



## **Knowledge is Power – and Power Affects Knowledge: Challenges for Research Collaboration in and with Africa**

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### **Abstract**

This article engages with the challenges facing genuine research collaboration and knowledge production in a North–South interaction. It maps the asymmetries in global knowledge production in general and revisits African realities in particular. Using the experiences of the Norwegian research programme NORGLOBAL as an empirical reference point, it critically explores the limitations of partnerships and identifies some challenges resulting from the centuries of Northern hegemony established in all spheres related to global affairs and interactions. It presents some thoughts and suggestions as to how these limitations might be reduced or eliminated in favour of a truly joint effort to meet the challenges on the way towards equal relations and mutual respect.

### **Résumé**

Le présent article se penche sur les défis en matière de collaboration de recherche véritable et de production de connaissances, dans le cadre d'une interaction Nord-Sud. Il dresse les asymétries dans la production mondiale de connaissances en général et revisite les réalités africaines en particulier. En utilisant les expériences du programme de recherche norvégien NORGLOBAL comme point de référence empirique, il explore de manière critique les limites des partenariats et identifie quelques défis résultant des siècles d'hégémonie du Nord établie dans tous les domaines liés aux affaires et interactions à l'échelle mondiale. Il présente quelques réflexions et suggestions quant à la façon dont ces limites pourraient être réduites ou éliminées en faveur d'un véritable effort conjoint pour relever les défis et arriver à des relations d'égalité et de respect mutuel.

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This article benefits from experiences within the Programme Board of 'Norway – A Global Partner' (NORGLOBAL) at the Norwegian Research Council (NRC). These inspired some more general reflections on the opportunities and limitations of academic collaboration between North and South. The first cycle of the programme ended after more than five years in mid-2014. The caesura motivated some preliminary conclusions and recommendations by the board members. This self-reflection had been the point of departure for the deliberations that follow. They put the case study within a more general context of North–South relations with a particular view on Africa in the academic settings of externally funded activities. Hence the insights provided by the initial experiences of NORGLOBAL are used for a more principled engagement with the subject of research collaboration.<sup>1</sup>

### **North–South collaboration revisited**

Current examples of collaboration between policy makers, development agencies and funding institutions in the spheres of research, including the involvement and role of scholars, offer differing results and conclusions. The tricky part – often not explicitly reflected upon – is actually the (self-) critical exploration of the extent to which European or Western frameworks are considered as universal and/or taken simply for granted as being hegemonic when it comes not only to applied but also to best practices. This is at times the invisible hand shaping exchanges within the frame of an interaction guided by mindsets not (yet) emancipated from the paternalistic and patronizing undercurrents of an earlier period.

A recent study compiled by two members of the Executive Committee of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutions (EADI) has reconfirmed what many (though far from all) involved in these processes were aware of. Based to a large extent on interviews with practitioners, the findings document that research partnerships 'are far from immune to the tensions and conflicts permeating unequal power relations accruing from unequal access to funding, knowledge and expert networks'.<sup>2</sup> This is a reminder that international cooperation – even when done with the best of intentions – is far from being per se good. Well-meaning engagement is not protected from flaws, setbacks and failures in terms of asymmetric forms of cooperation. 'North–South partnership' (which interestingly enough is hardly ever called South–North partnership) in the true sense of the word requires careful and critical self-reflections especially (though not exclusively) by those from the North entering the minefield but trying to avoid the trappings of all sorts of common devices related to

paternalism or racism. As will be shown, also the often praised Nordic or Scandinavian forms of development cooperation, considered for quite some time as positive examples, are anything but immune to such setbacks.<sup>3</sup> Even its critical analysis is prone to flaws and risks one-sided engagement with the subject. In this particular case the empirical research revealing limitations in Nordic interaction with African partners is itself based almost exclusively on interviews with locally-based Nordic ‘development experts’ and practitioners. Through such a reductionist approach the method (unintentionally) again marginalizes the view of the partners in the ‘recipient countries’, who remain – *nomen est omen* – on the receiving end.<sup>4</sup>

A lack of deliberate and conscious consideration of the underpinning structural asymmetries as a core obstacle and challenge for any meaningful partnership, in the true meaning of the word, already risks failure. Being international in nature, outlook and practice does not mean being automatically on the safe side. Something international in nature and organization is far from necessarily all-inclusive, or securing adequate representation. All too often inter-nationalism in its basic characteristics and with regard to its main beneficiaries is confined to those countries and their people inside the circle of power – in contrast to those remaining at the margins or outside and on the receiving end. Put differently, if European or Western or Northern or any other type of internationalism exercises a power of definition over others and imposes its values, norms, mindsets and views as a particular (in this case Eurocentric) project on the rest of the world – as done for far too long in the history of European colonial and imperialist expansion – then this international dimension of European frameworks is of dubious value, at least for others. So-called progressive political-philosophical ideologies and perspectives rooted in Western trajectories are by no means secure scaffolding that avoids falling prey to ‘the discrete charm of European intellectuals’.<sup>5</sup>

Not by accident had the World Social Science Report 2010 as its sub-title ‘Knowledge Divides’.<sup>6</sup> Especially the contributions to its chapters four and five provide sobering evidence for the fact that the current internationalization – like its preceding stages – tends to reinforce the dominance of the North. This does not exclude challenges, also from within the belly of the beast. The Enlightenment was always ambiguous establishing on the one hand a rationality, which promoted a pseudo-scientific belief in mono-causal, linear progress and development as all-embracing concept to explain and master the world while at the same time providing the tools and instruments for emancipation based on questioning this claim. The era of Enlightenment, to a large extent, established a smokescreen covering Eurocentric dominance

through claims of universality. But the legitimizing humbug of such claims has been questioned not only by those raised at the receiving end of such an introverted, self-centred mindset, but also by some of those socialized within the system and supposed to be an integral part of its reproduction. Emancipation from hegemony, power and subjugation is a collective effort, which crosses boundaries and is in itself internationalism in practice.

Being European or Northern or of any other descent therefore moulds but does not pre-determine worldview and convictions in an irrevocable manner, even though cultural and religious factors (and the privileges that go hand-in-hand with the social positioning of many scholars in the Northern hemisphere) should not be dismissed lightly in the formation of identities and mindsets. But primary experiences and socialization do not exclude or even deny processes of learning, changing, adapting and re-positioning. A continued supremacy of American-European social sciences, as diagnosed in the World Social Science Report 2010, does not offer scholars any excuses to abstain from joining counter-hegemonic strategies also from within the dominant spheres of influence and knowledge production. Partnership in research and knowledge production should in principle be able to overcome boundaries.

### **African realities and perspectives**

In as much as economic disparities were integral parts of the unequal development reproduced on a global scale since the days of colonial-imperialist expansion, the world of science and knowledge production displays similar characteristics of inequality. Scientific dependence in Africa<sup>7</sup> corresponds with and is an integral part of the structurally anchored socio-economic imbalances.<sup>8</sup> As the concept paper for a continental summit on higher education in Africa,<sup>9</sup> co-organized by CODESRIA in March 2015 in Dakar, (self-)critically summarized, less than 0.5 per cent of GDP is invested in research in the continent, with less than 1.5 per cent of the annual global share of research publications being a result. This current quantitative dimension illustrates the impact and consequences of a historical process, which had its origins in the colonial-imperialist expansion of central Europe and the imposition of its forms of reproducing societies (including mindsets, ideologies and knowledge) for centuries to come in a global project claiming (misleadingly so) universality in character, creating the misperception that it would reach beyond the universal hegemony executed. As aptly summarized on the occasion of the celebration of CODESRIA's fortieth anniversary:

That knowledge has been colonized raises the question of whether it was ever free. The formulation of knowledge in the singular already situates

the question in a framework that is alien to times before the emergence of European modernity and its age of global domination, for the disparate modes of producing knowledge and notions of knowledge were so many that knowledges would be a more appropriate designation.<sup>10</sup>

The perpetuation of such a system degrades the continents of the so-called global South and their own specific academic realities to second grade juniors. Africa, and to a certain extent also Latin America, tend to be at best considered as laboratories or test cases for exploring or verifying by application more general theories created in the Northern hemispheres.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Eurocentric hegemony produced a locally embedded dependency culture, at interplay with local elites exercising political and administrative control over societies predominantly in their self-interest as kinds of satellites feeding – despite occasional radically different populist rhetoric – into the further entrenchment of the globally dominant systems.<sup>12</sup> This unfortunate constellation of a ‘combination of domestic repression and financial strangulation’ greatly affected subsequent tertiary education and research in African countries that were shaped by a toxic blend of an ‘incontinent insistence of conformity and sycophancy by authoritarian rulers’,<sup>13</sup> captured by Joseph Ki-Zerbo in the image of a sign that was hung on the entrance to Africa saying ‘Silence, Development in Progress’.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, the so-called postcolonial sphere of local science, research and academic knowledge production (as well as its dissemination) remained a domain defined to a large extent by external factors. Far from being home grown, scholarly efforts were often restricted by the global economic disparities and structures permeating all other spheres of social organization of life and work. African scholars, aware of the challenge and willing to face it, are engaged in uphill struggles to at least reduce, if not to overcome, such distortions.<sup>15</sup> Despite their efforts, ownership remains in many if not most cases outside of the African realm, also with regard to the power of definition of what is considered to be ‘truly’ academic and scholarly, or for that matter relevant. The triumph of neoliberalism during the last decades has done anything but ease the challenge. Rather, ‘the proliferation of neo-liberal practices in the institutions ... force academics to pursue short-term goals without any connection to the public interest in their teaching’, thereby ‘contributing to the emergence of a new “crisis of quality” engineered from within the institutions’.<sup>16</sup> As a result, ‘a pervasive consultancy culture has undermined serious scholarship and, in extreme cases, has even violated ethical standards’.<sup>17</sup>

Ebrima Sall, as part of a stocktaking exercise in the World Social Science Report 2010, concluded that ‘The challenge of autonomy, and of

developing interpretative frameworks that are both scientific and universal, and relevant – that is, “suitable” for the study of Africa and of the world from the standpoint of Africans themselves – is still very real’.<sup>18</sup> His predecessor as Executive Secretary of CODESRIA is as adamant in advocating a dismissal of foreign perspectives imposed upon the continent and its people as an integral part of the ‘North–South asymmetries in international knowledge production’.<sup>19</sup> He criticizes ‘mainstream African Studies’ that ‘has constituted itself into a tool for the mastering of Africa by others whilst offering very little by way of how Africa might master the world and its own affairs’.<sup>20</sup> He further concurs with Mahmood Mamdani that ‘the culture of knowledge production about Africa ... is based on analogy: Africa is read through the lenses of Europe and not on terms deriving from its own internal dynamics’.<sup>21</sup> African Studies might indeed, more so than any other so-called area studies (which are as global as they are local), reflect the distortions rooted in a colonial perspective surviving in times dubbed as post-colonialism – a term which tends to obscure the continuities effectively impregnating the ongoing unequal relations between societies and people.<sup>22</sup>

This view is reconfirmed by the authors of the EADI paper,<sup>23</sup> who identify the notion of power as being a necessary challenge in efforts to effect ‘transformational’ research on global issues. Arguing that ‘there is no such thing as a-political research’ the findings suggest: ‘Partnerships are embedded in a web of power relations while development-oriented research often implies conflicting and contesting objectives between scholars, aid agencies and development practitioners.’<sup>24</sup> This requires efforts to create an enabling environment for more equal partnerships, guided by the need to deconstruct an agenda claiming to be global, but in actual fact still to a large extent driven by actors in the North. All too often, such efforts remain confronted with the dilemma that even with the best intentions these are still based and dependent on Northern funding and Northern scholars, who might try to overcome the structural constraints but remain confined to operations rooted and embedded within a Northern setting. These undertakings often have hardly any direct Southern participation – neither in terms of funding nor by direct individual and institutional representation. Southern partners – individuals as well as institutions – remain at the receiving end as implementing agencies, often added on after decisions are taken without them being adequately (if at all) consulted during the process. At best, they are invited to indicate their willingness to enter such forms of cooperation in funding applications, in which they had no say during the drafting process, to create the impression that this is about true partnership – while it clearly is not.

## The case of NORGLOBAL

The first cycle of NORGLOBAL was operational between February 2009 and June 2014.<sup>25</sup> The programme was established to strengthen Norwegian research on and for development in low – and middle-income countries and to contribute to additional research capacity in these countries. The programme had a special responsibility to generate new knowledge within the field of development-related studies in Norway. NORGLOBAL encompasses a number of thematic areas, including women and gender issues, health, food production and the effect of development cooperation, as well as issues relating to conflicts, climate, the environment and clean energy. These topics were among the priorities being addressed within the various thematic activities under the diverse NORGLOBAL programme calls. Most activities were funded following calls for proposals and applications within the thematic areas, while a few others were the result of a cooperation with other NRC programmes, for example through joint-funding announcements. Several of the thematic calls stipulated as a condition that projects are required to incorporate the active participation of researchers from countries in the South financed through budgets applied to promote cooperation and strengthen capacity building in these countries.

In summary, the programme objectives were designed and initiated to:

- Strengthen research in Norway on development in developing countries, as well as ensure an effective, flexible, visible and coherent organization of this research by consolidating much of the effort within the field of development under a single programme, and through cooperation with other programmes.
- Strengthen research for development, through the integration of development perspectives into relevant programmes.
- Strengthen the research capacity of developing countries by enhancing research cooperation between researchers based at institutions in the countries in question and leading Norwegian research institutions and qualified scholars.

The programme dealt with some ten thematic priority areas, for which calls were drafted and issued (often announced several times):

- Poverty and Peace (POVPEACE)
- CGIAR Fellowship Programme (CGIAR)
- Globalisation of Environment, Energy and Climate Research (GLOBMEK)
- Women and Gender (GENDER-EQ)

- Economic Growth, Poverty Reduction, Reproductive Health and Population Dynamics (ECONPOP)
- Western Balkan Countries Development Studies Programme (W-BALKAN)
- Tax Havens, Capital Flows and Development (TAXCAPDEV)
- Research on Humanitarian Policy (HUMPOL)
- Effect of Aid (AIDEEFFECT).<sup>26</sup>

The Programme Board had a far-reaching mandate. It allocated research funds in principle (and depending on the specific call) also for projects including PhDs, networking, equipment and other costs related to a closer interaction between Norwegian and Southern partners as well as capacity building components both in Norway and in the Southern partner institutions and countries. Financial support was based on accepting an application submitted in response to calls issued by the Programme Board. Applicants had to be individual scholars affiliated to Norwegian research institutions and universities. Collaboration with partners in the global South were in many cases a pre-requisite, as was the allocation of a certain proportion of the funds for these partners. The collaboration with African counterparts was among the priorities. Partner institutions in a total of sixteen African countries were among the recipients of research grants under the different programmes: Benin, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The budget was to a large extent provided by NORAD as the specialized directorate under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with limited additional funds from the Ministry of Education and Research. Since its inception, the amounts allocated varied according to the specific areas and calls.<sup>27</sup> NORAD had a representative as an *ex officio* member on the Programme Board, but the board members' authority in decision-making remained fully autonomous. NRC staff members in charge of the sectors facilitated informed decisions. They prepared, circulated and summarized the necessary information (including the reports and rankings compiled by individual reviewers or review panels, whose identity remained undisclosed to the Programme Board). They also submitted recommendations based on these assessments, while the board took final decisions as a result only of its internal deliberations. These were at times different from the views of NORAD or the NRC recommendations. Notably, for the whole period all the decisions were taken without any major dissent among the board members, in mutual agreement and on a consensual basis, at times after extended discussions guided by a remarkable degree of respect for diverse



competences, differing arguments and approaches. At times, the final decisions also deviated considerably from the rankings submitted by the reviews.

The board had a total of eight members, of whom only the NORAD appointed representative and the chairperson were Norwegians. The other six members were scholars recruited from other countries to reduce the risks of any potential conflict of interest. They were competent in a variety of disciplines and areas, such as political sciences, sociology, development studies, social anthropology, economics, agricultural sciences, environmental sciences and human geography with a variety of practical regional experiences in different countries and continents. The Programme Board undertook a self-evaluation taking stock of the first five years as an input to the formulation of the mandate, aims and goals for the following phase.<sup>28</sup>

### **Beyond NORGLOBAL 1**

By December 2014 the NRC had appointed the members of a new Programme Board for the next anticipated term (dubbed NORGLOBAL 2). But while the board met to resume work for the next cycle in early 2015, the conservative Norwegian government, in power since late 2013, undertook considerable policy changes. The office of a minister for development affairs was abandoned and development cooperation became an integral part of the portfolio of the foreign minister. While the new office bearer, as a trained economist, had among other positions a history in the UN Commission on Sustainable Development and as Managing Director of the World Economic Forum, which increasingly focused on matters in the global South, he was more reluctant to continue allocating funds to such research. What was taken for granted turned out to be in doubt. By mid-2015 the new board was still awaiting the overdue decision to continue funding the programme and was forced to operate with the unspent funds from NORGLOBAL 1, unable to initiate calls in the absence of any new budget.

While criticism also mounted in the public domain,<sup>29</sup> the Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg and her Minister of Foreign Affairs Børge Brende emphasized that education is a human right. In a joint article published ahead of the opening of an Oslo Summit of Education for Development they declared in July 2015:

We must reverse the recent downward trend in development assistance for education, and leverage our assistance to attract investments from various other sources. For our part, we are in the process of doubling Norway's financial contribution to education for development in the period 2013–2017.<sup>30</sup>

The next day, in her opening speech to the Oslo Summit, Prime Minister Solberg reiterated:

We need to innovate and forge new partnerships. Information technology and globalisation offer new opportunities. We must make the most of these opportunities and work together to secure education for all children and young people.<sup>31</sup>

It seems as if the awareness about the obvious connection between school education and institutions of higher learning, research and academic excellence as integral parts of knowledge production (and components of the much referred to development) has not yet managed to gain ground within Norway's current government. Instead of moving forward, its policy moves several steps backward, deals with educational and poverty-related matters in isolation and adheres to a neoliberal paradigm, which is neither new nor liberal.

Such setbacks, which document the effects of conservative governments in the Nordic countries not only in terms of their migration policy, cannot however eliminate the insights gained and presented during the course of NORGLOBAL 1. When NORAD during 2012/13 embarked on a research strategy process seeking to improve current practices, the Programme Board was asked to offer its views. It recommended that the following priority areas, among others, should be considered with special preference:

- natural resource and energy management/governance
- industrial policy and labour market dynamics
- promotion of health.

It was also suggested that the creation and dissemination of knowledge should be considered in future research activities as a complementing aspect attached to the subject-related analyses. Most prominently, the Programme Board emphasized that NORGLOBAL has already established research activities on the effects of climate change and was in contact with the Global Environment and Climate (GEC) initiative and its activities. It had also established a close alignment with the new Future Earth initiative. Therefore not by coincidence, the board in its report stressed as a priority,

That research in this area is continued and is linked to concerns specific to the global South and to development challenges. Research here could and should engage researchers in the engineering and technical communities as well as in biology and other relevant natural sciences, with a view to strengthen the notion of sustainability.

Sharing the understanding of the Future Earth approach,<sup>32</sup> it stressed the

need for an alliance of different initiatives, working in a solution-orientated mode within interdisciplinary research on global environmental change for sustainable development. As the initial design of the Future Earth initiative summarizes:

Future Earth will address issues critical to poverty alleviation and development such as food, water energy, health and human security, and the nexus between these areas and the over-arching imperative of achieving global sustainability. It will provide and integrate new insights in areas such as governance, tipping points, natural capital, the sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity, lifestyles, ethics and values. It will explore the economic implications of inaction and action and options for technological and social transformations towards a low-carbon future. Future Earth will explore new research frontiers and establish new ways to produce research in a more integrated and solutions-oriented way.<sup>33</sup>

But such a noble statement, which also links to the aims and aspirations of NORGLOBAL, needs to be realistically interrogated. There is a need to acknowledge and implement in any research design that the global is at the same time local and vice versa. Much more awareness among scholars and donors alike should be fostered concerning the practical implications of the inter-connectivity between seemingly different worlds and social realities. Methodology as well as theory should consciously integrate such understanding in its approaches.

This resonates strongly (and deliberately) with the World Social Science Report 2013.<sup>34</sup> Similar to Future Earth, it seeks to reconcile and bring together the social, human and natural sciences and explicitly endorses the Future Earth approach as a like-minded (and joint) initiative, which

provides a unique and robust institutional basis for accomplishing something that has long been called for: research that brings the various scientific fields together on complex, multi-faceted problems. In addition, Future Earth fosters knowledge production, guided by a vision of science working with society to find solutions for global sustainability.<sup>35</sup>

However, by stressing ‘a vision of science with society’, the potential collaborators should be daring enough not only to think outside of the box but also to collaborate with those so far considered in their civil society and social movement roles of no direct relevance for closer interaction. The separation between the sciences as knowledge production from actors producing possibly less academic but equally socially relevant knowledge has not yet been overcome. In reality, however, the results of these initiatives might pass the test and provide as relevant and useful insights as the example of the Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives

might be able to show.<sup>36</sup> Its major report so far had a measurable impact on the Rio+20 debates and engages with closely related issues.<sup>37</sup> Other earlier initiatives of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation relating to its programmatic engagement over more than thirty years within the areas of 'Another Development' and 'What Next' testify to similar undertakings, directly linking to the approaches of the Future Earth initiative.<sup>38</sup> Matters of climate change are indeed issues reaching far beyond academic discourse and into wider social movements for global change, which should not be ignored when it comes to further knowledge production, utilization and – even more importantly – the related fundamental search for alternative concepts of development.<sup>39</sup>

As the World Social Science Report 2013 points out:

Global environmental change is about humans changing global environments, and about humans, individually and collectively, shaping the direction of planetary and social evolution. The social sciences therefore have a vital role in enriching society's understanding of what it means to live – and maybe thrive – in the Anthropocene, and in raising awareness of the opportunities, accountabilities and responsibilities this brings with it.<sup>40</sup>

## Challenges

Current (self-)critical examinations suggest that the mainstream academic community is not at all close to an amicable solution to overcoming the dichotomies existing in the forms of knowledge production and the specific focus and nature of such common knowledge production within North–South interaction – also in isolation from other initiatives by NGOs.<sup>41</sup> The NORGLOBAL Programme Board diagnosed *inter alia* 'a clear danger that partners in projects managed by Norwegian research institutions become junior partners who work in a fairly asymmetrical relationship with managing researchers'. For the EADI paper the structural constraints show similar results 'often leading to southern partners becoming implementers of a northern agenda'.<sup>42</sup> Overall, 'collaborative North–South research projects still tend to favour supporting southern researchers individually, but neglect broader institutional support that would be essential to enhance autonomous research capabilities of southern institutions'.<sup>43</sup> The NORGLOBAL board, sharing a similar concern, therefore recommended that

Projects should also be monitored during their execution and evaluated after completion with respect to whether they lead to future collaborations, produce joint research reports or lead to subsequent research bids, and more generally contribute effectively to building sustainable research capacity in

the South.

The problem is exacerbated by the dubious if not toxic so-called relevance criteria defined within the neoliberal mind of those executing the power of governing. They are manifested in the shifts of emphasis towards so-called Impact Factors in scholarly production measured by indicators such as the number and ranking of publications. These dubious criteria, void of any concept of practical social or political relevance, are increasingly applied not only by those holding the power of definition over academic advancement and careers but also by Northern funding agencies:

This provides an incentive for northern research institutions to seek collaboration with well-established (usually western) foundations rather than to engage in complex partnerships with southern partners involving capacity-building components. The tensions between short-term recognition of academic excellence and longer-term capacity building objectives lie at the heart of the North-South research partnership debate. ... the more northern institutions put an emphasis on publishing numerous articles in renowned journals for their own survival, the weaker the incentive to invest in building effective partnerships that contribute to capacity building and inclusion.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, funding tends to be project-related, which is not conducive to long-term planning and investment in human resources and institutional collaboration. This seems to be confirmed by the observation that 'successes seem to be more frequent when dealing with applied research geared toward the development of technical "solutions" – for instance in the area of health or civil engineering - than in the case of more fundamental research in social sciences writ large'.<sup>45</sup>

Shifting the emphasis to a new alliance between scholars of a wider range of disciplines, connecting the human (social) with the natural sciences more closely is however only one important aspect of the challenges ahead. Efforts seeking to address the fundamental obstacles towards sustainability should at the same time not risk losing sight of imminent problems existing in terms of socio-economic realities produced by and testifying to the current reproduction of a fundamentally flawed and unsustainable form of human reproduction.

Therefore, new forms of collaboration should not abandon engagement with other issues, which impact on the mindset, dominant configurations in societies and global orders and the continued abuse of natural resources as well as a further promotion of inequalities. Some of the current issues requiring consideration by concerned social scientists would include as much discussion about social protection floors as well as a critical interrogation of the emerging hype on the assumed positive role of the middle classes,<sup>46</sup> as well

as potential governance options by means of a taxation policy, to mention only a few relevant issues. These are intrinsically related to concepts of social policy, justice and sustainability. Their discussion by a group of gender-aware scholars of both sexes representing different disciplines, cultures, religions and regions would create new insights linked with the search for future models of social reproduction to secure sustainability and a point of departure for the next generations.

If the social sciences are indeed useful in efforts to 'untangle the processes by which global environmental change affects societies, and thus help them to respond to it in context-sensitive ways',<sup>47</sup> then a mere 'switch' from rigorous social analyses (including class analysis) towards environmentally-oriented research is not a solution. While it might be a correct observation that there exists a continued lack of interest among social scientists in global environmental change, and that disciplinary barriers are prevalent also with regard to other sciences,<sup>48</sup> this cannot result in abandoning the original strength of the disciplines. As the World Social Sciences Report 2013 recognizes:

The insights of traditional social sciences have often been dismissed as value-laden, contextual, and therefore unreliable. Yet attention to context and values may be precisely what is needed to lead humanity out of its current predicament. The growing engagement of the social sciences in global change research is a sign of their readiness to deliver. This engagement now needs to be accelerated.<sup>49</sup>

The relevance of social sciences within integrated research on global change has been stressed in an initiative under the GEC framework. Climate and global environmental change are understood as a central concern and subject for the social sciences, and global change as organic to this field of science. This is emphasized by stating the obvious, that 'the simple recognition that if the fundamental causes and consequences of global change are social, then so must the solutions be'.<sup>50</sup> Such a perspective was also the common understanding at a meeting of some seventy participants representing international, regional and national development aid agencies and research funding agencies, along with African scholars and scientists.<sup>51</sup> They reiterated the crucial role of social scientists in issues related to sustainable development research, since the resulting challenges are to a large extent the consequence of social activities and behaviour. This also impacts on perceptions and strategies of how best to address the challenges. After all:

Critical to a social-ecological perspective is the role of humans as reflexive and creative agents of deliberate change. Understanding how values, attitudes, worldviews, beliefs and visions of the future influence system structures and processes is crucial. It challenges the idea that catastrophic global

environmental change is inevitable, and directs attention to possibilities for acting in response to such change.<sup>52</sup>

As the World Social Science Report 2013 also notes:

Global environmental change is simultaneously an environmental and a social problem. Social science research helps us to comprehend the complex dynamics of 'social-ecological' or 'coupled human-natural' systems, and can help explain how these systems unfold and interconnect across space, from the local to the global, and in time, from the past and present into the future.<sup>53</sup>

### **Concluding reflections**

Future Earth suggests being a pioneering initiative to bridge the North–South divide in the face of meeting the challenges for global survival in times of devastating effects of climate change. At the same time, however, it remains confronted with lasting structural disparities which the initiative seems to be aware of and seeks to at least reduce if not to overcome. In early July 2014 the alliance that initiated Future Earth had announced the results of an open bidding process for the hosting of five global hubs. These were to be established to function as a single secretarial entity. The status was awarded to research institutions in Canada, France, Japan, Sweden and the United States. They will be complemented by four regional hubs in Cyprus, Japan, the United Kingdom and Uruguay – the latter the only location out of nine representing the global South. Strikingly, the African continent is not represented in any institutional form in this configuration, while being widely considered to be the region of the world, whose people are most dramatically affected by the environmental shifts as a result of climate change.

In response to a critical article voicing frustration by mainly Asian observers over Northern bias,<sup>54</sup> members of the Science and Technology Alliance for Global Sustainability (an informal international partnership of sponsors of Future Earth composed of members from research, funding and the international sectors dubbed 'the alliance'<sup>55</sup>) stated that 'work is ongoing to address this important issue, particularly in terms of the development of strong regional hubs that will become part of the secretariat'.<sup>56</sup> This seems not to be an ideal start and might confirm reservations as to the genuine motives of the initiators. On the other hand, they might well have reasons to bemoan the lack of serious bids presented from institutions located elsewhere, offering the opportunity to allocate more responsibility (and funds) to Southern agencies. If, as a result of disproportionate means, limited capacity or maybe even the prevailing suspicions that a competition

is anyway unfair and unfavourable to Southern bidders, the potential players from these regions abstain, the end result will be another self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>57</sup> This experience suggests that even the most sensible insights are not yet a cure to the quagmire when it comes to the practical steps of implementing a sound idea.

Declared awareness of asymmetrical North–South relations does not eliminate the risk that these are perpetuated even within settings of those claiming to be aware, as long as historically rooted animosities and structural legacies as well as internalized value systems and behavioural patterns prevail. The EADI survey identified in conclusion

large gaps between stated ambitions and actual practice regarding research partnerships. Under the drive of ‘global studies’ and the global public goods agenda, research organizations with no previous exposure in North–South collaboration are joining in and face many of the traditional pitfalls well-known in international development cooperation, such as basic contextual understanding, cultural sensitivity and a need to explicitly address the issue of power relations, all of which remain central to the success of such research collaboration.<sup>58</sup>

In addition, local policy priorities impact on the agenda. Bridging the scholars – consultants–donors divide remains, under these circumstances, a challenge. Academic criteria guiding career planning in a scholarly environment – such as the infamous ‘Impact Factor’ of publications – often overrule practical or even policy relevance. North–South cooperation still remains in the hands of Northern partners with Southern counterparts as a fig leaf or junior partner reduced to an implementing agency for local empirical studies and data collection, which, after completion of local service functions, are later owned by the Northern ‘big brother/sister’.

As a result, indeed at times relevant insights for local policy-makers and communities in the South generated by new research end in peer-reviewed journals, whose commercial publishing priority remains prohibitive to access by those who might benefit most from it. Often, research projects awarded with the necessary funding, are not even tasked or expected to share their insights with a wider audience as the potential beneficiary of the new knowledge created. Similar to the lack of investment in institutional capacity building as part of such research collaboration, the publishing of the results remains in the Northern domain. Instead, one could make provisions that research results are supposed to be published in accessible ways in a local context, and provide the necessary funding for this as an integral part of the project. This would at least be a deliberate effort to address the imbalances by putting money where the mouth is.



While this emphasizes the need to mobilize for further resources allocated by governments to enable such true collaboration, it also reminds actors engaged in such cooperation to live up to the proclaimed goals:

The academic community must support their counterparts in Africa as they struggle against the ravages of the consultancy syndrome that rewards reports over refereed academic papers, against the repressive practices and criminal negligence of their respective national governments and against the pressures for the commercialization of educational systems. Universities should not wait for the initiatives of governments and donors. Instead, they must seek ways creating autonomous spaces for interacting with each within a 'commonwealth of scholars'. This will entail changes in the current relationship between African scholars and the university communities elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

But such interaction would also require a paradigm shift away from the monolithic understanding of theory towards the plurality of theories, including a 'theory from the South'.<sup>60</sup> Such 'new theoretical currents, grounded in deep knowledge of and engagement with the realities of life in Africa, will be able to fill in the current void of theorization in the "Euro-America" and to stimulate a global return to Theory'.<sup>61</sup> But over and above such fundamental shifts in premises, there remains a need to equate sustainability with notions of justice, equality and civil as well as political and socio-economic rights for individuals and collectives within a world of cultural and religious diversity impacting on and shaping norms and values as well as life perspectives. This requires the pursuance of the same goals with differing but complementing responsibilities to transcend borders not only geographically but also mentally and beyond narrow disciplinary confinements, while paying respect and recognizing diversity and otherness when seeking and establishing common ground. Last but not least, despite all these demanding aspects, one should never compromise on quality, but rather re-define the criteria for meaningful quality and relevance – for both, knowledge and life.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of the paper was prepared for a meeting on 'Enhancing collaboration between the development aid and the global environmental change communities to achieve development goals in Africa', organized by the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the Swedish Development Agency (Sida) on 5 and 6 May 2014 at the Soweto Campus of the University of Johannesburg. I thank Inger-Ann Ullstein, Jan Monteverde Haakonsen and their colleagues from the NRC and Kevin Noone and other members on the Programme Board of NORGLOBAL for the fruitful cooperation during the last years and all the

- indirect inputs to this paper, for which I bear the full and sole responsibility. Its final revisions also benefitted from the observations shared by the reviewers.
2. Gilles Carbonnier/Tiina Kontinen, *North–South Research Partnerships: Academia Meets Development?* Bonn: EADI (EADI Policy Paper Series), June 2014, 3. For a considerably modified later version see Gilles Carbonnier/Tiina Kontinen, ‘Institutional learning in North-South research partnerships’, *Revue Tiers Monde*, 221, January–March 2015, 149–62.
  3. Maria Eriksson Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership: A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid*, London: Zed 2005.
  4. See the review by Jonathan Goodhand, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 7 (3): 418–20. For a general, critical assessment of the developmental discourses in current forms of cooperation see inter alia the special issue of *Progress in Development Studies* 6 (1), 2006, guest edited by Uma Kothari as well as chapters in Mark Duffield/Vernon Hewitt, *Empire, Development & Colonialism. The Past in the Present*, Woodbridge: James Currey, 2009.
  5. See the challenge to Slavo Žižek by Hamid Dabashi, ‘The discrete charm of European intellectuals’, *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 3 (4), 2009. Accessible at <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/220/314>. See also Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, London: Zed, 2015.
  6. *World Social Science Report 2010. Knowledge Divides*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Social Science Council (ISSC) 2010.
  7. Paulin J. Houtondji, ‘Scientific dependence in Africa today’, *Research in African Literature* 21 (3): 5–15.
  8. Cf. Peter Weingart, ‘Knowledge and Inequality’, in Göran Therborn, ed., *Inequalities of the World. New theoretical frameworks, multiple empirical approaches*. London: Verso, 2006, 163–90.
  9. Published on 17 March 2015 as ‘Africa Focus, Africa: Higher Education Must be Higher Priority’, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201503190891.html>.
  10. Lewis R. Gordon, ‘Disciplinary decadence and the decolonisation of knowledge’, *Africa Development* 39 (1), 2014, pp. 81–92 (here: p. 81; italics in the original).
  11. See on this the revised PhD thesis by Wiebke Keim, *Vermessene Disziplin. Zum konterhegemonialen Potential afrikanischer und lateinamerikanischer Soziologien*. Bielefeld: transcript 2008.
  12. Revealing for this anomy have already been the early insights presented in the chapter ‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness’ in the manifesto by Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967 (French original 1961); but also the mimicry he disclosed in his earlier work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press, 1967 (French original 1952).
  13. Thandika Mkandawire, ‘Running while others walk: knowledge and the challenge of Africa’s development’, *Africa Development*, 36 (2), 2011, pp. 1–36 (here: p. 15).
  14. *ibid.*
  15. See among the numerous noteworthy efforts some of the results facilitated

- by CODESRIA, such as the contributions to Paul Tiyambe Zeleza/Adebayo Olukoshi, eds, *African Universities in the Twenty-First Century. Volume II: Knowledge and Society*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004; Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, ed., *The Study of Africa. Volume I: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 2006; as well as Alois Mlambo, ed., *African Scholarly Publishing*, Oxford: African Books Collective, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications, 2006. For a summary overview on the impact of African intellectuals challenging the restrictive system see Thandika Mkandawire, 'African intellectuals, political culture and development', *Austrian Journal of Development Studies* 18 (1) 2002, pp. 31–47.
16. Ibrahim Oanda Ogachi, 'Neo-liberalism and the subversion of academic freedom from within: money, corporate cultures and "captured" intellectuals in African public universities', *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 9 (1&2), 2011, pp. 25–47 (here: p. 44).
  17. Recommendations for Reinvigorating the Humanities in Africa. Submitted by the Forum on the Humanities in Africa of the African Humanities Program. University of South Africa, 7 June 2014. For consideration by the African Higher Education Summit. Dakar, Senegal, 10–12 March 2015, p. 11. Released on 5 December 2014 at: [http://www.acls.org/Publications/Programs/Reinvigorating\\_the\\_Humanities\\_in\\_Africa.pdf](http://www.acls.org/Publications/Programs/Reinvigorating_the_Humanities_in_Africa.pdf).
  18. *World Social Science Report 2010*, pp. 44ff.
  19. Adebayo Olukoshi, 'African Scholars and African Studies', in Henning Melber, ed., *On Africa. Scholars and African Studies. Contributions in Honour of Lennart Wohlgenuth*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute 2007, pp. 7–22 (here: p. 17).
  20. *ibid.*, p. 15.
  21. *ibid.*, p. 18. Cf. Mahmood Mamdani, 'African studies made in USA', CODESRIA Bulletin 2, 1990; and 'The Challenge of the Social Sciences in the 21st Century', in Ruth Mukama and Murindwa Rutange, eds, *Confronting 21st Century Challenges: Analyses and Re-dedications by National and International Scholars*. Volume 1, Kampala: Faculty of Social Sciences and Makerere University, 2004.
  22. For some critical reflections on the contested notion of African Studies from the perspectives of an European scholar see Henning Melber, 'The relevance of African Studies', *Stichproben. Vienna Journal of African Studies* 9 (16), 2009, pp. 183–200, and Henning Melber, 'What is African in Africa(n) studies? Confronting the (mystifying) power of ideology and identity', *Africa Bibliography* 2013, November 2014, pp. vii–xvii.
  23. See note 2.
  24. Carbonnier/Kontinen, 'Institutional learning', p. 159.
  25. Further details at: [http://www.forskningsradet.no/prognettnorglobal/Home\\_page/1224698160055](http://www.forskningsradet.no/prognettnorglobal/Home_page/1224698160055) [http://www.forskningsradet.no/prognettnorglobal/Home\\_page/1224698160055](http://www.forskningsradet.no/prognettnorglobal/Home_page/1224698160055). The designed first chairperson of the newly established Programme Board, Carl-Erik Schulz, died in a tragic accident while hiking on Table Mountain on 30 November 2008 and so could not take up this

- function. I dedicate this article to his memory.
26. In addition, NORGLOBAL cooperated occasionally with other programmes in the Research Council, such as INDNOR on India. The programme board also handled a limited call sponsored by the Norwegian embassy in Malawi, which allocated funds to research projects aimed at presenting findings to strengthen political governance.
  27. In 2013, NORGLOBAL had a disposable budget of some NOK 153.5 million (around US\$ 25 million), of which for the first three months some NOK 51.5 million (around US\$ 8.5 million) were used.
  28. The report was drafted in August/September 2013 by the board's chairperson Helge Hveem, based on the inputs of the other board members.
  29. Both Helge Hveem, the chairperson of NORGLOBAL 1, and Øyvind Østeryd, the chairperson of NORGLOBAL 2, are among the top senior scholars in Development Studies in Norway, and have published critical opinion articles in established Norwegian print media, appealing to correct this situation. For another critical intervention see the opinion article by John Y. Jones/Henning Melber in *Development Today* 8, August 2015.
  30. Erna Solberg/Børge Brende, 'No Education, No Development', published on 6 July 2015 in Project Syndicate. Accessible at [«https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/no-education-no-development/id2426818/»](https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/no-education-no-development/id2426818/) <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/no-education-no-development/id2426818/>.
  31. The Prime Minister's Opening Speech at the Oslo Summit of Education for Development, 7 July 2015. Accessible at: <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/the-prime-ministers-opening-speech-at-the-oslo-summit-of-education-for-development/id2426937/>.
  32. See [«http://www.icsu.org/future-earth»](http://www.icsu.org/future-earth) [www.icsu.org/future-earth](http://www.icsu.org/future-earth) and [«http://www.futureearth.info»](http://www.futureearth.info) [www.futureearth.info](http://www.futureearth.info).
  33. Future Earth, *Future Earth Initial Design: Report of the Transition Team*, Paris: International Council for Science (ICSU), 2013, p. 11.
  34. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Social Science Council (ISSC), *World Social Science Report 2013. Changing Global Environments*, Paris: OECD Publishing and UNESCO Publishing, 2013.
  35. *World Social Science Report 2013. Summary*, p. 5.
  36. See <http://www.reflectiongroup.org/>.
  37. *No future without justice. Report of the Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives*, Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2012 (*Development Dialogue* 59). Accessible at: <http://www.dhf.uu.se/publications/development-dialogue/dd59/>.
  38. See for a summary on some of the contributions Henning Melber, ed., *50 Years Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation*, Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2012 (*Development Dialogue* 60). Accessible at: [«http://www.dhf.uu.se/publications/development-dialogue/dd60/»](http://www.dhf.uu.se/publications/development-dialogue/dd60/) <http://www.dhf.uu.se/publications/development-dialogue/dd60/>; and more specifically by Niclas Hällström with

- Robert Österbergh, eds, *What Next Volume III: Climate, Development and Equity*, Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and What Next Forum 2012 (Development Dialogue 61). Accessible at: <http://www.dhf.uu.se/publications/development-dialogue/dd61/>. The Foundation's web site offers access to several more related publications.
39. See Henning Melber, 'Whose world? Development, civil society, development studies and (not only) scholar activists', *Third World Quarterly* 35 (6), 2014, pp. 1082–97.
  40. *World Social Science Report 2013. Summary*, p. 4.
  41. This observation by no means suggests that NGO-interactions are immune from paternalistic forms of collaboration. Rather, they reproduce to a large extent similar problems and challenges as encountered in the collaboration among scholars and academic institutions. See as examples some of the articles in the special issue of the *Austrian Journal of Development Studies* 31 (1), 2015 on 'Civil society, cooperation and development'.
  42. Carbonnier/Kontinen, *North-South Research Partnerships*, p. 10.
  43. *ibid.*, p. 9.
  44. *ibid.*, pp. 5 and 7.
  45. *ibid.*, p. 16.
  46. See for a critique of such discourses Henning Melber, 'Africa and the middle class(es)', *Africa Spectrum*, 48 (3), 2013, pp. 111–20 and 'Where and what (for) is the middle? Africa and the middle class(es)', *European Journal of Development Research*, 27 (2), 2015, pp. 246–54.
  47. *World Social Science Report 2013. Summary*, p. 14.
  48. *ibid.*, p. 12.
  49. *ibid.*, p. 9.
  50. Heide Hackmann/Asunción Lera St. Clair, *Transformative Cornerstones of Social Science Research for Global Change*, Paris: International Social Science Council, May 2012, p. 8.
  51. 'Enhancing collaboration between the development aid and the global environmental change communities to achieve development goals in Africa', conference held at the University of Johannesburg, Soweto campus, 5–6 May 2014.
  52. *World Social Science Report 2013. Summary*, p. 7.
  53. *ibid.*, p. 4.
  54. 'Future Earth's "global" secretariat under fire', SciDevNet, 23 July 2014. Available at: <http://www.scidev.net/global/sustainability/news/future-earth-global-secretariat.html>
  55. Core members include the ICSU, the ISSC, the IGFA/Belmont Forum, UNESCO, UNEP, UNU and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).
  56. 'Future Earth's globally distributed secretariat designed to be flexible and diverse', 7 August 2014. Available at <http://www.futureearth.info/news/future-earths-globally-distributed-secretariat-designed-be-flexible-and-diverse>

be-flexible-and-diverse.

57. China, for example, reportedly took an explicit decision not to bid to host the secretariat, while potential Indian partners did not respond to invitations to participate in the bidding process. Nor was there any African organization willing to act as a host for a hub or to coordinate a bid.
58. Carbonnier/Kontinen, 'Institutional learning', p. 160.
59. Mkandawire, 'Running while others walk', p. 25.
60. John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Theory from the South or, How Euro-America is Evolving toward Africa*, London: Paradigm 2012.
61. Ksenia Robbe, 'African studies at a crossroads: producing theory across the disciplines in South Africa', *Social Dynamics* 40 (2), 2014, pp. 255–73 (here: p. 259).