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Imbalance of Power

Towards Genuine Collaboration in International Research

[Nora Chirikure](#)

[Lennard Naumann](#)

Researchers worldwide continue to face significantly unequal starting opportunities, particularly in terms of research funding, academic career paths, visas, and networking. Nora Chirikure and Lennard Naumann explore what is needed to establish truly equitable South-North research partnerships and to ensure the success of research originating from the Global South.

The use of the term “Global South” continues to rise, in both academia and public discourse, but what exactly does the term mean? How can it help us understand the inequality within academic research? And how can some of these inequalities be overcome? Through interviews with research practitioners, we find that there has been increased interest in South-North research cooperation. Yet, the underrepresentation of Global South' research in the international academic discourse is still rampant. In this article, we discuss the use of the term for understanding international inequality. We argue that a range of issues such as extraversion, restricted standards of excellence, and limited access to funding, need to be addressed to foster more equitable South-North research cooperation. Finally, we conclude by highlighting a set of changes that might help address some of the structural inequalities.

With the implosion of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the terms “Global North” and “Global South” were increasingly used to describe the changing international power dynamics, with the latter term loosely relating to what was formerly known as the “Third World”. The economic growth and increased political influence of several countries from the Global South in the past two decades, such as China, Brazil, and South Africa, has coincided with the promotion of a common “Global South” identity which centers struggles against global inequalities and highlights the consequences of colonialism. The identification of these shared concerns has sparked increased international cooperation in fora such as the Group of 77 at the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement, whose summit in Kampala in January 2024 was attended by more than 120 countries.

The term “Global South” thus extends beyond geography as it encompasses a complex mix of economic, political, and historical elements. Its importance stems from its potential to emphasize the dynamics of global relations, socio-economic inequalities and the enduring legacies of colonialism. Given that many countries are facing these challenges, finding a way to categorize them using the term “Global South” is useful, even if the term cannot be defined in a precise manner and is subject to continuous changes and discussions. For the sake of discussing issues related to South-North research cooperation in this article, we follow a “minimal” definition from the United Nations Development Programme's 2004

publication on [“Forging a Global South”](#). It encompasses most of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. We use the term “Global North” to loosely relate to industrialized countries in Europe and North America.

International South-North research cooperation has historically mirrored the global power imbalances, and continues to do so in many cases. In an analysis of 1,000,000 articles published between 2001 and 2020, researchers from New York University in New York and Abu Dhabi found that researchers from the Global South wrote 35 percent of the analyzed articles, but only 19 percent were edited there. In line with this, György Csomós found in a [current study from 2024](#) that more than 75 percent of the editors-in-chief of the 11,915 journals listed in two major citation indexes were based in Europe or North America. While this type of research is still scarce, these findings highlight a systemic imbalance where research predominantly resides within Northern institutions, with top journals primarily overseen by North American editors. This exclusion of large parts of the academic community from the debate will not result in the optimal form of knowledge production, particularly in the social sciences, where context knowledge is often key. But how do these inequalities come about?

Extraversion and lack of appreciation for researchers from the Global South

One fundamental driver of the South-North disparities appears to be what Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji called “extraversion”: a practice in which “European and American scientists go to Zaire or the Sahara in search not of knowledge, but only of materials that lead to knowledge.” There is a prevailing presumption that researchers and institutions in the Global North are more knowledgeable and their interpretations more authoritative, constituting a systematic bias against Global South researchers and undermining equity within research partnerships. Even in cooperative projects, researchers from the Global North often retain control over the research agenda, methodology, interpretation of results, and theoretical frameworks, while researchers from the Global South are relegated to symbolic roles.

Jacqueline Braveboy-Wagner, Professor Emerita at the City College of New York, highlights how Southern scholars' participation in conferences or partnerships with Northern counterparts primarily benefits the latter, despite Southern scholars contributing valuable information, ideas and access to networks. In this regard, research manager Geetika Khanduja emphasizes the fear of tokenism, where the inclusion of Southern researchers is merely seen as a necessary box to check. The model, as described by philosopher Paulin Hountondji, where researchers extract data without any further engagement, “has recently seen a shift towards more equal South-North partnerships”, according to Margarita Gómez. However, a key challenge remains ensuring genuine agency and recognition of Global South researchers throughout the entire research process—from setting objectives to disseminating findings and receiving credit.

Limited access to funding

Researchers from the Global North generally stand a better chance of receiving funds, for both Global South and Global North projects. For instance, [reviewing](#) the funding

portfolios of the African Education Research Funding Consortium, researcher Enrique Mendizabal finds that although approximately half of the grants were awarded to African organizations, they received significantly less funding compared to their counterparts in the Global North. North American grants for education research in Africa were, on average, 4.5 times larger than African grants and approximately half of the processes for awarding grants were closed. Such practices favor individuals with existing connections, exacerbating inequalities beyond the financial. Furthermore, most research in the Global South only receives project-based, short-term funding, which does not cover overhead costs needed to strengthen institutional capacity.

Narrow standards of academic excellence

In addition, contemporary academia has a very narrow definition of which methodologies and theories constitute excellent research. In line with the issues raised above, this definition is usually very close to Northern concepts of knowledge. This results in geographical biases: For example, focusing on authorship patterns of articles published on Africa in leading economic journals between 2005 and 2015, the researcher Grieve Chelwa found in 2021 that, on average, only 25 percent of articles had at least one African-based author. Of the analyzed journals, only 3 percent of the editorial boards were based on the African continent. Similarly, an academic from Peru or Kenya is usually expected to take at least a detour to the United States or Europe, even if prestigious research institutions exist in her country of origin, and securing research funding from the Global North becomes imperative for any international scholar's career. This would not be a problem; indeed, academic research thrives on the exchange of diverse minds, ideas, and worldviews. However, the fact that this exchange is largely one-way undermines the value of regional knowledge and tilts the playing field against researchers outside of Europe and North America.

If researchers from the Global South are underrepresented, held to standards that do not reflect their realities and are unable to secure sufficient funding, it perpetuates a cycle of dependency and hinders progress. Many of these dynamics compel researchers in the Global South to conform to criteria that prioritize recognition in the Global North, often disregarding the relevance of their work to their own contexts and needs. To effect sustainable change, an environment where researchers can ask relevant questions and get to the necessary answers using appropriate methodologies is key. The focus should therefore shift from mere mental distinctions of self and other, towards addressing the substantive concerns inherent in the South-North dynamic. Below we outline some suggestions how such equitable research cooperation between the Global South and North can be achieved.

Thinking Beyond Western Standards of Academic Excellence

In order to challenge the South-North power imbalance, a commitment to shifting mindsets is vital. As Margarita Gómez highlights, it is essential for researchers from the Global North to be humble and recognize that researchers from the Global South often possess a deeper understanding of the context. This includes being open to new forms of knowledge and methodologies, even if they may initially seem uncomfortable or lesser

known. Additionally, researchers from the Global North should self-reflect on their positionality before conducting research outside their own cultural environments. For instance, the non-governmental organization "[Free Radicals](#)" has put together the Research Justice Worksheet for this purpose, which asks researchers to locate themselves and their research.

Furthermore, it is necessary to expand the networks of researchers and to think beyond Western standards of academic excellence. Authors from the Global North should include a section on their CVs indicating the proportion of work they've collaborated on with scholars from the Global South, along with the number of talks delivered in those regions. Additionally, Northern researchers should invest in learning the languages of the countries in which they conduct research. While dedicated scholarship opportunities for Southern researchers are already a step in the right direction, Global South researchers must also stand a chance of academic success without utilizing their "Global South" label. For this, they must be represented in hiring and funding committees and the hiring criteria must be questioned for biases. Relatedly, Western research institutions should lobby their politicians to simplify visa processes for researchers to enable field work, research stays, and conference participation, or consider moving conferences to countries with less restrictive visa processes.

In addition, more long-term funding must go directly to Global South institutions to enable more autonomous research. For example, in a grant for a study in Zambia, at least 75 percent of salary money should be spent in the country. If it is the case that some institutions do not fulfill the criteria to access funding, administrative support should be provided so that the grants go directly to institutions in the Global South. Autonomous research can foster lasting impact as institutes in the Global South are more likely to conduct research that addresses problems faced in local communities and have networks with governments and civil society and can include them so that findings are included in key decision-making processes.

The results of our interviews lead us to the following conclusions: Overall, in order to foster a more equitable research landscape and harness the full potential of collaborations across regions, it is imperative to create an environment of mutual appreciation. This requires researchers and institutions to value new forms of knowledge, open up academic networks, and establish sustainable, equitable funding environments. Prevailing biases need to be challenged, and the culture has to change from one of "doing a favor to the Global South" to one of mutual respect, according to Bruce Mutsaers, Professor and Chair of Media, Politics and the Global South at Utrecht University. After all, a world with global problems calls for global solutions, and this requires all parties to have an equal seat at the table.

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Margarita Gómez, Executive Director at Southern Voice

Geetika Khanduja, Program Officer, Evidence Use & Research Partnerships at Southern Voice

Bruce Mutsvairo, Professor and Chair of Media, Politics and the Global South at Utrecht University

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