

4 Collaborative Knowledge Production for Sustainable Development: Experiences from the NCCR North-South

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Abstract

Does collaborative knowledge production in intercultural teams of researchers from the global North and South offer ways to avoid 'Western' dominance in globalised science? This is the key question examined in the present article, which draws on experiences from the international development research network of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South. The article illustrates what has been done to bring together 'Western' and 'non-Western' research traditions and rationalities in development research and provides insights into the opportunities and constraints of intercultural, collaborative knowledge production. It reveals a critical awareness of the potential, limitations, and consequences of methodological inclusiveness. Although collaborative knowledge production processes involve challenges and large investments, they offer an alternative to the dominant aspirations of individualistic leadership and scientific excellence. Collaboration plays a critical role in the development of scientific creativity in general, and in the context of sustainable development in particular.

Keywords: Knowledge production; research partnerships; globalised science; development studies; multiple social realities and epistemologies.

4.1 Introduction

The globalisation of science and research is already far advanced and follows an implicit desire to contribute to the betterment of human conditions and increased standards of living. Today, there is a high degree of interaction between universities, laboratories, and industries as well as enhanced collaboration and exchange in a growing number of international research networks (UNESCO 2005). Science has become a global social enterprise, aspiring to achieve innovation, convergence, and excellence, and disseminating the idea of modernity. It is precisely in this last point that the globalisation of science and research has provoked fundamental critique. Globalised science is accused of an aggressive hegemony based on the expansion of ‘Western’ culture (Alvares 1992; Olukoshi 2007). While it enhances the body of knowledge, modern science is thus said to contribute to a disqualification of diversity, alternative rationalities, and non-scientific forms of knowledge.

Despite a long history of international research collaborations and a wealth of experience with various modes of intercultural exchange and research partnerships (Bradley 2007; Molenaar et al 2009), the broad field of development studies has not remained unaffected by the hegemony of ‘Western’ thought. However, criticism has been voiced and debated within the field of development studies for quite some time (Schuurmann 2000; Humphrey 2007). One strand of criticism focuses on the lack of integration of, and exchange between, heterogeneous, diverse forms of knowledge, including voices, opinions, beliefs, and rationalities from all parts of the world. Olukoshi (2007, pp 24–25) identified a particular weakness of development studies in that they failed to engage more fully with the intellectual production of the countries whose experiences were being studied, and suggested to invest more in multidisciplinary approaches and to rediscover the capacity to study development in its pluralism and diversity, including tapping into the history and cultural contexts of different peoples. In a similar vein, Guttal (2007, p 35) called for an imperative turn of attention to the body of discontinuous and dispersed knowledge that is systematically suppressed and marginalised in the dominant development discourses. Does collaborative knowledge production in intercultural teams of researchers from the global North and South offer ways to avoid ‘Western’ dominance in globalised science? This is the key question examined in the present article.

Drawing on experiences from the international development research network of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR)

North-South, this article illustrates what has been done to bring together ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ research traditions and rationalities in development research. It also provides insights into the opportunities and constraints of intercultural, collaborative knowledge production. The main purpose of this article is to contribute to a methodological reflection about collaborative knowledge production in the field of globalised development research, in which the NCCR North-South itself actively participates (see Kothari 2005; Sumner and Tribe 2008). It is assumed that collaboration plays a critical role in the development of scientific creativity in general, and in the context of sustainable development in particular.

4.2 Concepts, methodology, and sources of data

In its second of three four-year phases (2005–2009), the NCCR North-South created a programme component called “Transversal Packages”, with the objective of developing theoretical, conceptual, and methodological foundations for consolidating and refining the syndrome mitigation approach in sustainability studies. One of the three studies carried out in the Transversal Package Project entitled “Knowledge, Power, Politics: Studying Social and Institutional Practices in Development Research and Policy” aimed at specifically contributing to achieving these goals by theorising patterns of knowledge and power and by providing empirical insights into the NCCR North-South’s core research practices and concepts.

Knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is considered a political, cultural, social, historical, and economic phenomenon that reflects the conditions in which it is produced (Jasanoff 2004; Weiler 2006; Maasen 2009). Linking this conceptualisation of knowledge with the fundamental criticism of the hegemony of science (see Alvares 1992), it can be said that new scientific knowledge reflects primarily a ‘Western’ culture of science. A number of studies in the field of development research have responded to this fact, which some development researchers experience as a source of unease (Mehta 2001; Fairhead and Leach 2003; Forsyth 2003; Goldman 2005). They draw attention to the social and institutional frameworks in which scientific knowledge is produced, and they dig deep into the explanatory power of meta-level conditions of knowledge production, communication, transformation, and application. A growing concern is that although new knowledge is being generated in numerous research and development projects, many of which strive to make a contribution towards betterment in terms of

poverty alleviation or nature protection, the resulting scientific explanations and development interventions often do not work for the poor and most vulnerable people (e.g. Li 2007).

Against this background, the present article sheds light on the research practices and reflections of senior development researchers about their contributions to promoting sustainable development. The article combines different sources of data to unravel meanings and processes in collaborative knowledge production for sustainable development. The core body of empirical data used in this article was collected in 24 episodic interviews with senior researchers, conducted between March 2007 and August 2008.² Moreover, a side-study on collaborative knowledge production in intercultural research teams, carried out in June and July 2008 among the transdisciplinary research team of the North-South Exchange Project,³ resulted in another 12 interviews. By complementing the primary empirical material, and in line with the purpose of the present volume to provide a synthesis of NCCR North-South work, the various sections of this article highlight selected additional sources and publications by NCCR North-South researchers. No details are provided on the sociology of team research and the power relations between team members, as this has been discussed elsewhere (Bradley 1982; Muntz et al 2003; Zingerli 2010).

4.3 Knowledge for sustainable development

The NCCR North-South research programme aims to contribute to mitigating syndromes of global change and to establish the foundations for advanced research in sustainable development (NCCR North-South 2008). The research programme combines and adapts the methods of traditional scientific disciplines in order to meet the needs and challenges of a changing and increasingly globalised and complex world. The senior researchers interviewed consider it a great success that establishment of the NCCR North-South resulted in an increase in funds made available for collaborating with researchers and institutions in partnership regions of the South (#S3; #N14; #N23).⁴

Many of the participating researchers, in fact, have been collaborating in North–South partnership arrangements for a long time, contributing to the advancement of thematic issues as well as capacity development in the various partnership regions. Recent publications and presentations document and analyse some of these partnerships for sustainable development (Bolay and Schmid 2004; Maselli et al 2006; Kiteme and Wiesmann 2008; Schell-

ing et al 2008; Béchir and Bonfoh 2009; KFPE 2009; Wiesmann and Kiteme 2009; Zingerli 2010). They demonstrate joint research efforts, mutual respect, and a deep understanding of each other's contexts and concepts by collaborators from the North and the South. This kind of development research involves a strong commitment to contributing something that is of relevance to the world (#N21; #N24) (Zingerli et al 2009). It addresses the key question of “how to transform the conditions of life and work of poor people” (#S6:16; #S5) to eventually “make a better world” (#N25:21). This resonates with the idea of an engaged scholarship (see Blomley 1994) and a notion expressed by Molteberg and Bergström (2000, p 7), who say that “Development Studies is research committed to improvement [and its] knowledge generation is not an end in itself”.

Although there are many different definitions of development research, not only in the literature but also among NCCR North-South researchers, some key lines can be identified in the empirical material. Development research should respond to problems and needs (#S1) and to specific target groups (#S3); it should produce knowledge and results which can be used in practice (#S2; #S4). It is research about change and this involves understanding not only change but also what this change implies and how it could be influenced (#N14). One interviewee put it as follows (#N18:33–34): “[...] one key lesson is that by looking from the outside, which is often what science does, you can have the best solution, but if it's not developed from inside with the people, it's useless. So there is a huge limitation of research that doesn't work very closely with the people who are affected.” This implies integrating people's diverse views and knowledge claims, which, however, calls for awareness of different frames of reference (#S5) and “different levels of rationality” (#G1:5).

What emerges from these last few points is the logic of team research and collaboration. Research for sustainable development is certainly not an individualistic undertaking. The complexity of the issues under examination requires mixed methods, as well as individual collaborators with diverse skills and educational backgrounds. A combination of similarity and dissimilarity of these characteristics among team members is a productive asset for collaboration (Levine and Moreland 2004). To ensure creativity, however, the diversity of team members needs to be acknowledged, discussed, and valued (Mountz et al 2003). This means getting involved and exposing oneself to this process. The next section concentrates on experiences with collaborative knowledge production in intercultural teams. Implicitly, it thus deals with the question of whether collaborative knowledge production can contribute to sustainable development by drawing on multiple knowledges.

4.4 Insights from collaborative knowledge production processes

In the NCCR North-South research programme, collaborative knowledge production has been practised by researchers from the North/West and the South/East for a long time. There are a number of (self-)critical contributions regarding the level of participation of researchers from the North and the South in the set-up of the programme as well as the setting of the research agenda (Hurni et al 2004a; Hurni et al 2004b), and on the dynamics and power relations in North–South research partnerships (Zingerli 2010; Upreti et al, in press). At the individual level, a great number of NCCR North-South researchers have extensive experience with collaborative knowledge production processes. Usually, collaborating researchers raise more and different questions against several disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, which enhances both overview and in-depth understanding of the thematic issues investigated (#N27; #S11). One interviewee put it as follows: “I think one of the most positive things that I take from these collaborations is an understanding of a variety of approaches to the question of development; a variety of approaches in the sense of a variety of ways of looking at development” (#S6:19). The experiences made during joint fieldwork phases are considered to be particularly valuable (#N14; #N22; #G1).

It is not only the co-produced knowledge, reflecting different sources of knowledge and epistemological foundations, that is valued. The collaborating researchers particularly appreciate the process of collaborative knowledge production, which is often seen as involving mutual learning and understanding. Collaborative knowledge production “is a way of learning new things” (#S7:20), but there is “the necessity to really come out with different points of view, that each one really has something to share” (#S11:12). Indeed, the members of teams featuring a diversity of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds often complement each other in terms of knowledge and abilities. Nonetheless, for a collaborating group to be creative, it is necessary to break down existent hierarchies of both forms and cultures of knowledge. The researchers of the North–South Exchange Project explained it as follows: “[...] most of the time, even if we are aware of that, most of the time it looks like we [from the South] have more to learn than to share. Obviously we have also something to show, [...], people from the South should be able to really contribute, to craft, or to create new concepts and to elaborate new concepts; [...] there are different levels of rationality, and people from the South, first, should understand that; only then we will be able to really have a mutual learning process” (#G1:3–5).

Mutual learning and understanding are thus not only results of, but also pre-conditions for creativity in collaborative knowledge production processes. To facilitate contributions to sustainable development, it is deemed necessary to build mutual understanding together with multiple stakeholders – that is, research partners, informants, intermediaries, or local people – and to jointly seek innovative, context-specific pathways (#N15). The collaborating researchers interviewed feel both exposed and enriched by the diversity of discourses, languages, and scientific concepts (#N14). Although this diversity can increase the range of knowledge and skills available to the collaborating group and stimulate divergent, and potentially innovative, thinking, it can also elicit interpersonal conflicts and negative emotional reactions (Levine and Moreland 2004). Collaborative knowledge production thus requires extra investments of time and thought into ensuring the creation of shared understandings, continuous interaction, and effective communication. One of the informants confirmed that “the true articulation between social reality and theory – not only referring to theories and epistemologies of the global North – is constructed together and this takes usually several years” (#N19:101).

Globalised science with its dominant ‘Western’ culture of doing science not only lacks adequate recognition of diverse forms of knowledge and rationalities; it also favours product over process. For collaborating members of intercultural teams, located in different countries, this implies a constant trade-off between engaging in time- and resource-intensive collaborative knowledge production processes and focusing on relatively rapidly produced disciplinary knowledge by conducting studies with colleagues sharing a similar professional context or the same working place. There is a contradiction between the demands of the globalised research market to engage in networks and collaborate in heterogeneous teams, on the one hand, and the stiff competition for scientific excellence ascribed to outstanding and widely published individuals – and their teams of co-authors – on the other (#N24). As Mountz and colleagues (2003, p 31) have pointed out, researchers tend to divorce the product from the process of research, thereby glossing over other important aspects of the research process and decontextualising data from their various source bodies of knowledge.

4.5 Conclusions

This article set out to reflect on and position the collaborative practices of research for sustainable development evolving in the international development research network of the NCCR North-South. As it contributes to

The North-South Exchange Project (2008)

In summer 2008, the NCCR North-South launched the North-South Exchange Project as a pilot study to open up a new dimension of collaborative knowledge production for sustainable development. The typical set-up of development research was reversed. A team of researchers from Mali, Kyrgyzstan, and Switzerland jointly conducted research on Swiss alpine pasture management from June to July 2008. The idea was to compare the situations in three different partnership regions where pastoral production systems are in transition. The transdisciplinary and intercultural team of researchers carried out field research together, and each team member contributed to the project based on their own scientific, professional, and personal background. During the joint fieldwork, the team members worked “as equal scientific partners” (#S11:5). The knowledge production process was characterised by constant exchange, discussion, and negotiation, and the added value was described as follows: “[...] everyone comes with his/her own perception and this is also a reverse of what is currently going on. You see people from the North going to the South, but now, we have people from the South, going to the North and investigate. This can generate a lot of information because we are coming to the North with our own perceptions [...]. It is a good opportunity to bring all this knowledge together, to combine it and to try and identify similarities and differences” (#S11:4). The first product of the North-South Exchange Project was a “social product” (#G1:31), in that a small team of researchers spent four weeks of intensive fieldwork together. The second product was the project report, completed in September 2008 (Fokou et al 2008). The researchers concluded that “we enjoyed our stay, we enjoyed the time we spent together, but we think we would have done more if we had had enough time” (#G1:52). Indeed, both the schedule and the financial budget were tight for this first North-South Exchange Project. The team of researchers had to tackle several questions at the same time, thematic as well as procedural questions. One of them concerned the originality of the knowledge production process in this North-South exchange. The researchers were confronted with the fact that “many things have been done in the Alps and the challenge was really to think originally [...] the process itself was already somehow original but the originality does not come from the fact that someone comes from Mali or Kyrgyzstan to carry out research in the North” (#S11:14). Rather, the originality of the knowledge production process could have stemmed from the fact that researchers coming from Mali or Kyrgyzstan contributed their Malian or Kyrgyz experiences and reinterpreted the conception of pastoralism in Switzerland; or it could have lain in the particular kind of knowledge generated by a transdisciplinary, international team investigating alpine pasture management in Switzerland. Systematically pursuing this objective, however, would have required extra efforts and especially more time and more financial resources. Indeed, reactions to the report were supportive with respect to the research process but rather critical with respect to the findings. The outlines of an original view of Swiss alpine pasture management from the perspective of researchers from the South remained tentative only.

the international field of development research with its broad range of disciplines, the NCCR North-South programme cannot remain uninfluenced by the hegemony of ‘Western’ scientific thought. Nonetheless, based on the above analysis of collaborative research practices within the NCCR North-South, this article concludes with a plea for the continuation and enhanced recognition of the programme’s team research approach and of the role played by collaborative knowledge production processes in achieving sustainable development.

NCCR North-South researchers are dedicated to the fundamental logic of intercultural team research and collaboration. By embarking together on shared journeys of research projects in the field of sustainable development, they encounter and draw on multiple sources and cultures of knowledge and beliefs. Collaborative knowledge production at the individual, group, and programme levels is generally highly appreciated for the scope it gives to mutual learning and creativity. However, although collaboratively produced knowledge bears the potential of resting on an integrative, equitable, and epistemologically broad base, there is no guarantee that it will be appreciated as substantive knowledge for sustainable development. The wider institutional frameworks of globalised science tend to apply different frames of reference and knowledge requirements, demonstrating a lack of scope and appreciation for alternative scientific knowledges.

Attention thus needs to be drawn to the creativity and innovation potential of collaborative knowledge production for sustainable development in North–South settings, by providing telling examples and by reflecting about and identifying good practices. In short: it is necessary to lobby for such knowledge production, to allocate time and resources to it, and to realistically factor in the capacities of the researchers involved in such undertakings.

The empirical evidence on collaborative knowledge production collected in the NCCR North-South reveals a critical awareness of the potential, limitations, and consequences of methodological inclusiveness. Although collaborative knowledge production processes involve challenges and large investments, especially because additional time is required for joint intellectual contemplation, these processes represent more sustainable research relations, as they suggest alternatives to the dominant aspirations of individualistic leadership and scientific excellence. Knowledge collaboratively produced by intercultural research teams reflects multiple social realities and rationalities, thus fulfilling a basic requirement towards meeting the needs and challenges of a changing and increasingly globalised and complex world.

Endnotes

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² The informants have different disciplinary backgrounds. They range between 37 and 60 years of age; 14 of the 24 respondents work in a Swiss research institution; 12 originate from the global South; and 6 are female. The narrative interviews had durations from forty minutes to two hours. The interviews were thematically structured into five parts: i) the researchers’ professional biography, ii) their involvement in international research collaborations, iii) their specific experiences with research partnerships, iv) their activities to communicate research results, and v) their self-conception as development researchers. The decision to use a narrative type of interview (see Flick 2005) was based on the idea that this would give the researchers ample time to talk about their experiences with international research collaborations.

³ The research team was made up of four researchers and practitioners from Mali, Kyrgyzstan, and Switzerland, who conducted field research together in the Swiss Alps on alpine pasture management (Fokou et al 2008).

⁴ References to and direct quotes from interviews are marked with a code. Although the respondents remain anonymous, the code shows whether they are from the North (#N) or the South (#S) or members of the mixed focus group (#G) of the North-South Exchange Project. The numbers indicate the record number and the line in the interview transcript (e.g. #N15:69).

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