



INTERVENTIONS: PROVOCATION

Beyond ‘equitable partnerships’: the imperative of transformative research collaborations with Africa

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Debate on the need for more fairness in academic research collaborations between actors in Africa (or the ‘Global South’, broadly) and counterparts in the Global North has intensified in recent years, while practice-oriented frameworks and efforts to foster more equitable partnerships have proliferated. Important approaches to recognise and undo asymmetries in concrete collaboration arrangements – division of labour, decision making, access to rewards, capacity building – have been identified.

In this provocation we draw on African and other postcolonial, decolonial and feminist scholarship, as well as systems thinking and global science data to argue that such ‘equitable partnerships’ efforts at best sidestep the urgent need for a much more profound rebalancing of the positioning of Africa and ‘Global North’ in the worldwide science and research ecosystem as a whole. We consider why such wider rebalancing is an imperative for both Africa and the global community, propose that research collaborations must be understood as a key entry point for advancing such a systemic shift, and suggest a necessary *transformative* collaboration mode to this end. We conclude by positing an urgent need to think and act beyond ‘equitable’ partnerships and highlight where responsibilities for action must lie.

Key words Africa • research collaborations • equity • decolonisation

Key messages

- Present ‘equitable research partnerships’ debates and frameworks offer important approaches to ensure greater fairness in arrangements for collaborative Global South–North inquiry.

Yet they sidestep the need for a fundamental rebalancing of Africa–North relations and positionings in the worldwide scientific effort.

- The present positionings are neither accidental nor benign. They reflect active strategies and multiple layers of power imbalances in scientific knowledge production reflecting colonial legacies; and they harm Africa's economic and political prospects as well as the potency of global scholarship.
- Research collaborations offer an important leverage point for rebalancing Africa–Global North relations and positioning in the global scientific effort.
- This requires instituting a *transformative* mode of joint inquiry, which ensures fair collaboration arrangements *and* redresses the multilayered power imbalances in knowledge production.
- We all, as individual scholars, research managers and decision makers in the higher education space are called upon to advance such change.

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Introduction: International research collaborations and equitable partnerships perspectives

Research collaborations between academic actors in Africa and those outside of the continent in the 'Global North'¹ continue to expand, as part of an ongoing internationalisation of higher education (HE) within an increasingly globally competitive and market-oriented sector (Halvorsen and Nossu, 2016; Thondhlana et al, 2021; de Wit and Altbach, 2021). Viewed, and in some quarters deployed, as a cornerstone of efforts to advance 'development' in Africa (or the Global South, broadly) (Hydén, 2016; Manji and Mandler, 2019; Bucher et al, 2020; Fekadu et al, 2021), such collaborations are considered strategically important by both sides.

Rationales for Global North scholars or institutions include the potential to increase the social 'impact' and global reach of their research, and to widen and deepen 'overseas' networks (Bucher et al, 2020; de Wit and Altbach, 2021, Faure et al, 2021a; 2021b; UKCDR and ESSENCE, 2022) – metrics that, variously, count in domestic assessments of research as well as in international university rankings (QS, 2023). Motivating factors for actors in Africa include prospects for engagement in novel inquiry, access to resources, 'modernising' and capacity-strengthening opportunities (Ishengoma, 2016; Faure et al, 2021a; 2021b).

Yet, concerns about the extent to which collaborative research with Global North partners does in fact strengthen Africa's scientific endeavour have been long-standing (Bradley, 2008; Jowi, 2012; Ishengoma, 2016; Crane, 2020; Abdirahman et al, 2022). An evolving academic debate about unfairness in such collaborations has focused on examining the nature and sources of asymmetries in Global North–South research partnerships and considering approaches to reducing them (Bradley, 2008; Ishengoma, 2016; Crane, 2020; Grieve and Mitchell, 2020; Gunasekara, 2020; Kontinen and

Nguyahambi, 2020; Mitlin et al, 2020; White, 2020; Faure et al, 2021a; 2021b; Fekadu et al, 2021; Flint et al, 2022; Snijder et al, 2023).

Analyses exploring the experiences and perspectives of collaborators have identified several key areas in which inequities in concrete partnership arrangements. These include (1) the *division of labour* in joint projects, with Global North partners typically leading ‘high-value’ and prestigious aspects of the inquiry such as global analyses and ‘theorising’, and African (Global South) counterparts consigned to data collection or local interpretations; (2) the dominance of Global North actors in *decision making* about research objectives, approaches and methodologies, the allocation of budgets and the usage of data or, for example in global health, samples once collected; (3) the typical *unidirectional framing of capacity building* aimed solely at Global South partners; and (4) the *access to rewards*. This includes most obviously the authorship of scientific publications that report on the joint research, which is typically led by Global North partners (Ishengoma, 2016; Kontinen and Nguyahambi, 2020; White, 2020; Faure et al, 2021a; 2021b). Less visible, though more consequential, are knock-on disparities in career opportunities that accrue through the import of project and publication leadership in criteria for academic promotion and further grant capture (Hedt-Gauthier et al, 2018). Snijder et al (2023) show that gender hierarchies and those related to academic seniority can shape the form of North–South inequities. Crane (2020) highlights the role of administrative infrastructures and modes in entrenching asymmetries in the control of joint projects.

Both intersubjective and structural factors have been identified as key to nurturing greater fairness in research collaborations. The former include factors such as trust, recognition, open communication, including an acknowledgement of deeper inequalities (Faure et al, 2021a; 2021b), and a focus on the relationality between and among individuals and institutions involved in the joint inquiry (White, 2020). The latter, with emphasis on ensuring a mutuality of benefits, include shifts in the command over resources, samples and data; the pursuit of *two-way* capacity strengthening and (un)learning; and the negotiation of advance agreements covering authorship plans, budgeting, the division of work and authority; and, where relevant, the involvement of local communities (Kontinen and Nguyahambi, 2020; White, 2020; Faure et al, 2021a; 2021b; Snijder et al, 2023). The importance of funding regimes in influencing opportunities for greater equity in collaborative research has been underscored (Bradley, 2008; Ishengoma, 2016; Grieve and Mitchell, 2020; Faure et al, 2021a; 2021b; Flint et al, 2022).

Reflecting such insights, a growing number of Europe- or North America-led schemes – including, for example, the Research Fairness Initiative (COHRED, 2018), the KPFE and SCNAT (2011) or UKCDR and ESSENCE (2022) guides and the IRD equitable scientific partnerships model (IRD, 2022) – have developed blueprints for fostering or tracking good ‘equitable partnerships’ practice. Such practice is, variously, expected to yield enhanced impact and uptake of research findings, longevity of partnerships and the integrity of investigations. While some frames additionally reference a consequent ‘decolonisation’ of research agendas (UKCDR and ESSENCE, 2022), the goals, meanings or pathways to this end are neither clarified nor elaborated. Explicitly non-prescriptive in nature, the guidance provided by present equitable partnerships efforts is targeted, variously, at individual researchers, institutions and/or research funders.

Today, references to 'equitable partnerships' have become ubiquitous in Global North HE spheres, while a flurry of activity on the issue – comprising seminars, discussion forums and formal training, among others – continues to unfold.

Such mainstream attention, and the opening of dedicated space to consider how collaboration arrangements can be made fairer is as much welcome as it is overdue. We contend, however, that the present equitable partnerships 'push' at best sidesteps, at worst distracts from the imperative of a more profound rebalancing of Africa–Global North relations in the global scientific effort *as a whole* – a rebalancing called for in a long history of intellectual thought from Africa and the 'Global South' broadly.

Thinking beyond equitable partnerships?

In what follows, we delineate a set of arguments on the case for, and nature of, such a fundamental shift and on the need to think beyond 'equitable partnerships'. We draw on African and other post- and decolonial, including feminist scholarship, on official UNESCO international science statistics as well as on systems thinking. Recognising the infinite complexity of research and HE dynamics, relationships, actors and structures that we are concerned with, we understand our lines of reasoning as necessarily partial and heuristic in nature. We offer them as propositions for what needs to become a more critical and broad-based debate on a 'reimagining' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2022) of, and true alternatives (de Sousa Santos, 2022) for Africa and global science futures.

Point of departure

Our point of departure is an acknowledgement of Africa's deeply unfavourable positioning in the global science and research ecosystem. This has been highlighted in recent analyses (Fonn et al, 2018; Badat, 2022) and is illustrated by all presently available metrics. UNESCO data show that Central, Eastern, Southern and West Africa together, while constituting 10 per cent of the world's adult population in 2018, contributed only 0.7 per cent of all researchers and 1.6 per cent of all scientific publications worldwide.^{2,3} Indicators at individual scientist-level echo this picture: among the 6,602 most highly cited scholars globally in 2021, only 16 were affiliated with institutions in the continent of which 8 were from South Africa (Clarivate, 2021). More broadly, the citation impact of Africa-only publications is considerably lower than that of internationally co-authored work (Confraria et al, 2018; Asubiaro, 2019), reflecting, among other things, a dominant wider academic publishing culture that disadvantages actors from continent (Mills et al, 2022). Such positioning of African actors and outputs in global science contrasts, inescapably, with that of the 'Global North' – Europe, North America and Australia–New Zealand. The disparities are further reflected in – and entrenched through – global university league tables, which purport to measure, among other things, the volume, recognition and global 'reputation' of scientific work (QS, 2023). Latest rankings show only one African higher education institution (HEI) to be within the top 200: the University of Cape Town, placed 173rd. Only seven institutions in the continent, of which five are in South Africa and two in Egypt, are in the top 500. No African university outside of South Africa, Ghana, Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda and Tunisia is positioned among the top 1,000 (QS, 2023) – underscoring the extreme disparities in rankings and scholarly

output also *within* the continent, with an overwhelming majority of institutions located at or close to the bottom of the scale.

Problematising positionings in the global knowledge production system

The contrasting places of the ‘Global North’ and Africa in the worldwide scientific knowledge production system appears, in present ‘equitable partnerships’ thought, to be taken as a given, even at face value, as a backdrop of ‘inherent inequalities’ (Faure et al, 2021a). While this invites reflection in and of itself, the broader point is a need to properly *problematis* these positionings – on four counts.

Problematic 1: product of active strategies

Rather than being accidental, the disparate position of Africa and the Global North in the global scientific effort needs to be understood at least partly as an outcome of strategies and investments in particular by those at the top of the field. Amid ever fiercer competition in the sector and its vital importance in the global knowledge economy, many HEI and national governments are intent on retaining or improving their leading positions in global science (Ndofirepi, 2017; de Wit and Altbach, 2021). Individual HEI expect such standing to yield returns in international student numbers and expanded funding, while governments anticipate both political and economic gains to national interests. An example of the latter is the UK’s ambition to become a ‘global science superpower’, as articulated in the UKRI strategy 2021–27 (UKRI, 2022). Crucially, national policy explicitly seeks to foster and fund international, including ‘equitable’, research collaborations as part of efforts to this end:

Through our international activities we will forge new equitable partnerships and deepen existing relationships with trusted partners, making the UK a collaborator and destination of choice for international talent, innovative companies and inward investment. ...

Collaborating internationally will help us discover new science, develop new technologies, enable UK companies to success globally and access overseas markets, improve our security and resilience and increase our global influence. (UKRI, 2022: 12)

Making use of concomitant domestic funding streams, many Global North HEI pursue international and ‘equitable’ research collaborations including with Africa, in the knowledge that they earn gains in rankings and prestige and, probably, in research assessment frames that reward development or policy ‘impact’⁴ (de Wit and Altbach, 2021; QS, 2023).

Problematic 2: uneven playing field

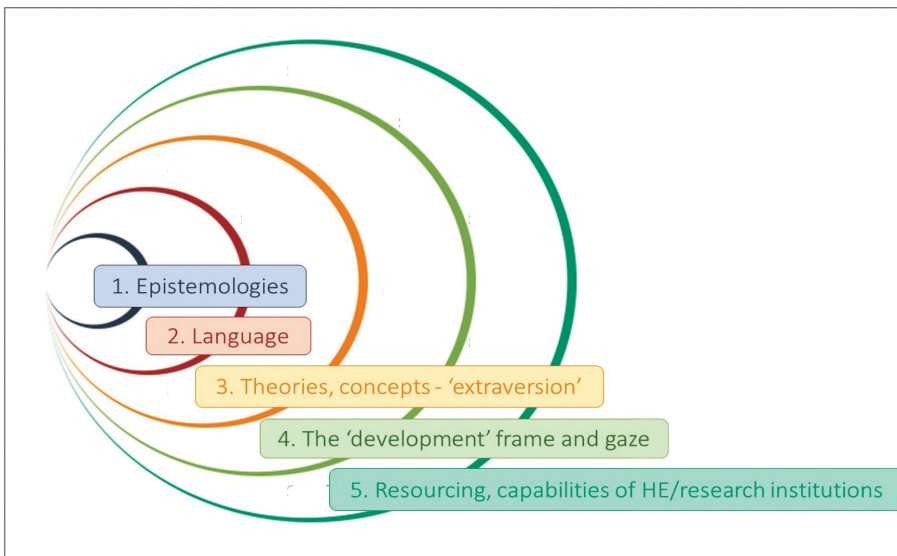
Just as the contrasting positionings of Africa and the Global North in the global science and research ecosystem are an outcome of active strategies pursued by actors today, so do they reflect an uneven playing field in scientific knowledge production. This unequal opportunity endures as a legacy of colonialism – and entails multiple

layers of power imbalances that are perhaps best imagined, heuristically, as a set of concentric circles (see [Figure 1](#)).

At the very core are imbalances and injustices at the epistemic level. African post- and decolonial scholarship ([Mudimbe, 1988](#); [Hountondji, 1995; 1997; 2009](#); [Odora Hoppers, 2002](#); [Nyamnjoh, 2012](#); [Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; 2018; 2020](#); [Badat, 2022](#)) has long drawn attention to, and critiqued, the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemologies in the production of scientific knowledge in/on Africa and globally, the associated assumption of their universal validity, and the concomitant discounting of ways of knowing from the continent. Historically part of a wider negation of the capacities of African colonial 'subjects' for knowledge production, such 'epistemic violence' ([Spivak, 1988](#); [Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018](#)) was premised on racist notions of inferior intellectual and mental competencies of conquered peoples in the continent ([Nwosimiri, 2022](#)). [Quijano, 2007](#) has posited an inextricable link between such discriminatory beliefs and the Cartesian duality of 'subject' and 'object' in processes of generating knowledge. A second layer of power imbalances, inextricably linked with the first, arises at the linguistic level. Languages, as [Mignolo \(2003: 669\)](#) observes, 'are not just cultural phenomena' but the 'location where knowledge is inscribed'. The predominant use of Western languages in the production of scientific knowledge, as [wa Thiong'o \(1986\)](#) and [Prah \(2009\)](#) underscore is constitutive of the hegemony of Eurocentric ways of knowing.

A third layer of power asymmetries then builds on the epistemic and language imbalances. This, as [Paulin Hountondji's \(1990\)](#) notion of 'extraversion' and wider Southern theory and decolonial perspectives ([Trisos et al, 2021](#)) highlight, is the default, dominant use of Western theories, categories and concepts in scientific inquiry on how the world (including Africa) works. An accompanying inherent orientation toward the 'West' as the rightful site of scientific knowledge production is entrenched as a result ([Hountondji, 1990; 2009](#); [Connell, 2007](#)). Critical African, including

Figure 1: Multiple layers of power imbalances in global North - Africa scientific knowledge production



feminist, analyses have exposed the fallacy of assuming that ‘Western’ constructs – even the most basic, such as gender or individual agency – are necessarily valid as a priori scaffolds for understanding ‘Africa’ in ways that do justice to its multiple and evolving ‘realities, lexicons and matrices’ (Cooper and Morrell, 2014: 3–4) (Mudimbe, 1988; Nyamnjoh, 2002; Oyěwùmí, 2005). Notwithstanding spaces of contestation, the ‘theoretical hegemony of the North’ continues, however (Connell et al, 2018; Connell, 2018) and undergirds a fourth, crucial, layer of power imbalance in scientific knowledge production that arises from the logic of the development frame. Just as Eurocentric knowledge frameworks dominate present global understandings of how the world and humans ‘work’, so do such frames and ‘global designs’ (Mignolo, 2020) dominate shared international agendas on what human flourishing entails and how the world *ought* to work (Eglund and Nyamnjoh, 2004). Such agendas marginalise alternative understandings of progress (Ramose, 1999; Freeman, 2017; Matthews, 2018; Macamo, 2019; Tamale, 2020) and render Africa as ‘developing’: a site of deficits that needs to catch up with modern advancement (Amin, 1989; Matthews, 2018; Pailey, 2020). Currently captured in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, the development frame sustains, indeed motivates, much, if not most, contemporary research in/on/for Africa. As such it constrains scholarship in and from the continent in three critical ways. First, it delimits the major substantive fields that are considered ‘relevant’ – and receive funding for investigation in/by/for Africa. Second, within fields, the frame often ‘imposes’ particular accounts of the ‘problem’ or desired solutions that require evidence for action and impact (Hountondji, 2009). Such foci can certainly align with needs on the ground (Matthews, 2018; Pailey, 2020). However, they foreclose inquiry on alternative interpretations of key development problematics (Macamo, 2019) and, more broadly, *curtail* research on substantive areas and intellectual agendas that are priorities in the continent, but are not included or foregrounded in international development agendas (Mkandawire, 1994; Badat, 2022). UNESCO (2021) data illustrate this point, showing a large preponderance of health-focused research outputs in the continent – on average, 49 per cent of all academic publications across 53 African countries (2017–19) were in health sciences⁵ – but only comparably minimal scientific work in critical, strategic areas, including future technologies and engineering-related fields (ICT/maths/statistics/physics/astronomy).⁶ Badat (2022), in a similar vein, highlights the restricted body of arts, humanities and social sciences research in the continent.

The third constraint on African scholarship imposed by the development frame is the near closing-off of geographies or spaces for investigation and engagement. Pailey (2020) highlights the unidirectional research ‘gaze’ from the ‘developed’ Global North to Africa. The gaze renders Africa as a certain place for investigation and benign intervention by Global North actors (Matthews, 2018). In contrast, scholarly examination of the Global North (or indeed the world, broadly) by African scientists is, implicitly, considered implausible, almost inconceivable. Rarely, thus, is the gaze returned in bidirectional inquiry of comparable issues; rarer still is it reversed through African investigations and interpretations of challenges in Europe or North America for example (Pailey, 2020; Kupe and Isike, 2022).

Returning to the multiple layers of power imbalances, a fifth and final such layer is furthered by the prior four. These are the vast disparities in institutional resourcing and capacities, including physical and data infrastructures, between most HEI in Africa and their counterparts in the Global North (Hountondji, 1995; Ezeh and Lu, 2019). The

deficient resource-base of African universities reflects not only limitations in domestic investments in science within the continent (UNESCO, 2021). It is also perpetuated by dominant international funding approaches, which focus on supporting discrete, limited-duration research projects – often geared to achieving relatively short-term policy or practice ‘impact’. Such envelopes are poorly positioned to foster sustained, longer-term programmes of autonomous Africa-based scientific work and to build independent institutional and individual academic expertise (Mkandawire, 2010; Ishengoma, 2016; Ezeh and Lu, 2019). Together, the five layers of power imbalances then underpin and give rise to the visible asymmetries observed in arrangements for Africa–Global North research collaborations.

Problematic 3: wider repercussions for Africa

The respective place of Africa and ‘Global North’ and the underlying uneven playing field in global science may be understood as a manifestation of the workings of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) in the empire framework terms the ‘metaphysical empire’ or what Quijano (2000) diagnoses as the ‘coloniality of knowledge’. Both authors underscore the foundational importance of such hierarchies in knowledge production for sustaining wider disparities in the global political and economic order. The third problematic of Africa’s unfavourable positioning in global science then, is the probably far-reaching negative repercussions for the continent’s broader prospects and place in the global political economy.

Recent analyses underscore the benefits of a strong and expansive domestic scientific effort for economic growth and global influence (McClory, 2015; Pinto and Texeira, 2020). Prestigious universities, by enhancing a country’s ability to attract foreign students, yield not only direct economic benefits, but accrue diplomacy and reputational gains – key components of soft power (Nye, 2011; McClory, 2015). Control of (the development of) strategic, future technologies is key for attaining or maintaining commercial and political as well as military strength (Lewis, 2022). Africa – given its unfavourable positioning and the uneven playing field in global science – remains poorly able to reap such critically important returns.

Related but distinct are likely negative consequences for the continent’s ability to substantively and positively shape international or domestic policy (Freeman, 2017). The dominance of the development frame and the ‘theoretical hegemony’ of the Global North imply that problematics of – and solutions for – challenges, as conceived and prioritised ‘on the ground’, remain uncaptured (Amin, 1990; Hountondji, 1990; 2009) and largely unavailable as a resource for informing transformational policy agendas at local, national or global levels.

Problematic 4: wider repercussions for the global community

A fourth, final problematic, then, is negative consequences for the global community as a whole, which arise from the marginalisation of knowledges and knowledge actors from the continent in the quest to produce scientific knowledge that can help address the multiple, including existential, crises facing humanity.

Scholars such as Odora Hoppers (2002) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) have argued that it is precisely the ‘monochrome logic’ of Western knowledge systems and models of modernity, sustained by what Santos (2023) identifies as a pervasive ‘presentism’,

that has given rise to these crises. A continued reliance on science that reflects this logic would mean compromising the world's collective potential to find meaningful solutions to them.

Imperatives

These four problematics imply that a rebalancing of the positioning of Africa and the Global North in the global science and research ecosystem is indispensable. The goal must be that scholars, institutions and knowledges produced from the continent take their rightful place in the global scientific effort. At this juncture such a shift is imperative, on one level, as a matter of social justice and advancing Africa's aspirations (AU, 2015) – or perhaps more to the point, and drawing on Young (2011), it is a matter of remedying a 'structural injustice'. On a second level, it is a matter of fostering the richer, more potent, pluriversal science and scholarship that the global community, collectively, requires to help sustain humanity and the planet and properly support human dignity (Escobar, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

Toward 'transformative research' collaborations

Africa–Global North research collaborations have a critical role to play in advancing the required rebalancing of the global science and research ecosystem. This is precisely because such collaborations, presently, *dominate* Africa's scientific effort. Latest UNESCO *Science Report 2021* data show that a large majority of recognised scientific outputs from the continent – 88 per cent for East and Central Africa, 85 per cent for Southern Africa between 2017 and 2019 – arose from international collaborations, with the US, UK and France positioned as top partnering countries (UNESCO, 2021).⁷ Intra-African cooperation, though increasing (Abdulrahman et al, 2021) has remained minimal in comparison (Blom et al, 2016; Owusu-Nimo and Boshoff, 2017; Hagenmeier et al, 2017; Badat, 2022).

The pervasiveness of joint Global North–Africa inquiry means that such collaborations presently underpin the continent's unfavourable positioning in global science system. Vice versa it means – drawing on systems thinking (Meadows, 2008; Green, 2016) – that such collaborations offer an entry or 'leverage point' for advancing a shift in the system as a whole: they have the potential to be *transformative*.

What will such transformation take? It will take, first, a *transformative* mode of research collaborations. This would be oriented not only to ensuring fairness in concrete collaboration arrangements. It would also actively redress the multilayered power imbalances – at epistemic, language, theory, development frame and institutional resourcing levels – that make up the uneven playing field in knowledge production.

Ways to translate such an abstract mode into practice will, of course, need to be forged across the formal, natural and social sciences, arts and humanities. Important ideas in this regard will come from recent or ongoing learning initiatives focused on finding new approaches to doing joint South–North inquiry (for example, Halvorsen et al, 2019; IDS, 2023).

A transformative collaboration mode will then need to become established as best, and then standard, practice. This will necessitate wide-ranging changes: in individual consciousness and capabilities, in shared norms, in resourcing streams and, crucially, in the policy and regulatory frameworks that, ultimately, set the rules of the game for

Africa–Global North research relations (Green, 2016). Such policy change will need to be pursued by individual HEI and networks, funding agencies, HE or research assessment bodies, publishers, national or international science policy agencies and, ultimately, by national governments.

If there is an imperative to advance such change, then being explicit about where responsibilities and the onus for action should lie becomes unavoidable. Young's (2011) notion of structural injustice and the allied 'social connection model of responsibility' may again be helpful here. Young argues that all those – institutions and individuals – who contribute through their actions, even if without malicious intent, to structural processes that result in injustice, have a shared, forward-looking responsibility to work together to 'reshape their social practices to eliminate or rectify the injustices' (Reiman, 2012: 741). Individuals, specifically, have, in Young's view a *political responsibility* to 'monitor [their] social institutions to make sure that they do not perpetuate structural injustices:

Because we dwell on the stage of history, and not simply in our houses, we cannot avoid the imperative to have a relationship with actions and events performed by institutions of our society, often in our name, and with our passive or active support. The imperative of political responsibility consists in watching these institutions, monitoring their effects to make sure that they are not ... harmful. (Young, 2011: 88)

Applied to our context, this suggests that we all – individual scholars and research managers, decision makers in HEI, relevant science networks, funding and governance agencies – are duty-bound to advocate for, or drive, required policy shifts in our respective spheres. We are similarly called upon to nurture the further critical intellectual exchange, debate and mutual learning that will be needed not only to inform and sustain such structural shifts, but to shape, embed and progressively hone the practice of transformative collaborations.

Policy change, engagement, debate and learning, clearly, are required by actors in the Global North just as in Africa. The thrust, however, will need to differ: the former must focus on ceding power and space. The latter must focus on demanding them.

A final thought returns us to the present 'equitable partnerships' effort: to a realisation that it sidesteps, or at worst distracts from, the necessary transformation in Africa–Global North research relations – and to the conclusion that we must think and move beyond it.

Notes

¹ We employ the terms 'Global North' and 'Global North–Africa' cautiously. We understand the former as an analytical category that captures actors benefiting from the unequal power-relations derived from historical and contemporary processes such as slavery, colonialism and the neoliberal restructuring of the global political economy since the 1980s. We understand 'Africa' as part of the equivalent analytical category, the 'Global South', encompassing societies that continue to suffer from historical and contemporary unjust relations that render socio-economic, political, financial, military, cultural and epistemic dominance to the 'Global North' (Dados and Connell, 2012; Prashad, 2014). We recognise that a simple 'Global North–Africa' categorisation cannot

represent the complexity of evolving power-relations within and among societies globally and in the continent (Kloß, 2017) and acknowledge the need for continued reflection on potential alternative terms better suited to capturing Africa-wide concerns in the global science and research ecosystem.

² This contrasts with publication shares of 5.3 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO, 2021).

³ It is important to note that such analyses fail to capture the considerable volume of African scholarly work that is published in the continent in journals that are not included in the global science indexing database that informs measures of ‘legitimate’ academic output. This, and the consequent limited worldwide recognition of such scholarship (notwithstanding important initiatives to enhance it (AJOL, 2023; AfricArXiv, 2023)) are further drivers of Africa’s unfavourable positioning in the global scientific effort (Mills et al, 2022).

⁴ Global university rankings give weight to internationally co-authored journal articles, wide and sustained global research networks and the global reputation of HEI (QS, 2023).

⁵ The highest share (89 per cent) was recorded for the Gambia. A notable exception to this trend is Algeria with only 6 per cent (UNESCO, 2021).

⁶ While for EU28 countries the proportion of publications in these technology fields was 44.3 percent in 2017–19, it was only 19.8 per cent for Southern Africa, 17.9 per cent for Central and Eastern Africa, and 13.6 per cent for Western Africa. In several African countries the share was below 10 per cent (UNESCO, 2021).

⁷ This scenario contrasts sharply with that for EU28 or OECD members for whom the share of international collaboration on scientific outputs was 45.2 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively, much of this reflecting intra-EU or intra-OECD cooperations (UNESCO, 2021).

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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