

Putting **equitable** and **transformative**
collaborative research with Africa-based
partners into practice



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Welcome to the Playbook for equitable, transformative partnerships!

Collaborative research between Africa and the global North is increasing. Yet multiple power imbalances that disadvantage Africa-based partners persist, and this creates an uneven 'playing field'. This playbook aims to help you understand what these power imbalances are, how and where they manifest in collaborative research. It also aims to provide you with knowledge and tools to help you actively redress these power imbalances in your collaborative work with Africa-based partners, to lead to truly equitable, transformative partnerships.

Introduction

The Africa Charter is a framework for equitable partnership working which has the overall aim of 'transforming' the research ecosystem worldwide. Co-created by the major higher education bodies in Africa, it has been recently adopted by the University of Bristol.

This playbook aims to support researchers and research professionals in transforming collaborative research with Africa-based partners. The playbook has been produced by a cross-disciplinary project, funded by a University of Bristol Strategic Impact Acceleration Award (2023-2025), to develop resources to support University staff in putting the Africa Charter in practice. It draws on the experiences of two collaborative research networks that worked extensively with partners based in Africa:

CONNECTED, the Community Network for Africa Vector-Borne Plant Viruses, aimed to increase capacity in vector-borne plant virus research across Africa by building a global community, funding new research and providing training for early career researchers.

TESF, Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures, aimed to provide better understanding of how education can support sustainable livelihoods, sustainable communities and climate action, and funded new research across India, Rwanda, Somalia/Somaliland, and South Africa.

These two very different networks aimed to support African scholarship and built partnerships with researchers and professionals from across Africa. They navigated a range of issues that could have perpetuated - rather than redressed - multiple power imbalances arising in joint research.

To capture a wider range of disciplines than those covered by CONNECTED and TESF alone, we have integrated learnings from these two projects with insights emerging from other Africa-facing collaborative research pursued across the University.

We distilled experiences of this range of recent or extant collaborations through the conduct of case studies and structured consultations with researchers and research professionals both in Bristol and in Africa.

This has allowed us to identify the current major opportunities, enablers and barriers for equitable, transformative partnership working between Africa-based partners and the University of Bristol. This learning is captured in this playbook. It is intended to support you in co-creating research projects in Africa in line with the principles of the Africa Charter.



The Perivoli Africa Research Centre (PARC) represents the University of Bristol's cross-disciplinary commitment to championing transformation in research collaborations with Africa. It is funded by a generous grant from the Perivoli Foundation. Learn more at parc.bristol.ac.uk



Who is this Playbook for and how to use it

This playbook aims to support researchers and research professionals from all faculties and divisions at the University of Bristol in developing equitable, transformative research partnerships with Africa-based researchers in line with the principles of the Africa Charter. The playbook guides you through the process, helping you to understand what truly equitable, transformative research partnerships look like in practice. It introduces you to the Africa Charter, an Africa-centred framework for equitable and transformative research collaborations, to help you understand the power imbalances that are typically at play in Africa-global North collaborative research and how we can actively redress these to foster a level playing field in international collaborative research.

01 Self-evaluation framework

This playbook encourages you to reflect on your activities and practices to understand how you can better support equity and transformative potential in research partnerships. The core of this is the 'Self-evaluation framework' which provides questions to ask yourself and points to consider. This guide can be used when you're starting out, to inform the process, from project inception and funding applications, all the way through to disseminating your findings and designing next steps. It can also be used during or at the end of your project to review your previous activities to assess how your partnership has been configured and, potentially, what adjustments to make. Each section of the self-evaluation is accompanied by an illustration of good practice from Bristol's recent Africa-facing projects, or from the Africa-based partners from the CONNECTED and TESF Networks.

02 Bristol's experiences: case studies with vignettes

The playbook then presents case studies from a variety of University of Bristol faculties, from projects or groups who have collaborated recently with partners based in Africa. These provide honest, transparent reports of how they engaged with their partners, what went well but also where barriers existed, plus support that would help for future improvement. The CONNECTED and TESF case studies provide short vignettes to highlight good practice in rebalancing power in collaborative research with Africa-based partners, in line with the Africa Charter.

Your roadmap to success

Your starting point for this journey will depend on your previous experience and institutional infrastructure. Making progress is important – it may not be perfect to start with, nor for a while: informed aspirations, a commitment to continuous improvement and taking action to make progress towards goals are what matter. Working out how your institution or project can improve its approach requires reflecting on current practices, identifying where these enable or hinder equitability, and deciding actionable changes to transform partnership working.

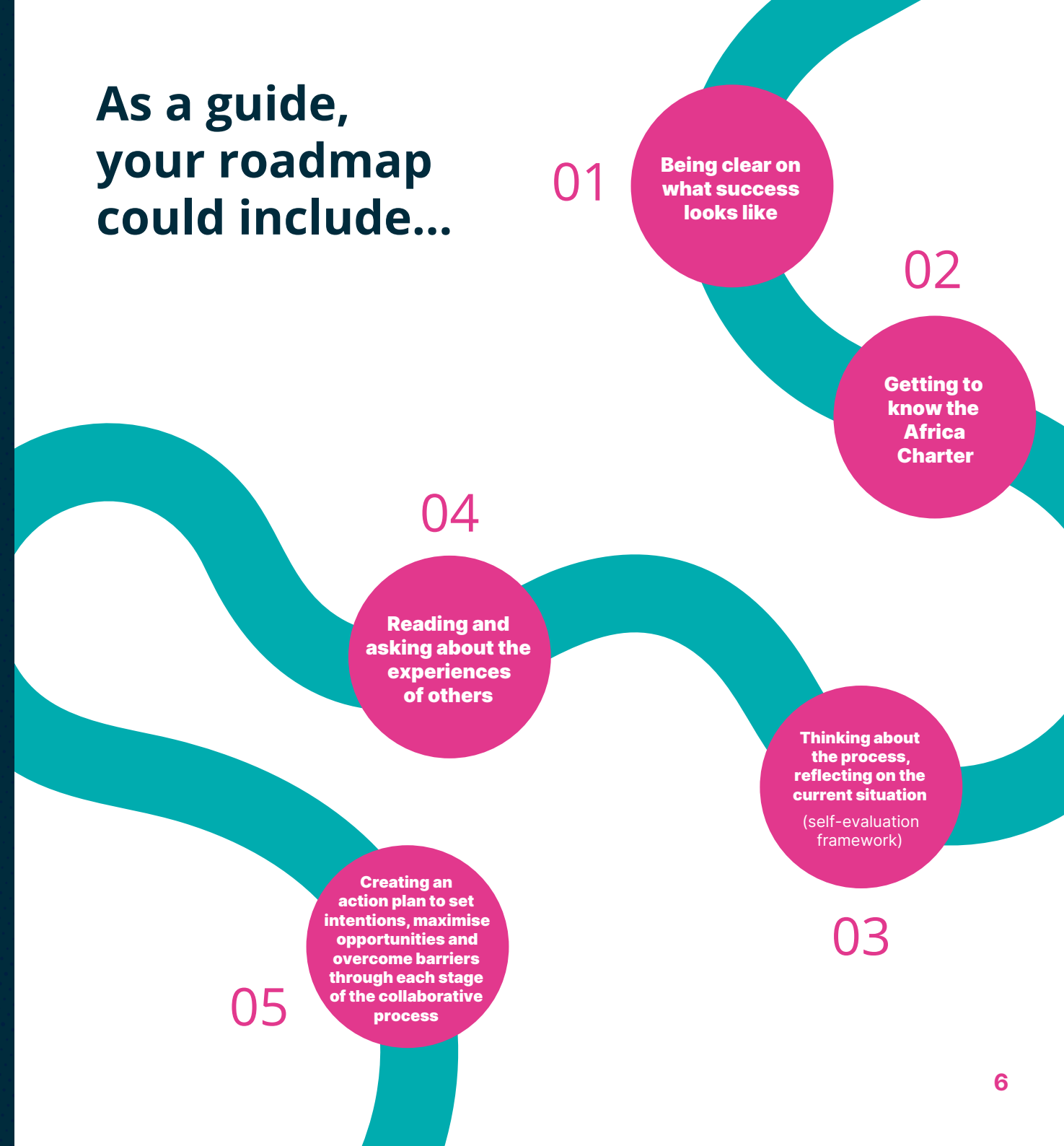
ACTIVITY:

If you've worked with partners before, whether from Africa or anywhere else, reflect on your past experience. Think about the role you played, how did it go? If you're embarking on collaborative research with Africa-based partners, what will be your role and remit? How might you be able to influence the nature of the partnership?

Your roadmap could include:

1. Being clear on what success looks like
2. Getting to know the Africa Charter
3. Thinking about the process, reflecting on current practices (self-evaluation framework)
4. Reading and asking about the experiences of others
5. Creating an action plan to establish goals and priorities, maximise opportunities and overcome barriers through each stage of the collaborative process.

As a guide,
your roadmap
could include...



Notes

What makes an equitable, transformative research partnership?

Collaborations with Africa-based partners should aim to be transformative, that is, they redress the current systemic imbalances and inequities in collaborative research, which the Africa Charter describes (read more on this in the next section). Achieving transformation requires thinking and acting intentionally at each stage of the collaborative process to recognise, and consider approaches that address the power imbalances at play, and to understand and prioritise factors that are important to your Africa-based partners.

In practice, what equitability and transformation for Africa-based partners in a collaborative relationship look like includes:

- ▶ Research priorities emerge from dialogue with Africa-based colleagues, not from external agendas that assume a deficit in African development.
- ▶ The expertise, interests and knowledge systems of Africa-based partners are actively understood and prioritized within the collaborative work from the outset.
- ▶ African scholarship is built upon to generate new underpinning theories and concepts that reflect African experiences and knowledge systems.
- ▶ The role and value of the diverse linguistic landscape of Africa is central to the operation of, and outputs arising from, the collaborative work.
- ▶ Participation in and contributions to leadership, decision-making, and access to rewards are prioritized for Africa-based partners.
- ▶ Differences between the operational and administrative systems of partner institutions, and differing access to financial, technical and human resources are thoroughly identified so that partnerships can be set up to maximise participation by Africa-based partners.
- ▶ Access to outputs from collaborative work conducted in Africa is prioritized for the African communities to whom it is relevant.

ACTIVITY:

Reflect on your experience of partnership working to date – to what extent did it meet these goals?

Notes

Getting to know the Africa Charter

The Africa Charter is an Africa-centred framework for equitable and transformative research collaborations. The aim of the Charter is to improve on current modes of collaborative research so that African scholarship can take its rightful place in the global research ecosystem, being able to fully contribute to knowledge production and helping to solve world crises for the benefit of all. The Charter helps us understand what the current problems are and where they manifest in collaborative research practices so that we can take action to redress the power imbalances that result for African scholarship.

Facilitated by Bristol's Perivoli Africa Research Centre (PARC) together with the Institute for Humanities in Africa at the University of Cape Town and the Chief Albert Luthuli Research Chair, University of South Africa, the Charter has been co-created by Africa's major higher education constituencies in 2023 and has been endorsed by more than 120 signatories thus far.

There are a range of terms, including 'global South', 'global North', 'non-Western' and 'Western' which are currently used to refer to regions that differ with regard to their relative political and economic

power, and levels of income poverty. Typically, 'global North'/Western countries comprise former colonising nations in Europe and North America, but also those positioned favourably within unequal global capitalist structures and treaties. We recognise the problematic nature of these terms, their inadequacy in capturing actual disparities between and within regions and the insufficient attention given to their origin. In this document, we use the term 'global North' to refer to those regions where systemic power imbalances in collaborative research with actors in the continent of Africa emerge.



ACTIVITY:

The table below summarises the power imbalances often experienced by African research collaborators and ways that individuals engaging in collaborative research with Africa-based partners can redress those issues. Have a read, and note in the last column whether you have been aware of or experienced any of these issues in your collaborative work so far (whether international or otherwise). It could also be helpful to reflect on how given situations arose and any action that may have been taken to counter disadvantages faced by partners.



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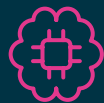


Notes

Imbalance

Power-imbalances

Principles for redressing the imbalances: All collaborative research needs to:



Epistemology

Academics typically assume that knowledge and approaches from their discipline, established in the 'Global North' are universal and should form the foundation of new collaborative research. This undermines the value and contribution of knowledge and approaches arising from Africa.

Redressing these imbalances is about recognising that dominant disciplinary ways of seeing and interpreting the world exist alongside other knowledge systems, including indigenous- or community-based knowledge systems. We need to recognise that these knowledge systems are equally valid and relevant for collaborative research. As researchers and research professionals, we need to identify and consider the different knowledge systems pertinent to the research at hand, and find ways to draw on them as a foundation for creating new academic knowledge. This has practical implications regarding institutional policies and ways of working, including research methodologies.

Have you been aware of, or experienced these imbalances in collaborative research?

Yes	No	Maybe
-----	----	-------



Language

Dominant global languages, particularly English, are the default for conceiving, developing and conducting international research and for publishing collaborative outputs.

Redressing this imbalance begins with recognising that language plays a vital role as the 'location' and source of knowledge, besides being a means of communication. As researchers and research professionals we need to identify the African language(s) pertinent to the research at hand and ensure they are appropriately represented and used at all stages of collaborative research. This includes the conceptualisation of research questions, experimental design and conduct, interpretation of findings, and dissemination of outputs (written, spoken and visual materials). It also has very practical implications regarding ways of working, including research methods.

Have you been aware of, or experienced these imbalances in collaborative research?

Yes	No	Maybe
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Theory, concepts, extraversion

Academic research defaults to 'global Northern' theories, concepts, and approaches to frame collaborative research. This can marginalise existing intellectual thinking and hamper the generation of new concepts and approaches from Africa. This can also make outputs less relevant to African audiences, and undermine the value of African scholarly expertise.

Redressing this imbalance begins with recognising that current academic and disciplinary theories, concepts, and categories may be insufficient. We need to identify and build on existing African scholarly thinking from the outset, generating new theories and concepts that reflect African experiences and ways of knowing in the research context. African communities contributing to the generation of empirical data for our research should also be audiences of the research output(s). We need to produce academic knowledge that is equally relevant and accessible to the groups who co-produced that new knowledge.

Have you been aware of, or experienced these imbalances in collaborative research?

Yes	No	Maybe
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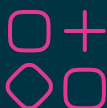
The Development Frame

Collaborative academic research, and its associated funding, assumes that priority research topics for the African continent relate primarily to development ‘deficits’ as defined in global agendas (such as the Sustainable Development Goals). These position Africa as a ‘developing’ region that must catch up with the ‘developed’ ‘global North’. This leads to a tendency for ‘global Northern’ researchers to investigate and address ‘problems’ in Africa, whereas African scholars do not typically research and help address ‘problems’ in the ‘global North’. It can also mean that problems, issues or questions of prime concern to Africa, which fall outside the global development agenda, go unresearched.

Redressing these imbalances begins with recognising that conceptions of the ‘global North’ as ‘advanced’ and Africa as needing to ‘catch up’ are flawed. Issues or questions relating to human/planetary wellbeing or futures exist everywhere, and are not always framed within global agendas. As researchers and research professionals we need to investigate issues and desired solutions as they are understood and prioritised in the continent, within funding constraints. Additionally, we need to include a complementary element in our research that sees African scholars investigate corresponding problems in the North. Going further, we could develop collaborative research that focuses only on investigating ‘global North’ problems drawing on perspectives from Africa.

Have you been aware of, or experienced these imbalances in collaborative research?

Yes	No	Maybe
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Institutional resourcing

Unequal access to resources, and funding that favours ‘global Northern’ partners results in disparities in the financial, operational, physical and data infrastructures between Africa-based and ‘global Northern’ institutions. The imbalance impacts the capacity of Africa-based researchers to lead and/or participate fully in collaborative research and can affect project implementation.

Funding agencies have a major role to play in redressing these imbalances by adjusting funding strategies to promote leadership by Africa-based partners and incorporate support for institutional infrastructures alongside longer-term research programmes. For researchers and research professionals, redressing this imbalance begins with understanding differences between partner institutions’ access to financial, technical and human resources as well as operational systems. This should happen early on, when developing funding proposals. The next step is to seek mutually agreeable arrangements to create opportunities for Africa-based partners to lead or participate in the project. This includes expectations around due diligence, contracting and payment schedules.

Have you been aware of, or experienced these imbalances in collaborative research?

Yes	No	Maybe
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Practical arrangements

Collaborative research favours ‘global Northern’ partners with superior positions and influence regarding leadership, decision-making, high-value tasks (e.g. theory development, data analysis, writing for publication), and access to rewards (e.g. lead authorship). Additionally, focusing capacity building activities on Africa-based partners devalues their existing knowledge, expertise and skills, overlooking capacity needs of the ‘global Northern’ partners.

Redressing these imbalances is about ensuring equitability in the division of leadership, decision-making, labour and access to rewards at all stages of the research, with an emphasis on prioritising contributions by Africa-based partners. Capacity building activities should satisfy the development needs of all international partners and be agreed at the start of the collaborative activity

Have you been aware of, or experienced these imbalances in collaborative research?

Yes	No	Maybe
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1. Thinking about the process, *reflecting on the current situation*

What follows is a framework of self-evaluation questions which are designed to help you reflect on collaborative work that has already taken place. However, this also provides useful prompts when starting out on new collaborative endeavours. This framework is designed to support researchers, research professionals and professional service staff alike, and is structured according to the different stages of a typical research project lifecycle – but the approach is also relevant to other collaborative activities that do not fall into this structure.

The framework has been compiled from data co-created with University of Bristol researchers, research professionals and professional service staff from a range of Faculties together with insight from Africa-based partners in the CONNECTED and TEF Networks. It has been augmented with findings from case studies of University of Bristol projects that have collaborated with Africa-based partners.

While the self-evaluation framework aims to support staff through important decision making, there are sometimes factors

beyond the influence of the individual which can constrain the transformative nature of collaborative partnerships. Barriers to equitable, transformative partnerships can arise from a variety of sources, including mismatches between institutional priorities, drivers, and internal systems (such as contracts, payment methods, and financial reporting), due diligence requirements and timeframes, capacity needs from both sides. They can also arise from aspects related to funding, including the amount of time to develop and submit proposals, eligibility and leadership constraints, and exclusion of overseas partners from rewards (e.g. authorship). Having an awareness of these risks and planning for how to manage them can support successful partnership working. Enablers of equitable partnerships include recognition of partner strengths, expertise and resources, funding calls that actively enable overseas partner eligibility and leadership, excellent communications within the consortium and understanding the needs of all involved, and ensuring that designated project support resources/roles are included within the project. Below, some aspects of these are outlined to help

you become more aware of their wider implications in collaborative work.

Institutional policies and processes

If due diligence requirements, payment schedules and contracts are not flexible enough to accommodate differing needs of overseas partners, these can limit the ability of individual researchers and research professionals to implement truly equitable, transformative approaches. Change at the institutional level may be required to enable this. Consider the following:

- Due diligence requirements are implemented by institutions to manage financial risk when funding overseas partners. These processes and requirements can undermine the equitability of collaborative research partnerships if they are communicated and implemented in ways that instill an ethos of distrust and if they fail to recognise the challenges for resource-limited partners in complying with the requirements. This is particularly true where financial regulations, expectations and processes differ

from those in the UK. Adapting the requirements according to the level of funds involved can help to mitigate this.

- Overseas partners, particularly those based in Africa, often require payment in advance for work to be able to progress. Accommodating this can pose problems for institutions, like the University of Bristol, which typically operate by paying partners in arrears. However, the Finance department can be amenable to advance payments when proper rationales are provided.
- When an institution will not accept contracts not written in English, this can pose problems for international projects, particularly those led by overseas partners.

The funding landscape

Funding terms and conditions can provide important opportunities and constraints for the equitability and transformative potential of collaborative partnerships. Can overseas partners be included? To what extent are they eligible to receive funding, and can they assume leadership

positions (e.g. Principle Investigator/Project Lead or Co-Investigator/Co-Lead)? Funding scope can also affect the nature of the work that can be conducted. For example, grants from Official Development Assistance (ODA) sources can require that the work explicitly delivers economic and welfare benefits, set out in global development agendas, for countries considered to be Low or Middle Income Countries (LMICs). These may shape approaches to, and the focus of, collaboration, for example, by pre-determining problems to be investigated and assuming that Africa exists in a state of deficit rather than as a continent rich in material, cultural and knowledge resources. Award terms and conditions can also impact those who may benefit from the funding. For example, students may not be eligible to receive any funds, which can disadvantage researchers based in Africa where the academic career progression pathways can differ from those typical in the global North: Africa-based researchers, despite being employed senior world-leading experts, may be studying for a PhD concurrently. The timeframes for funding applications may preclude full co-creation with Africa-based partners, potentially limiting the establishment of mutual interests, goals and joint approaches early.

Further points to consider

- Consider using the Africa Charter as an intention-setting tool at the onset of projects.
- Ensure participatory approaches in all steps of project design, implementation and sharing of results.
- If partners' fundamental understandings of the research questions or core concepts are divergent and incompatible, implementing a joint project may be challenging. Consider local sensibilities about gender and hierarchical relationships, as these can hamper equitable collaborations if not approached with appropriate awareness.
- What would be required to fully co-create a project for a funding call, and did we give enough time to do this with our partners? Co-creation and co-design in project conception means actively involving African-based partners from the outset, ensuring that projects are developed collaboratively and aligned with local priorities and needs (including the use of appropriate languages), and taking seriously the need to build on knowledge and expertise from Africa. By engaging in inclusive, equitable decision-making processes, we can ensure

that projects are culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and responsive to the realities on the ground, with sincere consideration for different research approaches, perspectives and institutional resources. Co-creation approaches (especially involving non-academic local populations in the research process) can reveal a variety of indigenous knowledge which could be considered as alternative epistemology from Africa but are often excluded from current academic structures.

- Data collection may be distinct from interpretation and analysis: this is not always straightforward in certain subjects (e.g. the humanities). It can be useful to build in check points over the duration of the project for reviewing authorship, acknowledging the relative collaborative contributions from different partners, and reaching agreement on where/how to publish outputs. There can be problems when it comes to writing up and publishing the work where groups haven't been clear about who will do what at different stages and how aspects will be noted as independent or collaborative. Additionally, distributing authorship in an equitable fashion

may require balancing authorship positions from paper to paper, providing equitability over the project's lifetime. It can also be helpful to consider the relative value of different output types (such co-authored pieces versus as monographs) to different disciplines, at different career stages, and in the international system you are working within. Consider a variety of forms of dissemination to cater for various audiences, such as booklets, videos, blogs and more. Also consider whether it might be appropriate to use generative AI technology to support the translation of materials/outputs into local languages.

ACTIVITY:

Using a collaborative project/ activity you've previously worked on as a test case, go through the self-evaluation framework: consider the points and answer the questions as best you can. Alternatively, you could consider a new activity you're planning – how could this be as transformative as possible for your partners?

Notes

Self-evaluation

Project stage

Self-evaluation questions and points to consider

General

- How did I/the team go about identifying the right partners?
- Did we consider the need for ensuring 'equity' in our partnership? If yes, how did we define or think about what equity means in this situation?
- In what ways did we try to foster an 'equitable' partnership? In what ways was the partnership transformative? It may be helpful to look through the multiple layers of power imbalances that can manifest in collaborative research with Africa (see section 5, Getting to Know the Africa Charter).
- Overall, to what extent did our partnership address different layers of inequalities between UoB and Africa-based research partners? How did we try to address different aspects? If others weren't considered or addressed, why was that? What could be done differently next time?

Good Practice:

Early on in the process of establishing a collaboration of any kind with Africa-based partners, it is important to make sure there is a shared understanding of mutual interests, intentions, goals, existing expertise, resources (as well as constraints) and ways of acquiring and using knowledge. Establishing a Memorandum of understanding (MOU) between collaborating organisations can be a useful exercise to ensure this understanding is in place from the very start of a collaborative relationship. It can also provide an initial commitment between organisations that can then be built upon and developed into a future collaboration agreement as funding is sourced to support collaborative activities. The Jean Golding Institute found that establishing a MOU early with their Africa-based partner, Strathmore University (Kenya), enabled their emerging collaboration, which has since flourished and continues today. Strathmore initiated the process: it was relatively easy to put in place as an MOU is not typically a legally binding contract unlike a collaboration agreement. As such, it can provide a good initial starting point to build towards establishing collaboration agreements when funding is secured.

Project conception & collaboration development

1. How and from whom did the initial project idea arise? To what extent did it reflect priority interests of the Africa-based partners? To what extent did we ensure that Africa-based partners led or co-led the project conception and planning stages? If they didn't – what happened and why?
2. Was it possible to identify funding calls that allow overseas leadership? Where else might we have looked to identify possible funding opportunities, including in the Global South, that allow Global Southern partners to lead?
3. To what extent did the knowledge and expertise of the Africa-based partners help establish the key concepts, research questions, and methodologies of the project? How did we enable this?
4. How did we ensure that Africa-based partners could participate fully in project conception and planning stages? If they couldn't, what happened?
5. Did our African partners have the resources (e.g. time, capacity, etc.) to develop a new funding bid? If not, what would have been required to ensure this was possible?
6. Was it possible to identify funding calls that allow overseas leadership? Are there funding opportunities in the global South, for southern partners to lead?
7. Did we consider whether research materials (e.g. project plans, guidance documents) need to be available in multiple languages? What were the implications of language(s) used for data collection? What local knowledge did we make use of for understanding where different languages are spoken, cultural nuances, hierarchies of language?
8. How did we manage the use of disciplinary languages when collaborations were inter-disciplinary as well as multi-country?
9. How did we identify the relevant publication avenues including Africa-based journals during project development?

Good Practice:

To enable truly equitable, transformative research partnerships to develop from the outset, it is important to seek funding opportunities (a) where Africa-based collaborators/partners are eligible to receive funding, (b) that allow overseas partners to assume academic leadership positions, and (c) providing suitable lead times to enable true project co-creation. We include a list of funders and schemes in the 'Extra Resources' section at the end of this document but these are only current at the time of drafting (summer 2025). Please contact the DREI Research Development International team for up-to-date information on suitable funding schemes.

Resourcing, contracts & payments

10. At the start, how did we ensure we understood the differences in financial, contracting auditing, and reporting systems/processes between collaborating institutions? Understanding any flexibility in these approaches can be useful as disparities in institutional resources can be significant. For example, lack of administrative capabilities can draw on researchers' time significantly in some institutions. Therefore, the ability to primarily focus on research activities can become unequal.
11. Did the funding call include eligibility constraints and/or T&Cs which impacted the amount and/or type of costs that could be claimed by Africa-based partners? Could we have worked around these?
12. Were there open discussions about resourcing needs and the allocation of costs for UoB and Africa-based partners? Did we identify whether paying our Africa-based partners upfront (rather than in arrears) would be necessary? Did we ensure that full visa/travel/healthcare (etc.) costs were covered for partners and that time was allocated to accommodate these? It is essential to address the issue of compensation from the onset. Establishing a clear compensation structure for all project staff, outlining how their time spent on project activities will be remunerated, is crucial. Sometimes the transfer of funds can be delayed so flexibility in the scheduling of project activities may be beneficial. Delays can be due to institutional bureaucracy and bank transfer processes.
13. How did the various concepts/approaches/resources brought to the collaboration by each partner influence how financial and staff resources were allocated within the project?
14. Were the University of Bristol's policies and procedures for establishing research contracts for Africa-based partners clear, straightforward and fair for all partners? Was the due diligence process clear, straightforward and completed in a timely fashion? Do we know what difficulties or tensions, if any, arose for the Africa-based partner in completing it?

Good Practice:

Aligning the financial needs of UK-based and Africa-based institutions can be challenging but these challenges can be minimised by including designated project management roles within project budgets, particularly for larger or more complex projects. Both the CONNECTED and TESF Networks did this: CONNECTED employed a Network Team which included a project manager, communications officer and executive assistant; TESF employed a contract and finance manager. These functions were critical in overcoming delays caused by new due diligence processes and incompatibilities between institutional finance systems (for instance, regarding payment schedules).

Implementation

15. Did we agree (early in the project) the contributions that each partner would make to different stages of the work? How did we do this?
16. Reflecting on the contributions made by Africa-based partners during project implementation, were these minor, or significant? Did they contribute to data analysis and interpretation, concept/theory-building, or primarily to data collection and field engagement?
17. How did we establish a shared understanding of the need to equip all partners (both Africa-based, UoB researchers, and others) with new skills and expertise (rather than focusing all capacity building on Africa-based partners)? Did all partners contribute to deciding what was needed and relevant?
18. Did we have the right expertise and/or contacts to understand the languages that should have been used during the project? How did languages relate to cultural factors and/or biases relevant to the project or ways of doing the work? Did we need to develop a shared (interdisciplinary?) language – if so, how did we achieve this? Was it appropriate to use certain cultural, linguistic and disciplinary terms? For example, the term ‘basket of tools’ may be more gender-sensitive than the related term ‘toolkit’.
19. How did Africa-based partners contribute to decision-making processes during the project? How were roles and responsibilities clearly outlined, agreed? Were they distributed with priority given to leadership by Africa-based partners? How did we manage agreeing a work plan between all partners, and ensuring flexibility in implementation was considered?
20. What challenges were faced by UoB researchers compared to Africa-based partners when traveling to the countries active in the project? How did we mitigate/minimise these for all partners?

Good Practice:

To ensure the work is feasible and relevant to the local context, it is important to involve Africa-based partners, where possible as leaders, from the outset in deciding how to implement the collaborative work. Projects from Bristol's Faculty of Science and Engineering achieved this by instigating collaborative approaches from the start around mutual interests and shared goals – agreeing leadership by Africa-based partners when it became clear that their expertise was most appropriate to lead, and where funders prioritised Africa-based leadership.

Generating outputs & dissemination

21. How did we agree (early in the project) the contributions that each partner would make to different stages of the research, including approaches to be used?
22. How did we ensure that all partners discussed and agreed on how to collect, interpret, and analyse data and present it in publications? How did we agree and capture the roles, responsibilities and activities of all participants within the project to ensure fair credit being given?
23. Thinking about power imbalances in collaborative research, was authorship distributed in an equitable fashion?
24. How did we consider who had the opportunity to lead the publications, and what effect did these decisions have on the careers and future prospects of all individuals involved (regarding track record and future funding)?
25. Did we consider the need to develop outputs in relevant African languages? How did we ensure we produced outputs in languages appropriate to the relevant academic, public and community audiences? Reflecting on the language(s) in which outputs were created, was translation and back-translation via English/Western language suitable? Could co-creation of outputs have been done in multiple languages in parallel?
26. Did we consider the need to produce outputs to convey findings that reflect (and respect) other knowledge systems, such as indigenous knowledge?
27. Were the project outputs equally accessible to Bristol- and Africa-based researchers – how was this ensured? Reflect on what accessibility means for our collaboration. Considering wider accessibility and tools for dissemination, in addition to written outputs, did we include spoken, recorded, or visual outputs?
28. Were open access costs considered and budgeted for equitably?

Good practice:

Early identification of accessible regional as well as global outlets for publishing and sharing project outputs is important to ensure the work benefits all communities and audiences it is relevant to. Pay attention to the ethical authorship requirements of various journals that are increasingly emphasising the importance of including local co-authors when research is conducted in Low and Middle Income Countries, a term which encompasses multiple countries in Africa. Considering the language(s) that outputs are produced in, whether written, audio or visual, is important to ensure accessibility to the relevant communities and audiences. TESI's Africa-based hubs operated in local languages as well as dominant colonial languages and produced outputs in local languages, enabling the network to operate using languages that members felt most comfortable with and ensuring that findings were made accessible to the most relevant audiences. To generate outputs that have real impact, it can be helpful to be flexible about what form those outputs are envisaged to take. For example, drawing from a documentary film which had been produced collaboratively with academic and civil society partners in Africa, a project from Bristol's Faculty of Arts produced flexible open access training materials. Through the process of engaging with different audiences, the team realised that the full-length film could be presented in several different ways, including in shorter themed segments and with discussion questions and links to additional materials that were relevant to particular audiences. This enables findings from the underlying research to be accessed and used flexibly by different groups, according to their interests and resources, thus ensuring maximum impact.

Monitoring, learning & evaluation (MLE)

29. How did we ensure we had a clear understanding of what outcomes and impacts were desirable, achievable and measurable from the beginning? How did we attempt to measure these? It is important to ensure that both UoB and Africa-based project members agree with the purpose, methods, and progress metrics of the MLE used.
30. What metrics were most meaningful and/or important to each partner (e.g. publications, leading publications, participation, funding access, others) and what metrics were applied by funders? Did we consider, agree and cost in who would monitor and evaluate progress and how?
31. Did we consider whether MLE is done differently in different disciplines? Was there a need for separate MLE approaches for Africa-based activities compared to UK-based activities? How did we accommodate “learning on the fly” into our MLE approaches?
32. Did we monitor how many resources/outputs were downloaded in different languages?
33. How did we ensure that both UoB-based and Africa-based project members can access and use the findings of MLE activities for their future work?

Good practice:

A MLE framework in place from the start helps to understand whether the project is making progress towards its intended impact. It is therefore important to jointly develop and articulate the main outcomes and impacts that the research desires to generate, emphasising what is important to the Africa-based partners. Having clearly articulated and agreed outcome and impact statements from the outset is useful. Performance or evaluation questions at various stages need to be well articulated alongside the most appropriate metrics and key performance indicators; mechanisms must be put in place to ensure progress can be measured. Both the CONNECTED and TEF Networks established MLE systems early on in network development. CONNECTED's system was developed and implemented by the Network Team and emerged from a Theory of Change which articulated the main activity themes, key actors, and long-term impact the network was aiming towards. The CONNECTED MLE system comprised participant demographic monitoring for all network events, surveys (pre, post, and 6 months follow-up) following all training courses/awards, and a thorough post-project outcome/impact questionnaire for all new pump prime funded projects. TEF's approach employed an external consultant to develop and implement their MLE system. The measures and monitoring methods used a bottom-up, values-led approach which was devised and agreed by the Africa-based partner hubs. MLE progress reports were captured and shared across the network via a centralised online platform, enabling the synthesis of network-level learning.

Designing next steps

- 34. What lessons in equitable, transformative partnership working can be learned and applied to future projects?
- 35. Did we use MLE results for future project design? How did we ensure that UoB and Africa-based partners could participate fully in designing the next steps of the project (e.g. onward funding bids, or impact activities)? Was language a barrier to achieving goals in terms of scientific outcomes or outreach?
- 36. Can we leverage existing investment to support new activities/projects?
- 37. Have both UoB and Africa-based partners been able to secure follow-on funding? If so, reflect on what enabled this.

Good practice:

To be able to work together in the long term, it is important to establish good understandings of each partner's goals, motivations, expertise, methods and available resources, and to build trust. Many of the Bristol projects we have analysed to contribute to this playbook emerged from prior connections and previous collaborative activities. When continuing collaborative relationships towards new endeavours, it can be helpful to review how the proceeding work has gone, and revisit and reaffirm those understandings of each partner's priorities, strengths and constraints. Was the partnership as equitable and transformative as it could have been? What worked well, what didn't, and what has changed since? Some of the new research projects funded by TEF and CONNECTED went on to secure further funding, continuing the collaborations they forged as part of those networks. Projects from CONNECTED went on to secure over £300,000 from a variety of UK-based funding sources.

2. Bristol's experiences: case studies of collaborative research with Africa

Here we present case studies from a selection of University of Bristol projects and professionals that have collaborated with Africa-based partners. The case studies reflect on the approaches and practices used for establishing and maintaining equitable, transformative research partnerships. They consider the challenges and opportunities associated with equitable partnership working in practice, and ways to improve practices moving forwards, with institutional support.

Each case study has been created through focus group interviews that were then qualitatively analysed to identify themes, enablers and barriers relevant to equitable, transformative partnership working. All quotes were provided by the UK-based team members who were interviewed.



The CONNECTED Network

Background

CONNECTED aimed to increase capacity in vector-borne plant virus research in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), through pump-priming new research, training, and networking. CONNECTED was led by Professors Gary Foster (Bristol – replaced by Dr Andy Bailey) and Neil Boonham (Newcastle), and was implemented by a designated Network Team with network manager, communications officer and executive assistant. It was governed by a Management Board comprising many Africa-, and UK-based experts, and depended upon key partnerships with Africa-based agricultural research organisations.

How equitable, transformative partnership working was considered from the start

CONNECTED was funded by a UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) call which explicitly aimed to deliver

economic and welfare benefits in Low and Middle Income Countries in Central, East, West and Southern Africa. The network was initially founded upon existing connections between UK academics and Africa-based partners, leveraging prior collaborations and trust. It was not initially co-designed due to the short funding competition timeframe. Practices improved during implementation, moving away from colonial approaches and supporting equitable collaboration and partnerships within the constraints of funder terms and conditions. However, engagement with African knowledge systems was limited due to the top-down nature of the funding call.

The funding required that the project increased research capacity specifically in SSA. This was achieved by consulting the Africa-based research community to understand needs and co-creating new training resources through strategic partnerships with relevant Africa-based organisations.

“ taking that consistent approach and the fact that we were in touch with them on a personal level, understanding, relating trying to help solve the problems. I think it helped the setup of those projects and helped instill that kind of collegiate supportive. You know, we care about you. ”

Initially, funder eligibility constraints prevented Africa-based collaborators from leading the new research projects funded by CONNECTED. UK institutions were required to lead projects, creating power imbalances. To improve equity, the CONNECTED team lobbied the funders to change this, which was successful. Institutional due diligence processes suggested distrust of overseas partner organisations. Collaborative teams developed good professional relationships, important partnership enablers. The strong representation of Africa-based experts in the Management Board played a key role in governing activities and promoting equitable decision-making.

Opportunities and challenges for equitable, transformative partnership working in practice

Various funder requirements caused complications, delays, eroded partnership trust, and hampered equitability: paying Africa-based partners via the UK leads HEIs, new due diligence requirements, and initially not allowing Africa-based researchers to be academic leads of the new projects. Where UK institutions had to lead projects, this created perceptions of unequal power, the funding structures and administrative requirements reinforcing these dynamics. Differing financial models between UK- and Africa-based organisations presented further issues regarding eligibility of costs within projects and inappropriate payment schedules. Funder mistakes, exchange rates and bank charges associated with working with Africa-based partners reduced the funds available. Differing pressures on UK- and Africa-based researchers regarding research evaluation and recognition drove behaviour and choices in partnerships, affecting equitability.

☞ **There's also the administrative burden on the African partners for having to complete the extensive due diligence checks when they're**

only going to get, you know, a few thousand pounds worth of funding. A lot of which got absorbed into institutional running costs anyway. ☹

However, trust between initial partners via prior collaborations was crucial to CONNECTED's success. The flexibility in how funding could be used allowed for more equitable practices, allowing adaptation to partner needs of the partners. Focused efforts on training and capacity building helped bridge gaps and fostered a collaborative environment. Excellent lines of communications, including meeting in-person helped alleviate issues, supporting collaboration development. The early community needs analysis enabled members to communicate needs which informed the priorities for the project. Having designated staff to work on practical implementation.

☞ **The benefits have still been materialised and that, I think is due to the kind of the motivations, the ethos, the aims of the individuals involved. ☹**

Learning how research is conducted in the partner country/institution/region on a practical level helped understanding what was feasible within a project. Purposefully



supporting projects from a range of countries and institutions maximized the benefit from the funding. The network collectively lobbying the funder to allow Africa-based partners to be academic leads on funded projects was a significant step towards more equitable partnerships. Ensuring all Africa-based partners received 80% of their funding upfront helped address administrative burdens and financial constraints, crucial for the smooth implementation of the projects.

“ Yeah, we have the lovely situation that we could claim that the insects didn’t realize that there were borders. ”

Examples of successful practices from CONNECTED include the training events and workshops, held in both the UK and Africa, tailored to participants’ needs: these provided valuable skills, and fostered collaboration and cultural awareness. The Management Board played a crucial role in overseeing all activities, ensuring they aligned with project goals, and the diversity of Board ensured more equitable decision-making. CONNECTED established a Theory of Change (ToC) and associated monitoring, learning and evaluation (MLE) framework early in the project to guide the project towards long-term impact. This

also generated impact metrics to evidence delivery of grant objectives, demonstrating the value of the project. The ToC included priorities for network members identified by a needs assessment and the MLE framework was designed to capture progress towards these. MLE activities included pre-, post-, and follow-up surveys completed by participants of all networking and training events and a thorough evaluation of all new funded projects. CONNECTED also adapted its approach and activities based on feedback and lessons learned, demonstrating continuous improvement in action.

“ A positive thing from experience with CONNECTED was just the immense positivity of all of the people that you’re working with, the ambition and drive and sense of purpose of all of the early career researchers. ”

Moving forwards, with Institutional support

Longer lead times for funding applications would allow time for appropriate co-creation and co-design: the short timeframes were a significant barrier. Providing dedicated support for project management within project budgets would

facilitate smoother project implementation: having this dedicated resource was a key factor in CONNECTED’s success. Greater institutional flexibility and coordination between financial and administrative processes would better accommodate the needs of international collaborations. For example, when due diligence and contracts processes are not well coordinated and overly complicated, this can present barriers to progress. Alignment and simplification of these processes alongside improved communications between professional services, finance, and contracts teams would have enabled better equitability.

“ The administrative burden in managing this with due diligence and things was more money of Admin time than the award being made. ”

Toolkits and resources would also be useful, with precedents and examples of best practice from an organisational standpoint. These should include guidance for how to conduct international research that is culturally appropriate and has the flexibility to succeed within different financial and administrative structures. This would help address the current lack of institutional memory for international collaborative projects, providing a framework for future projects.

“ Learning from best practice and having precedent and ways of doing these things from an organizational viewpoint, I think was the biggest frustration that we continuously came across. ”



Collective action to change inequitable funder policy

If you are involved in a collaborative project, and you notice approaches or practices that don't seem equitable, taking action can bring about change for the better. This is exemplified by the CONNECTED Network lobbying its funders to allow more equitable academic leadership opportunities for Africa-based partners. Initially, Africa-based collaborators were not eligible to be Principal Investigators on CONNECTED's pump prime funded projects – they were only eligible to be Co-Investigators – limiting the recognition of their academic leadership. A UK HEI was required to be the lead organisation on any pump priming bids, primarily to ensure that the administration of funds sent to overseas partners satisfied the funder's requirements. This meant that these UK collaborators had to assume the Principal Investigator position, whether or not they were the true academic leader of the work.

CONNECTED, together with three other vector-borne disease networks funded by the same GCRF funding opportunity, felt that this policy did not fit with the ethos and spirit of the GCRF funding, which aimed to deliver economic and welfare benefits for Low and Middle Income Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa by enhancing research capacity. How can capacity be truly enhanced if UK funders do not allow Africa-based academics to lead the new international collaborative research? As a group, CONNECTED and the other vector-borne disease networks lobbied the funders change this policy. Network Directors and Managers wrote a joint letter setting out the implications and ramifications that the current situation presented for capacity in Africa-based scholarship and equity for international collaborative research, and the rationale for changing the position based on the aims of the GCRF funding. They then submitted this letter to the funders for consideration. The result was that the funders changed their policy, allowing Africa-based partners to assume the role of Principal Investigator, provided that a UK HEI was a co-investigating organisation on the grant for solely administrative purposes. This rebalanced the level of reward and recognition associated with project leadership roles by clarifying that the UK HEI was only required for administrative purposes and that true academic leadership rested with the Principal Investigator.



The TESSF Network

Background

TESF, Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures, was a UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)-funded network+ project which aimed to understand how education systems can act as drivers of sustainable development. Led by Professor Leon Tikly (Bristol), it engaged partners in India, Rwanda, Somalia/Somaliland and South Africa. TESF supported a balanced mix of 67 exploratory and innovative research projects within those four hub countries. The findings from the projects were then synthesised by the network.

How equitable, transformative partnership working was considered from the start

TESF arose in response to a GCRF funding call. GCRF funding was distinctive because it specifically promoted equitable Global South-North partnerships, aligned UK research with international development

goals, enforced ODA compliance, emphasised interdisciplinary collaboration, and prioritised tangible development impact and capacity building. The network plus model was distinctive in that it allowed a degree of autonomy in network design, implementation and governance. Strong existing connections, helped create trust and facilitate collaboration. The leadership reported to an Advisory Board that provided oversight for the running of the network.

“ The network plus model itself provided an opportunity to think beyond more conventional funding models between North and South ”

Fundamental tensions existed between the ODA funding objectives, which explicitly aimed to deliver economic and welfare benefits in Low and Middle Income Countries, and UKRI academic research funding in general, such as the short timescales for applying which limited the co-creation possible within the funding proposal.

“ the whole process, because it was quite time limited and constrained and pressured, it wasn't nearly as co-creative as it ought to have been from that at that inception stage. ”

To support the emergence of equitable, transformative partnerships from the outset, TESF decided early to utilise a 'flat' management structure where leadership was distributed between Global South partners. To support decentralized decision-making, more than 50% of funding was devolved to Global South partners including funding for 67 new projects. The network+ funding model supported co-creation between Global North and South by allowing more Global South-led research.

“ We decided that actually one of the ways that we could facilitate Southern African led research and Indian led research was if Bristol took the central role in terms of the scaffolding that's needed in a project of this nature. ”



During project inception, the Bristol team worked to understand the Global South partner country context, and intellectual leadership on the topics. They co-produced background papers with Global South partners on key concepts, generating intellectual buy-in from Global South partners and exposing asymmetries in power. These papers informed the emerging research agenda across the network as a whole, fostering intellectual leadership by Global South partners on the topics that would underpin the proposals that were later funded by TESF.

“ So it seemed like within that broader framing of the overall goals and the funder, the objectives as well, there was room for each of the four countries to kind of take their own approach to it. ”



The project emphasized mutual capacity development, recognizing that both UK and Global South team members had valuable skills and knowledge to share. Efforts were made to ensure that capacity-building was not unidirectional. TESF collaboratively developed a monitoring, learning and evaluation (MLE) framework early in the project which used a multi-level values-centred approach. A designated consultant worked with Global Southern hub teams and partners to set their own ambition statements for their project and delivered training sessions to lead partners to build skills across the network. This gave teams the freedom to determine the most relevant outcomes for their context and key categories to evaluate in the mid-term and final report.

“ I think from the outset it was it was planned as a two-way capacity strengthening exercise and opportunity for that... we didn't use the term capacity building, but we did initially start with this term capacity development, thinking of a mutual capacity development. ”

“ To do that, facilitate that, we had different kinds of structures in the network, one of which was this idea of community of practice groups focusing on different substantive concerns and different projects. ”

“ Getting people to think about what they have found particularly valuable or worthwhile about their earlier work, and then looking forward, what they saw as the best case scenario outcomes for

TESF. And so building, weaving all of that together into an evaluation framework and indicator framework and which was then refined at the first two in person workshops. ”

The project actively sought to engage with and value African knowledge systems and there was an amount of indigenous knowledge production. Diverse approaches taken by the different hubs, which were shaped by local contexts and relationships, for example, using local languages and cultural practices in their research and outputs. However, there were challenges in fully integrating these knowledge systems, particularly in the early stages of the project when the academic frameworks and processes of Bristol as a Global Northern institution in the coordinating role were more dominant.

Opportunities and challenges for equitable, transformative partnership working in practice

Funding conditions and application time constraints presented barriers to achieving true co-creation. The approach of some global South partners focused more on getting the job done than ensuring the projects were genuinely co-created. The inclusion of flexible funding pots allowed for more responsive and context-specific support. Having designated roles within the project for contracts and finance to facilitate these aspects between Bristol and the global South partners helped manage the complexities of the project and ensure compliance with funder requirements. Additionally, establishing approved contract templates for use with a variety of partners expedited the contracting processes. Early groundwork to ensure all partners understood the funding, contracting, and administrative requirements helped avoid delays and problems. Visiting global South partners in person was beneficial for Bristol team members for building connections and relationships, and for understanding challenges, priorities. It also helped understand the global South partner context to a limited degree due to the necessarily short visits.

“ So I think from my perspective, one of the great things about TEF was that all this was handled in a very nuanced, dedicated way. Actually, we had a dedicated team working on this, which really just let researchers go on with the work. ”

“ And it made a world of a difference because you’re approaching people in a respectful way. ”

The project adapted its contracting processes to accommodate the needs of smaller global South organisations, including providing upfront payments and adjusting reporting requirements. Adapting Bristol's processes as a result of learning from the project was aided by having designated project support roles.

“ There were a lot of cases where the university did really change their process and policy on things too because they understood where we were coming from. ”

Nonetheless, inconsistencies and/or misunderstandings of rates at which global South partners could be funded caused a shortfall for those partners. This was due to the difference in funding rates between UK and global South partners (80% vs. 100%). Differences between

Bristol's approach to providing funding/ paying expenses to partners in arrears, while global South partners need funding in advance, presented barriers to equity.

“ mostly any back and forth we had was about the finances and an organizations requiring funds up front rather than being paid in arrears, which would be Bristol standard approach.”“But we always knew from the beginning that that wouldn’t work for some organizations, and that was part of our due diligence process is working out the best way that we could do upfront payments. ”

While partners from the global South had significant input into the leadership of the network and in research design and implementation, there were still challenges in ensuring that their voices were equally heard and valued. Power imbalances were imposed by the funding being distributed from Bristol as the coordinating institution with associated deadlines, and inadequate timescales for conducting participatory, bottom-up co-created research. Power dynamics were present within each global South partner hub institution. These were linked to differences in access to time and other



resources to undertake research between HEI- and non-HEI based researchers. Tensions were sometimes exacerbated by the reality of political hostilities at a local level that hampered the process, causing difficult working environments. However, the network+ funding model enabled vital flexibility to handle these.

“ [Global South partners] had done this kind of work many times before reflected that you know, it was rare for them to have this much space and flexibility. ”

“ That was probably the one of the main things that came up was that people were really celebrating the space and the flexibility to kind of work differently, which they saw as rare....with other types of funding they had before. ”

Some project outputs include academic papers published in African journals. Efforts were made to produce outputs in local languages and engage with local knowledge systems, and the Global South hubs used local languages as well as dominant colonial languages.

“ We navigated that by ensuring that that people could operate in the language that they were most comfortable with. ”

TESF's MLE system required use of a centralized platform for submitting reports. This occasionally presented challenges to (1) ensure GDPR compliance if partners submitted details identifying institutions and individuals, and (2) to accommodate limitations of digital platforms in low-bandwidth settings. Despite these, the MLE process was generally seen as a valuable tool for learning and reflection.

Moving forwards, with Institutional support

Longer timelines would allow more time for relationship-building and co-creation. Implementing more flexible and supportive policies around contracting, financial management, and ethics would help to achieve more equitable, transformative partnerships. The project also highlighted the need for more sustained and context-specific support for better capacity mobilisation would help to address power imbalances.

“ Research is never black and white, but TESF there was a lot of grey areas, but being able to work within those grey areas is what meant that we were able to achieve as much as we did and I think, yeah, that's definitely something that the institution as a whole needs. ”

Embedding transformative modes of collaboration from the outset

Setting intentions for achieving equitable, transformative modes of collaborating with Africa-based partners is important for guiding the way new activities are designed and implemented. Identifying funding that allows flexible approaches, or identifying approaches that are allowable within funding constraints to maximise the transformative potential of the collaboration can be challenging but TESH demonstrates how this can be feasibly achieved.

While the network+ grant that TESH obtained provided relative freedom in network design, implementation and governance, TESH embedded clear philosophical approaches that facilitated and supported Global Southern leadership, decision-making and recognition. From the outset, TESH established a management structure and division of funding that, as far as possible, removed hierarchies between global Northern and global Southern partners, and enabled new global South-led research. It also facilitated a monitoring, learning and evaluation system that was devised by global South partners to ensure it was appropriate to the country contexts, priorities, and methods. These approaches arose from a collective intention to ensure the work was as relevant to and led by the global South context as possible. By setting that intention and identifying tangible routes that would enable it to manifest (leadership, management, decision-making), TESH embedded transformative modes of partnership working that acted to redress multiple power imbalances that typically persist in global North-South collaborative research.



Faculty of Science and Engineering

Background

This case study discussed aspects of several collaborative research projects between Bristol's Faculty of Science and Engineering and Africa-based partners, some of which built on previous connections and collaborations. Projects, either led by Africa-based partners or Bristol, were supported by a range of funders and involved Africa-based partners in countries including South Africa, Senegal, Ethiopia and Uganda.

How equitable, transformative partnership working was considered from the start

The projects were developed through collaborative approaches from the start, emphasising mutual interests and shared goals, ensuring all partners were involved in the conception and planning stages. This approach was driven by the need to design research that is both feasible and relevant in the African context and by a

philosophical commitment to creating equal collaborations. The research strengths of the Africa-based partners were greater than those of Bristol in specific topics – this made it a true joint effort for how the research proposals were framed, how research questions and plans were identified, and how they were implemented. Additionally, funder priorities promoted African leadership. For example, for one project initially to be led by Bristol, leadership was handed over to the expert Africa-based partner when it became apparent that having Africa-based leadership would be more successful.

From the start, the team was upfront, having open conversations about the funding envelope, how much could go to different partners, and how much different partners realistically needed to be able to complete the proposed work.

“ I think you have to be really clear with your partners so that they really are fully aware of those [funding constraints] and

say that they have an option to say ‘well actually you know what that really just doesn’t work for us because the kind of budgets and constraints you’re putting on us just means we can’t do this. So we’re just going to have to, you know, respectfully decline’. ”

The equitability of partnerships were different depending on the Africa-based institutions involved: Africa-based institutions from more high income countries were robust, capable, and well resourced - more equivalent to the UK. In those cases, the partnerships were more likely to be more equitable. This was not necessarily the case for institutions in less developed countries.

“ If you’re trying to design kind of research that is going to be, you know, feasible to do with an African context and is responding to what the key questions are, it really does have to be rooted in the realities of partners who live, work and reside in Africa. ”

There was a shared understanding of the need to equip both UK and Africa-based team members with new skills and experience. However, many of the necessary skills existed already within the consortium, which was reflected in different partners taking the lead for different pieces of work. Africa-based partners led areas including data analysis and survey instrument design, reflecting their expertise and capacity. Equipment and infrastructure support were provided to Africa-based partners as needed, ensuring they had the necessary resources to participate fully in the projects. The projects aimed to address power imbalances and dynamics influenced by funding sources, structural imbalances, and differences in institutional capacities and resources by ensuring open communication, collective decision-making, and equitable distribution of funds. For instance, one project ensured that the majority of funds went to Africa-based partners, with Bristol receiving a smaller portion. However, there were still challenges, such as the difficulty in meeting due diligence requirements imposed by UK institutions.

“ We have built very positive relationships. I mean, a reflection would always be to be honest and say, are they all truly equitable, probably not. Because there are inbuilt structural power imbalances that with the best will in the world, one research project doesn’t suddenly get rid of. But I think we try as far as we possibly can. ”

All projects had management teams with representatives of all key partners so decision making was collective and collaborative. Additionally, outputs always included co-authors from the African countries where the partners were based with recognition for the contribution made. Differing publishing power of journals often means that Global Northern partners prefer to publish in global rather than regional journals, with English often considered the ‘official language’.

“ Where we’ve done multi-country studies under the projects we might have a UK lead author but we always have co-authors from all the African partners with due recognition as a basic principle. ”





Some projects heavily depended on the engagement, relationships and knowledge partnerships that the Africa-based partners had with their stakeholders. They tried to surface indigenous knowledge through data collections processes, community engagement and feedback dissemination and relationships. But it was recognised that more could have been done as the projects were not necessarily set up with this in mind. Engagement with African knowledge systems can depend on the topic, scope and aims of the project – more community focused projects tend to be more able to tap into indigenous knowledge on those particular topics. The UK worldview around science and research is often at odds with different world views and different understandings of what research is important and why.

“ Most research funders, for instance in the UK, and institutions have a worldview around science and research that is defined by our own cultural norms and what we view as being good science. I think at times that is at odds with different world views, different paradigms of knowledge, different understandings of what research is important, and why it's important. ”

“ There is probably more that I could and should be doing to think about how I integrate different paradigms of knowledge, different ways of looking and thinking about things that would change the nature of some of the research that I'm engaged with. ”

“ Why do we always privilege a high income, largely Western European North American view about what kinds of science and what counts as rigorous research? ”

Challenges and opportunities for equitable partnership working in practice

Funder conditions often place constraints regarding having overseas project leads: some funders allow international co-leads but do not allow those individuals to become lead if the UK PI leaves. Some funders don't allow international partners to be co-investigators, merely subcontractors, whereas some do now encourage leads from Low and Middle Income Countries. Some funders (e.g. Wellcome) are creating incentives for the majority of awarded funds to go to overseas partners. Some funders (e.g. UKRI) remain conservative about the

amount of funds that can be awarded to overseas partners, making it harder to send substantial funds to their institutions.

“It’s a classic case in point where they’re saying you can have an overseas partner. We will pay 100% fEC, but there was a cap of 30% of the total value of the project can go to an overseas partner.”

This can create ‘perverse incentives’, particularly where international elements are critical for the research topic being promoted by the funder: allowing overseas partners but placing a cap on the total value of the project that can be transferred to them, or not allowing them to be co-investigators.

“And then we’re told that all your partners in South Asia can only be subcontractors. They can’t even be Co-Is. I think it illustrates some of the points that the research councils really struggle around international engagement.”

With these projects, handing over leadership to Africa-based partners ensured genuine collaboration and leveraged the strengths of those partners, and ensuring a substantial proportion of funding went to Africa-based partners was a clear

success. Projects which involved in-country researchers doing fieldwork proved more successful when COVID-19 hit compared to some that relied on UK researchers going overseas to do the fieldwork, because the fieldwork could continue.

Due diligence processes can be difficult for partners and can feel intrusive. This is a wide issue for all UK HEIs and is not limited to working with Africa-based partners, but any overseas partners. Difficulties arise around expectations: for partners in some countries, it is almost impossible for their institutions to demonstrate full due diligence and this is because the due diligence expectations are informed by the UK accountancy model. Applying these expectations to other country contexts where the auditing cultures are very different is unrealistic: the sorts of policies and frameworks asked for may never have been developed. This can lead to unfounded reservations about working with those partners. If funders do not incentivise universities to do due diligence in more flexible ways to accommodate differences in partner country auditing/accountability systems, then universities seem to default to rigorous, rigid formats that give them confidence at the expense of the partnership.

“For partners to demonstrate full due diligence and no matter what happens, there will always be kind of reservations and I think it’s partly because the expectations that we place on partners, which are informed by a UK accountancy model, are just simply unrealistic.”

“The problem is that if the funders don’t incentivise you to do that, then universities, for instance, will always default back to a much more rigorous, rigid format, because that’s what gives them most confidence in their audit and accountability trains.”

However, for these projects, success was enabled by Bristol’s due diligence processes were ‘lighter touch’ for transferring smaller amounts of money to Africa-based partners. Additionally, finance staff/processes being flexible to establish payment schedules that work with the needs of Africa-based partner institutions that have different financial systems/requirements enabled these partnerships.

Some UK academics don’t feel the need to include Africa-based partners as co-authors on papers arising if they feel a UK-based academic did “all” the work

arising from a research context in Africa. However, many journals will now reject manuscripts before they go to review if the manuscript doesn’t include co-authors from the country of the research context.

“I would always demand that processes are done in that way and I still find it quite surprising when I come across colleagues who don’t necessarily seem to buy fully into that. Not least of which is that half the journals will just reject your paper up front if you do not have a co-author coming from the country itself. Like journals I edit, that is automatic rejection without going to review. So I still find it quite weird that there are people out there who don’t understand that sense of the need for partnership.”

Differences in Africa-based partners’ compliance with funder or university financial/expenditure reporting requirements can present barriers: sometimes it can be easy or conversely very hard to get the required reporting from the partners. Additionally, it is much harder for Africa-based partners to visit the UK than for UK-based researchers to visit Africa, usually relating to the time and cost associated with obtaining visas.

The teams worked to find common ground and adapt their approaches to meet each other's needs. They maintained regular and transparent communication and flexibility, which built trust and understanding. Being clear from the start about where funders are imposing limits or constraints allowed them to navigate challenges and continue the collaboration despite funding and focus differences. Common interests in research and capacity building provided a strong foundation for collaboration. Practical solutions included holding meetings in third countries, such as Australia, and ensuring upfront payments to cover initial costs for Africa-based partners. Robust partner institutions with strong existing capabilities and experienced partners helped facilitate effective collaboration.

Monitoring, learning and evaluation approaches comprised informal information sharing, with ongoing communication and feedback rather than using formal tools. There was recognition that more formal frameworks could be beneficial, particularly for evaluating the impact of partnerships while it was acknowledged that evaluating research is inherently hard to do.

“ Arguably we should have done some more formal systems within that evaluation. I always find

particularly interesting just because I think evaluating research is inherently quite difficult to do. ”

Moving forwards, with Institutional support

The University can support equitable partnerships by providing clear guidelines and resources for collaboration, offering training on equitable practices, giving flexibility in due diligence requirements and support for visa applications, and creating opportunities for networking and knowledge exchange to help build stronger, more balanced partnerships. This would better support a general culture shift towards greater equitability in research practices: why would you treat overseas colleagues any different to UK-based colleagues? Providing tools and frameworks for monitoring and evaluation would also be valuable, helping to ensure the success and sustainability of the partnerships.

“ I think what you can do is just do as much as you possibly can, basically, act like a decent human being and do things as a decent human being. And try to make things as equitable as you can. But don't kid yourself that you've transformed everything. ”





Faculty of Arts, Law and Social Sciences

Background

This project was funded by Bristol's AHRC Impact Acceleration Account and aimed to use historical film to inform practice on gender activism in Ghana. An academic based in Bristol's Faculty of Arts, Law and Social Sciences collaborated with a civil society organisation in Ghana, demonstrating the positive influence of humanities research on democratic participation. This project followed on from an earlier British Academy / Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)-funded project in which historical documentary filmmaking had been a core component.

How equitable, transformative partnership working was considered from the start

Both the original and follow-on projects arose from long-standing connections that could be activated in response to new relevant funding opportunities. The work benefited from advice from more senior

colleagues in Ghana who had extensive experience of international collaboration: this was very useful for helping to establish what was feasible and achievable.

“ Basically, if you don't know anybody, it's incredibly hard to get started on any of these projects. You need to kind of at least have some kind of network, even if it's fairly preliminary. ”

The purpose of the follow-on project was to adapt outputs from the previous project for wider use in training. This involved editing the original film material to create adaptable training packages. The project aimed to make the materials more accessible and usable for particular groups of women who dealt with gender issues in their current roles (e.g. in the media or in local government).

The project team were not themselves directly trained within either the original or follow-on projects; rather, they adapted their prior academic and professional training to the requirements of new projects and 'learned on the job'. Journalists involved

with the project found the experience was beneficial, noting that gender issues had not been sufficiently addressed during their initial journalism training.

The Bristol academic partner was aware of the inherent power advantage arising from being established within a well-resourced global Northern institution, but they did not necessarily feel 'powerful' in their interactions within the project. A strong reliance on the Ghana-based partners for the progress and success of the work was felt due to the need for the Ghana-based partners' expertise, insights, and contacts, and the limited opportunities for the UK-based partner to travel to Ghana. It was felt that the Ghana-based partners' experience of power relations within collaborative projects were often shaped by the institutions that deliver the funds, and the processes and systems that are implemented by those institutions. However, the importance of shared goals and willingness to spend time negotiating obstacles was emphasised. Despite

imbalances, there was a strong sense of mutual reliance and the need for dialogue so that partners in Ghana shaped the design and implementation of the project.

Many project participants expressed frustration at how critiques of gendered relations of power in their society were silenced or dismissed as ‘foreign ideas’ that were not part of Ghanaian culture. There were evident struggles over who exactly was defining or interpreting ‘culture’ in that setting. Claims that critiques of gendered relations of power were ‘foreign inspired’ were sometimes used to ‘shut people down’ and protect the status quo.

“ No knowledge is innocent of power. Whether you’re calling it African knowledge or whether you’re calling it Western knowledge, no knowledge takes place, no knowledge is gained outside of a society in which there are power dynamics. ”

Opportunities and challenges and for equitable, transformative partnership working in practice

When institutional processes are different between collaborating organisations, it takes time to understand how each

operates and how to enable them to work together successfully. During the original project, the COVID-19 pandemic restricted opportunities for collaborators from the UK and Ghana to meet in-person, and in the follow-on project a relatively small budget limited the collaborators’ scope for international travel.

An issue raised in both projects concerned the use of African languages to make research outputs accessible and engage as wide an audience as possible. In both the original and the follow-on project, filmed interview footage was used as part of a documentary film, and the question of sub-titling and dubbing arose. If people are interviewed for a film using Twi (a particular African language that is widely spoken in Ghana), this may make the film accessible to more people there, and English sub-titles can be added relatively easily for those who want them. However, this approach also risked creating its own form of exclusion, because although Twi is very widely spoken in Ghana, there are people there who do not speak that language. Conversely, in this case, English had been used in the original filmed interviews. There was potential to add sub-titles in an African language later, but that approach

assumed that all the audiences who speak that language can also read it in easily, which is not necessarily the case. Hence dubbing presented a preferable alternative, although it is expensive and time-consuming.

“ There are many requirements that go around research...a lot of processes. And sometimes, what you’ve gotten used to in your own institution, maybe you see it as being slightly bureaucratic, but you’ve accepted that’s how it is. You go to a different system which also has its own bureaucracy and things don’t always speak to each other in a very straightforward way. Basically, when you do international collaboration, the amount of time that you have to spend on running your projects, it just goes up. ”

Smaller organisations can be easier to work with as it is more likely that collaborating individuals can have one-to-one conversations to resolve issues. In this case, long-standing contacts and networks facilitated collaboration. These relationships provided a foundation of trust and mutual understanding. Open communications, regular discussions and willingness to adapt plans based

on partner input helped ensure that all partners were on the same page. Adaptable training packages that could be used with varying levels of resources helped to make the materials more accessible and usable for different audiences. Reliance on partners’ knowledge and networks to achieve project goals was essential for the project’s success and helped to ensure that activities were relevant and effective.

The academic staff member hired in Ghana produced the only single-authored publication from the original project (all other publications were co-authored). In the follow-on project, the Africa-based partner organisation encouraged journalists to report on the workshop, giving rise to unexpected beneficial outcomes from the event. Engaging diverse groups such as women who are elected representatives in local government, as well as women journalists, in the project workshops provided valuable learning opportunities. This helped to build capacity and address the needs of different audiences.

Moving forwards, with Institutional support

It can be difficult to know how much time a UK partner should spend in the Africa-

based partner's country. On one hand, spending time face-to-face can help sustain momentum and enable the UK partner to learn more quickly. On the other hand, not being there makes clear to the UK partner that the project cannot succeed without the partners who are based in Africa, thereby reducing the possibility that the UK partner deems themselves more important than they actually are.

Finding effective and affordable ways to make materials accessible in African languages (e.g. dubbing of film, translation of text) would help to ensure that more outputs from research are accessible to a wide audience. While this small follow-on project did not implement a formal monitoring and evaluation framework due to its limited scale, there was recognition of the value of such frameworks in supporting the equitability of partnerships, particularly for larger projects. Future projects could benefit from third-party evaluations and structured assessments to help to identify and address issues as they arise.

If institutions can better understand each other and find mutually agreeable ways to work together, this will aid international collaboration. Assistance in navigating different institutional bureaucracies and aligning processes can reduce the

time and effort required to manage projects. Rigorous internal review of grant applications can help to anticipate and address potential challenges, and mitigate issues before they cause problems or delays, better equipping Project Leads to understand the requirements of working with international partners and to resolve issues. Sufficient time needs to be allowed for academics to develop high-quality funding applications involving international partners. Sharing guidance, training and best practice on equitable practices and resources for collaboration would build capacity to help researchers establish and maintain equitable partnerships.

“ Quite a lot of prospective PIs who have not got all that much track record of running projects means that they might be a little bit surprised and taken aback by all the requirements that they have to meet, even in their own institution, and then when they realise that actually their partners in another country are going through their own version of the same thing. And actually, it's their job to understand what the partners are experiencing as well as what they're experiencing. That's quite a high burden on them. ”



University Research Institute: the Jean Golding Institute

Background

Bristol's Jean Golding Institute (JGI) has established a long-term partnership with Strathmore University in Kenya. The partnership began in 2019, initiated by a conference on global data for development. When initial interests in collaborating on particular datasets did not progress, they shifted their focus to training and capacity building, which was more feasible and beneficial for both parties. This led to Strathmore University developing and implementing their own version of the JGI's Bristol Data Week, which has since been providing training in data science to underrepresented groups in Africa.

How equitable, transformative partnership working was considered from the start

The collaboration was driven by mutual interests in data science and training. The purpose was to develop training programs and enhance data science capabilities. The partnership arose from Bristol's interest in satellite data managed by Strathmore University, and Strathmore's driver for training in data science – the partnership evolved to focus on training and capacity building. Finding ways to work together on activities that were beneficial for Strathmore University arose from conversations identifying their needs.

“It more obviously focused on what they needed in Strathmore University, so we started working together. And because again, you know, they have a very strong data science team, it was a really good collaboration because

we could really discuss what are the methods and what are the areas that would be more useful for them.”

Shared goals and interests in data science and training provided a common foundation for collaboration. The need to upskill individuals at the Africa-based university was a main driver of the partnership alongside the demand for training female undergraduates interested in research software engineering. The training programs were designed with input from both partners to ensure they met the specific needs of Strathmore University. There were good communications and discussions of needs: staff at Strathmore University felt they could be clear about what was needed, who for, and what the activities should look like for them. There was limited engagement with indigenous knowledge systems, as the focus was on applying existing data science tools to local challenges.

Opportunities and challenges and for equitable, transformative partnership working in practice

Open communication and mutual respect helped to build trust and understanding between the partners. A Memorandum of Understanding was established between JGI and Strathmore University, initiated by the latter: this was easy to set up because it was not a contract and didn't involve any funding. As Strathmore University is a well-funded institution, the existing team had strong capabilities and similar resources to JGI. This helped with planning and implementing the training activities as it was easy to clearly discuss the partnership needs. The relative freedom that JGI had as a University Research Institute to make decisions about the activities they undertake made it easier to work towards delivering benefits for the Africa-based partner.

The development and implementation of Data Week at Strathmore University, modeled after Bristol's Data Week, was a significant success. It provided training and networking opportunities and helped build capacity in data science. Having very open communications about what was or wasn't possible or interesting to each partner led to clear commitments to activities that

each would and could deliver. Strathmore University was then able to make Data Week work for their context. The collaboration led to tangible outcomes, such as increased diversity in training participants, particularly female students in data science, and the establishment of ongoing training programs.

The training materials were produced in English, which is the technical working language in Kenya and was presumed to be the working language for data science tools; there was no significant discussion about translating materials into other African languages. This raises the topic of the role of Africa's wide language diversity in data science. While the data science tools and coding languages have been developed in the 'global North/West', they are being applied to African problems, for example farming early warning systems using smartphones. By being used by data scientists in the UK and Africa alike, this is supporting equitability in collaborative approaches, although more needs to be done to integrate data science approaches arising from African scholarship and innovation. Power imbalances arose from funding availability and associated constraints: it was found that Africa-based partners with experience of UK and EU funding often don't mention the inherent





power imbalances - this is something that is always there but often does not get discussed.

To take the relationship further, Strathmore University was keen to discuss the possibility of studentships but Bristol seemed less keen to engage with them in that way, instead favouring other Africa-based institutions where strategic partnerships were already being established. While Strathmore University was more focused on developing commercial solutions (e.g. smart phone apps) by conducting translational/innovative research, Bristol was typically more focused on pure science via fundamental research, highlighting differences in focus. However, the teams maintained open communication and flexibility, allowing them to navigate challenges and to continue the

collaboration despite a lack of funding and focus differences. Partnership development was also hindered by differing research career progression/success drivers: in the UK, papers and grants lead to promotion, whereas in the Africa-based university it was more about funds awarded from working with companies.

“ In the UK as we know the academic structure of how you go up in academia is through papers and grants. What it is in Strathmore is if you bring money from [working with a] company you get a better salary. So, it's just different drivers. ”

“ I think one of the big differences was that because they really focus on working on solutions, like solutions for companies, solutions for the farmer, you know, it's more about the

challenge rather than the research question or pure science. ”

Due to the length of the partnership, benefits are now being seen from the training delivered: some individuals who attended the training early on now work in the data science team. Also, the brand that has been created of 'JGI's Bristol Data Week' is also being seen in Strathmore University as they are following a similar model that works for them. By visiting their partners in Kenya, the Bristol team realised they had much to learn from them, particularly regarding working with commercial companies. The UK team also gained experience in delivering training to diverse audiences, different from their usual training cohorts of University of Bristol students and staff.

“ It's amazing because we have met other people from the data team and some people came into the data team because they attended the first Strathmore Data Week. So we can see the real outputs from that effort, that it really changed people's lives. ”

No monitoring, learning or evaluation (MLE) was conducted as part of the collaboration: there was a recognition of the need for better MLE to assess

the impact of the partnership. The lack of tools to process data on protected characteristics was identified as a barrier to effective evaluation. Developing a standardised framework for MLE would help ensure the partnership's success and sustainability. This would include collecting feedback from participants, analysing the data, and using the insights to improve future collaborations.

Moving forwards, with Institutional support

To help those just starting out with working with Africa-based partners, case studies of good practice by those who have worked in these kinds of collaborations are beneficial. Additionally, it is helpful to have material that describes better and/or different ways to collaborate in more equitable, transformative ways. In this case, more institutional support and clarity on strategic priorities, particularly regarding joint studentships and long-term funding opportunities, would have been beneficial. It would also be useful to have more training on monitoring, learning and evaluation that is approved by the University plus opportunities for networking and knowledge exchange.

Action plan...

Use this space to create a bespoke action plan appropriate to your research context. It is helpful to establish some goals or intentions for your collaborative work. These might be informed by reflections on past experiences or purely based on what you know about the Africa Charter. Then you can identify ways to maximise opportunities presented by your research context for employing equitable, transformative modes of collaboration, and also noting any obvious barriers you might anticipate. You can use this to refer back to and guide progress as you review previous work and/or embark on new activities.

ACTIVITY:

Use this space to reflect on your goals and priorities for transformative partnership working and what are the opportunities and barriers to achieving those within your working context. Within the scope of your role, what is realistically achievable and how best can your influence be manifested to bring about positive change?

- ▶ **Goals and intentions**
- ▶ **Opportunities to maximise**
- ▶ **Barriers to minimise**

Notes

Extra resources

Funding guidance:

- ▶ **UKRI's project co-lead (international) policy** theoretically allows for specific costs of project co-leads (international) involved in applications led by UK project leads, up to a limit of 30% of the overall cost of the project (however, in practice only AHRC, ESRC and MRC tend to implement the policy by allowing international co-leads in their responsive mode schemes). In addition to UKRI-wide cross-council calls, there are specific calls published by each of the research councils that allow or require international co-leads.
- ▶ The Wellcome Trust tend to better accommodate overseas partners than other funds currently. Their standard eligibility criteria are detailed here (although specific calls can have different criteria): wellcome.org/research-funding/guidance/prepare-to-apply/eligibility-information-grant-applicants#organisational-eligibility-2eff. Their Early-Career Award, Career Development Award, and Discovery Award funding schemes are open to administering organisations based in the UK, Republic of Ireland as well as those in a low- or middle-income country (except mainland China and India).
- ▶ The NIHR Global Health Research – Researcher led programme is currently paused, but these are set up so that researchers from institutions in high-income countries are not eligible to apply as Sole Lead: www.nihr.ac.uk/research-funding/global-health/funding-programmes/global-health-research-researcher-led.

Visa and passport equity and budget equity toolkits

- ▶ Two toolkits to promote equitable partnerships, produced by the Towards Equitable Partnerships with Global South (TEPSO) project. The toolkits aim to promote visa and passport equity for research-related visits and budget equity for research collaborations with the Global South:

Visa and Passport Equity toolkit: express-licences.bristol.ac.uk/product/tepso-toolkit

Budget Equity toolkit: express-licences.bristol.ac.uk/product/budget-equity

Inclusive Research Hub:

- ▶ Guidance and resources for more equitable, inclusive research: inclusive-research.org/

Equitable Partnerships Resources Hub:

- ▶ The UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) & ESSENCE equitable partnerships resource hub aims to support all those involved in the research process to embed practices which ensure equity in the design, delivery and dissemination of research. The hub brings together relevant tools, guidance and resources from global partners focused on ensuring equity in international research partnerships: ukcdr.org.uk/equitable-partnership/

Capacity:

- ▶ 'Train the trainer' format programmes are powerful in expanding the impact of capacity building/mobilisation:

www.sessionlab.com/blog/train-the-trainer-model/

[Train-The-Trainer: A Generic Offer-And-Use Model for the Development of Trainers - Wisshak - International Journal of Training and Development - Wiley Online Library](#)

