

# **Disrupting the Knowledge Trap: ECRs and the Global South as Agents of Epistemic Change. Aug. 2025**

GLOBAL SOUTH; KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION; INCLUSION; NORTH-SOUTH COLLABORATION; EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE



Workshop for Early Career Scholars in Meru, March 2025

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This entry questions the foundations of knowledge production in Peace and Conflict Studies by advocating an incremental movement that adopts a bottom-up and inside-out approach. Specifically, we argue that, with support, early-career researchers (ECRs) from the Global South can be pollinators, spreading new knowledge production methods across ECR groups globally and scaling up to engage mid- and senior-level researchers. This is essential for the progression of better, more inclusive knowledge production worldwide. To illustrate our argument, we draw on our own experience leading an international intensive three-day writing workshop on Peace and Conflict Studies for ERCs from the Global South.

## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

This article interrogates entrenched epistemic hierarchies in Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) and highlights the potential role of early-career researchers (ECRs) from the Global South in reshaping knowledge production practices. Despite increasing scholarly attention to global asymmetries in knowledge production, and important initiatives aimed at reversing this trend, the structural and colonial foundations of academic knowledge systems remain largely intact. We contend that current strategies – such as expanding representation in journals – fall short of fostering epistemological shifts. Addressing this requires a deeper, bottom-up and inside-out transformation, which challenges the ontological and methodological assumptions underpinning knowledge production.

To illustrate this proposition, the article reflects on a three-day writing and publishing workshop designed for Global South ECRs, held in Meru, Kenya in 2025. Organised by three female academics from Brazil and Kenya, the workshop aimed to incubate a supportive, peer-driven network and foster South–South collaboration. Through mentoring, collaborative writing, and engagement with journal editors from both the Global North and South, the workshop facilitated mutual learning and challenged conventional publishing norms.

The metaphor of the ‘knowledge trap’ is used to depict the constraints that force Global South scholars to seek validation through Northern academic systems. ECRs, we argue, are well-positioned to act as ‘pollinators’ who can circulate alternative knowledge practices within and beyond their peer groups, potentially influencing more senior scholars and institutional norms. However, this potential must be supported by equitable, demand-driven North–South collaboration and sustained institutional commitment. The article concludes by reflecting on the challenges of maintaining momentum after the workshop and presenting another output of the initiative, the Global South Peace and Conflict Studies Network, aimed at weaving an inclusive web of knowledge production. Through this, the authors propose a long-term vision for epistemic justice in PACS.

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## Introduction

Knowledge production, including within Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS), has come under growing scrutiny in recent years. Scholars from both the Global North and South have increasingly highlighted the need to address entrenched inequalities in representation, funding, access to existing knowledge production, language and other factors that determine which knowledge is deemed legitimate and influential (e.g. Briggs and Weathers, 2016; Crawford et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2024; Adegoke and Alvarez, 2025).

A key issue in this debate is the deep asymmetry in representation. In a study assessing African representation in two leading journals on African Studies, Briggs and Weathers (2016) showed that between 1993 and 2013 the number of publications by Africa-based scholars declined from 25% to 15% of all contributions. Medie and Kang (2018) examined gender and politics journals and showed an even starker gap, with fewer than 5% of articles published in the selected journals being authored by researchers based in the Global South. In some cases, this figure was below 1% (*ibid.*; see also discussion in Adegoke and Oni, 2018).

In the specific case of PACS, a recent article has assessed the effects of the 'local turn' in peacebuilding in knowledge production by focusing on articles published between 2015 and 2018 (Johnson et al., 2022). The study found that, notwithstanding this important discursive and theoretical shift, higher-income countries (HICs) still dominate knowledge production across five domains: publishing institutions, research focus, collaboration, theorisation, and discourse. As noted, authors affiliated to institutions in HICs account for 72% of all publications and 80% of theory-building articles, in contrast to 27% of articles authored exclusively by non-HIC-affiliated authors (*ibid.*, p. 686).

Many studies agree that increasing the number of Global South authors publishing in leading journals – a 'nominal' shift (Johnson et al., 2022) – is important, but this does not necessarily entail an epistemological shift. The deeper issue is structural and rooted in the colonial foundation of the knowledge production system (Adegoke and Alvarez, 2025). This system is characterised by structural and material inequalities between researchers and institutions in the Global North and South that directly affect the context, visibility and potential application of the knowledge produced by Global South scholars.

One of the main structural barriers in this regard relates to access to funding and resources, since Global South scholars have access to fewer funding opportunities or limited amounts compared to those offered by institutions in the Global North (Briggs and Weathers, 2016; Crawford et al., 2021). Where funding is available, it is often restricted to basic research assistance rather than comprehensive project support. This means that scholars must use their limited resources very carefully, frequently having to undertake tasks personally that could otherwise be delegated to paid research assistants. Consequently, they need to invest significantly greater effort to deliver timely and successful research outputs while working within these constrained parameters. This also affects the visibility and impact of research produced in the Global South.

A second structural barrier relates to language, translation issues, as well as the very structure and format of standard mainstream academic articles. Most high-impact journals are published in English, which means that Global South scholars from non-English speaking contexts either have to be fluent in English, or have the resources to pay for translation. Moreover, translation itself can affect knowledge production by distorting the representation of local knowledge (Maschietto, 2018; Vogel et al., 2024). The need to stick to a specific article structure that often prioritise quantitative methodologies further forces scholars to fit their research in a shape that does not necessarily reflect the epistemological premises, methodological choices, or contextual specificities of their work, thereby limiting how findings are presented, understood, and ultimately validated. That said, when Global South scholars publish in non-English outlets, this affects the impact of their work, which will not be cited as much given the dominance of the English language in Northern academia. Ultimately, these barriers combine to result in fewer publications in journals with reduced impact factors, and fewer opportunities to influence academic debate and policy at the global level. This may eventually lead to reduced funding and/or fewer collaborative opportunities.

All this leads to a wider problem that reflects the colonial nature of knowledge production, namely the pervasive dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies which marginalise indigenous and local knowledge systems and methodologies (Crawford et al., 2021; Vogel et al., 2024). These asymmetries further lead to a 'hierarchical scholarly gaze', as 'non-HIC-affiliated authors tend to write about the country where they are located, whereas HIC affiliated authors study each other and lower-income countries' (ibid., p. 687). In this context, challenging epistemic

hierarchies and injustice calls for engagement with a decolonial turn, critically evaluating the broader process of knowledge production, considering how it has been historically constituted and working towards structural change.

In practice there have been various efforts to support the inclusion of Global South voices in academia, such as writing workshops, mentorship programmes and calls for journals to promote inclusive editorial practices and increase representation from the Global South (Crawford et al., 2021). However, as noted above, major challenges still exist, especially in the domain of the ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations of knowledge production (Crawford et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2024; Adekoke and Alvarez, 2025). How to challenge the foundations of knowledge production is therefore a central question that needs to be addressed.

Simply rejecting current patterns of knowledge production is complicated, since the asymmetries are too wide and Global South scholars would have much to lose. As international research funding is based on existing patterns, and dominant knowledge is produced in English, publishing outside this framework would mean giving up the possibility of influencing important debates. Being part of the existing community provides at least some space to raise our voices and contest structures from within.

That said, however, as Global South scholars we also need to acknowledge our epistemic privilege and our unique ability to navigate different worlds. Although we may have been trained in colonial patterns of knowledge production, we are the ones living in the pluriverse.<sup>2</sup> We speak both our own languages and the dominant languages. We experience what is often treated as an object of study, and we move between worlds and experience the connections and contradictions that sustain knowledge production. We experience these asymmetries. However, we also have a different vantage point that can be used to our benefit, particularly if we leverage this position to foster stronger South-South connections alongside North-South partnerships.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of pluriverse stands for the idea that the world is comprised of many worlds (a world where many worlds fit), diverse ways of being, ontologies and epistemologies that coexist. It advocates that neither worldview should take precedence or dominate the other. It is a decolonial critique to the assumption of the world as one reality, sustained by one truth — a universe — that justifies the expansion of homogenising forces, such as capitalism. See discussion in Escobar 2018.

With this in mind, we argue that contesting knowledge production patterns must be an all-encompassing movement. We go on to suggest that one way to do this is through an incremental approach that is both bottom-up (reaching the established structures and influencing them) and inside-out (moving horizontally, i.e. across the pluriverse, fostering exchange between different types of knowledge). We also argue that with the necessary support, early-career researchers (ECRs) are particularly well-equipped to act as potential 'pollinators', spreading new ways of producing knowledge not only across ECR groups in the Global South and Global North (inside-out), but also by scaling up to include groups of mid- and senior- level career researchers (bottom-up). Our writing workshop funded by the British Academy was an initial but fundamental step in that direction.

In what follows we reflect on our experience leading an academic writing workshop for ECRs from the Global South. We explore how this type of activity has the potential to contribute to shifting epistemic hierarchies in PACS, as well as discussing the practical limitations we encountered. We conclude by sketching a few recommendations for future activities in this realm.

## Visibilising Marginalised Early-career Researchers in Peace, Conflict and Security Studies: The Project

We begin by noting our positionality. We are three female academics from the Global South (two from Brazil and one from Kenya) who have navigated academia in both the Global South and the Global North. We all hold PhDs from European institutions, with two of us based in the Global North (the UK and Portugal) and one in the Global South (Brazil). If we apply the term ECR loosely we also fall into this category, having all completed our PhDs within the last 10 years and with only one of us holding a permanent academic position. We are also mothers and caregivers and have experienced the challenges of keeping up with the competitive demands of academia, especially the high publishing standards required in the Global North, while taking care of our children, partners and/or parents – a delicate balance that receives little recognition when applying for grants or jobs, despite often having a significant impact on publications and sometimes even stalling career and professional progression. Our shared experiences and awareness of knowledge production asymmetries were a major incentive in our collaboration

towards amplifying the voices and perspectives of the Global South in the debates in PACS, leading us to apply to the British Academy's International Writing Workshop scheme in 2023.

Our proposal was entitled '[Visibilising Marginalized Early Career Researchers in Peace, Conflict and Security Studies: A Writing and Publishing Workshop for Scholars from the Global South](#)', aimed at bringing together 20 ECRs in PACS from different countries in the Global South for an intensive training workshop focused on publishing and writing grant applications.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on our own experience of publishing in high-impact journals, a key element of the workshop was to incubate a peer-to-peer support network for ECR scholars from the Global South, who could share similar experiences and collaborate on future research projects.

The workshop location reflected our commitment to amplifying less visible voices. Having decided to hold the event in Kenya, we partnered with Meru University of Science and Technology – a relatively new institution established in 2008 as a university college of Jomo Kenyatta University of Art and Technology (JKUAT) and located in a rural area, over 200 km from the capital Nairobi. This was also in recognition of the need to decentralise knowledge, stepping away from the elite, capital city-based universities and prioritising institutions on the periphery that are often marginalised in collaborative partnerships.

Aware of the structural inequalities limiting Global South scholars' access to postdoctoral opportunities, we sought to strike a balance in terms of significant international participation and diversity in terms of theory, geography, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race. We recognised that caregiving responsibilities can create barriers to participation, particularly for women. To address this, our application form asked prospective participants to identify any obstacles they faced with the view of allocating part of our modest budget to help overcome these barriers and enable broader participation. Moreover, while the target participants were ECRs working within and across disciplines in academic institutions on issues related to PACS, in recognition of the more challenging and often precarious academic context of the Global South we adopted a broader categorisation of ECRs to include participants with longer post-PhD experience so long as they had not published more than one article in an international journal, and participants with extensive research experience who were nearing the end of a lengthy PhD.

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<sup>3</sup> Of the 20 selected participants (among over 50 applicants), only 14 attended the workshop. A couple of selected participants stopped answering their emails and never sent their papers. One started a new job and was not able to get the week off, another had visa problems, while another missed their flight.

While the key event of the proposal was the three-day workshop in Meru, we also wanted to ensure that this experience would not merely be a ‘capacity building’ encounter, but rather the culmination of an ongoing process that would deliver concrete outcomes – particularly in the form of publications by the participants. With this in mind we planned a progressive timeline of activities in which participants would develop a manuscript in stages, linking participation in the Meru workshop to the delivery of an initial draft of a potential paper based on previously provided guidelines. This proved very effective. After receiving the first drafts we provided extensive feedback to participants to enable them to produce an improved version, and included a collective peer-to-peer review process during the workshop.

## The Workshop Journey

The workshop in Meru took place from 19 to 21 March 2025. With the British Academy's approval, we used surplus funds to extend the activities to include researchers and staff from Meru University, who actively participated and enriched the event even though many worked in areas different to PACS.

The workshop opened with an inspiring presentation by a Global South ECR based in the UK on ‘The Politics of Knowledge Production in Peace, Conflict and Security Studies’. Drawing on his research (Adegoke and Oni, 2018) examining academic journals and geographical representation in the field, the talk highlighted the core rationale for the workshop and raised critical questions about knowledge production processes, which were further discussed over the following days.

An important part of the workshop was the input from three journal editors – two from established Europe-based journals (a female practitioner-academic and a male professor) who spoke via video conference, and a young male professor from a newly established Latin American journal, who provided a pre-recorded video and notes for the participants. Given their different backgrounds and positionalities, the views of these editors offered participants a multifaceted understanding of academic publishing that would have been impossible with a single editorial perspective. The practitioner-academic consistently brought conversations back to real-world applications, while the professor pushed participants to deepen their theoretical foundations and strengthen their methodological approaches. The views from the Global South editor reinforced some of the key aspects discussed by the other editors, but he also stressed

how the journal he edited seeks to provide space for alternative narratives that often did not receive enough space in journals in the Global North. This included accepting different types of papers, such as research notes and papers focusing on microscale case studies.



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Another key feature of the workshop was a session providing the step-by-step process of the submission and peer-review process grounded in the experiences and real examples of the facilitators. This included understanding editorial preferences, reviewer feedback, managing the emotional toll, dealing with impostor syndrome, and finding the right journal match. It emphasised how rejections, while difficult, can be valuable learning experiences that contribute to scholarly growth and improved writing. The interactive peer-review sessions built on these activities; the participants were split into three groups which included ECRs from different countries and papers with different themes. The idea was to allow the participants to adopt the position of editors and assess papers based on general criteria related to structure, methodology and the general aspects that make up an academic paper.

Feedback from the participants indicated that this was one of the most highly-rated activities. Not only did they find the feedback on their own paper helpful, they also saw providing peer feedback as an important learning experience. Unlike some of their real-life rejection experiences – often brutal and with no proper feedback – here the activity led to a very supportive and constructive environment, since the objective was not to accept or reject but to find ways to improve each other's work.

Recognising that funding is one of the elements that feeds knowledge production asymmetries, we also included a session focused on how to write a successful grant application. This was followed by an exercise to review real proposals, once more placing participants in a position to evaluate a proposal on its merits.

Finally, because one of the purposes of the workshop was to foster collaboration, on the last day we split the participants into three thematic groups to discuss possible avenues of collaboration. Various researchers from Meru University joined these sessions where discussions related to health, education, technology and other areas, along with PACS issues, leading to many ideas for transdisciplinary collaborative projects.

## Lessons Learned and Insights on How to Disrupt Epistemic Hierarchies

One of the project's aims was to foster South-South collaboration and produce tangible outputs from the activities, so the workshop in Meru did not mark the end of our engagement, although it did technically represent the end of the funded project. Based on the collective peer-review process, we set a deadline for participants to send in their revised papers with the aim of putting together a proposal for a special journal issue in a high-ranked English publication. This would effectively mean that the outcome of the workshop would be collection of articles in a published special issue, demonstrating our commitment to improving the presence of Global South ECRs in high-ranked journals in PACS. As we write this piece, however, we recognise that one of the additional challenges of defying epistemic hierarchies is sustaining momentum. Setting aside the various reasons for the low response rate, it is important to note that only 6 of the 14 participants have so far sent us a revised paper.

Global South ECRs face competition from academics who have the privileges of better funding, mentoring and access to academic resources. Participants in the workshop wished they had more time for the peer-reviewing session, and some mentioned the idea of individual tutoring. While we would have liked to provide this, we did not have the time and resources to deliver it, but we recognise that taking young scholars 'by the hand' can make a huge difference.



Academia is still a highly patriarchal environment, where individualism, competition and the fallacious idea of meritocracy – which does not take into account the structural inequalities mentioned above – prevail. In our experience, empathy, attentive listening and care matter as much; indeed, if the purpose is inclusiveness there is no other way. This is particularly true when we talk about ECRs in the Global South. At the same time, one of the things that is very clear to us is the importance of with

engaging ECRs in the Global South and carving out more space for their (our) voices to be heard. A key question is: what role do ECRs play in reshaping who gets to produce and own knowledge in PACS?

To explore this, we use the metaphor of a 'knowledge trap' – an inescapable need to be a player in the Global North, even in a marginal role, in order to be seen as legitimate and relevant. Lacking the same access to resources and opportunities, Global South scholars are required to deliver as much as, if not more than, their Global North counterparts in order to be recognised. In addition they have likely experienced a tortuous and difficult educational journey, which further undermines their position. The unanswered question here is whether it is possible to escape this trap.

Inspired by nature, Lederach (2025) suggested that in order to build broad-based pro-democracy movement groups there is a 'need to learn to fly like bees and thread like spiders' (p. 1). Put simply, the idea is to create small groups that circulate (i.e. a circulatory system),

meeting different groups and consistently pollinating them with shared ideas, purposes and goals. In the context of the knowledge trap, we argue that ECRs can be potential pollinators, able to spread new ways of producing knowledge not only across ECR groups from the Global South and North but also by scaling up to groups of mid- and senior-career researchers.

One might then ask: why ECRs in particular? Here we present some of the reflections shared by one of us in a recent blog (Njeri, 2025), following an invitation to speak at a professional development workshop for racially minoritised ECRs organised by the Development Studies Association. We collectively agree with Njeri's argument that ECRs are uniquely positioned to challenge traditional knowledge hierarchies in several key ways. First, the majority of ECRs are from the Global South or marginalised communities that have historically been the subjects rather than the producers of development, peace and conflict knowledge. This means that ECRs from these backgrounds bring lived experiences and cultural insights that can fundamentally reframe how we understand peace and conflict issues, challenges and solutions. ECRs also challenge methodological orthodoxies because they often feel less bound by established academic traditions and are more willing to experiment with different research methods, community-based approaches and indigenous knowledge systems. ECRs constantly question who gets to define what counts as 'valid' research, pushing for more inclusive methodologies.

Thus, when it comes to building collaborative partnerships, rather than perpetuating extractive research relationships ECRs have the potential to shift the research dynamic from research 'on' communities to researching 'with' them. Having themselves been the subject of study, they are more inclined towards collaborative approaches. They also leverage new platforms and technologies, using digital tools, social media and alternative publishing models to bypass traditional gatekeepers and make knowledge more accessible to affected communities. When they enter academic institutions, they can collectively contribute to driving institutional change by advocating for more equitable hiring practices, diverse curricula and decolonised approaches to knowledge production.

A further challenge lies in ensuring these emerging voices have the institutional support and resources they need in order to sustain this transformative work as they advance in their careers. One might question here what we mean by 'institutional support and resources'. For starters, we do believe that North-South cooperation is vital for overcoming epistemic injustice and opening up more inclusive support for all. The writing workshop was only possible thanks

to a British Academy grant. However, we suggest that these instances of collaboration need to be recalibrated to become more responsive to the demands of the Global South. In other words, Global South academics must participate as equals in a process grounded in greater equity and reciprocity, rather than being included merely as ‘needed’ partners in a process driven by the Global North.

Bearing this in mind, we decided to set up a Global South Peace and Conflict Studies Network, following on from a [Google Group](#) that was promoted on social media. Much to our surprise, we reached nearly 300 people in less than one week, and we now have 923 members from all over the Global South. The network is taking shape, and we have been discussing ways to foster South-South and South-North collaboration. As one of our first initiatives we have created a [bi-weekly bulletin](#) to publicise the work of the members, so that we can familiarise ourselves with each other’s work. The journey is long, but we keep flying like bees and threading our network like spiders with the (probably never-ending) goal of weaving a truly inclusive web of knowledge.

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