

Perspectives on North-South Collaborative Conflict Research. A Conversation between Two Research Partners

Jan. 2024

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH; CONFLICT; POSITIONALITY; IMBALANCE; EPISTEMOLOGY



The cartoon is from the artist and caricaturist Kash Thembo, who illustrated the [Bukavu-Series online exhibition](#) that "explores the power dynamics between researchers from the Global North and the Global South".

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This contribution is a dialogue between two Conflict Studies academics who have both invested in close research collaboration for over 20 years now. One of them is based in Bukavu, DR Congo; the other works in Ghent, Belgium. Both have been part of international research consortia and have developed joint research agendas and activities on conflict-related issues. Despite the shared incentive to do things differently, such collaboration has often been affected by dominant logics of knowledge production which have proven hard to overcome. Funding agencies are almost exclusively based in the Global North; they often require a research lead in the Global North and the association of research partners in the Global South. Selection committees are usually similarly based in the Global North and hardly ever invite voices from the Global South to participate in their assessment of proposals. These conditions have long been taken for granted as the established guiding framework for research funding – also by those applying for it and participating in collaborative work.

Awareness about how these standards have induced specific ways of doing research and how dominant epistemologies have constantly been guided by and served to reproduce power imbalances has been even thinner on the ground. Researchers from the Global North often see themselves as inherently in the driver's seat; their colleagues in the Global South, meanwhile, see their role mostly reduced to that of associates and hence position themselves as such. This state of affairs leads to mutual frustration, marginalises local voices and leaves little room to question dominant perspectives, approaches and theories.

Many of these issues have gained increased visibility of late as part of debates on how to move away from the status quo and to decolonise knowledge production. Small steps have been made in seeking to change approaches and funding mechanisms. So far, however, these have not led to a radical change in how collaborative research is framed, funded and executed.

What follows is a conversation on how we have lived and dealt with these realities. We start from the different positionalities, roles and experiences we have had in research projects considered to be collaborative in nature. Our aim is not to reach mutual agreement on causes and consequences but to create space for critical reflection on our own approaches, choices, mistakes and solutions. Despite our efforts, the challenges outlined remain vividly present. How, then, to transcend existing logics and build collaboration based on inclusion, equity and equality, trust and horizontal partnership?

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Godefroid: If we examine the players involved in collaborative research, we realise that the disparity in the balance of power has both historical and contextual foundations. From a historical point of view, there's no need to point out that contemporary university culture has been built up in the West since the twelfth century! More than ten centuries of knowledge production, and 'ahead' of African universities. It therefore seems logical that researchers in the North should consider themselves to be the repositories of knowledge, the guardians of the universal epistemic heritage. This is not a claim, but a certainty. From a situational point of view, the universities of the South, modelled on the West with its outward-looking teaching and research programmes, are supposed to evolve in that direction: 'Nothing to be done, history has determined the role of each!' This disparity in the balance of power should, in my opinion, also be read through the lens of a 'superiority complex' embodied by the North in the face of a follow-the-leader attitude adopted by academics in the South.

Koen: This superiority complex is a complicated and multi-layered issue which until today continues to inform collaboration efforts. Strikingly, researchers based in the North are seldom aware of its existence and of the impact on their own behaviour. We have both been part of several international research consortia, yet power imbalances often have been reinforced through these collaborations despite the explicit objective of doing things differently. The association of partners from the South continues to be not much more than that – an 'association'. A research partner from the North is often considered the one deciding for the partner in the South: about research priorities, research settings, the recruitment of staff and even salaries. Inclusion in such collaborative research is defined as the outsourcing of specific research activities. Not as jointly defining objectives and approaches. One would expect from Southern partners a firm reaction against this experienced superiority complex, often also framed as neo-colonial behaviour. But in our experience, this is rarely the case. More often we see a rather passive positioning, as informed by different incentives and having a reinforcing effect on existing power balances and research traditions.

Godefroid: Indeed, just as this situation has long been considered normal in the North, so have the academics of the South integrated this followership into their tailor-made scientific selves. A doctorate obtained by an African in a Western university is, and will be, even more envied than one obtained by the same African in a Southern university. The former provides many

opportunities in the academic world, while the latter is sometimes described as a 'local doctorate', with a certain amount of disparagement. Can we talk about colonial logics, a form of cultural alienation or scientific resilience? Yes and no, I think. Yes, insofar as the dominant epistemologies have solid foundations and resist any attempt at deconstruction, whatever the origin of these attempts. No, insofar as accepted epistemic models are not immune to criticism, even in the Western world. This implies that it is possible to shift the debate to a less sentimental register than is the case with the decolonial debate, and therewith open up spaces for North–North, South–South, South–North dialogue which are likely to find points of convergence between Western 'secular epistemologies' and the 'epistemological infancy' of the South. Structuring these spaces for dialogue requires financial resources: 'No money, no research'.

Koen: It is true that academics from the South often engage in debates which are initiated and framed by their colleagues from the North. Similarly, their research is often informed by existing epistemologies developed in the North. The opposite is far less the case; academics from the North seldom participate in, or contribute to, debates or research produced by peers in the South. Some have called for the promotion of equal epistemic opportunities, and collaborative projects could and should provide the space for this. The convergence of epistemologies as an essential pillar of a collective production of knowledge, however, is not only about financial resources. Nor is it about changing the ethics of research. Indeed, reducing the challenge to merely an ethical issue assumes that it can easily be met with some technical changes. The stakes are political, as is the case with all relations of power. It is, rather, about opening up to new encounters. This cannot be limited to personal responsibility. We, being individual researchers, will never be able to change existing logics and transcend differences in positionality and ideology, and regarding experiences of inferiority and superiority. As long as the academy and the production of knowledge are guided by a neoliberal logic, it will be hard to reverse the dynamics of inferiority and to promote a pluralistic epistemological landscape.

Godefroid: One of the main challenges facing African researchers is financial. Our governments provide almost no funding for research. As a result, we are dependent on the opportunities offered by universities in the North as part of collaborative research. Here, too, the so-called 'domino-centric' logic is invading relations between researchers in the South and those in Western universities. For some time now, some progress has been made in the process of fundraising for research. But the key boundaries are still not moving: researchers in the South

are finding it hard to access the funds offered by structures based in the North. Is this just the result of colonial logics? I'm not sure! It seems to me that competition for resources is normal. It's just that the players do not have the same weapons!

Koen: The financial issue cannot be disconnected from the research culture which determines practices of funding. It is true that in our collaboration, it is almost always me as a researcher from the North who is invited to submit a research proposal. Inviting you to join forces with me is already to introduce a level of inequality. Donors based in the North increasingly want researchers to engage explicitly with peers from the South. Such 'collaboration through association' is counterproductive if we want to reverse existing logics. Opening up research funding to those from the South, as is increasingly being promoted, is not necessarily producing this change either – those concerned often feel the need to, or are expected to, associate with their partners from the North. This to gain credibility and to meet the dominant evaluation standards, which until today have remained very much guided by specific output metrics. Changing institutional research practices, standards and funding mechanisms has to go hand-in-hand with giving the players the same weapons and ammunition indeed.

Godefroid: It is true that we are dealing with collaboration by association, the principles of which are predefined both upstream and downstream in the research process: funding standards and procedures, the choice of research topics, the conduct of research, the production and dissemination of knowledge, and similar are all agreed between the parties – yet not on an equal footing. I fully subscribe to the idea that it would be counterproductive to try to reverse these existing logics at all costs. Also, without being too pessimistic, I do not see donors suddenly creating the space for researchers from the South who want to apply for funding on their own. Beyond colonial logics, a number of prejudices have become 'immutable' alongside certain falsehoods taking hold: the financial management of Southern structures is not transparent, the latter are unable to absorb the budget, monitoring is difficult, and so on. Also, collaboration by association has both its strengths and weaknesses. The strength is that it is a lifeline for me as a researcher based in the South. In a context where resources are almost non-existent, it makes it possible to maintain a scientific atmosphere in the research centre as well as an almost permanent connection with the academic world in the North. The weakness is that it reduces the freedom of researchers in the South to choose their topics of study. In my experience, collaborative research agreements often stifle 'local' ambitions – namely, those which do not fit

with the interests of Northern-based players in general and with donors in particular. The framework for collaboration is hence predefined and not sufficiently flexible. At the same time, giving researchers from the South access to funding opportunities should not be seen as encouraging a severance with their colleagues in the North! Not at all. On the contrary, they will always need each other. Rather, it would be a question of finding areas, outside the themes addressed by common agreement in collaborative research (and thus often coming from the North), where part of the funding could be allocated to enable researchers from the South to carry out work which they consider essential for their society, for example. Such practice would show that certain research centres are not unable to absorb the budget, for instance, and that follow-up is possible. Proceeding in this way could encourage the emergence of specific reading grids which are currently dormant, grids which could challenge the dominant paradigms! In the end, it would also be another way of reinforcing North–South dialogue and getting off the beaten track.

Koen: An additional problem with this ambition, particularly in Conflict Studies, is that much of the research we do is mainly funded by non-academic agencies. Even more, in many cases it has become the main or only source of available funding. The consequences of such ‘lifelines’ regarding funding should not be underestimated. We have built a long and shared experience with such funding mechanisms, and it has offered ways to get off the beaten track. But it has also conditioned us, researchers, in a different way. Non-academic funding pushes us into applied research, with all its particularities in terms of objectives, approaches and deliverables. It is important to claim our voice in debates on specific conflict settings, to inform the different agencies which try to intervene in, mitigate or reverse conflict dynamics, and to provide direct recommendations on strategies and activities. We often talk about an ‘NGO-isation’ of research and research environments. We understand the advantages: it provides an income to our research collaborators; it gives us a voice in specific conflict-resolution strategies; and, it helps our research to gain impact. This kind of funding stream and consequent NGO-isation can also do more harm than good though. The same collaborators have become excellent analysts of specific contexts and dynamics but are seldom recognised as such. They also risk gradually losing their position as critical researchers and becoming even further alienated from (international) academic debates. Moreover, they are giving up any remaining control over their own research priorities and agendas and are guided by the funding agencies’ instead. In the end, this state of affairs is further compromising the development of African scholarship and

affecting collaboration, with researchers finding themselves increasingly forced to move away from their own academic rigour. It is sometimes argued that 'African authors do not know how to theorise'. The field of Conflict Studies shows us that this is obviously a short-sighted stereotype without any substance to it: besides the power dynamics defining the lack of access to academic funding, the more easily accessible non-academic funding is guided by its own priorities and is simply not interested in critical research.

Godefroid: You are saying that changing institutional research practices, standards and funding mechanisms must go hand-in-hand with providing the players with the same weapons and ammunition. That sounds very good ... and it's true. But who is going to provide the players with the same weapons and ammunition? I'm thinking aloud. National public policies on scientific research are already very mixed: while, overall, governments in the North and NGOs use research as a torch to light up their views and actions, also for most governments in the South research is the sixth wheel of their car. Researchers are forced to support themselves with their meagre salaries. For example, I've personally missed some top-class academic meetings simply because the Internet connection didn't allow it! And that's not even to mention access to online libraries. So, in the end, we are condemned to position ourselves within the current conflict landscapes – facilitating an NGO-isation of research. It is not a matter of choice but of pure survival.

Koen: The question remains to what extent conflict research can be an arena to produce much-needed change, reverse power dynamics and research practices, and build new research agendas and knowledge. Our field is often consulted by practitioners, including diplomats, humanitarian workers, peace-building organisations etc. This puts us in a privileged position to help change dominant narratives and provide alternative readings of conflict dynamics. In our case, it is striking to see that Congolese experts used to be rarely consulted. This has gradually changed over the years. Locally based experts are not only better positioned to provide detailed context-related knowledge; they also have their own priorities, approaches and perspectives which offer a welcome corrective to common knowledge about specific conflict settings. Collaborative research could serve as a tool to bridge the gap between these experts and practitioners. The expert-practitioner field ultimately shows that existing power dynamics defining research agendas and practices are not limited to research environments and thus cannot be tackled by academia alone. This should not serve as an excuse not to act, but as a call

for joint efforts to change all the structures, practices and settings determining how conflict research is done, who is involved and what topics are looked at.

Suggested Reading

Nyenyenzi, A., Ansoms, A., Vlassenroot, K., Mudinga, E., Muzalia, G. (2020). *The Bukavu Series. Toward a Decolonisation of Research*. Presses Universitaires de Louvain.