



# ELEPHANT

IN THE LAB

OPINION

## Are international research partnerships are a pipe dream?

<b>Short title</b>	Are international research partnerships are a pipe dream?
<b>Long title</b>	Four reasons why genuine research partnerships are a pipe dream.
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Between 2016 and 2021, the UK government is channelling £1.5 billion of aid funds through the [Global Challenges Research Fund \(GCRF\)](#) the beneficiaries of which are primarily UK researchers. They are in turn expected to work in partnership with their counterparts and other stakeholders in the 'global south' and in so doing, contribute to improvements in development outcomes. But from experience accompanying UK and Southern researchers during a five year natural hazard risk reduction project, I argue that genuine partnerships, especially between researchers from the UK and those from developing countries (which applies to many countries in the global south) just aren't possible. Here are four reasons why.

### Reason 1: Collaborating for instrumental rather than substantive reasons

Southern counterparts when approached by their UK partners to work together, are unlikely to refuse. Given UK research funds are largely accessed through UK research institutions, they just can't afford not to. Even if Southern researchers don't get on with their UK counterpart, are not

ready to collaborate with a UK based organisation (logistically) or have too much other work to do, the chances are they will still agree to 'partner'. This creates a problem in the relationship: if as a UK researcher you've never heard a Southern counterpart say 'no', how can you trust them when they say 'yes'?

Often relationships are 'marriages of convenience'. UK researchers need to work with Southern counterparts to legitimate their use of aid funds and access data, whilst Southern counterparts need the cash as well as external validation. Moreover a measure of excellence of a Southern research institute might be the number of collaborations it has with North Atlantic (not necessarily international) research institutes. Relationships where partners want to explore working together, consider that partnering is a good thing in itself or believe that doing so will help both partners to be creative – are rare.

## Reason 2. A lack of genuine deliberation

Key parameters, such as budgetary and time allocations are usually set during the proposal development stage. This stage usually takes place under significant time pressure with decisions made by a small group of researchers in the UK (often geographically close). Southern counterparts rarely have a say during this process. UK researchers usually tell their Southern partners what sort of time allocations they are likely to receive after the proposal has been submitted. Moreover, few panels convened by research councils to review proposals genuinely care about how UK researchers will approach partnership during the research process.

UK researchers who are in charge of research processes tend to exert a high degree of control. This stems from the anxiety experienced by UK researchers by the possibility that Southern counterparts may make suggestions that steer the research away from what the former are interested in (and what was agreed to in the funding proposal). This often means, holding launch meetings in the UK and unilaterally deciding on the agenda, agreeing on research questions and establishing analytical frameworks without consulting partners – asking for comments on these only once they have neared completion. When challenged about the lack of participation, research leaders might cite reputational damage – saying they need to look as if they know what they are talking about in their engagement with partners, and avoid presenting 'half baked' solutions. Under pressure to comment, collaborators are forced into suggesting changes around the margins, even if they disagree with the underlying fundamentals.

This has a number of knock on effects on the rest of the process. UK researchers often subsequently take an extractive and/or contractual approach, leaving Southern counterparts to introduce them to key informants, organise interviews and/or collect and provide data, leaving UK researchers to write up data – or lead on it, which is the most interesting aspect of the process. Southern counterparts may well agree to do this, in order to pay salaries and cover overheads. UK researchers usually assume lead authorship for final outputs.

## Reason 3. Power asymmetries

Even when Southern counterparts might have the opportunity to provide critique or 'speak up', they may choose not to, or be conditioned not to, for fear of the consequences: having their role during the research process reduced, or not being approached by UK counterparts in future. A lack of self-confidence – stemming from having limited capacities (which might be real or imagined), a fear of making mistakes and a feeling that they might be inherently inferior to their UK counterparts – might also prevent Southern counterparts from speaking up, taking up, and living up to, their responsibilities when offered. Further, Southern counterparts may not be able to converse frankly with UK researchers in English, which might be a second or third language for them.

But if Southern counterparts do speak up, UK counterparts may not be willing to listen and act accordingly – stemming from a feeling of superiority ([however subtle](#)), a need to conform to UK academic standards, as well as pressures to complete research projects in short timeframes and publish in leading journals (more on this below). Race, gender and age all play into these dynamics.

On the occasion that Southern counterparts are [asked to collect and write up the data into reports](#), they are usually sent back to UK researchers for comment. But comments made are often numerous and sometimes make little sense to Southern counterparts. Those providing the feedback often have little understanding of the context in which the data was collected and some of the constraints the local research team were under. And so, they review with an eye to the UK research community, and privilege UK quality standards and frameworks over Southern alternatives.

Moreover, UK researchers often believe that their Southern counterparts are in need of ‘capacity development’ (in terms of training, the development of institutions, etc). This may well be the case. But there is very little acknowledgement that UK researchers themselves may be in [need of capacity](#) (to understand Southern contexts, develop more inclusive funding processes, etc).

## Reason 4. Different notions of impact

Finally, with regards to communication processes, research teams focus on writing papers that can be published in high impact journals originating in Northern Europe and the US rather than producing outputs that might be taken up by actors in the Southern counterpart’s society, economy and/or industry. Very little of the research results finds its way back to people and communities where the data was collected. Societal engagement is positioned as being in opposition to “objective” and “international” measures of “excellence”.

In sum, I think we need to be honest about the type of relationship that UK researchers have with their Southern counterparts. And in many cases, partnership is not the word I would use to describe them. However, if UK researchers are genuinely interested in embracing partnership with their Southern collaborators they could start by considering these [eight suggestions](#).

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