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A SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

This article summarises some of the findings from a recent research project that investigates the knowledge-power-politics-nexus in international development and looks deeper into the everyday realities of research partnerships between institutions and individuals from the Global North and the Global South.

Nobody would deny that partnership is a great concept that helps structure relations from the private sphere of individual couples up to the level of international economic and social affairs. What it implies is most appealing: voluntary and self-organising in nature; based on mutual respect and responsibility; sharing risks and benefits; adding value to existing achievements; and including the possibility for revising agreements if necessary (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Mayers and Vermeulen, 2002). No wonder that the partnership idea has become programmatic in international development (Bossuyt and Laporte, 1994). And also in the research sector the partnership idea has advanced to a veritable hype in the competition for ever more innovative scientific ventures aiming at cutting-edge understandings of the increased complexities of our globalised world.

However, there is also controversy and critique. The partnership agreement in itself will not automatically change the relationships between partners. Inequalities stemming from unequal power relations, various political and economic interests, or differing norms and values continue to exist. This requires special attention, respect, and commitment. In short, the very positive aspects of the partnership concept are intrinsically linked with the need for negotiating social relations, finding solutions to emerging conflicts, and searching for common ground. Partnership is not only a goal but a way to grow together – sometimes for a life-time, sometimes for the short term.

In a recent research project [3] that investigates the knowledge-power-politics-nexus in international development we have started to look deeper into the everyday realities of research partnerships between institutions and individuals from the Global North and the Global South. We are interested in providing evidence of what it means to engage in research partnerships that take into account and deal with the inequalities, differences, and polarisations that characterise both the subject matter of development research as well as its scientific organisation.

Based on narrative interviews conducted with senior researchers we can say research partnerships help in tackling complex and pressing issues that mark the thematic involvement of development research. They bear the potential to integrate various forms and sources of knowledge, they reshuffle historically loaded North-South relations by intellectually and personally rewarding experiences, and they show little by little ways and answers to deal with inequality and asymmetry in our globalised world as well as in globalised research networks.

Despite the ultimately rather positive accounts, we would like to highlight two critical issues regarding the functionality of research partnerships with respect to science policy and the political economy of research funding:

1) International research collaborations and the research partnership concept are contingent upon science policy frameworks. However, science policy frameworks and performance measurement schemes usually fail to do justice to the procedural aspects of research partnerships between institutions of the Global North and the Global South engaging in sustainable development research. The output-oriented standard performance measurement of science (e.g. number of publications, international visibility, prizes, patents etc.) miss out on aspects such as individual and institutional capacity development and the social and political relevance of sustainable development research conducted in research partnerships. To take them into account would mean

preparing the scientific organisation of research relations between the Global North and the Global South for new modes of functioning, collaborating, and exchanging. Clearly, this would involve a radical change.

2) The implementation of funding schemes drawing on the concept of research partnerships creates obligations with potentially negative implications for development research undertaken in partnership. It creates a new political economy which organises research according to a targeted distribution of resources, in which the partnership concept may not be able to crucially address and reduce power asymmetries. By overly responding to external demands or due to project cycle pressures, insufficient attention may be paid to certain risks with partnerships, including conflicts of interest, or poor choice of partners.

In sum, international research partnerships for sustainable development are not an easy remedy to act upon inherent inequalities in the field of development research as well as the undertaking of sustainable development per se. And yet, those who engage in research conducted in partnership prove that they are able and willing to withstand structural constraints and scepticism and that their engagement for contributing to a better world is supported by the international and cross-cultural exchange, respect and friendship built up in common research endeavours.

Notes

[1] This research project is part of the international research network of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South ([->website](#)). For information about the project on 'Knowledge, Power, Politics' please follow the link 'research for sustainable development'.

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