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Reframing Global North–South Collaborations Through the Lenses of Aware, Connect, Empower (ACE) Principles

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of how equitable, inclusive, and meaningful partnerships between the Global South and Global North, which have been characterized by challenges (Kumar 2019), can be established and enhanced by minimizing the power dynamics that undermine their intended goals. This article argues for a relook and disruption of the current models of partnerships and collaborations that have over the years not worked well for partners in the Global South by proposing a consideration and adoption of more responsive and mutually beneficial options through the ACE (Aware, Connect, Empower) principles. The ACE principles provide for new ways of action, including alternative strategies for equitable collaborations across cultures and regions. This includes the adoption of the African Ubuntu philosophy advocating for the creation of awareness amongst partners in collaboration with the need for transformations and empowerment to enable students to gain both intentional intercultural and international experiences.

Keywords: collaborations, Global North, Global South, aware, connect, empower, Ubuntu

INTRODUCTION

The collaborations between institutions from the Global North (GN) and Global South (GS) have been facing many challenges over a period of time (Kumar 2019). Literature shows that when there is a diversity of partners who have their own goals, intentions, and contexts – it is challenging to form mutual partnerships where all parties gain (Jackson et al., 2018). Hagenmeier (2015) argues that, "inequalities are inherent in many higher education partnerships, and especially those between universities of unequal strength" (p. 9). Such partnerships are characterized by power dynamics, which should be guarded against by focusing on meaningful and equitable partnerships and collaborations.

This article provides an analysis of, and makes an argument about how equitable, inclusive, and meaningful partnerships between the GS and GN can be enhanced. In fact, using practical, real-life GN-GS experiences such as African and North American conference presentations, special projects, GN-GS student exchanges, academic and experiential research, and writing publications by this team of authors, it reinforces that balanced and equitable partnerships are very much possible. The implementation of the Ubuntu philosophy intertwined with decades of professional experiences from several educational backgrounds and higher education institutions have once again been brought together to successfully collaborate and compose this article. It is these kinds of balanced working relationships, with explicit, straightforward honesty, and genuine efforts to take the crucial time necessary to openly discuss, understand the attitudes, beliefs, cultures and the histories of the other, which has led to the evolution of the Aware, Connect, Empower (ACE) principles. In particular, it focuses on the contestations that take place in partnerships in the knowledge domain. This particular focus is informed by the view that what we do on a daily basis, and how we do it, is shaped by our knowledge and the conditions under which it was acquired which also influence our behavior and dealings with people. As Ngara (2017) argues, "the Western knowledge paradigm, with its ways of knowing, ways of seeing and its notions of reality – has dominated the global knowledge arena, rendering many indigenous knowledge systems invalid, illegitimate, and irrelevant" (p. 332). This manifests itself clearly in the relations between scholars, students, and institutions from the GN and GS. Part of the contribution of this article is the call to embrace the African philosophy of Ubuntu to create an awareness amongst partners for institutional leaders (senior administrators, international administrators, and faculty) of the current situation of these relations and how they can be enhanced. This article utilizes the ACE principles to provide a new way of addressing the current challenges in the GN-GS collaborations.

In developing this argument, the following ACE principles will be discussed:

A   Become more **AWARE** of the lenses through which we operate and identify assumptions that we bring into these collaborations.

C   Review how we **CONNECT** with our partners in a GN-GS context with a view to making meaningful and equitable connections.

E   Acquire actionable strategies and **EMPOWER** collaborators to adopt effective relationships that are holistic, equitable, and inclusive to achieve a better balanced collaboration in line with the Ubuntu philosophy.

The Double-pronged Dimension of Knowledge

Within the context of this article, knowledge, and consequently its production and utilization, is viewed within a double-pronged dimension. It can be used as a tool – a resource to develop, congregate and create; or it can be used as a weapon – an instrument to dominate, separate, and destroy (Ngara, 2012). Using the example of medical knowledge systems, Ngara (2017) shows how Western medical systems have dominated the global knowledge arena, "rendering many indigenous knowledge systems as invalid, illegitimate and irrelevant (p. 332), and that the Indigenous medical knowledge systems in the GS have struggled to articulate their voices from marginalization imposed by colonialism, globalization, and modernity. Such marginalizations and suppression of voices do occur in collaborations with partners from the GS that are characterized by resource challenges and lack of cultural capital (as often assumed by the GN) and may be suppressed and not heard in these partnerships. Given the centrality of knowledge in partnerships and collaborations, it is important to ensure that relationships between institutions and scholars in the GN and GS are not tilted in favor of dominant discourses, but are equitable, inclusive, and affirming. They need to guard against the sidelining of less dominant discourses of the scholars or partners from the GS, to ensure that their ways of knowing and ways of doing things are given a fair chance to form part of the engagements in collaborations (Zeleza, 2005; Sensoy, et al., 2017; Chasi, 2019)

The concept of global education, which is often implied and is one of the pursuits in collaborations, is often taken for granted in terms of what it refers to, and it mistakenly appears neutral and innocent. There is a need to interrogate this concept and what it _really_ looks like and from whose perspective. Hundreds of years of colonialism, valuing profit over people, and an imposed system of education by the GN on the GS has brought to the forefront the need to relook at the impact of GN paradigms that continue to influence the ways in which collaborations with GS institutions are couched. These developments have been historic and have been addressed by vast literature (Zeleza, 2005; Jowi & Sehoole, 2017; Mohamedbhai, 2002; Peter & Estrada, 2014; Sensoy, et al., 2017; Chasi, 2019) but with no significant transformations being realized.

Globally, there is dissonance between GN-GS paradigms and their knowledge systems, which are informed by various epistemologies (what constitutes valid knowledge and how it can be obtained), ontologies (assumptions regarding the nature of reality), and axiologies (the study of the nature of value) (Ngara, 2017). The notion of the supremacy of GN paradigms and its taken-for-granted acceptance in how things have to be done, need to be challenged. Part of how this could be achieved is through what Ngara (2023) refers to as "transformation by enlargement," meaning the inclusion of what has been excluded before in collaborations. This can also be achieved through Visvanathan's (2009) notion of "cognitive justice," which is the right of multiple forms of knowledges [and experiences] to co-exist. This plurality recognizes the diversity of knowledges not only as methods, but as ways of life. The idea of

cognitive justice sensitizes us not only to forms of knowledge, but to the diverse communities of problem solving. It foregrounds non-competitive approaches to life with emphasis on reciprocity, collaboration of memories, legacies and heritages, whereby citizens take on power and knowledge into their own hands Vivanathan, (2009).

Global North post-secondary education systems have been built on assumptions rooted in colonialism, a legacy of exploitation, and power dynamics that continue to have a profound impact on educational outcomes and opportunities for students across the world (Sensoy, et al., 2017).

In the today's society, how can these centuries of entrenched ways of thinking and ways of doing things from the GN perspective, that are based on deep-rooted indoctrinated assumptions, be recalibrated to be authentically inclusive, more diverse, more equitable and more collaborative across the globe? What actions can be taken to reduce marginalization, inequities and disparities, lack of resources, limited access, and address underrepresented student populations in higher education?

In light of the challenges of collaboration as discussed above, the ACE principles are a way of addressing these challenges.

The "A" … AWARE of Assumptions

The ACE model as presented in the introduction, proposes how to mindfully be "aware," which is important in addressing the knowledge asymmetries and imbalances between the GN and GS. Awareness in this case refers to being conscious of the lenses through which we operate and identifying assumptions that we bring into these collaborations.

The GN's education systems continue to be influenced by the legacy of colonialism. This has resulted in assumptions being made about the GS that are often inaccurate and lead to a limited view. This is the same view that Perkins S, Nishimura H, Olatunde Pf, et al. (2023) hold pointing to the role of global health education programs and institutions in perpetuating inequities and colonial ideologies with the resultant reinforcement of Eurocentric standpoints and ways of seeing the world.

Albeit not always conscious, or perhaps intentional by 21st century GN scholars and educational institutions, these conscious and unconscious biases must be illuminated and eliminated. Hierarchical knowledge systems and GN-style views perpetuate attitudes and stereotypes that the GS is less advanced, has limited potential, is oppressed by poverty, and cannot succeed in scholarly research and publication without the guidance, direction, and ownership of GN institutions and its publishers.

Knowledge and how it is utilized, defined, and implemented by the GN has been built on privilege and devalues other forms of knowledge, culture, and traditions from the GS. The very assumption that the education systems of the GS need "fixing" and reform revert to the deep-rooted thinking of colonialism and a "white savior" attitude (Sensoy, et. al., 2017).

While there has been much research about the need for collaboration between the GN and the GS (Obamba & Mwema, 2009; Costa, 2014; Gaillard, 1994; Zeleza,

2004), and what is required for more inclusive, diverse, and equitable partnerships, what is required now is increased awareness, meaningful engagement, and empowerment.

The asymmetries that exist between GN knowledge production systems and GS knowledge production systems, also impact on the ways in which partnerships are couched and executed. Kwete, et al., (2022) identify three colonial remnants in global health, including practices that further strengthen unequal power hierarchies; organizations and regulations that put more power in the powerful and unwritten norms that the developing world is incapable of solving its own health problems. These asymmetries are also supported by powerful media productions and images that portray GN as resourced, advanced, and almost perfect.

There is an assumption that they are to be emulated by the GS that is seen by some sectors of the GN and GS as undeveloped, poor, and in need of help and rescue. These developments have created some assumptions in terms of how some sectors of the GS view the GN as rich, problem-free, and having solutions to all world problems. This contributes to stereotypes among people in the GS that influence them to develop aspirations to live in the GN where they expect to have better living conditions and solutions to their problems.

To have meaningful partnerships between institutions from GN-GS, there is a need to lay our cards on the table, be honest, and deal with these stereotypes. These include the assumptions that scholars from the GN know better than those from the GS, that speaking English better means that they are more intelligent, that scholars from the GS need to listen and learn from scholars from the GN, and that GS universities need to partner with top GN universities to have visibility to boost their global rankings. In terms of research, the GS should not be viewed as a site for data collection, in the same way minerals are extracted from the GS, and the data/minerals are processed in the GN and then returned to the GS as finished products for consumption. There is a need for equity in terms of participation in the processing of research data, research findings, and dissemination.

These wrong assumptions need to be corrected so that partnerships need to be based on the fact that all partners irrespective of their geographic origins and location, have something to contribute. What is needed is what Perkins et. al., (2022) refers to in the context of global health education as the disruption of the colonial mindset that has subconsciously made us less sensitive to the colonial remnant in daily practices and in organizations (Kwete, Tang, Chen, et al., 2022).

The "C" … how do we CONNECT with Others and in what Context?

Having laid bare the wrong assumptions that often characterize North–South partnerships, we propose as the next step the need to "connect" with fellow collaborators on an equitable basis. To achieve that goal, it is necessary to deal with biases that are related to attitudes, values, and traditions that are informed and influenced by the paradigms we operate in, and are reflected in our

behaviors, actions and words. Hence, we view others through our own cultural lens that may or may not be equitable, fair, and just.

The principles of mutuality, co-partnership, respect, and an understanding that we all have contributions to make, will go a long way in laying a foundation for connections necessary for successful collaboration. This requires dealing with the inherent power dynamics when developing relationships and partnerships. Power dynamics are often influenced by the technical expertise each partner brings into the collaboration, the support provided in the movement of resources, assistance with stakeholder engagement, and the monitoring and evaluation of activities. Some of the barriers to mutually-beneficial collaboration are inequities in research roles, processes, practices and outputs, which also have an impact in power relations between partners. To address these inequities, we must create a holistic and collaborative "connection" whereby leaders of institutions/organizations use a side-by-side approach, rather than a top-down approach regarding international strategic partnerships. This can also be achieved by finding new methods to lead/train/teach a new generation of students and researchers by finding a "balanced playing field" that acknowledges contributions from all partners. There is so much we can learn from each other. Engaging the broader campus community in planning for such collaborations will create buy-in and group-think activities, and may provide innovative and unexpected insights that when incorporated may heighten the profile of the institution as well.

The Role of Intercultural Competency Development in "Connecting"

One of the ways to enhance connectivity is through Intercultural Competency Development (ICD) (Bennett, 2009). Intercultural Competence is the ability to communicate and act appropriately and effectively across cultural differences. When ICD is intentionally developed and rolled out across our community that includes students (domestic and international), staff, faculty, administration, etc., it can nurture a global education space and work world with meaningful connections (Bennett, 2009). ICD infused in student learning using guided development will move through the cycle of practice, to review and reflect, followed by analysis of desired changes and programming to reframe and incorporate iterations that are destined to create habitual practices to accomplish the desired outcomes of positive change.

Intercultural learning involves becoming more aware of how we make meaning of and engage with the world, and increasing the complexity with which we experience cultural differences and similarities. People from differing cultures make meaning differently. So, culture can influence relationship building, and it can be positive if we communicate effectively and in so doing, enhance connections.

Vande Berg et al., (2012) points out that research now clearly demonstrates that international experience alone does not lead to intercultural development for students and for educators. Administrators, faculty, staff, and students alike, have much to gain from implementing such an intercultural mindset in all that we do. Striving for a balance of resources from all areas world-wide will contribute to funding needs, knowledge gain, and utilizing recommendations of texts and international experts to address topics from their perspectives and their geographical parts of the world. This

will create a more authentic, balanced and interesting curriculum. The curriculum used to inculcate intercultural mindsets can influence what transpires in the classrooms, resulting in more engaged and connected students. In turn, they can develop global citizenship skills that influence their choices in their future studies and work in an increasingly diverse, and hopefully more equitable world.

International Mobility to Build "Connections"

One of the ways of building connections is through student exchanges and mobility. In this regard, this article draws from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funded project involving partners (two of the writers of this JIS article) of the GS (Kenya) and GN (Canada). This project involved student internships by intersecting the disciplines of Education, Nursing, and Environmental Science, with a focus on health and wellbeing. This project produced engaging and meaningful partnerships and connections. This was achieved by ensuring participants were involved in pre-departure training, which included intercultural skills, as well as a knowledge gain of the host destination, and risk mitigation. There was also intentional guided development infused throughout the semester abroad to ensure awareness of acquiring intercultural skills, reflection on their development of relationships, and appreciation of the intersection of their fields of study as it related to the focus theme of improved health and well-being. Journaling and commentary compiled in short videos was used as well as a recorded debriefing upon re-entry to the home country. In addition, occasional follow-up discussions with the interns have occurred, enabling them to reflect on the intercultural learning from their sojourn and realize how it has affected their life choices in respect to education, career, family and community. What follows below are their verbatim quotes of their experiences.

Reflections of the Canadian Intern in Kenya

Jennifer A., (2022) Nipissing University Environmental Studies student commented:

> I overcame biases and pre-disposed stereotypes that I didn't realize I had during my internship by being immersed in the Kenyan community. Rather than being quick to provide suggestions to situations, as I would usually do, I acquired active listening skills. This resulted in a more equitable ability for me to feel and display empathy. By understanding my Kenyan friends' values of family and sense of community within their environment, I learned to appreciate their cultural values, which in turn has enhanced my global mindset enabling me to be open to differences while appreciating my own culture more. By reflecting on experiences throughout the internship, I acquired intercultural skills such as open-mindedness, being less judgmental, and looking at things from different perspectives. I now model these skills in teaching and creating an open-

minded multicultural classroom in my current position as an elementary school teacher in Canada. I encourage my students to take off their own lenses of how they view the world, and step into each other's shoes to help gain new perspectives.

Reflections of the Kenyan Intern in Canada

Andrew K., (2022) Moi University Education student stated:

While in Canada I gained an appreciation of a mutually beneficial experience to learn about how daily life unfolds in a different culture by connecting with local students in and outside the classroom. Opportunities to network with faculty members at my host university allowed me to build my knowledge in International Studies and make connections with a network of scholars to enhance my Masters studies in Comparative and International Education. Being immersed in another country through this internship allowed me to really understand different perspectives from different cultural views. Upon return to Kenya, I expanded my learning as a researcher with the African Network for Internationalisation of Education (ANIE) as I continued my studies. Cross-cultural understanding has benefited my scholarly research and career, as I am now a faculty member at my home university where I share my learning with students. Also, I'm pursuing my PhD in Education, Research and Evaluation at this university.

The intentional way in which we make new acquaintances and develop relationships across cultures is dependent on our cultural lens and our open-mindedness to embrace differences as well as similarities. There is a need to be willing to not only accept change, but adapt in each situational encounter. A tool that can be incorporated in this pursuit to intentionally develop intercultural competencies is the "Four-Phase Developmental Framework" created by Dr. Michael Vande Berg. Through recent discussions with Dr. Vande Berg (M. Vande Berg, personal communication, March 15, 2023) we believe that this framework can be used to address the "C" in our ACE principles to become more aware of how we "connect." The first phase focuses on oneself – to discern how we make meaning of the world and view it through our own cultural lens. The second phase encourages us to understand how others view life experiences and make meaning of the world. The third phase involves our ability to learn how to respond mindfully in the context of our communications. When this is done intentionally, we move into the fourth phase – incorporating what we've learned in the first three phases, to become empowered to bridge cultural gaps. This enables us to reframe our values and attitudes to embrace North–South collaborations in a new light that is respectful, equitable and just, thus moving in a positive direction.

The "E" … EMPOWER in Collaboration

Drawing from the discussions on the above sections, the last component of the ACE Principles i.e., EMPOWER, becomes crucial in the attempts to address the asymmetries and imbalances in collaborations and knowledge engagements between

the GN and GS. The previous sections have foregrounded the historical and contemporary imbalances in the knowledge engagements between the GN and GS. Empowerment is thus one of the adaptive strategies that partners from both the GN and GS can use to further strengthen and enhance their relations to make them productive and beneficial to all. This brings in the concept of "transformation by enlargement," advocated by Ngara (2023) which calls for inclusion of what has been excluded before. There is a need to consider and embed "cognitive justice," (Visvanathan, 2009) which mainly refers to the right to the co-existence of knowledges and varied epistemologies, including consideration of alternatives to Western framing by acknowledging different types of knowledge and featuring diverse voices, locally and globally (Perkins et al, 2023). As such, partnerships and knowledge engagements between the North and South need to be duly recognized and allowed to converge and enrich the collaborations.

Part of the solution to this problem is the true dialogue between the two systems (GS and GN) of knowing which requires what Ngara (2017) refers to as ontological and epistemological 'sakonfa' - an impetus to 'return and get it' (p. 351). As she further argues, these systems need to look back at their origins, search for places of resonance or dissonance, diminish their perceived differences, and take the combined expanded paradigm into the future (Ngara 2017, p. 351).

As a departure from the position of the growing knowledge asymmetries, this would enable partners to jointly work together with enhanced awareness and in a more connected way with supportive and symbiotic relations that would enable them to support each other and enhance the gains from these collaborations and exchanges. This would enable the North and South knowledge relations to be more focused towards a shared/common future for humanity. Empowerment contributes to, and should lead to, trust and development of a collaborative culture (Tschannen-Moran, 2002). As Luo (2002) argues, "collaborations are a result of empowered cultures and are a ground for constant engagement and learning. The loss of empowerment weakens collaborations and brings in a sense of loss of power which is not healthy for a shared future" (p. 587).

In recent years, there have been some collaborations and partnerships that are gravitating to this new approach. This reverberates with the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which underscores the essence of empowering each other and recognizes the power of connections between humanity, and also applies to instances such as the North–South engagements. Ubuntu provides a powerful lens for reexamining the North–South knowledge imbalances by calling for embracing joint efforts and engagements between the partners from the different world regions. Ubuntu's main principle is that, "I am, because we are," which encapsulates the essence of empowering each other across the various divides.

The recent experiences with the COVID 19 pandemic clearly demonstrated our common vulnerabilities, interconnectedness, and the power of collective efforts. The rise of digitalization and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) which have also been fueled by the experiences of the

pandemic period, among others, provides an avenue for even further strengthening and streamlining these collaborations. ICTs also provide additional opportunities for addressing some of the challenges and risks that scholars and institutions in the GS have been associated with during these international collaborations over the years.

CONCLUSION

This article argues for a reexamination and disruption of the current models of partnerships and collaborations that have not worked well for partners in the GS and consideration and even adoption of more responsive and mutually beneficial options. The ACE principles that have been advanced in this article, if fully engaged, should lead to new developments in higher education in the GS. This presents a viable opportunity for institutions and scholars from the GS to claim their rightful place and make meaningful contributions to the growing knowledge society. In addition, it would enhance the awareness and empower scholars and partners in the GN to reposition themselves to the new realities of viewing collaborations, knowledge and the historical inequities for improved engagements. It has been acknowledged that due to these perennial asymmetries and imbalances, international partnerships have not worked to the advantage of all, especially those in the GS which end up with the short end of the stick.

This article argues for a departure from this trend to a more collaborative and empowering future through the utilization of the three ACE principles i.e., Aware, Connection and Empowerment. The ACE principles encompass the African philosophy of Ubuntu that has been used in this article to emphasize the essence of trust, cognitive-justice, transformation by enlargement, strong relations, empowerment and continuous learning, among others, as ways of strengthening North–South knowledge relations. In fact, the composition of this article is a product of past GN-GS collaborations amongst the authors, that has led to the development and practical application of the ACE principles.

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