



# Collaboration in a ‘North–South’ Context: The Role of Power Relations and the Various Context-Based Conditions

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## Abstract

This response is focusing on the various power structures influencing research–practice–collaborations, transdisciplinary projects, and participation. It will be discussed how power asymmetries globally as well as locally influence and structure collaborations and participation between the involved actors and, thus, the expected transformative potential of the produced knowledge. Based on experiences and challenges encountered during a North–South capacity building project, it will be shown how funding schemes as well as the positionalities of the involved actors produce and reproduce historical, social, or cultural power structures which influence research–practice–collaborations. The main argument put forward is that instead of focusing in the current scientific as well as science-policy debates primarily on how research–practice–collaborations and/or participation could be improved ‘technically,’ the respective contexts and/or power structures and relations have to be considered and reflected in each phase of collaborative endeavors. This especially, but not exclusively, in the context of North–South collaborations.

**Keywords** Research-practice-collaborations · Transdisciplinarity · Power relations · North-South

## Resumen

Cette réponse porte sur les diverses structures de pouvoir qui influencent la collaboration entre recherche et pratique, les projets transdisciplinaires et la participation. Nous verrons la manière dont les asymétries de pouvoir aux niveaux mondial et local influencent et structurent les collaborations et la participation entre les acteurs impliqués, et ainsi, le potentiel de transformation attendu des connaissances produites. Sur la base des expériences et des défis rencontrés lors d’un projet de renforcement des

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Commentary on “Research-Practice-Collaborations in International Sustainable Development and Knowledge Production – Reflections from a Political-Economic Perspective.”

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capacités Nord-Sud, nous verrons comment les mécanismes de financement ainsi que les positionnements des acteurs impliqués produisent et reproduisent des structures de pouvoir historiques, sociales ou culturelles qui influencent la collaboration entre recherche et pratique. Le principal argument avancé est qu'au lieu de se concentrer sur les débats actuels sur la science ou le lien entre science et politique, qui portent principalement sur la façon dont la recherche collaborative et/ou la recherche participative pourrait « techniquement » être améliorée, les contextes et/ou les structures et relations de pouvoir respectives doivent être pris en compte et reflétés dans chaque phase des efforts de collaboration. Ceci est pertinent notamment—mais pas exclusivement—dans le cadre de collaborations Nord-Sud.

## Introduction

Research–practice–collaborations (RPCs) are, as Katja Bender in her paper rightly states increasingly important in the context of the Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs) and a decisive topic in science-policy debates. To strengthen the relevance of science in society and its role in researching complex, global and transdisciplinary themes and shaping them are doubtless needed and urgent. Collaborations with non-academic actors or practitioners from different areas or sectors are assumed to foster, for example, new and relevant social, ecological, economic, or political knowledge 'to use.' Thereby, the main argument put forward is that the inclusion of practitioners will lead to more 'inquiry driven' knowledge production since different perspectives about a phenomenon, a process, or transformation will be considered. However, as Bender in her paper argues, several challenges which accompany RPCs like diverging interests, information, and resource asymmetries reflecting various power relations between the different actors are hardly discussed. The later will be in the focus of this respond.

I will focus on structural conditions especially on power structures and dynamics which influence RPCs at different levels though rarely discussed in above-mentioned debates. This despite the fact that they influence or hamper research–practice–collaborations, transdisciplinary endeavors, mutual learning, or participatory methodologies. It is stated throughout the literature on RPCs or transdisciplinary approaches (especially those focusing on transdisciplinarity as a research practice) that collaborations need to be designed to enable a process of mutual learning and knowledge generation (Mobjörk, 2010; Pohl, 2011; Schmidt et al., 2013). Questions of what is needed to enable or what might negatively influence such processes, especially what role power structures play, are just beginning to enter the debates (see Bender 2022, p.11; Schmidt & Neuberger 2017; Dannecker 2020). Instead, various strategies are discussed and put forward of how to conceptualize and to implement successful research–practice–collaborations. Debates about the various degrees of non-academic or practitioner's involvement or the 'best' number of involved practitioners can be found (e.g., Brandt et al., 2013; Polk, 2015; Pohl et. al. 2017), as well as discussions about what kind of participation is needed, in which stage and how participation can best be implemented. Furthermore, reflections about setups, framing, and processes of or strategies to implement RPCs are part of the discourse (e.g.,



Elzinga, 2008; Schmidt et al., 2013). These are no doubt important issues. However, most of these debates on and evaluations of RPCs concentrate on the technical dimensions, and thus, possible improvements of collaborations without reflecting or discussing the respective contexts and/or power structures and relations influencing these collaborations from the conceptualization through the implementation to the dissemination phase. The decontextualization leads to the observed focus on technical questions and the idealistic views. Academic norms and/or power relations which might influence collective and collaborative research are rarely considered. Additionally, possible outcomes that might challenge institutionalized ways of knowing (like the discussed research quality by Bender (this issue)) nor the epistemological dilemma of whether and how it is possible to represent the ‘others’ (see also commentary Health & Mormina this issue) especially but not exclusively regarding non-academic actors involved, are also not discussed yet. Not to speak about structural inequalities, as in the case of North–South collaborations, or the global education system in which such collaborations or border crossing often do take place (Nagar 2014). All these dimensions influence collaborations, cooperation, participation, and mutual learning on one hand, and as important, the transformative potential of the produced knowledge on the other (Rosendahl et. al. 2015).

No doubt RPCs can create many synergies and ‘win–win’ situations; however, it is necessary to broaden the debates and discussions by including perspectives and approaches that focus on the entanglement of social relations of power in knowledge production and bring them in dialog with the scientific and political debates about RPCs. This includes feminist perspectives like, for example, by Haraway (1988) who argues that knowledge is always situated (and regarding RCPs not only pertaining non-academic actors), or Rose (1997) who calls for reflexivity of the researcher’s positionality in the production of knowledge. In the context of North–South projects or collaborations, postcolonial perspectives are relevant to understand and explain how power relations between the Global North and the Global South structure and influence the agency, voice, and knowledge of the involved actors (e.g., Bhambra, 2007; Chakrabarty, 2000). These perspectives help understand the concrete entanglement of the various structural conditions within local contexts which shape possible collaborations and the expectations of the involved actors. Instead of focusing on RCPs, immanent challenges and possible technocratic strategies regarding the implementation the place-based contexts need to be considered. It is necessary to embed and discuss the challenges faced or experienced in RPCs in conjunction with structural conditions and the positionalities of the involved actors. This will be started in the following by reflecting and discussing the challenges, problems and conflicts which accompanied the implementation of North–South capacity building project on transdisciplinarity.

Thus, the focus of his response is on research–practice–collaborations and knowledge cooperation between actors from the Global North and the so-called Global South, collaborations, and cooperation which are increasingly demanded not only in the context of the SDGs or policy-science debates but are also part of the current discussions in the field of development studies. The later firstly due to the discussed need of new frameworks of integral knowledge production due to new ‘global’ challenges like global poverty and inequalities, climate change, or migration (Basile &



Baud, 2019; Horner, 2020). Second, due to criticism, power relations between the Global North and the Global South still influence agenda setting and knowledge production (Connell et al., 2017) not only in development projects but also in research partnerships (Melber, 2019) and RPCs. As a response, more and 'different' 'research partnerships' focusing on academic institutions based on the Global North and a 'practitioner' or policy-making institution working in the Global South are increasingly discussed (Fransman et al., 2021, p. 328) focusing on the inclusion of different knowledge and, thus, diverse actors (Basile & Baud 2019).

## The Context

The following discussion is based on experiences and challenges encountered during the North–South capacity building project KNOTS (Fostering Multi-lateral Knowledge Networks of Transdisciplinary Studies to tackle Global Challenges) revolving around transdisciplinarity. The KNOTS project was financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education program and implemented between 2016 and 2019. The project will not get presented in detail<sup>1</sup> nor the positive outcomes. The focus will be on some of the conflicts and challenges faced to reveal how global and local structural conditions and power relations influence different phases of RPCs, especially in a so-called North–South context. The reflections are based on my position as the initiator and coordinator of the project, my sociological and feminist background as well as my position as a female professor at a University in the Global North.<sup>2</sup> The positionalities of the participants as well as mine intersect, as will be shown, with institutional, geopolitical, and material aspects and led to the problems which will be discussed in the following. In the first section, I will critically reflect the development of the proposal thereby discussing the project scheme which influenced the implementation and the knowledge production throughout, whereas in the second section, conflicts due to pre-framing and different understandings of science and knowledge are in the focus. The aim is, thus, not a reflection on concrete collaborations between academic and non-academic actors but a discussion of historical, social, and political developments influence them. As stated by McGiffin (2021, p. 309), partnerships and collaborations between different actors can succeed and can offer in the field of development studies (and I would add also beyond) unequivocal development benefits, however, only if the contexts in which collaborations occur are considered throughout.

<sup>1</sup> For information regarding the activities and outcome see [www.knots-eu.com/the-teaching-manual](http://www.knots-eu.com/the-teaching-manual) and for a broader discussion of the project see Dannecker 2020 and the special issue of ASEAS, "Negotiating Transdisciplinarity" (2020).

<sup>2</sup> The reflections and discussions presented in this chapter are thus the result of my observations and informal talks with participants and colleagues from the different universities in course of the KNOTS project. I follow thereby Wickson et al. (2006) and Goven et al. (2015) in analyzing the project as an 'embedded researcher'.



## Project Development

Factors discussed for successful collaborations in the context of RPCs are an equal say of all actors in the design and production of research to identify and address divergent perspectives and priorities (McGiffin 2021, p. 309) as well as open communication throughout. However, this needs time and space and is often not foreseen by funders in their calls or included in the project requirements nor does the increased competition and standardization within the global and national education systems create such environments. No specific space for collective problem framing, for example, is usually designated or funded by funding agencies beforehand (Pohl, 2010, p. 60). In case of the KNOTS project, it was primarily my colleagues and myself at the Development Studies Department at Vienna University who read the EU call, got engaged, asked colleagues to join and wrote the proposal. Due to our existing cooperation with university institutes in Southeast Asia, we were aware that some of our colleagues in the Global South strive to redefine their role in providing knowledge and innovation for and about 'development' to construe own aims and perspectives together with practitioners (see Bärnthaler 2021). Against this background, we argued in the project proposal that transdisciplinarity could be the framework to produce new forms of integral knowledge on and also for 'development' with our academic partners inside Europe and Southeast Asia and their partners (practitioners) outside academia (who were not at all integrated in this phase). We assumed that the intellectual and political value of engaging in face-to-face learning across national, cultural, and disciplinary borders is the common ground as well as the willingness from all scientific actors to integrate non-academic actors and their knowledge.

We formulated the aim to develop transdisciplinary in the transnational space integrating different and diverse forms of knowledge and expertise through Summer Schools and field research. This idea was positively perceived by the five University Institutes we approached in Southeast Asia and two in Europe<sup>3</sup> via e-mail as was the thematic focus on social inequalities, migration, and environmental resources. In the process of writing the proposal, we formulated questions which we have send around to get feedback on the aims we formulated as well as several draft versions asking for comments and ideas; however, we only got a few returns. Since the time-frame between the call and the deadline for handing in the proposal was very short,<sup>4</sup> there was definitely not enough time to discuss the aims, the activities, and the distribution of work packages, and due to the pressure to be ready in time, we were not pushing for more participation. The time pressure we experienced is, at least from my reading and experiences, systematic for such processes also rarely scientifically or politically discussed. The conceptualization of and the expectation that scientists can integrate different kind of knowledge and write a proposal for a temporarily

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<sup>3</sup> The Erasmus + Capacity Building Program guidelines do not fix the number of participating partner Universities however the number of participating Universities from Europe.

<sup>4</sup> The call came out in November and the proposal had to be handed in February. Thus, altogether we had four months' time..



RPC project proposals are increasingly required by funding agencies, especially but not exclusively in the development sector. And as argued by McGiffin (2021), scientists have ascribed to this logic due to increased competition within higher education's organizations (audits and performance assessments).

The call by the EU regarding the capacity building program that we responded to, reflects certain assumptions (Felt et al., 2015) which can be more broadly observed especially in schemes focusing on North–South RCPs collaborations or knowledge cooperation. Namely that a transfer of capacities and/or knowledge from the Global North to the Global South is needed. The special context of the EU call mirrored how the role of European higher education organizations and knowledge is understood and perceived, namely as exemplars of 'modernity' whereas the 'others' still lag behind. It could, thus, be argued that the funding scheme as well as the EU capacity building strategy, we subscribed to, reflect discourses and assumptions about the global North and global South which got reproduced in the writing process of the KNOTS proposal and throughout the project's life time (see Schmidt & Neuburger 2017, p. 64). Even though the collaboration was driven by our aim to work in close collaboration with the partners in the Global South the way how the collaborative work was planned and thus put into practice was influenced by the requirements and procedures set by the funding agency (Stevens et al., 2013) which we did not question. The scheme for example foresaw that only the coordinator could communicate with the funder, that only we from the University of Vienna could decide when funds to the partners got transferred<sup>5</sup> or that the summer schools and fields trips have to take place in the Global South. Due to these prescriptions, some partners in the Global South felt primarily responsible for the organization, as foreseen by the funding guideline and did a great job. The tasks of agenda setting or taking over responsibilities, for example for the field trips, were shifted to colleagues from the Global North, who often actively took over despite not being familiar with the local setting or the non-academic actors. The 'reluctance' of the colleagues who organized the activities can be interpreted as a lack of ownership since we allocated these work packages to them according to the EU guidelines. To put it more generally, it can be seen as a reaction to the decade's long experiences of scientists and intellectuals in the Global South who, as the study by Connell et al. (2017) shows, have been treated as a workforce in the periphery by knowledge institutions and scientists from the Global North. The EU call further highlighted that collaboration with non-academic partners in the Global South should be an important pillar to increase the social value for the countries respectively societies involved; however, no financial resources were foreseen for these activities. This shows, following Felt's et al., argument (2015, p. 10) that they are not considered to have the capacity to independently produce new knowledge. These prescriptions reflect and reproduce power structures in this case primarily along postcolonial legacies not only while developing the proposal and during implementation but also regarding the reporting.

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<sup>5</sup> I will in the following not specify which Institutes and colleagues in the different countries joint for anonymity reasons.



Another assumption or ‘myth’ inscribed in such programs is “...a bias towards the ideal of a universal scientific culture” (Sonnenwald 2007, p. 648) and the construction of scientists as objective and neutral. The question discussed by Bender (2022 this issue), regarding the quality of research shows that power relations and different positionalities of and between scientists in the social field of science (Bourdieu 2001) and how these might influence the transformative potential of collaborative knowledge production are not a subject worse to discuss neither in the literature on RPCs nor the funding schemes. Instead, as Fransman et al. (2021, p. 328) argue, archetypes of individuals such as ‘academic’ or ‘researcher’ and ‘practitioner’ are constructed and classified as homogenous groups. Different motivations, expectations, and positionalities of researchers, for example, which might influence and structure collaborations between, for example, scientists from the Global South and the Global North and/or questions whom practitioners represent (Health & Mormina, 2022) are rarely taken up. Despite the fact that we were theoretically aware that researchers are not neutral or objective, we did neither question the funding scheme and the assumptions nor reflected our positionalities or the positionalities of the ‘others’ namely the colleagues in the Global South when conceptualizing the project proposal. Conscious about the historically and geopolitically informed power relations between North and South concerning knowledge production for and about ‘development’ through our reading and critical attitude towards ‘development,’ it did not make a difference to our self-understanding when writing the proposal or using this specific funding scheme. We did not question the privileges that we, as academics from the Global North, embody through our social position. We intended a reordering of values in research and collaboration between the Global North and the Global South in the field of Development Studies, however, could not translate our theoretical knowledge about power symmetries into the proposal instead we were uncritically accepting and reproducing the ‘myths’ and assumptions inscribed in the funding scheme. Whether and how the increased competition in the global education system due to neoliberal tendencies, as analyzed by McGiffin (2020) also regarding RPCs, influenced the writing process might be an aspect, an aspect which, however, cannot be discussed in the context of this respond. The main argument put forward here is that funding schemes as well as the positionalities of the involved actors, as discussed above, produce and reproduce power structures and do influence RPCs and need to be discussed more intensively scientifically as well as politically.

### **During Implementation: Whose Knowledge Counts?**

Another aspect which is urgently needed to discuss especially with regard to RPCs is how the understanding of science by researcher and their self-understanding influence what is defined and framed as a social problem or who relevant actors or practitioners are and whose knowledge is needed (Messing et al., 2012, p. 646). During the activities and the discourses among the scientific project participants (all having a social science background) in course of the KNOTs project regarding the aims, activities, and especially the collaboration with the non-academic actors, conflicts emerged which demonstrated the different understandings of science and knowledge





which resulted in pre-framings of the topics influencing throughout the implementation, the various collaborative activities, and outcomes. Also, the perception of the quality of research, as discussed by Bender (2022), is closely related to this point.

Actors, especially scientific actors, do initiate or take part in RPCs with certain scientific or even political assumptions or perspectives regarding the issue at stake. Even though it is argued that especially regarding RPCs, it is necessary to overcome traditional scientific patterns and procedures and tolerance for ambiguity, openness to the perspectives of other and readiness 'moving into foreign territory' is needed (Bromme 2000, p. 116, MacGriffin 2020). How this can be achieved is yet rarely discussed nor is the pre-framing. In case of the project, topics especially regarding migration and social inequality were pre-framed either due to theoretical perspectives or the local political contexts. A scientific pre-framing, for example, could be observed in the case of the topic social inequality when only economic structures were put forward to explain inequalities at the expense of engagement with questions of gender or cultural difference, or when universalist templates of development and theoretical categories based on European experience were defined as important perspectives to understand inequalities without reflecting the historical and social structures that pervade them or taking the interpretations of the non-academic actors into account (especially if they didn't support or match with the scientific and 'ideological' standpoints). There was no observable North–South divide rather gendered or ideological positions were of importance. Political pre-framing was place based and could be observed especially in the partner countries where universities, thus, knowledge production is controlled and influenced by political actors, and their interests and civil society organizations are controlled by the government. In the case of migration, for example, this implied that 'only' climate change was made responsible for rural–urban migration by some, whereas other aspects, like the modernization or the capitalization of the agriculture sector, were not even 'allowed' to be discussed neither by the academic nor the non-academic actors due to the political strategies and aims of the respective government. Thus, while the topics we took up were inquiry driven, they were pre-framed and transparent communication, thus, difficult. The inclusion of different or diverged perspectives was, thus, conflictive and not always reached. The political and hierarchical local context in one setting and the impenetrable organizations made it difficult for the actors to reflect their own personal and biographical dispositions, social relations, and epistemological perspectives. This led to emotional reactions and frustrations (issues also rarely discussed in the literature on RPCs) not only on the side of the coordinator trying to fulfill the project's prescriptions but also during the implementation of the various activities between in different actors.

The different understandings of science and knowledge as well as the pre-framing of the topics also influenced and structured debates and discussions about which and how non-academic actors should be integrated and whose knowledge they represent and which knowledge counts. The non-academic actors from civil society and the public sector participating in the KNOTS project were proposed and selected by the academic partners from the Global South. The integration of non-academic actors and their knowledge was very controversially discussed in the preparation of the collaborative research activities. Klein (2014) argues that complex problems





necessarily need the involvement of various non-academic actors from a range of organizations. However, whom and whose knowledge these actors represent is not considered; neither is the difference in interests of the scientific participants, namely, whether such knowledge should serve science, serve the existing social and power relationships, or challenge the status quo, discussed (cf., Augsburg & Henry, 2016, p. 101). These different perceptions and accordingly the value attached to non-academic knowledge accompanied the collaborations throughout the project's life time. The inclusion of critical NGOs or activists working on the topics, for example, was suggested by those colleagues aiming at challenging power structures and the status quo, whereas the inclusion of government agencies or private sector organizations were demanded by those colleagues who did not want to criticize the government's migration or environmental policies but aimed to integrate the interests of these actors in research activities. Whether non-academic actors are perceived as knowledge producers also depend on the respective understanding of science and knowledge. Those who were postulating that science and knowledge are and should be objective and universal argued that only science can produce knowledge, hold expertise, and represent the authority to explain. This implies that scientists are assumed to be objective observers, whereas non-academic actors can never be more than research subjects or informants, because only their knowledge is situated, contextual, cultural, and inherently social. Defining scientific knowledge as outside of society or culture is not new and is one reason for increased interest in RCPs and transdisciplinarity (see, Dannecker & Heis, 2020). The desire and the need to integrate experience-based, local, or cultural forms of knowledge in a participatory way were doubtless shared by all participating actors in the project, however, in what way and for what reason only became visible through the planning and implementation of the activities. Only through looking inside RCPs and analyzing them from within by taking the political, institutional, social, and scientific contexts into account, the way I tried to do it in this respond, RCPs can increase the relevance of science in and for society and in the development context positively influences development 'outcomes.'

## Conclusion

The respond raised probably more questions than it could answered. The main aim was to redirect the current scientific and political debates of and about RCPs away from the analyzed focus on technocratic issues and strategies only. The questions which should, at least from my experience, be discussed are how and whether academic norms allow a successful conceptualization and implementation of RCPs and what changes are needed institutionally regarding, for example, the education systems (this includes also the discussion about the quality of research) and funding schemes. The inclusion of feminist and postcolonial perspectives (the later especially in the North–South context) could be a starting to discuss and realize that also scientific knowledge is situated, contextual, cultural, and inherently social and what this implies for collaborations. Especially in RCPs, the positionalities of the involved actors need to be reflected to avoid the reproduction power structures



through or despite collaborations with non-academic actors. RCPs only can produce transformative knowledge if the context-based structures are taken into consideration in all phases of RPC projects, this especially in a North–South context. The discussions presented above intended to show that this is difficult and challenging and requires a skilled and visionary academic staff prepared to challenge existing norms and to explore new terrain. This implies critically reflecting 'our' projects and our positionality as scientists also to improve future collaborations. This is a difficult task as the respond hopefully revealed.

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