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The challenge of capacity strengthening in holistic and actionable research.

Considerations from an ongoing international collaboration to encourage evidence-based decision-making in education

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What is this presentation about?

- To present an auto-ethnographic reflection from my role as an advisor, assisting research teams from the “global South” in implementing projects led by “global North” researchers. **These are just hypotheses, not generalizable findings.**
- Briefly situating this reflection in a flourishing literature discussing the perils of global North-South collaborations
- In the specific reflection about our experience as advisors, I discuss three issues:
 - the challenges and incentives for contextualizing research design and findings
 - the importance of initiating methodological discussions and training early in the process
 - the need to consider South-South collaborations.

Some assumptions behind SHARE

“Central to promoting education outcomes in sustainable and locally appropriate ways is the impartial generation and accurate translation of data and evidence for purposeful utilization”

“A priority ... is to strengthen the capacities of research institutions, academia, government units, implementing partners, and education service providers to generate high quality and actionable data (...) [to] ensure research activities are not only rigorous, but also feasible for researchers in low-income and fragile contexts”

*Figure 2: UND
Partner Specializations*





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Context: the challenges of capacity strengthening

The challenges of global North–South research collaborations



“... these collaborations are marred with many challenges that include power inequities, communication barriers and diverging research priorities (...) [P]artners may never be “equal” in size, resources or influence, but they should always strive to be equitable by respecting the value that each brings to the partnership”

Molosi-France & Makoni (2020). A partnership of un-equals: global South–North research collaborations in higher education institutions. *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*.

“To achieve more equitable Northern–Southern partnerships, funders and scholars alike must understand and include the views, perspectives and aspirations of Southern partners in research”

Rakotonarivo & Andriamihaja (2023). Global North–Global South research partnerships are still inequitable. *Nature human behaviour*.

Capacity strengthening is a key topic in the literature

Table 3. Topics addressed by partnership guidelines

Ranking	Topic	# Guidelines
1	Roles, responsibilities and ways of working	18
2	Capacity strengthening	15
3	Motivation and goals	14
=3	Resource contributions	14
5	Agenda setting and study design	11
=5	Governance structures, institutional agreements	11
7	Dissemination	10
=7	Respect for affected populations, including local relevance	10
=7	Data handling and ownership	10
10	Funding	8
=10	Long-term commitments	8
12	Acknowledging power dynamics and inequalities	7
=12	Trust	7

“Capacity strengthening was the second most prominent topic (...) Some guidelines framed the provision of resources and expertise to support the development of the weaker partner as a fundamental responsibility of the stronger partner in order for partners to collaborate on a more equal playing field. Other guidelines presented capacity strengthening as bi-directional and talked about mutual learning and growth”

Different motivations behind research collaborations

Scientists' Expectations in International Research Collaboration.

South Partners		North Partners	
Expectations	Response (%)	Expectations	Response (%)
Build new relationships with other scientists	84.8	Help scientists build capacity	85.6
New/advanced technical and/or scientific skills	79.7	Help scientists improve/increase their scientific productivity	65.8
Grow existing relationships with other scientists	75.1	Build new relationships with other scientists	59.5
Provide my community with a solution	68.4	Expansion of my current research	57.7
Develop a new product (journal article, technology, lab process)	66.1	Connection to scientists in the country where I do research	56.8
Change the information my government uses to make decisions	62.7	Grow existing relationships with other scientists	55.9
Improvement in/or access to equipment/technology	54.8	Access to new data	47.8
More graduate students to support my research	48.0	Experience working in a developing country	42.3
New material/expertise to teach courses	41.2	Develop a new product (journal article, technology, lab process)	30.6
<i>N</i>	177		111

Note: The survey question stated, "What did you expect to gain through PEER collaboration?"

Lee et al. (2023). How Scientists from Developing and Developed Countries View International Research Collaboration: A Case Study of the USAID PEER* Program. *Journal of Developing Societies*.

* Partnerships for Enhanced Engagement in Research (PEER)

Priorities for growth (# of mentions) by SHARE's partners in baseline survey



SHARE's baseline data suggests that "global South" partners expect capacity strengthening in research. *Proposal writing* plays a crucial role in accessing grant funding.



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Some insights from an auto ethnographic reflection in the context of SHARE studies

Research questions of the projects we were supporting

A. CONTEXTUALLY RELEVANT EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING TOOLS (CREST)

- How do primary school-age children, parents, and educators define and prioritize the social and emotional skills [and teachers' well-being factors] they believe are important in the lives of children [and educators]?
- What are the psychometric properties (validity and reliability) of a measure that is developed using this context-specific information?

B. LEARNING TO IMPROVE BOOK RESOURCE OPERATION SYSTEMS (LIBROS)

- What are the characteristics and perceived impacts of a specific strategy designed to improve the book supply chain?
- How and under what conditions was the improvement strategy developed and implemented?
- What challenges were observed and addressed during the process? What additional supports are required for the success of the book chain improvement strategy?

Issue 1: the challenges and incentives for contextualizing research design and findings



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- SHARE is committed to involving partners in the research design, including contextualizing tools, methods, and data reporting strategies. However, not always partners take an active role in contextualizing research as expected.
- Some local researchers may have more traditional expectations of mentorship, which can lead to frustration when these expectations are unmet.

“Limited timely responsiveness to [the local partner’s] deliverables by the UND team, and inconsistencies in requests, feedback, and guidance.

Mitigation: *Constant follow-up with the UNDs team”*

Source: comment by local partner. Quarterly report

Issue 1: the challenges and incentives for contextualizing research design and findings

- It is often observed in the literature that there are conflicting views between researchers from the "global north" and "global south" regarding the “scientific quality” of data and its “usefulness” in informing action in specific contexts.
- This tension was evident during the debate about developing an app to measure children's social and emotional learning (SEL) skills.

ASSESSMENT CREATION: SEL What is CHAT-E?

- Need to send text and audio to Synergetx
- Updates take time and create new app
- Limited functionality (only one puppet animation)
- Each app needs specified admin and server



- Can be used offline
- Easy and clear interface
- Can collect other basic data
- Synergetx are responsive and easy to work with



Issue 2: the importance of initiating methodological discussions and training early in the process



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- UND has organized multiple training sessions for research methodologies and methods open to all partners led by experts from various country teams who expressed willingness to share their skills with global partners.
- However, earlier discussions on methodology could have facilitated agreement between partners at different stages of studies. Contextualizing methodological training within the needs of specific projects would be more beneficial.

“... the amount of qualitative data generated requires (...) the synthesis of the data without losing the richness of the information collected, achieving this (...) involved the analysis of various methodological possibilities on which the advantages and disadvantages were assessed, until a consensus was reached”

Source: comment by local partner. Quarterly report

Issue 3: the need to (also) promote South-South research collaborations.



- In accordance with existing literature, SHARE faces tensions between top-down and bottom-up strategies for strengthening capacity, as both approaches may be effective at different stages of its research projects.
- We argue that as advisors representing, to a certain extent, the “global South”, we played a crucial role in balancing the “quality” and “context-responsiveness” of the generated data. We also have incentives (e.g., learning, networking) and specific skills.

“[We experienced challenges in] identifying SEL skills and item generation. A joint work was carried out with the [UND] and UniNorte, at the methodological level, which involved different meetings and revisions”

Source: comment by local partner. Quarterly report



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Summing up

Considerations for upcoming capacity strengthening efforts in SHARE



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- It is crucial to continue reflecting on ways to empower local research partners and give them more active and decisive roles in decisions made during SHARE projects. For instance, is inviting more global South partners to become principal investigators feasible?
- During the early stages of project planning, discussing and agreeing on specific data collection and analysis strategies is essential. This may involve providing additional training at the local level in addition to global SHARE training efforts.
- Encouraging more South-South partnerships can facilitate broader collaborations between the “global North” and “global South” in projects.



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Thanks

Questions?



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