

# Re-thinking North-South cooperation and knowledge production for SDGs

*WUN Global Africa Group workshop · 15 Dec 2020 · online meeting*

**Divine Fuh:** Thank you too all thinkers who have offered their time here today.

**A few questions to ponder over as we begin discussion:**

- How do we approach challenging existing orthodoxies?
- What might be done? What can be done? Where do we start? How wide do we cast our net? What do we have to rethink? What assumptions must be questioned?

## **INTRODUCTION: Isabella Aboderin**

Points of Departure I

- Historically rooted power imbalances, inequities in global Africa research opportunities around (sustainable) development
- Negative impacts on:
  - African scholars, institutions, constituencies, capabilities
  - The relevance and use of evidence
  - Pursuit of Africa's aspirations + the global scientific endeavour
  - Need for explicit effort to redress imbalances (within, and beyond WUN)

Points of Departure II

- Various emergent / resurgent bodies of debate driven from continent and/or global North, but:
  - Different starting points, rationales
  - Focus on different kinds of imbalances
  - Connections, interrelationships, sum of impacts not (fully) examined
  - Need for synthesis, more holistic understanding
  - Implications for research governance, funding, management, cultures, practice

Layered imbalances in global Africa research cooperation:

- The sustainable development frame, gaze
- The relative strength and positioning of African research institutions in the global research ecosystem
- Collaboration modes (leads, finances, division of labour, access to rewards)
- The production of new, and use of existing knowledges (epistemology, methodology, theorising)
- The use of knowledge

Queries for each layer:

- What are the nature and drivers of the imbalance?
- What are its manifestations?
- What are its impacts or implications – for whom/what?
- How do layers inter-relate?
- What/who needs to change, where – how?

Explorations in our first session:

- Key issues, big questions, and main conceptual ideas across layers
- Determine common understandings of the above
- Identify ways forward to further develop our examination
- Agree immediate next steps

## **KEYNOTE ONE: Elisio Macamo**

### **Rethinking Development and Coloniality**

Can we describe the Europeanisation of Africa as a colonial project?

- It is important when approaching colonialism to distinguish between its causes when first conceived, and the explanatory reasons given in hindsight – as they are often very different.
- In the wake of colonialization, the colonizers had to increasingly explain and justify their actions to themselves as atrocities were committed in the name of global development. The reasons that are often given themselves amount to a racialisation, and consequently what can be called a colonial project – rather than the causes themselves.
- In essence, colonialism created a European world, and placed before everyone else the burden of finding their way in that world. When Africans fought for independence, they were fighting for a place in this constructed European world.
- Following this a little further, the idea of Africa is therefore only intelligible as an expression of nationhood and culture in a European world. Africa's development in this line of thought contributes to upholding that world, the world formed and developed through the colonial project.
- Development aid is not about developing countries, it's about developed countries, and their need to protect their own world.
- Though the presumption that one knows how developed countries *actually* develop is based both evidentially and practically on the European model – whilst empirical evidence tells another story. We're not looking for an ideal world, but development aid in its current form binds Africa to a European world – and most often this serves Europe's economic interests, sadly the world does not always reward good behaviour.
- Following the European model, we are supposed to arrive at systems of strong institutions, a commitment to good governance, democracy, human rights, and low corruption, but it is not implicitly understood and recognized that these are the products of development, not its a-priori drivers. Good governance and anti-corruption were the outcome of development, not its cause!
- Therefore, should not necessarily be expected before they're due. Regardless, both the successes and failures of development interventions create new opportunities for human action.
- Rather than expecting the institutions to perfectly form in and of themselves, what we should be striving for is the engendering of values which in turn produce desirable institutions.
- For ex. fighting poverty means much more than just getting people out of poverty through microfinance schemes and economic policy. Fighting poverty is best done through the foundational strengthening of values and principles which uphold the dignity of the human experience and will protect us from those who believe poverty is a price that must be paid to ensure the welfare, and development of the few.

- Poverty is a problem because of the way we approach the world, that is, from an economic point of view – consequently making the issue of poverty the prime problem that needs to be tackled. Our model is geared towards producing wealth, and consequently leads to a viewpoint that with steadily rising and ever-increasing wealth production, we are automatically on the path toward the elimination of poverty. But the majority of poverty is produced through the activities of wealth production! Why do we think that poverty is the problem? Why do we not think that wealth is the problem?
- Refocused attention needs to be given to the seeds that we are planting, and not just to the flowers as they grow, and critical attention paid to the various models of development that cannot, as time has told us, be loosely imprinted on African nations in the vain hope of generating national infrastructures resembling pseudo-European models. A lot can be gained by returning to first principles, and organically developing systems from a critical analysis of these.

## **KEYNOTE TWO: Samia Chasi**

North-South partnerships in public higher education: A selected South African case study:  
<http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/28064>

### **4 main areas of challenge:**

1. Attitudes and expectations
  - a. We are being “treated like vast bed and breakfasts”, “they do not want an intellectual input from our side” (P17).
  - b. The approach of Northern partners is “what can we do for you, not what can you do for us” (P12).
  - c. North-South partnerships reflect an “imperialist kind of relationship of the imperial ruler...and the colonial ruled” (P12). By design, they are often “developmental partnerships” (P11).
2. Funding, monopoly of resources
  - a. Institutions in the North “have the money, they have the endowment funds, they have everything” (P7).
  - b. “Southern students could not afford to come to the North”, even when partner institutions go “as far as offering South African students free housing, just to lower their costs” (P1).
  - c. Southern scholars are anxious “about the consequences of resources being monopolized by Northern institutions, and the unequal politics that derive from, uh, that, uh, unequal, uh, control over resources” (P9).
3. Unequal resources and benefits
  - a. A Wits researcher who works in “the old broom closet” collaborates with a partner at a Belgian university who has “a corridor of state-of-the-art laboratories” (P4).
  - b. There is ‘mobility inequality’, as “We receive far more students than we can send out per year”, which makes exchange agreements “hardly beneficial to the university” (P10).
4. Hegemony of Northern Knowledge.
  - a. Knowledge is mainly produced with “the conventional gaze from the North to the South” and a “convention of Northern theory and Southern, uh, field studies” (P9).

- b. There is a reported practice of “hit and run’ type of science”, with “people coming and grabbing some rock samples and taking them away and then publishing on it” (P15).
- c. You “better be careful where you publish” because “people measure you in terms of where you’ve put your work”, so “you have to be very strategic which outlets you chose” (P1).

### **Implications of these four areas of challenge**

- Confirmation of:
  - Imbalances of resources, power and knowledge
  - Internationalisation as ‘recolonisation’ ☒ Extractive nature of North-South partnerships (Maringe & De Wit, 2016)
  - Raw materials vs. “raw facts” and “unprocessed data” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012)

### **Ways forward from here**

- Focus on mutuality/balance/inclusion
  - Research outputs and outlets
- Commitment to re-center Africa
  - Research questions and methodologies
- Knowledge production by the South
  - About the South and About the North
  - Returning the gaze.
- Criticality
  - Development rhetoric
  - Terms of engagement between former colonised and colonisers

## **KEYNOTE THREE: Alex Ezeh**

### **African institutions & the global research ecosystem**

Collaboration:

- Leagues
- Division of labour
- Access to resources and rewards
- Finances

A glance at finances:

- In 2018 there was \$2trillion spent globally on Research and Development.
- 2.85% of that was invested in Sub Saharan Africa
- The total GDP of SSA was \$1.7 trillion, and African countries spent 1.4% of their GDP on R&D (Research & Development).
- Domestic funding of research and development in Africa was 40%, external research and development funding was 60%.

From this we can see that R&D in Africa, at present, relies largely on external support, from which we can see one consistent outcome – the weakening of domestic institutions in Africa.

Capacity is one of the greatest constraints of Africa's development today, despite 50 years of focus on capacity building. Why is this?

1. External research funding is built on ID model:
  1. Strongly anchored in humanitarian/emergency response (look at all the NGOs – wars (first, second, Biafran etc.), famines, natural disaster) Look at the old refugee camps (no matter the investment, they're still there) How ubiquitous this mindset is.
2. Narrative of Dependence:
  1. Constant narrative of 'Africa' that ignores its potential, agency, discounts capacity and insists on dependence as the only mechanism for progress. Huge barriers to research being funded in Africa, unless they either relate to capacity building or the dynamic is of the North helping the South.
3. Lack of funding:
  1. 1m to a UK/US institution, results in 25-30k for the African partner (enough but not enough for them to reflect, assess, and invest to position themselves for bigger money grants.)
4. Lack of intra-African partnerships:
  1. Only 2 – 3 % of research is between intra-Africa partnerships. We now have African institutions who find it hard to work with one another and prefer to work with external partners. African countries and institutions need to come together. This is a conversation that needs to happen now, in Africa, and then with our partners outside of the continent.

#### **KEYNOTE FOUR: Adrienne Van Klinken**

##### **African knowledge Systems for Sustainable development**

Why African knowledge?

- The research development agendas pushed through such 'Agendas of Progress' as the SDGs are good, yet pose the risk of establishing a North-South dynamic of an 'Africa as deficit model'.
- In such a dynamic, western partners and western knowledge systems are perceived as the antidote to many of the problems present on the continent today.
- In many ways, this generates more problems and can be thought of in many cases as a shoe that just doesn't fit; there is a need for African knowledge production and theorizing from Africa. To return the gaze.
- Part of a broader debate where there is an assumption that the modernity is defined by the European enlightenment.
- But inputs and insights from outside this model can provide frameworks for understanding the south, north, and the wider world in ways that break from preconceived assumptions of development and knowledge production.

Southern theory (Raewyn Cornell, 2007) emphasises:

- 'Relations - authority, exclusion, inclusion, hegemony, partnership, sponsorship appropriation – between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery.'
- Against 'Euro modernity'
- 'The global south affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large.'

## **Indigenous Knowledges**

- The notion of 'indigenous knowledge' has been criticized by various scholars, as it can be perceived as implying a certain stasis of knowledge rather than fluidity, thus making it not appropriate for modernity.
- Though to perceive it this way discounts an incredibly important factor, namely the multiplicity of African knowledges and sources of knowledge. The continent has a strong history of being global, diverse, and dynamic - a flowing river rather than a static puddle.
- Knowledge sources such as these usually produce knowledge that provides insights into experiential knowledge, embedded in culture, memory, and oral history. Often with an emphasis on ethical values such as wholeness, community, and harmony.
- Collectively this African knowledge has the potential to open a hybrid space between Euro-centric and Afro-centric knowledges, as 'Africa-centered' knowledge. Any form of knowledge can become Africa centered by virtue of entanglement with the continent.

## **Epistemological Questions**

### **Epistemicide:**

The colonial 'project' was engaged in an active killing of indigenous people's knowledges, or passively through gradual silencing and superimposition of existing Euro-centric models.

### **Epistemic justice:**

The liberation of reason itself from coloniality. Different forms of wisdom and knowledge can be recognised as such.

### **Epistemic freedom:**

The right to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop own methodologies, and write from where one is located and unencumbered by eurocentrism.

### **The Pluriversity:**

There is a plurality of knowledge, and what forms of knowledge is seen as holding 'proper' scientific and educational value is determined by politics, by power. So why the Pluriversity rather than the University? Because there is a critical need to acknowledge that there are multiple forms of knowledge and knowledge production, embrace epistemic freedom to interpret the world as such, and reject the notion of a universality of knowledge and knowledge production seen up to this point and stemming from the Enlightenment.

## **Broader questions for consideration**

- How do you see the need for 'African knowledges' in your own field of research, and how is, or can, this need be addressed in your field?
- In your understanding and experience, how do African knowledges speak back to Eurocentric knowledges? How do they change the way we think about 'development' and address developmental challenges?
- Cooper & Morrell underline the need for knowledge-makers to 'review and reflect upon their own frames of reference', as a precondition for Africa-centered knowledges to emerge. How do you engage in such self-reflection as part of your research?

## **BREAKOUT ROOM NOTES**

### **Group 1**

- Systems of value how to disrupt these, interest, rethinking colonial project, interrogating development, unequal playing field, historical factors shaping inequalities, northern Africa, race, racialization, what is considered knowledge, research funding
- What are the 5 key issues – institutions and political agendas, funding, inequalities, racism and who holds knowledge
- What are the 3 big questions: how do we rethink the colonial project? What knowledge is? What do we consider as Systems of value and how do we invert them? How to interrogate development?
- What are the two main conceptual ideas – Power, knowledge production

### **Group 2**

- What about composition of the group? Good to have decolonization on board the Global Africa group!
- Need for knowledge capacity development, how to get there, but practice?

### **Group 3**

Key issues:

- Politics behind ODA funding and senior academics in institutions in the Global North are framing the way funding calls are structured, evaluated, awarded and governed. Institutional and PI appeasement to such constructions often result in funding and reward to those same institutions.

NB.1. Researchers within inequitably designed projects are experiencing resistance and facing challenges implementing projects. New calls and projects are already being designed to improve the equitability.

Resistance and being present and active at the table in Research Council discussions in the design of calls seems necessary.

NB.2. Very recent reduction in ODA resources in the UK will have a significant effect on future funding and calls from the UK.

- Power dynamics – often not/difficult to discuss(ed) / challenged openly – power dynamics and imbalance in financial resources, institutional facilities (labs), composition of teams, partnerships, knowledge flows, the direction of capacity building...

Key questions:

- How do we change the mindset of funders and institutions in Global North?
- How do African institutions work together to build capacity?

### **Group 4**

- The production of knowledge is a way of understanding and/or explaining the world and we must be fully aware of the power in naming outputs.
- E.g., What about the dichotomy thrown up with concepts such as indigeneity? The term 'indigenous knowledge' is problematic, as it can reify ideas of Africa as static, isolated and 'traditional'; at the same time, the term serves a political and epistemological purpose, reclaiming Africa as a place from where knowledge can emerge and be produced.
- Knowledge as a cultural artefact arising from multiple, diverse cultures and our multiple identities (NOT the monolingual, monocultural nation states formerly promoted in Europe and beyond) The identity of the researcher can also be multiple/varied and we must be aware of the dangers of "othering" (as opposed to belonging or not to an inner circle)
- Divination as a form of knowledge production can provide value without having scientific meaning (in the sense of being rational and verifiable, in accordance with the western scientific method); perhaps, it can be seen as therapeutic. Has purposes beyond the immediate; serves to link the individual to the community, and the community to their perception of the universe. Conversations around the value of knowledge and knowledge sources, such as divination, form part of a wider discussion around the interfacing of secular, and non-secular, or spiritual / psychological knowledge in the modern world.
- Secular knowledge which underlies Western systems of science is assumed to be rational and verifiable, accessible to everyone. Decolonising knowledge may require a post-secular turn in the way in knowledge is conceptualised, allowing for epistemic diversity including these spiritual and religious knowledges.

#### Key questions:

- What challenges arise through the integration of secular and non-secular knowledges?
- What perspectives need to be taken into account when weighing the value of knowledge, and knowledge sources – especially when outside of the established western frame?
- How does one get past the hegemony of western knowledge systems, and work within the pluriversity?