensions of discipline, language, gender, and funding authority, reinforcing Northern epistemic dominance.

Nonetheless, the study also highlights moments of agency, resistance, and more equitable practice, particularly where institutional support and intra-African collaboration are present. The paper concludes by arguing for a reorientation of international collaboration towards shared authority, epistemic plurality, and strengthened research capacity in the Global South.

Keywords: Epistemic plurality, Global South scholarship, knowledge production, North-South collaboration, Power asymmetries

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Introduction

In recent decades, international research collaboration between African scholars and partners based in the Global North has intensified, driven largely by growing concerns about research capacity, funding constraints, and institutional sustainability within African higher education. This renewed interest reflects an acknowledgement that the production of robust, contextually grounded knowledge in Africa is inseparable from the health of its universities and research institutes. Yet this expansion of collaborative engagement has occurred against the backdrop of profound structural challenges. Across much of the continent, public investment in higher education has declined even as enrolment has expanded rapidly and academic disciplines have diversified. As a result, many African universities now operate under severe resource constraints, characterised by inadequate infrastructure, large class sizes, heavy teaching loads, and remuneration systems that compel academic staff to rely on consultancy work to supplement income. These conditions significantly limit the time, autonomy, and institutional support available for sustained research activity.

The effects of these pressures are particularly pronounced in the Humanities and Social Sciences, including African Studies, which are frequently marginalised within national and institutional funding priorities that privilege the natural sciences, technology, and professionally oriented programmes. In response, foreign donors and Africanist scholars from the Global North have increasingly positioned externally funded research initiatives as mechanisms for strengthening scholarly capacity, fostering international visibility, and facilitating participation in global knowledge production. While such interventions are often well intentioned and have enabled access to resources otherwise unavailable within African institutions, they have also introduced new forms of dependency and asymmetry into collaborative research relationships.

As this paper demonstrates, many international research grants are structured in ways that closely align research agendas, methodologies, and expected outcomes with donor priorities, thereby constraining intellectual freedom and reshaping scholarly practice in subtle but consequential ways. Funding bodies frequently retain decisive authority over project design, disciplinary orientation, language of knowledge production, gender frameworks, and the ownership and circulation of research outputs. These dynamics risk compromising the epistemic integrity of scholarship, weakening local institutional ties, and reorienting research questions towards external political, theoretical, or policy concerns rather than locally grounded priorities.

Against this backdrop, the paper interrogates the implications of international research funding for epistemic plurality and intellectual autonomy in North-South collaborations. Drawing on qualitative evidence from Nigerian-based researchers with extensive experience of externally funded projects, it examines how power operates across intersecting dimensions of funding, discipline, language, and gender, while also attending to the strategies through which Global South scholars negotiate, resist, and sometimes reshape these constraints. In doing so, the paper situates contemporary collaborative practices within broader debates on knowledge production, inequality, and

decolonisation, and argues for a rethinking of North-South engagement that moves beyond symbolic partnership towards more equitable, plural, and contextually responsive forms of collaboration.

Literature Review

Scholarship on North-South research collaboration has consistently foregrounded the structural asymmetries that shape partnerships between institutions in the Global North and Africa. Early analyses of Europe-Africa collaborations emphasise inequalities in agenda-setting, funding control, authorship, and institutional authority, showing how collaborative frameworks often reproduce hierarchies rather than dismantle them (Chataway, Smith, & Wield, 2007). While such studies provide an important structural account of how power circulates within collaborative architectures, they largely abstract away from the lived experiences of African researchers and pay limited attention to how intellectual autonomy is negotiated in the day-to-day execution of externally funded research. Research on funding regimes and intellectual freedom further demonstrates how donor priorities influence research design, methodological choices, and epistemic scope, particularly for scholars based in the Global South (Fujii, 2018). These studies reveal how compliance with donor expectations can subtly constrain scholarly independence. However, they often conceptualise power asymmetries as static or uniform, without examining how they are mediated by disciplinary location, language hierarchies, gendered academic structures, or national research ecosystems within African Studies.

Recent policy-oriented scholarship has begun to interrogate the architecture of international research funding itself. D'aiglepieyre and Botton (2020) critically examine the concentration of funding power in Northern institutions and argue that current models of international research financing limit African ownership of research agendas, institutional strengthening, and long-term sustainability. Their call for a coalition-based approach, involving African governments, universities, funders, and civil society, marks an important shift from project-based collaboration towards systemic reform. Nonetheless, their analysis

remains largely at the level of policy design and funding architecture, offering limited insight into how individual African researchers experience, interpret, and navigate these funding arrangements in practice.

Decolonial scholarship provides a critical theoretical lens for situating these dynamics within longer colonial histories of knowledge production. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) and Smith (2012) trace how Western epistemologies continue to dominate global research norms, marginalising Indigenous and locally grounded ways of knowing. While these works compellingly argue for epistemic plurality, they remain largely normative and offer limited empirical engagement with how African scholars negotiate epistemic constraints within formal North–South collaborations and donor-driven research environments.

Nigeria-focused studies have documented structural constraints shaping research production. Research on Nigerian and sub-Saharan African authorship patterns shows that scholars from low-income and lower-middle-income countries are significantly under-represented in senior authorship positions, with high-income country researchers occupying first and last positions more frequently, illustrating entrenched power imbalances in collaboration outputs (Veronika et al., 2023). Bibliometric analyses of authorship in research about sub-Saharan Africa likewise reveal that African-affiliated scholars are under-represented in first and last authorship positions across global health and scientific journals, reinforcing the idea that publication practices reflect structural inequities in global research collaboration (**Akudinobi, Rietmeijer, Ndowa & Kilmarx, 2023**). These findings demonstrate persistent authorship hierarchies that shape knowledge production and academic recognition. Systemic scholarship on gender equity in African research publishing further shows that men disproportionately occupy first and last authorship roles in sub-Saharan contexts, including Nigeria, underscoring how gendered academic structures intersect with income and regional affiliation to shape research visibility and authority (Baobeid et al, 2022).

Policy frameworks such as the UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) reports propose principles for more equitable partnerships, including shared leadership, transparent budgeting, and fair authorship (UKCDR, 2017, 2022). Despite their normative value, these frameworks remain largely aspirational and insufficiently grounded in the lived realities of African researchers. Similarly, comparative analyses of North–South partnerships continue to document Northern dominance in decision-making (Färnman, 2016; Heleta, Jithoo, & Samuels, 2024), but rarely centre Nigerian scholars’ voices or examine how equity is negotiated in practice.

Against this backdrop, the present study fills a critical gap by foregrounding Nigerian researchers’ experiences of North–South collaboration, with particular attention to power dynamics in funding execution, intellectual freedom, disciplinary and linguistic asymmetries, and the conditions under which collaboration can become more genuinely mutual, context-responsive, and epistemically plural.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design in order to generate in-depth, contextualised insights into the dynamics of international research collaboration, research funding, and epistemic plurality in North–South engagements. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate given the study’s emphasis on lived experiences, perceptions of power, and the nuanced ways in which intellectual freedom and asymmetry are negotiated by researchers based in the Global South, particularly Nigeria.

Research Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study population comprised academic researchers based in Nigerian universities and research institutes who had demonstrable experience with externally funded research and, in many cases, direct involvement in North–South research collaborations. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant, and experience-based accounts aligned with the objectives of the study.

In total, ten respondents were interviewed. These included six full professors, three senior research fellows, and one research fellow. The participants represented a range of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, including philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, urban planning, sociology, arts and art history, African studies, African religion, history, and allied multidisciplinary fields. The sample was deliberately structured to capture disciplinary diversity, variation in academic rank, gender representation, and differing levels of exposure to international research funding.

The gender composition of the sample consisted of six male and four female academics. Participants' experience with research grants ranged from two to twenty-six international grants, ensuring that both moderately experienced and highly grant-active researchers were included. This variation enabled a comparative exploration of how power relations and intellectual autonomy may shift with increased exposure to international funding regimes.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using an interview guide developed specifically for this study. The interview guide was organised into three broad sections.

The first section focused on socio-demographic and professional characteristics, including gender, institutional affiliation, academic position, disciplinary background, and years of experience in academia. This information provided the contextual foundation necessary for interpreting participants' narratives and situating their experiences within broader institutional and disciplinary structures.

The second section examined power dynamics in the award and execution of research grants. Participants were asked about the number of research grants they had received from institutions in the Global North, perceived differences between Global North and Global South funding schemes, and the degree of intellectual freedom associated with externally funded projects. Particular attention was paid to whether funding bodies influenced the composition of research

teams in terms of gender or disciplinary background, dictated methodological choices, or exercised control over research agendas and outputs. Participants were also invited to reflect on proposal rejection processes and to offer suggestions for improving funding practices targeting researchers in the Global South.

The third section addressed issues in North-South research collaboration. Questions explored participants' experiences of collaborating with researchers from the Global North, how such collaborations were initiated, the nature and structure of the partnerships, and the specific roles occupied by Nigerian scholars within collaborative projects. Probing questions were used to elicit reflections on power relations, perceptions of inferiority or superiority, patterns of benefit distribution, and comparisons between North-South collaborations and collaborations within the Global South. Participants were further asked to propose ways in which North-South research collaborations could be strengthened to promote greater equity, mutual benefit, and epistemic inclusion.

Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted at times and locations convenient for participants, either in person or via virtual platforms where necessary. Each interview was conducted in English and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the depth of participants' responses. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and anonymity, were strictly observed, and participants were identified using initials rather than full names.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach. Transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarisation, after which thematic coding was conducted in line with the study objectives.

The analysis was organised around four core thematic areas corresponding to the study objectives: power dynamics and intellectual freedom in the execution of research grants; asymmetries

related to discipline, language, gender, and funding structures within African Studies; experiential accounts of Nigerian researchers involved in North–South collaborations; and pathways towards more equitable and mutually beneficial collaborative research practices. Patterns, convergences, and divergences across participants’ accounts were systematically examined to identify recurring themes as well as context-specific variations.

By grounding the analysis in participants’ narratives while linking these to broader structural and epistemic debates, the study sought to generate empirically grounded insights into how North-South research collaborations are experienced, contested, and potentially reimaged from the standpoint of Nigerian scholars.

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore power dynamics and intellectual freedom in executing research grant by grantees from global south
2. To determine the different dimensions of asymmetries relating to discipline, language, gender and funding of researches in African Studies.
3. To document the experiences of global south researchers with north-south research collaborations.
4. To examine how North-South collaborations can be more mutually beneficial and equal.

Presentation of Findings

This section presents and analyses the findings arising from in-depth interviews with Global South researchers engaged in North–South research collaborations. Organised thematically and progressing from structural conditions to lived experiences, the discussion foregrounds how power asymmetries shape intellectual freedom, disciplinary practice, gender relations, linguistic authority, and control over research outputs. The findings demonstrate that, although collaboration is often framed in the language of partnership and mutual benefit, the execution of research grants remains deeply embedded within donor-driven structures that condition autonomy and circumscribe epistemic agency. By situating participants’ accounts

alongside established scholarship, this section elucidates the complex interplay between opportunity and constraint that characterises North–South research collaboration, while also highlighting spaces of negotiation, resistance, and emergent models of more equitable knowledge production.

Power dynamics and intellectual freedom in executing research grant by grantees from global south

Participants’ responses indicate that, while researchers from the Global South may enjoy formal intellectual freedom to define research questions and theoretical frameworks, this freedom is frequently circumscribed by pre-determined agendas and donor expectations. One respondent noted that although grantees can “determine your research questions, your scope, your theoretical framework,” in practice these are often expected to align with the donor’s expectations and anticipated results. This resonance between researcher autonomy and donor interests suggests that intellectual freedom is not absolute but contingent on fitting within funders’ predefined frameworks.

Interview data confirm that many grants from the Global North come with specific expectations about outcomes and methods, a pattern echoed in the literature on North-South partnerships. Scholars have observed that research agendas are often shaped by Northern donors, limiting Southern partners’ ability to pursue questions rooted in local priorities (Rakotonarivo & Andriamihaja, 2023). Research agendas determined externally can marginalise Southern priorities, compelling researchers to tailor their proposals to what donors want rather than what local contexts require (Rakotonarivo & Andriamihaja, 2023).

Several respondents articulated the adage “he who pays the piper dictates the tune,” noting that funding bodies often dictate methodological choices, team composition, and thematic focus, even when local conditions suggest alternative approaches. One linguistics professor observed that grants from the North often restrict methodology and theoretical framing, which can impede the ability to

address local linguistic, cultural, or gendered complexities. These constraints reflect broader patterns in research partnerships, where the distribution of funds shapes who leads research and how it is executed (Matenga et al, 2019). Visibility in decision-making is reduced for Southern researchers when financial control remains with Northern partners, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations in the research process.

Moreover, several participants highlighted how funding priorities reflect the geopolitical and policy interests of funding bodies, rather than indigenous research needs. For example, one sociologist explained that their first grant was aligned with international priorities on human trafficking, rather than locally driven inquiry, underlining how donors' interests shape research trajectories. This aligns with findings in studies of North-South research collaborations which show that 90% of funding in partnerships often comes from Northern partners and is not aligned with Southern national priorities, which can lead to limited local relevance and capacity building (Matenga et al, 2019).

Overall, though Southern researchers may technically retain certain freedoms in framing their projects, the structural dominance of Northern donors shapes research agendas, methodologies, and expected outcomes. These dynamics underscore the contingent nature of intellectual freedom, where autonomy is relative to donors' interests rather than fully grounded in researchers' epistemic and contextual priorities.

Disciplinary, Linguistic, Gendered and Funding Asymmetries in African Studies Research

Interview data reveal that asymmetries in North-South research collaborations manifest not only through funding control but also through disciplinary hierarchies, language dominance, gendered expectations, and differential authority over data and outputs. Respondents consistently noted that grant providers frequently shape research team composition, often framing their preferences as

recommendations while retaining implicit power over final decisions. As one senior academic observed, suggestions regarding disciplinary or demographic composition are rarely neutral; they are often imbued with donor intent that reflects broader institutional priorities rather than locally grounded research logics. This experience aligns with existing scholarship showing that Northern funders routinely exercise agenda-setting power through team design, particularly by mandating the inclusion of foreign co-investigators or privileging certain disciplinary traditions perceived as more 'rigorous' or policy-relevant (Gaillard, 2010). Such practices reinforce epistemic hierarchies that position African scholars as collaborators rather than intellectual drivers, even within research conducted in African contexts.

Several respondents emphasised that interdisciplinarity, while potentially empowering, is unevenly negotiated. One linguist described productive collaborations across philosophy, psychology, religion, and urban planning, noting that such engagements can expand methodological and analytical horizons when researchers are able to justify disciplinary choices from positions of recognised expertise. However, the need to constantly defend disciplinary relevance reflects deeper asymmetries identified in African Studies, where qualitative and humanities-based approaches are often subordinated to quantitatively oriented social science frameworks favoured by international funders (Mkandawire, 2005).

Gender asymmetries emerged as a particularly complex dimension of donor-driven research design. Respondents reported that many grants explicitly require gender balance among researchers and research participants, often linked to Sustainable Development Goals. While these requirements are framed as equity measures, they can become methodologically problematic when imposed without sensitivity to local socio-cultural contexts. One participant recounted donor expectations for gender-balanced sampling even in male-dominated sectors such as construction, raising concerns about the performative fulfilment of gender metrics at the expense of empirical integrity. Feminist scholarship has similarly cautioned that externally imposed

gender frameworks may reproduce symbolic inclusion rather than substantive equity, particularly in African research settings (Mama, 2011, pp. 4–6).

Language constitutes another critical axis of asymmetry, though often less explicitly acknowledged by funders. While not always stated in grant conditions, the dominance of English in proposal writing, reporting, and publication privileges scholars trained in particular academic traditions and marginalises indigenous epistemologies and modes of expression. As wa Thiong’o (1986) argues, linguistic hierarchies are central to epistemic domination, shaping not only how knowledge is communicated but also what counts as legitimate knowledge (pp. 16–18). Respondents’ ability to “hide” or diplomatically reframe local perspectives within donor-approved narratives reflects this ongoing tension between epistemic expression and linguistic conformity.

Funding asymmetries further extend into data ownership, publication rights, and knowledge circulation. Several interviewees noted that while methodological flexibility may be granted in some cases, funders often retain authority over how data are used, disseminated, and acknowledged. This mirrors empirical findings that Northern institutions disproportionately control data repositories and lead authorship, even in research conducted entirely in the Global South (Akudinobi et al., 2023, pp. 556–557). Such practices reinforce structural inequalities in knowledge production and academic visibility.

Nevertheless, respondents’ experiences were not uniform. Scholars working in arts, culture, and history reported greater intellectual autonomy and fewer prescriptive constraints, suggesting that disciplinary location mediates the intensity of donor control. This variation supports arguments that asymmetries in African Studies are not monolithic but intersect across discipline, funding source, and institutional prestige (Zezeza, 2005).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that asymmetries in North–South research collaboration operate through interlocking dimensions

of discipline, gender, language, and funding authority. While interdisciplinarity and diversity requirements can create opportunities for intellectual growth, they often remain embedded within unequal power structures that privilege Northern epistemic norms.

Experiences of Global South Researchers in North–South Research Collaborations

The experiences of Global South researchers engaged in North–South research collaborations are diverse, shaped by pathways of entry into collaboration, disciplinary positioning, funding structures, and interpersonal dynamics. Interview data indicate that **conferences**, workshops, training programmes, academic networks, and postdoctoral mobility constitute the most common entry points into collaboration. These spaces function as sites of scholarly visibility and informal vetting, where shared research interests and perceived expertise often catalyse collaborative projects. Existing studies similarly identify conferences and international mobility as critical mechanisms through which African scholars gain access to global research networks (Zezeza, 2010).

Several respondents described collaborations that were professionally enriching and intellectually reciprocal, particularly where roles were clearly defined and expertise was mutually recognised. For instance, collaborations premised on complementary strengths such as qualitative contextual knowledge from the Global South and quantitative or technical expertise from the Global North were frequently described as productive. This resonates with Gaillard’s (2010) argument that North–South collaboration can enhance research quality when asymmetries are acknowledged and negotiated transparently rather than denied.

However, many respondents also highlighted structural inequalities embedded in collaborative arrangements, particularly regarding leadership, data control, and authorship. Researchers frequently entered projects as co-investigators or team members rather than principal investigators, with project leadership and final decision-

making power typically residing in Northern institutions. This reflects broader empirical evidence that African scholars are often positioned as data providers rather than agenda setters in international research projects (Carbonnier & Kontinen, 2014).

Dependence on Northern funding emerged as a recurrent theme shaping these experiences. While respondents acknowledged the superior infrastructure, funding volume, and capacity-building opportunities available through Northern partnerships, they also described losses of intellectual autonomy, including restrictions on data ownership, mandatory deposition of outputs in Northern repositories, and constrained freedom in publication decisions. Such patterns align with findings that international funding regimes frequently reproduce colonial relations of knowledge extraction, even when framed as capacity development (Mkandawire, 2010).

Experiences of epistemic marginalisation were particularly pronounced in linguistics and African language studies. Some respondents recounted instances where Northern collaborators attempted to impose Eurocentric theories or interpretations that were ill-suited to African linguistic realities, sometimes dismissing local expertise until challenged. Decolonial scholars have long noted that African knowledge systems are often subjected to epistemic scepticism, requiring local scholars to continually justify what is self-evident within their own contexts (Mignolo, 2009, pp. 161–163).

Nevertheless, respondents also described strategies of agency, negotiation, and resistance. Several emphasised the importance of asserting expertise, setting clear expectations at the outset, and diplomatically navigating disagreements without capitulating epistemic authority. In cases where African institutions provided parallel support or where collaborators explicitly recognised local knowledge, power tensions were significantly reduced, enabling more balanced partnerships. This supports recent arguments that institutional backing in the Global South can meaningfully recalibrate collaborative power relations (Heleta, Jithoo, & Samuels, 2024, pp. 87–89).

Importantly, respondents consistently contrasted North–South collaborations with intra-African collaborations, noting higher levels of solidarity, mutual understanding, and shared contextual assumptions among African scholars. While resource limitations persist within South–South collaboration, the perceived absence of epistemic condescension often results in more equitable intellectual exchange. This observation echoes Zeleza’s (2005) contention that intra-African collaboration remains undervalued despite its potential to foster epistemic autonomy.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Global South researchers’ experiences of North–South collaboration are neither uniformly exploitative nor uniformly empowering. Rather, they are characterised by a dynamic interplay of opportunity and constraint, shaped by funding dependence, disciplinary hierarchies, institutional support, and individual strategies of negotiation.

Towards Equitable and Mutually Beneficial North–South Research Collaborations

The literature on North-South research collaboration confirms that partnerships between the Global North and the Global South can yield significant advances in knowledge and development outcomes when they are founded on equity, shared decision-making, and mutual benefit. Such collaborations remain, however, marked by persistent structural inequalities and power imbalances that must be addressed for them to be genuinely equal (Rakotonarivo & Andriamihaja, 2023, p. 2042). The reflections of scholars from the Global South align closely with these findings and point to concrete changes that would make collaborations more mutually beneficial and equitable.

A central theme in both academic research and practitioner accounts is the need for mutual respect and joint agenda-setting. Researchers from the Global South frequently report that research agendas, data ownership and publication decisions are dictated by funders and institutions in the Global North, often with little regard for local priorities or realities. This dynamic mirrors wider evidence that agenda-

setting processes in North-South partnerships are typically dominated by Northern funders and institutions, reinforcing unequal power relations and limiting the ability of Southern partners to define research questions or methods that reflect their contexts (Rakotonarivo & Andriamihaja, 2023, p. 2042; Danida Fellowship Centre, 2023).

To move beyond this imbalance, scholars advocate for conditions in which local researchers are free to pursue research that matters in their contexts and to own the data and outputs generated. This entails granting autonomy over research design and publication, as well as recognising the intellectual contributions of Southern researchers as co-creators rather than field assistants. Such practices are consistent with principles for equitable partnerships that emphasise shared responsibility for research decisions, joint authorship, and recognition of diverse knowledge systems (Danida Fellowship Centre, 2023; Rakotonarivo & Andriamihaja, 2023).

The *Bayreuth Africa Multiple model* is invoked by some interviewees as an example of institutional research collaboration that seeks to reshape traditional North-South dynamics. The Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth works in close cooperation with African partner universities such as the University of Lagos, Moi University, Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Rhodes University, positioning these institutions as independent research centres that jointly implement research agendas, collect and analyse data, and support early-career researchers (University of Bayreuth, 2025). This model thus illustrates how collaborative structures can embed shared leadership, joint research platforms and sustained mobility across partner institutions, rather than reinforcing hierarchical roles (University of Bayreuth, 2025; UNILAG, 2025).

Another recurrent concern among Global South researchers is the need to benefit host communities and research participants. Many collaborations fail to allocate resources for community feedback or to

ensure that research findings translate into tangible benefits for those who provided data. Research on equitable partnerships similarly emphasises that collaboration should extend beyond academic outputs to include community involvement and reciprocity, which acknowledges local stakeholders as integral participants rather than merely subjects of research (Danida Fellowship Centre, 2023; ESPA, 2018.).

Capacity-building is also crucial. Interviewees argue that funders should recognise local logistical challenges, provide training and stipends for Southern researchers, and support open access publishing to alleviate financial barriers that disproportionately affect researchers in the Global South. This corresponds with broader recommendations for equitable partnerships that highlight investment in infrastructure, training and equitable financial arrangements as essential components of fair collaboration dynamics (Danida Fellowship Centre, 2023; ESPA, 2018).

Many Global South scholars call for broader *representation in decision-making*. They suggest that inclusion of Southern researchers on funding selection committees, journal editorial boards, and other governance bodies would help to counteract Northern dominance in the research ecosystem and ensure that research priorities, methodologies and publication outlets reflect diverse perspectives rather than exclusively Northern interests (Rakotonarivo & Andriamihaja, 2023).

Finally, a sustainable shift toward equality requires strengthening research capacity and funding within the Global South. As several contributors argue, until institutions and governments in the Global South allocate more resources for research grants, collaborations will continue to be shaped by Northern priorities and conditionalities. Enhancing local research funding and infrastructure would enable researchers to initiate partnerships on their own terms and contribute

as equal partners in global knowledge production (Llanos et al, 2024; North–South Partnerships Report, 2025).

In summary, more mutually beneficial and equal North-South collaborations would be anchored in shared agenda-setting, data ownership, recognition of diverse knowledge systems, capacity building and inclusive governance. The Bayreuth model demonstrates how institutional arrangements can embody these principles, but broader structural reforms in funding practices and institutional representation are also necessary to achieve sustained equity in international research collaboration.

Recommendations for More Equitable North–South Research Collaborations

In light of the findings presented, this report advances a set of interrelated recommendations aimed at fostering more equitable, mutually beneficial, and contextually grounded North–South research collaborations. Central to this endeavour is the institutionalisation of joint agenda-setting at the earliest stages of collaboration. Funding calls and project designs should be co-developed with substantive input from scholars in the Global South, ensuring that research questions, methodologies, and expected outcomes are rooted in local priorities rather than shaped primarily by externally imposed policy agendas. This shift requires moving beyond tokenistic consultation towards genuinely shared authority in defining research trajectories.

Equally important is the need to protect intellectual freedom in substantive, rather than merely procedural, terms. Although formal autonomy is often granted on paper, funders should reduce prescriptive constraints on methodology, theoretical framing, and team composition, particularly where such constraints compromise empirical validity or contextual relevance. Grant frameworks should therefore incorporate flexibility mechanisms that allow researchers to adapt research designs in response to local realities without fear of financial penalties or withdrawal of support.

Equity must also extend to data ownership and publication rights. Collaborative agreements should explicitly guarantee shared ownership of data, joint decision-making over dissemination, and fair authorship practices that reflect intellectual contribution rather than institutional location. In this regard, prioritising support for open access publishing is essential to enhancing the global visibility and accessibility of research produced in and from the Global South.

Furthermore, disciplinary and epistemic diversity should be recognised as a strength rather than treated as an obstacle to research quality. Funders and collaborators should resist privileging narrow methodological hierarchies that marginalise humanities-based, qualitative, or indigenous knowledge approaches. Evaluation criteria ought to explicitly value contextual expertise and locally grounded epistemologies alongside technical or quantitative competencies, thereby fostering more inclusive and intellectually robust research outcomes.

Attention must also be paid to the design and implementation of gender inclusion frameworks. While commitments to gender equity are necessary, they should not be reduced to performative metrics that distort research design or compromise methodological rigour. Funders should allow researchers to justify gendered sampling and participation strategies on the basis of empirical realities and ethical considerations within specific socio-cultural contexts.

Linguistic equity represents another critical dimension of reform. The continued dominance of English in proposal writing, reporting, and publication marginalises alternative epistemic traditions and modes of expression. Greater institutional and financial support should therefore be provided for multilingual dissemination, including the recognition of indigenous languages as legitimate and valuable vehicles of scholarly knowledge.

In addition, the representation of Global South scholars within decision-making structures must be significantly expanded. Meaningful inclusion on funding selection committees, journal editorial boards,

and governance bodies is essential to recalibrating entrenched power relations and ensuring that evaluative standards reflect a plurality of scholarly traditions and research priorities.

Sustainable equity in research collaboration also depends on increased investment in research funding and infrastructure within the Global South. Governments, philanthropies, and private sector actors in the region should be encouraged to expand support for locally administered research grants. Strengthening domestic funding capacity will reduce over-dependence on Northern donors and enable scholars to initiate and lead collaborations from positions of greater autonomy.

Finally, South–South and intra-African collaborations should be deliberately strengthened alongside North–South partnerships. Such collaborations often foster higher levels of epistemic confidence, contextual alignment, and intellectual solidarity, and should be supported as complementary rather than subordinate forms of global knowledge production. Taken together, these recommendations underscore that equity in North–South research collaboration cannot be achieved through goodwill alone, but requires structural reform, shared authority, and sustained investment in the epistemic and institutional capacities of the Global South.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has argued that international research collaboration between the Global North and the Global South, while often framed as a vehicle for mutual advancement, remains deeply shaped by structural inequalities in funding, agenda-setting, and epistemic authority. Drawing on empirical evidence and critical scholarship, it has shown that intellectual freedom in such collaborations is frequently contingent rather than absolute, mediated by donor priorities, disciplinary hierarchies, linguistic dominance, and unequal control over data and knowledge circulation. At the same time, the analysis has highlighted the agency of Global South researchers, who negotiate, resist, and reconfigure these constraints in

pursuit of more meaningful and contextually grounded scholarship. Rethinking North–South engagement therefore requires moving beyond symbolic partnership towards substantive equity, grounded in shared authority, recognition of diverse knowledge systems, and sustained investment in local research capacity. Only through such structural reorientation can international collaboration fulfil its promise as a genuinely plural and transformative mode of global knowledge production.

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