CHAPTER 2

Whose agenda?
Power, policies, and priorities in North–South research partnerships

Megan Bradley

Abstract

Research for development is often undertaken through partnerships between researchers working in the Global North and Global South. Continued domination of collaborative agendas by the interests of Northern donors and scholars is often lamented, almost invariably eliciting calls for more equitable Southern engagement in agenda-setting processes. Yet the implications of this and the obstacles to its realization are rarely examined. This chapter examines how bilateral donor strategies affect collaborative agenda-setting processes: donor policies definitively shape these by requiring Southern researchers to partner with Northern counterparts in order to receive support. Innovative experiences of the Netherlands and the UK in the first decade of the 21st century demonstrate that revamping funding policies can improve Southern researchers’ ability to influence North–South research agendas, and diversify access to collaborative funding. But even the most innovative partnership funding strategies cannot resolve all tensions and inequalities inherent to collaborative agenda-setting processes.

The chapter also explores researchers’ motivations for entering into North–South partnerships, the obstacles Southern researchers encounter in agenda-setting processes, and the strategies they employ to ensure that such partnerships respond to their concerns. North–South partnerships can augment individual and institutional resources and skills, but they are not a panacea for all the challenges associated with capacity building and the creation and use of knowledge for development. Donors and researchers alike are well advised to recognize the limitations of this approach and use it prudently: North–South partnerships are not necessarily the best way to advance research agendas rooted in Southern priorities.

Keywords: development research, donor–recipient partnerships, agenda setting, North–South collaboration, demand-driven approach, excellence-focused approach

Current relevance

Central to any discussion of what knowledge is created by whom and for which purpose in research and cooperation for development is the question

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of the power, politics, and priorities of those involved in donor-recipient partnerships. On this count, even if original research on which this chapter is based was completed in 2007, nearly a decade ago, this study remains more relevant than ever to the ongoing debate on this issue. Despite variations of degree in donor-recipient power imbalances, in Buffardi’s words (2013) there is a persistent under-representation of recipient-country actors in such partnerships. And there is a real risk that such an imbalance will endure, if not worsen. Over the last decade, slow economic growth and a more conservative political climate have been affecting donor governments’ revenues and priorities in most high-income and even in some emerging economies, thereby increasing domestic pressure everywhere for restraint on spending overseas and for shifting attention to widening domestic inequalities. As mentioned in the introductory chapter (Mougeot, 2016), official development assistance has stagnated or declined, becoming more selective and concerned with supporting trade to grow donor countries’ own competitiveness. Control over knowledge is becoming paramount to trade and includes creating development agendas in new resource or consumer markets, recruiting the best talents from such countries to advance science and innovation at home, as well as expanding abroad the reach of one’s own knowledge industry.

In this context, this scholarly examination of the inequity risks linked to power imbalances in donor-recipient research partnerships adds value to the debate in three ways. Firstly, it provides a unique review of innovative policy experiments from the first decade of this century by a couple of the more progressive and reflective OECD agencies that were trying to redress the power imbalance in partnerships involving Global North donors and research recipients in the Global North and Global South. Surprisingly, the Dutch ‘demand-driven’ and the British ‘excellence-focused’ approaches to development research partnerships garnered limited attention in the scholarly literature. Beyond their adoption to varying extents by most bilateral agencies, or at least they were said to have been adopted, the jury is still out on whether the adoption of these approaches significantly enhanced capacity; that is, turned nascent Global South institutions into strong national actors for the development of their society. But secondly, and more critically, although the broader literature on North-South research cooperation often laments the persistent domination of collaborative agendas by Northern donors and scholars – and perhaps more so when these tackle global challenges – and does call for more equitable Southern engagement in agenda setting, the implications of this and the obstacles to its realization are still rarely examined in detail. That is what this study does. Thirdly, beyond its scrutiny of institutional innovations in the Global North and the struggle of Northern and Southern researchers to agree on productive research agendas, the study quite distinctly explores Global South researchers’ own motivations for entering into North-South partnerships. It looks, from their perspective, at the obstacles that they face in agenda-setting processes and the strategies they use
to ensure that partnerships do respond to their own concerns. On this latter point, Southern researchers’ emerging strategies are consistent with a growing availability of more flexible sources of funding to Global South researchers and organizations, as well as with growing pressure for local control over agendas, as noted in the introductory chapter. Overall, the study offers a well-rounded appreciation of the political economy at play in the Northern donor–Southern recipient relationship.

Introduction

In 1972, the Northern and Southern delegates to an OECD Conference of Directors of Research and Training Institutes identified two major trends in international research cooperation. First, they applauded a growing commitment to Southern self-reliance. Second, they noted increased interest in ‘new forms’ of North–South research collaboration, particularly interdisciplinary, mutually beneficial partnerships managed in the South, and based on Southern priorities (Amin et al., 1975: 790). More than 40 years later, North–South partnerships remain a prominent feature of the development research landscape, but donors and researchers are still struggling to come to terms with these ‘new forms’ of cooperation.

Partnership suffers from no lack of proponents. Among many donors and researchers, partnership is often seen as a good in and of itself, and arguing against partnership is akin to standing up against motherhood or friendship. Advocates of North–South research partnerships suggest that it is efficient, intellectually enriching, and conducive to capacity building. Above all, it is seen as mutually beneficial (Hatton and Schroeder, 2007: 157–58). However, veterans of North–South research partnerships describe a more complex reality, shaped first and foremost by the fact that ‘partnering’ is often the only way for Southern researchers to access funding. Alongside the benefits of partnership come a range of obstacles from language barriers and complex management structures to inequitable access to financial resources, libraries, conferences, training, and publishing opportunities. Mismatched expectations, lack of face-to-face interaction, and different levels of methodological sophistication can also throw a wrench into partnership plans.

The agenda-setting process represents a particularly formidable obstacle for many development research partnerships. The literature on North–South research cooperation often laments the continued domination of collaborative agendas by the interests of Northern donors and scholars, and almost invariably calls for more equitable Southern engagement in agenda-setting processes. Yet the implications of this statement and the obstacles to its realization are rarely examined in detail. This gap between what is necessary and the reality is striking because the developmental impact of research initiatives is typically limited if they are divorced from the priorities that resonate among Southern actors. Furthermore, better integrating Southern perspectives into collaborative research agendas promises to diversify and enrich the quality
and insightfulness of scholarship in fields from disaster management and urban planning to competition policy and conservation.

As a modest response to this gap, the first section of this chapter examines how bilateral donor strategies affect collaborative agenda-setting processes, focusing on approaches adopted by the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, in particular on policies in effect between 2000 and 2007. I argue that donor policies definitively shape agenda-setting processes, chiefly by prompting or even requiring Southern researchers to partner with Northern counterparts in order to receive support. The experiences of the Netherlands and the UK demonstrate that revamping bilateral donors’ funding policies may improve Southern researchers’ ability to influence North–South research agendas and diversify access to collaborative funding opportunities. However, even the most innovative funding strategies cannot resolve all the tensions and inequalities that characterize collaborative agenda-setting processes.

The second section explores researchers’ motivations for entering into North–South partnerships, the obstacles Southern researchers encounter in agenda-setting processes, and some of the strategies they employ to attempt to ensure that research partnerships respond to their concerns. This analysis suggests that while North–South partnerships have the potential to significantly advance the production of knowledge for development, strong Southern research organizations are best placed to maximize the benefits of collaboration. However, many of the organizations entering into partnerships lack a clear sense of their own priorities and other institutional capacities critical to successful agenda negotiations. Although North–South partnerships can augment individual and institutional resources and skills, they are not a panacea for all the challenges associated with capacity building and the creation of knowledge to inform sustainable development policies. Donors and researchers alike are therefore well advised to recognize the limitations of this approach and use it prudently, as North–South partnerships are not necessarily the best way to advance agendas rooted in Southern priorities.

Before developing these arguments, the chapter introduces some of the key concepts that underpin this research and reviews the state of knowledge on North–South research partnerships, concentrating on the question of agenda setting. Next, the methodology used to execute this work is explained. Briefly, the arguments advanced in this chapter are informed by an analysis of contemporary donor policies, as well as by the understanding of North–South partnerships and development research funding gained while working with the Canadian Partnerships (CP) Program of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and subsequently as a university-based academic and as a policy researcher with the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. The chapter also draws extensively on the results of 43 semi-structured interviews on North–South research partnerships that were conducted in Europe, the Middle East, and Southern Africa with donors, NGO representatives, academic officials, and migration and governance researchers (see the section on methodology for additional detail).
State of knowledge and key concepts

Before proceeding, the state of knowledge in this field and the slippery terms employed in it demand a word of clarification.

Slippery terminology

While the terms ‘North’ and ‘South’ usefully underscore how geography and colonial history have structured development and research opportunities, they are certainly not discrete concepts. In fact, the practice of partnership underlines the impossibility of using these terms as binary opposites, as many of the foremost actors in international research cooperation elude easy categorization as ‘Northern’ or ‘Southern’. In some regions, ‘North and South’ is not the most relevant terminology of partnership. In the Middle East, for example, many researchers suggested to me that the key distinction structuring research partnerships was not North–South, but rather the distinction between western and predominantly Muslim states. Furthermore, countries like South Africa, Brazil, China, and India are home to well-financed, world-class research institutions, which operate alongside innumerable organizations struggling simply to pay their bills. International organizations, such as United Nations agencies, often play major roles in research cooperation, but cannot be neatly labelled ‘Northern’ or ‘Southern’. Individual researchers also subvert the North–South ‘divide’, as many Southern citizens pursue their education and careers in the North. At the same time, in some fields a growing number of Northern researchers are joining Southern institutions.

This chapter is concerned with agenda-setting processes in North–South development research partnerships. Development research may be defined as ‘applied research that has the objective of leading directly to sustainable improvement in the quality of human existence or basic research that results in an improved understanding of factors that affect development’ (Pestieau et al., 1998). To be sure, there are no monolithic research agendas on any issue in the Global North and South. Rather, broad regional and national priorities are tempered by factors ranging from institutional mandates and community-level economic interests to individuals’ political convictions and sociocultural allegiances. Development research agendas are increasingly enriched by the involvement in research partnerships of not only university-based academics, but also policymakers, practitioners, NGO representatives, and members of communities grappling directly with the causes and consequences of poverty.

Just as there are innumerable research agendas, there are myriad partnership modalities, including one-on-one co-authorship, training schemes, institutional twinning arrangements, networks, and the co-management of journals and other publications. Partnerships also vary remarkably in their duration, composition, budgets, and the extent to which they focus on capacity building. This study is principally concerned with partnerships linking teams of researchers in the Global North and South, which aim to produce new knowledge to support
the development process. Although various authors have attributed different meanings to partnership, collaboration, and cooperation, throughout this chapter these terms are employed interchangeably, reflecting their practical usage by the participants in North–South exchanges. There are pitfalls to any set of terminology. An important shortcoming of my use of the term ‘collaboration’ was pointed out to me by Palestinian researchers who stressed that in their context, ‘collaboration’ denotes support for the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories. This is of course not my meaning.

**State of knowledge**

Many professionals involved in North–South development research projects lament the lack of studies on these partnerships to support critical reflection and the refining of approaches to collaboration (Box, 2001). However, a review of the literature on North–South research partnerships suggests that studies and evaluations of collaborative research endeavours are more plentiful, and their findings more instructive, than often assumed (Bradley, 2007a).

Still, significant issues remain to be explored. Many scholars interested in the challenges of research partnerships appear to work in isolation, with little interdisciplinary dialogue. For example, while there are a considerable number of studies on North–South research partnerships in the fields of health and agriculture, opportunities have not been grasped to compare the experiences of each group. Furthermore, most of the literature on North–South research partnerships appears to have been produced by Northern or Northern-based researchers and institutions. Southern reflections on North–South research partnerships seem few and far between, although there may be studies by Southern scholars that are simply not available electronically or in Northern libraries. Major types of studies and reflections on North–South research partnerships include programme reports and evaluations (often produced by donors), discussions of policies and principles to guide effective partnerships, reports from conferences on North–South partnerships, and chapters in academic books and articles in peer-reviewed journals (Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries, (KFPE) 1998; RAWOO, 2001; AUCC, 2006). Most of these articles review the experiences of major research partnerships and suggest avenues for improving collaborative work. They are typically published in journals on research management and methodology.

The literature on North–South research partnerships identifies a wide range of partnership modalities. Ogden and Porter (2000) and Scholey (2006) provide detailed perspectives on the terminology of partnership. Ogden and Porter, for example, highlight the difference between individuals’ goals and concerns, and institutional needs and agendas in the context of research cooperation. They call the relationship between individual researchers ‘partnership’, and use the term ‘collaboration’ to denote institutional relationships.

Major types (structures) of North–South partnerships relevant to research include:
Partnerships between individual researchers / research teams brought together to carry out a specific project (ranging from one-off co-authorship of research papers to large-scale, long-term inter-institutional research partnerships);

- Capacity-building partnerships (no direct research component) (may be focused on individual or institutional levels, e.g. institutional twinning); and

- North–South research networks (formal and informal).

Beyond differences in the structure of North–South partnerships, collaborations also vary in terms of duration, sources of financial support, the degree of focus on advocacy and policymaking, and the frequency and intensity of interactions between Northern and Southern partners. Principal actors whose roles are examined in the literature on North–South research partnerships include individual researchers and research teams, research organizations (universities, NGOs, and think tanks), Southern communities, policymakers, international organizations, and donors. The literature on donor approaches to supporting research cooperation is plentiful, especially in terms of Canadian and Dutch experiences.

The literature on North–South research partnerships identifies a number of key trends that have emerged over time in the collaborative research landscape. As early as 1975, researchers argued that collaborative research frameworks were often inadequate and counterproductive. They called for a reorientation of North–South partnerships so that collaborations could strengthen Southern institutions while producing more policy-relevant, critical research. Early calls were also raised for the creation of mutually beneficial partnerships, supported with long-term, flexible, and diversified funding. In varying degrees, over the course of the past three decades, these prescriptions have matured into discernible trends. For example, the production of policy-oriented research has emerged as a virtually uncontested goal, and partnerships are increasingly seen as an opportunity for developing the capacity of Northern and Southern researchers alike. Sector-specific trends are also evident. For instance, the literature demonstrates significant and sustained interest in partnerships in the fields of health and agricultural research, and rising interest in the field of science and technology. Despite increased donor interest in multidisciplinary development research, the literature suggests that creating multidisciplinary North–South partnerships and promoting interdisciplinary dialogue remains a struggle.

A significant range of the literature in this field is devoted to examination of concepts and theories closely related to North–South partnerships, including innovation theory, demand-led research, and ‘knowledge-based’ approaches to development. However, there is much more limited research available on motivations for partnership. In contrast, there is more abundant work on the ethics and politics of partnership. Much of this literature suggests that asymmetry between partners remains the principal obstacle to productive research collaboration. This asymmetry manifests itself in the form of
inequitable access to tangible and intangible goods, including information, training, funding, conferences, and publishing opportunities, as well as in the disproportionate influence of Northern partners in project administration and budget management. Structural inequalities also clearly impact the process of selecting partners and setting the research agenda. In this connection, the literature on the ethics and politics of partnership also discusses the continued impacts of neocolonialism and globalization on collaboration. Although these obstacles face researchers working in a wide range of fields, they are perhaps particularly pertinent in the context of North–South development research partnerships.

As with development research more broadly, it is difficult to evaluate the precise impacts of North–South research partnerships. However, the literature suggests that conceptions of the success and impact of research partnerships are broadening. While the literature reviewed for this study highlights the considerable body of research on co-authorship, it also acknowledges widespread scepticism regarding the utility of co-publication as a measure of the health of a research partnership or collaboration strategy. By the same token, it is increasingly well recognized that scientific advances are only one yardstick that can be used to measure the utility of a North–South partnership. Mutual capacity building and the translation of research results into policy interventions are increasingly seen as significant achievements and indicators of success.

A review of the literature on North–South development research partnerships identifies a range of knowledge gaps that deserve greater attention. For example, the literature on North–South research partnerships is predominantly produced by Northerners. More in-depth examinations by Southern researchers of the questions and challenges surrounding partnerships would be an invaluable complement to the state of knowledge on this issue. The literature review undertaken in advance of this work concluded that subjects that would benefit from further research include: the approaches of key donors, including the United States and Japan, whose experiences do not appear to be well-documented in the literature; the changing role of North–South partnerships in ‘Southern’ countries with increasingly robust national research communities (e.g. Brazil, India, China, South Africa); alternative and emerging partnership structures and activities; strategies to maximize the potential of North–South research partnerships to be mutually beneficial; and the challenge of designing collaborative research agendas that advance mutual interests, but are firmly rooted in Southern needs and priorities. The latter issue was chosen as the focus of this chapter.

Methodology

The study profiled in this chapter is an analysis of donor policies and a detailed review of the secondary literature, as well as a series of 43 in-depth, semi-structured interviews on North–South research partnerships that were conducted in Southern Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Canada with researchers working in the fields of migration and governance, academic officials, NGO
representatives, and donors. The distribution of the interviews across the relevant areas was as follows: the Netherlands (8), the United Kingdom (5), Botswana (4), South Africa (9), Jordan (8), and Israel and the Palestinian Territories (9). Interviewees in the initial participant pool were contacted largely on the basis of recommendations provided by programme officers at IDRC. The interview pool was expanded on the basis of independent research and suggestions from various interviewees. Participants’ names and identifying details have been omitted to preserve confidentiality.

The interviews were carried out in English between October 2006 and March 2007, and each lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. (The analysis presented in this chapter draws on these interviews, but is also updated in light of more recent research and policy developments.) They focused on the fields of migration and governance because these are timely, contentious issues that place the question of setting equitable, locally appropriate research agendas in sharp relief. However, this chapter does not analyse the distinctive challenges facing migration and governance researchers involved in North–South partnerships, as these have been discussed elsewhere (Bradley, 2007a). Rather, it offers a more holistic discussion of agenda-setting challenges, given that these interviews underlined that many of the difficulties associated with agenda setting are common to different fields. Making accurate generalizations about researchers’ experiences is a delicate task. Owing to the highly personalized nature of partnership experiences, there are exceptions to almost every trend.

In terms of focusing on the development research policies adopted by the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, these donors were selected on the basis of a purposive sampling strategy. These countries were selected because over the course of the past 30 years they have concertedly engaged in a process of reflecting upon and refining their policies on funding research for development, and supporting partnerships between researchers in the Global North and South. An examination of these deliberations and policies, and their implications, may therefore be informative for a broader discussion of the influence of donor strategies on collaborative research agendas.

More broadly, the arguments advanced in this chapter are informed by the understanding of North–South partnerships and development research funding gained while working with IDRC’s CP Program, and in subsequent professional work as a researcher in the field of forced migration. As a university-based academic and as a policy researcher with the Brookings Institution, I have had the opportunity to participate in the development of North–South research partnerships, and have come to appreciate from a first-hand perspective the complexities surrounding the agenda-setting process that are explored in this chapter.

North–South partnerships: donor policies and the business of research cooperation

The pervasive influence of donors on North–South research partnerships is widely accepted as a foregone conclusion among many experienced researchers.
Indeed, according to many Southern researchers, it is a ‘buyer’s market’ where partnerships and research agendas are concerned. One leading Southern researcher I interviewed used the term ‘partnership’ to convey the major role economic interests play in the creation of North–South research partnerships. Research funding opportunities are limited, particularly as development and research funding budgets have been cut in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Collaboration with Northern institutions is often a prerequisite for support; consequently, many Southern researchers enter into partnerships far removed from their own priorities simply to generate the income required to stay afloat. Some researchers object that this approach reduces research cooperation to a business, although many of its benefits (and harms) are not easily quantified or aggregated. While bilateral donors have received the lion’s share of the blame for the continued Northern dominance of collaborative research agendas, these agencies operate under a wide range of different ‘business models’, some of which are more conducive than others to bolstering Southern priorities. To be sure, other members of the donor community, such as independent foundations, research councils, and the private sector, also shape the creation of collaborative research agendas. The strengths and shortcomings of these donors’ approaches certainly merit further examination, but are largely beyond the scope of this study.

Assessing bilateral donors’ influence on collaborative research agendas is a complex task, as donor priorities and researchers’ interests are constantly interacting and evolving, and it cannot be assumed that donor policies affect all recipients in a uniform manner. Studies on donor influence typically concentrate on how funding policies affect advocacy efforts and field interventions, rather than research. This literature struggles to identify and account for the numerous variables that increase or decrease donors’ influence, and the case studies used to explicate donors’ influence are often anecdotal (Minear and Weiss, 1995; Vakil, 1997). At the general level, however, donors’ impact on collaborative research agendas is best understood on a spectrum from direct to indirect influence.

While troubling, overt donor interference in shaping or restricting the dissemination of research results appears to be relatively rare. Instead, donors exert considerable indirect influence over agenda-setting processes by identifying their programming priorities and establishing the structure of the international research funding system. Many facets of donor influence are well-known and their merits hotly debated: for example, donors influence the development of research agendas by requiring the studies they support to be explicitly ‘policy relevant’; by concertedly supporting multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder projects; and by constantly revising or scuttling certain programmatic priorities, which can impede researchers’ efforts to create coherent, long-term research plans. For instance, Bakewell (2008) has critiqued the conditioning of funding on the assumed ‘policy relevance’ of research results. Donors also affect agenda-setting efforts through their categorization of different countries in the Global South. Botswana, for instance, is defined by most bilateral donors...
as a middle-income country, rendering researchers in the country ineligible for many funding streams. Since domestic funding remains scarce, various research institutions in Botswana continue to pursue international support by repositioning themselves as brokers for regional and inter-regional collaborative work. This strategy underlines that, despite donors’ considerable influence, researchers do not simply respond to donors’ frameworks, but challenge their policies and priorities, as well as the assumptions that underpin them.

Perhaps most significantly, donors affect agenda-setting processes by making partnership a prerequisite for funding. Using North–South partnerships as a ‘default’ for funding not only adds an extra layer to agenda negotiations, but also creates a problematic starting point for articulating common research goals. As Hatton and Schroeder (2007: 157) argue, ‘the funding context within which partnerships must exist … increasingly represents a significant barrier to genuine partnership among Northern and Southern organizations’. In a context in which partnership is all too often ‘forced rather than volunteered’ (Hatton and Schroeder, 2007: 158), to what extent can carefully honed donor strategies mitigate inequities in collaborative agenda-setting processes?

‘Almost an ideology’: Dutch support for demand-driven partnerships

In the early 1990s under the leadership of then Minister of International Development Jan Pronk, the Dutch government launched a programme of ‘experiments’ in demand-driven research. According to Nair and Menon (2002: 2), demand-led research refers to ‘activities in which people are able to bring about their own development, with the objective of building up research systems to unleash the potential of the South’. Although experimental, the Netherlands’ demand-driven approach was a comprehensive policy that aimed to make a ‘novel’ contribution to development research, in large part by reducing the influence of Dutch academics and policymakers and transferring managerial and substantive responsibility for Dutch-supported research programmes to Southern researchers and communities. The demand-driven policy was manifested in a handful of innovative projects including nine Multi-annual Multidisciplinary Research Programmes (MMRPs) and several ‘symmetrical cooperation’ projects, among them the Indo–Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development (IDPAD), the South Africa–Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), the Ghanaian–Dutch Programme of Health Research for Development, and the Philippine–Dutch Programme of Biodiversity Research for Development. While the Dutch Directorate General for Development Cooperation (DGIS) channelled direct support to Southern researchers through the MMRPs, some of the symmetrical cooperation projects were overseen by the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO), an advisory body based in The Hague.

Although the demand-driven programmes absorbed a considerable proportion of DGIS research specialists’ time and energy, the projects did not represent a
significant percentage of the agency’s budget for development research, much of which continued to be directed towards more traditional research partnerships. Rather than being managed by embassy staff in the South, the demand-driven projects were supervised by a dedicated group of staff at DGIS headquarters in The Hague, whom observers of the process have described as having an ‘almost ideological’ commitment to the demand-driven approach. The research agendas guiding these projects were determined through carefully crafted ‘demand articulation’ processes, often involving civil society advocates and community representatives, but the proponents of these projects nonetheless struggled to resolve what the Dutch refer to as the ‘Ganuza dilemma’. The dilemma carries the name of Latin American sociologist Enrique Ganuza, who articulated the problem in 1989 at an influential conference on development research in Groningen, the Netherlands: when Southern stakeholders express competing demands, whose priorities should receive support? Dutch advocates of the demand-driven approach stressed that lack of Southern consensus was not an invitation for Northern donors and researchers to substitute their own priorities, nor could local priorities be trumped by appealing to the pressing nature of global problems of concern to Northern populations, such as environmental degradation or, in the more contemporary context, the fight against terrorism. However, champions of the demand-driven approach were also forced to recognize that Southern researchers were not always the best allies in advancing locally defined priorities as the basis for development research. Often, researchers in the South ‘inhabited ivory towers at least as high as those of their counterparts in the North’ (Van de Sande, 2006: 3).

The success of the Netherlands’ demand-driven approach is a matter of debate – but while the construction of equitable development research agendas is little more than an obscure puzzle for academics and bureaucrats in most political constituencies, for 15 years debate on the demand-driven approach took place at remarkably high levels in the Netherlands, including in parliament. From its genesis, DGIS’s demand-driven policy sparked contention as it challenged the historical dominance of Dutch scholars in the research process and undercut, albeit minimally, their preferential access to development research funding.

Although DGIS staff members were concerned to counteract the perception that demand-driven research and North-South collaboration were mutually exclusive, it proved difficult to meld the demand-driven approach with the notion of mutually beneficial partnership. To preclude the possibility of Northern domination of the research agenda, the Southern partners had considerable control over decision-making processes, which at times resulted in the adoption of research questions of little interest to the Dutch participants. Furthermore, the collaborative projects had cumbersome managerial and decision-making structures, prompting some Dutch researchers to conclude that the minimal amount of funding DGIS provided was not worth the trouble. Despite the government’s professed commitment to supporting Southern demands, various observers pointed out that the projects’ research agendas
were remarkably relevant to the Netherlands’ development priorities, thus generating scepticism regarding the independence of the demand articulation processes. Within DGIS, however, supporters of the demand-driven approach were confident that the policy resulted in innovative, locally relevant research agendas. It was suggested that a sign of the policy’s significance was that it ruffled other bilateral donors, who regarded some DGIS-supported research as overly radical.

While the rhetoric of responding to local demands has been mainstreamed throughout the Dutch development architecture and is au courant in the broader donor community, by 2007 the Netherlands had adopted a strategy more firmly grounded in ‘enlightened self-interest’ and less focused on Southern-led research. This shift was prompted by a combination of factors including academic protest and the rise of a more conservative political climate in the Netherlands. This shift was foreshadowed in the title of DGIS’s 2003 development policy statement: Mutual interests, mutual responsibilities: Dutch development cooperation en route to 2015. This policy emphasizes the role of North–South partnerships in the Netherlands’ development assistance strategy, but downplays the provision of direct support to Southern researchers and the importance of supporting locally defined priorities. The 2005 DGIS policy memorandum Research in development also made several modifications to the demand-driven approach in effect since 1992. In 2006, the Netherlands announced its intention to enhance its support for development research partnerships through the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO), now known as WOTRO Science for Global Development. WOTRO is a branch of the national research council, the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). Soon after, in 2007, the government disbanded RAWOO, an organization historically outspoken in its support for demand-driven research.

WOTRO was committed to supporting research in accordance with both Southern and Northern priorities, as reflected in a 2006 strategy intended to guide the agency in this task (WOTRO, 2006); the 2006 strategy’s thematic framework was based on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In its 2011–2014 strategy plan Science and development: mutual inspiration, WOTRO indicated that ‘Although the MDGs remain important as a collective focus of development efforts and markers of progress, there is a growing need for evidence-based knowledge into the interplay of global and contextual dimensions of development’ (WOTRO, 2010: 26–27). The strategy indicates that:

The core of the WOTRO approach to research funding lies in enhancing both scientific quality and the use of research results for development. To this effect, WOTRO puts emphasis on stakeholder consultation, inter- and trans-disciplinarity, and international partnerships in research collaboration. This approach, representing the flagship of the WOTRO programmes developed under the 2007–2010 strategy period, will continue to absorb most of the funding that WOTRO can leverage. (WOTRO, 2010: 39)
One can question whether the MDGs represented a legitimate Southern agenda, and WOTRO supported critical research on this very issue. Beyond the inevitably thorny problem of how to determine what constitutes a Southern agenda, WOTRO’s institutional structure and mandate complicated its efforts to support collaborative research in tune with Southern priorities. The only research council in the Netherlands, the NWO functions as an umbrella organization under which agencies, including WOTRO, cooperated with one another while simultaneously competing for their share of the council’s centralized pool of funding. Balancing the imperatives of intra-organizational cooperation and competition is a major challenge for all the bodies within the NWO, but is often particularly difficult for WOTRO as an organization concerned with development. For example, as part of the Dutch research council, WOTRO does not generally have the latitude to fund Southern researchers independently, but seeks to involve Southern scholars in partnerships with Dutch counterparts. Using Dutch money to support Southern researchers has not historically been uniformly accepted throughout NWO, nor has inter-disciplinary, policy-relevant development research necessarily been held in high esteem throughout the organization.

As part of the Netherlands’ national research council, WOTRO typically awards funding on the basis of blind peer reviews that promote ‘research excellence’ first and foremost. WOTRO staff members interviewed for this study expressed strong support for the principle of peer review, arguing that it is unethical to fund development research that is not scientifically reliable. However, WOTRO recognizes the shortcomings of the peer-review process, particularly when applied to proposals for North–South development research partnerships. Because the members of peer-review panels are typically Northern academics with little development experience, the process often fails to value the developmental impact of the proposed work, focusing instead on questions of theoretical rigour. Further, Northern reviewers are sometimes suspicious of interdisciplinary research and start from the assumption that policy-relevant research is scientifically suboptimal. Reviewers charged with identifying the most academically ‘excellent’ proposals are also not necessarily in a position to consider how projects may advance development by strengthening the capacities of the partners and their institutions.

In response to these limitations, WOTRO introduced several innovations to its proposal-development and peer-review processes. For example, as of 2007, WOTRO has provided funds for teams to gather in the South to develop rigorous proposals that incorporate Southern perspectives from the outset and are more likely to survive the peer-review process. Proponents are given the opportunity to sharpen their proposals in response to feedback raised through an initial review. Proposals must be accompanied by support letters from NGOs or other stakeholders, and community advisory boards including NGO representatives and policymakers weigh in on partnership proposals, focusing in particular on the developmental relevance of the proposed research.
However, because of the risk of polarized discussions, the organization’s practice as of 2007 was that community advisory boards and the scientific panels would not generally sit down to review proposals together, and the scientific committees make the final decisions on whether proposals are accepted.

WOTRO’s efforts demonstrate how a Northern funding agency facing significant institutional constraints can endeavour to create conditions more amenable to the expression and validation of Southern research priorities. Whether these innovations actually translate into the increased approval of North–South partnerships grounded in equitable, mutually beneficial research agendas remains a matter of some debate. Reflecting on its shift towards more immediately ‘policy relevant’ research and the growing influence of DGIS on its own funding activities, WOTRO itself asks, ‘Could it be that this alignment of research funding with the priorities of the Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation has led to important research falling between two stools? Are we missing out on possible revolutionary research findings resulting from an individual scientist’s pure curiosity?’ (WOTRO, 2014: 9) WOTRO recognizes the critiques of researchers such as Hebert Prins: beyond the challenges associated with setting priorities in the context of North–South partnerships, Prins argues that ‘When civil servants rule the research agenda, ground-breaking science goes down the drain. Civil servants will not fund “risky” research. They will always play it safe. And that will not lead to innovation’ (WOTRO, 2014: 9).

Although the symmetrical research partnerships’ agenda-setting processes were far from smooth, DGIS’s ‘experiments’ in demand-driven research placed the Netherlands in a leadership role among bilateral donors, challenging preconceived notions of how development research should be done and supported. In comparison to this approach, Dutch policies in effect over the past 10 years appear predominantly to return to an earlier way of doing business, in which Northern researchers’ contributions and concerns are centre stage, or at least close by.²

The prevalence of this approach among bilateral donors is reflected in the Report of the Danish Commission on Development-Related Research, which was convened to examine ‘Denmark’s future role as a provider of development research’, and frankly admitted that ‘the development of indigenous research capacity in developing countries, in itself much to be welcomed, [poses] new challenges for the Danish development research sector’ (DANIDA, 2001).

Taken in total, the Dutch experience demonstrates how an ambitious commitment to supporting Southern research agendas is dependent on the political climate in donor countries, and that even the most ambitious or ideological commitment to advancing Southern agendas cannot fully resolve the challenges presented by agenda setting in the context of North–South research partnerships. At best, donor policies can attempt to mitigate any disadvantages to Southern researchers as the parties navigate the agenda-setting process.
Beyond North and South? British partnership funding strategies

In contrast to the Dutch funding strategies adopted in the first decade of the 21st century, which saw a retreat from the Netherlands’ ambitious experiments of the 1990s in Southern-led, ‘demand-driven’ research partnerships, the British approach to financing research for development in this period was less explicitly based on North–South partnership models. In this period, by some estimates, the British emerged as one of the more progressive and reflective of the bilateral agencies involved in funding research for development. To be sure, all progress is relative; despite improvements in some bilateral agencies' strategies, many Southern researchers interviewed for this study indicated that they still preferred to work with independent funders, such as the Ford Foundation, which often have greater flexibility than bilateral agencies obliged to advance Northern foreign policies.

Two events stand out as having significantly shaped the approach to research partnerships embraced by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in the first decade of the 21st century. The first was the UK government’s affirmation of the key role of science in the achievement of the MDGs, and its subsequent decision to dramatically increase funding for development research, doubling its 2005–06 budget of £110 million to £220 million in 2010. With this increased budget, DFID provided direct support to national research teams, as well as to international partnerships.

The second key event had direct bearing on how DFID supported these partnerships: the passage of the 2002 Development Act officially untied all British development aid, with the result that DFID-sponsored research partnerships could no longer require the involvement of British researchers. Rather, grants were to be awarded on the basis of open competition between researchers worldwide. While the British academic community was initially hostile to this policy, DFID’s efforts to untie development aid gradually garnered broader support. DFID officials attribute this change to researchers’ recognition that tying aid is morally dubious, and their awareness that they need to be prepared to compete in a ‘global market of ideas’, without relying on the British government for preferential treatment. (As discussed later, British researchers’ opposition to this policy was also arguably tempered by the fact that, by drawing on their close networks with the British government, many were able to continue to meet with success in obtaining nationally funded research grants.)

At the same time as it banned partnerships that formally required the participation of British researchers, DFID questioned the very significance of the terms ‘North’ and ‘South’ to development research cooperation. Although DFID broadly supported the view that collaborative research agendas should respond to Southern concerns, the salience of North and South as categories to structure international research cooperation has been called into doubt by the emergence of countries such as Brazil and China as new research powerhouses, and the transboundary nature of development challenges such
as climate change and migration. The propensity to question the relevance and timeliness of traditional North–South research partnerships was shared by scholars at various leading UK development research institutes. For example, Haddad underlines that the:

North does not have a monopoly on solutions nor does the South have a monopoly on problems ... A research model that looks at an issue across a wide range of contexts, unencumbered by labels of North and South, that can connect chains of events across the world and that can see an issue from multiple perspectives ... has to be more independent, legitimate, rounded and integrated than current models. (Haddad, 2006: 11–12)

It is difficult to determine precisely the full implications of these changes and debates in terms of ensuring that Southern voices are heard in collaborative agenda-setting processes. Although many applauded the move away from privileging domestic researchers’ access to partnership opportunities, others expressed scepticism about the sincerity and sustainability of the policy, noting that UK institutions were not, for the most part, actually edged out of DfID-funded partnership opportunities. While this may be a testament to the quality of development research in Britain, various researchers and donors questioned whether this policy change would significantly affect practice, given the close connections between DFID and certain British development research institutions. Indeed, various observers in the academic and donor communities suggested that domestic opposition to the policy would likely increase if British institutions’ access to partnership funding and control over DFID-supported research agendas significantly diminished.

Just as DFID grant-makers may not always recognize when Southern institutions are better placed than their British counterparts to take on the leadership of international research projects, there are also Southern organizations (just as there are Northern organizations) that are simply not yet ready to take on this type of work. It was and remains unclear how ‘excellence-focused’ research strategies such as those embraced by DFID may surmount this problem, to support not only cutting-edge, practical research, but also nascent Southern institutions’ ability to carry out such work.

While reflecting on the relevance of ‘North’ and ‘South’ to contemporary development research partnerships added nuance to DFID’s approach, the drive to ‘globalize’ collaborative agendas may in fact detract from efforts to advance Southern priorities and enable timely, evidence-based policymaking in the poorest countries and communities. Making links between conditions in far-flung communities may result in more sophisticated interpretations of development problems and policy imperatives. However, it may also overshadow local research agendas, which are arguably more likely to make direct contributions to resolving the challenges faced by the poorest countries. IDRC’s extensive experience of supporting development research in a variety of fields suggests that while Southern researchers are certainly interested in
international-level debates and analyses, many are often sceptical about the practical importance of this work, and are particularly driven to carry out specific, ground-level analyses that can have direct and immediate impact in their own contexts. When programmes such as IDRC’s former Peace, Conflict, and Development initiative have operated in a wholly responsive manner, the proposals submitted by Southern scholars have tended to focus on specific, pressing, local concerns, and almost never concentrate on ‘trendy’ issues occupying Northern scholars (Scholey, 2006: 185). This experience may serve as a reminder of the importance of recognizing the qualitatively different nature of many research agendas in the Global North and South, and as a rejoinder to the suggestion that internationalized, comparative studies are the most fruitful direction for donor-funded development research in the future.

The persistent face of business as usual

Taken in total, the experiences of the Netherlands and the UK in the first years of the 21st century demonstrate that revised bilateral donor policies have the potential to improve Southern researchers’ ability to influence collaborative research agendas while broadening access to partnership opportunities. However, even the most innovative partnership funding strategies cannot resolve all the tensions and inequalities that characterize collaborative agenda-setting processes. The impact of changes in donors’ funding strategies are tempered by factors including changes in political climate, the attitudes of domestic researchers, and the mandate and structure of institutions responsible for implementing collaborative funding programmes. The experiences of the UK and the Netherlands also illustrate the difficulty of translating policy innovations into improved practice. As weighty bureaucracies accustomed to using Northern-directed partnerships as a primary modus operandi, bilateral donor agencies may be slow to internalize and act on new policy initiatives, even those that promise to advance widely accepted principles, such as the importance of ensuring that research partnerships are grounded in, or at least attuned to, Southern priorities.

Many of the seasoned researchers interviewed suggested that Southern partners often have more leverage in agenda negotiations than is commonly assumed. This is due in large part to the popularization of donor policies that require North–South partnerships to be headquartered at Southern institutions. Various Northern researchers underlined the importance of this shift, pointing out that responsibility for the management of partnerships often translates into increased influence in substantive agenda-setting processes. However, this policy is not uniformly popular among Southern researchers, some of whom argue that it reflects the unfounded assumption that all Southern institutions are weak and require more experience in project management. When proficient but under-resourced Southern organizations work with longstanding, trusted Northern partners, it can be beneficial to base partnerships in the North, as this relieves the administrative burden on the
These researchers maintain that flexible donor policies that can account for the nuances of each partnership situation are preferable to blanket policies uniformly requiring partnerships to be based in the North or in the South.

My interviews with both researchers and bilateral donor representatives also highlighted pervasive confusion and unresolved tensions surrounding the rationale for bilateral donors' support for North–South research partnerships. On one hand, most donors have, to varying degrees, adopted the rhetoric of the demand-driven approach, suggesting that their goal is to support Southern priorities, as defined by Southern researchers, leaders, and community members themselves. On the other hand, there is strong support among donors, and Southern researchers in particular, for the idea that partnerships should be mutually, and even equally, beneficial. Indeed, many of the Southern researchers interviewed objected to the notion that their views should automatically dominate those of their Northern counterparts and donor representatives. Integrating the concerns of all partners and donors is, they argued, an essential part of productive research cooperation, and demonstrates respect for the Northern citizens who provide the bilateral agencies’ money.

As these researchers stress, demand-driven partnerships and mutually beneficial partnerships are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Yet, balancing the interests of Northern and Southern researchers, institutions, communities, and governments is rarely a simple task. While the prevention and resolution of poverty is surely in the general interest of both the North and South, there is clearly heated debate over the best route to take to achieve this goal, and it would be a grave oversimplification to suggest that Southern priorities can always be met without a cost to the interests of Northern actors at numerous levels.

Recognizing the potential dissonance between the concept of equally or mutually beneficial partnerships and the commitment to prioritizing Southern demands, is an important first step towards ensuring that donor strategies and North–South partnerships are based on coherent, viable principles. Some funders have made more progress than others in reflecting on and refining their approaches to supporting development research, including North–South partnerships. Numerous interviewees emphasized the need for these ‘progressive donors’ to take on a leadership role, challenging the face of ‘business as usual’ in the donor community. First and foremost, this entails a judicious approach to the use of North–South partnerships as a funding modality. Donor financing should be prefaced by detailed institutional assessments and open discussions with Southern researchers and governments. These discussions should identify when alternative funding modalities, such as direct support to Southern institutions, are more timely and appropriate approaches to advancing critical development research agendas than North–South partnerships. Second, while many welcome the drive towards donor coordination, experienced researchers caution that this can stifle the emergence of innovative collaborative agendas. When donors
overly focused on coordination go ‘to the field’, they are, as some interviewees suggested, more keen to talk to their fellow funders than to prioritize the opportunity to speak to Southern researchers and community members about their priorities and concerns. This risks muting Southern perspectives in favour of consensuses rooted in the North.

Individual donor representatives can make invaluable contributions to facilitating the development of equitable collaborative research agendas and prompting change from within the donor establishment. Yet numerous researchers stressed that individual donor representatives could also do serious harm by establishing cliques of Southern contacts, over-empowering certain researchers and their agendas. Rather than simply relying on leadership from donor institutions and representatives, interviewees emphasized the need for complementary leadership from researchers as well as from Southern governments. While the governments of emerging research powerhouses, such as India and South Africa, are well placed to pressure donors to retune their policies in accordance with Southern agendas, convincing these governments to take a stand on the issue is a difficult proposition. The question of research collaboration and equitable agenda setting typically remains a low priority for national governments, despite the impact it has on efforts to understand and respond to development challenges from environmental management to political reform.

Advancing agendas: Southern motivations and strategies

Given the perpetual elusiveness of ‘genuine’ partnerships and the limited role donor policies play in facilitating equitable agenda-setting processes, why do Southern researchers and institutions continue to pursue partnerships? How do Southern researchers advance their agendas, in spite of restrictive cooperation frameworks and often crippling institutional contexts? The abundant literature on North–South research partnerships illuminates some of the goals and strategies guiding Northern researchers involved in international research cooperation, but is virtually silent on the subject of Southern aims and approaches to agenda setting. In response to this dearth in the literature, concerted efforts were made during the design and execution of this study to draw out the perspectives of Southern researchers from a wide variety of professional and institutional backgrounds. Naturally, this does not mitigate the need for more research and reflection on the partnership process from Southern researchers themselves.

Although this study focuses on substantive agenda-setting processes, discussions with Southern researchers highlighted the multitude of interconnected, often competing agendas at stake in North–South partnerships. Much like substantive research agendas, capacity-building activities are subject to competing interests, and must be negotiated alongside management and research dissemination strategies. Prior to identifying shared research questions, diverse personal and
institutional interests determine who gets involved in partnerships in the first place. In both the North and South, access to cooperation opportunities is shaped by factors such as age, gender, professional seniority, social class, religious convictions, and political affiliations. Indeed, researchers’ drive to find ‘like-minded’ partners can preclude cooperation with those best-placed to provide insight into particular research questions. For example, as some interviewees in the Middle East pointed out, Islamist scholars are almost universally shut out of North–South research partnerships examining the rise of political Islam.

Time and again, discussions with Southern researchers underlined that partners’ motivations and agenda-setting strategies cannot be understood through uni-dimensional analyses that focus only on the interests of researchers, institutions, governments, or community groups. Rather, these different levels of interest constantly intersect, both enriching and confounding agenda-setting processes.

Why partner?

‘Received wisdom’ in the donor community suggests that Northern researchers seek out North–South partnerships principally to gain access to data and fieldwork opportunities, while Southern researchers are primarily looking for funding and the chance to publish in Northern peer-reviewed journals. The interviews affirmed that access to data, funding, and publishing opportunities are major motivators for prospective partners, but that they are mediated by a range of other interests, depending on the partners’ mandate and strengths.

While the opportunity to travel and the desire to contribute to development and poverty alleviation are important incentives for Northern and Southern researchers alike, among the researchers interviewed, almost without exception, access to funding stood out as a principal impetus to partner. This is partially a reaction to the structure of the international research funding system, in which most Southern governments have insufficient resources available to support domestic researchers, resulting in reliance on international donors who use North–South partnerships as a dominant funding modality. Although some donors certainly accept independent proposals from both Northern and Southern proponents, even prominent Southern institutions often struggle to secure support when they compete against well-connected, accomplished Northern organizations. Consequently, partnerships are a key source of funding for many Southern institutions, despite the fact that direct donor support remains their preference. Partnerships may be particularly appealing as a funding avenue for Southern institutions because their Northern counterparts are often better placed to secure large grants covering salaries and infrastructure. Furthermore, pairing up with influential Northern organizations may improve Southern institutions’ ability to attract independent support in the future. However, many Southern researchers emphasized that preserving their scholarly reputation and personal and institutional integrity was more
important than funding, and they highlighted instances when they turned down or withdrew from partnerships that could have endangered either.

Discussions with Southern researchers confirmed that the desire to publish, like the drive to secure funding, is subject to a number of provisos. The opportunity to publish in elite, peer-reviewed journals was simply not a top concern for various civil society research organizations primarily dedicated to channeling research into local and national policymaking processes. Although staff working with these organizations did not covet publications in top-tier Northern journals, they welcomed occasions to share their work with wider audiences, and appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with Northern academics who had the time and commitment necessary to shepherd their joint research through the peer-review process. On the downside, when collaborative research papers were unable to weather the peer-review process, Northern partners occasionally stymied the dissemination of the work through grey literature publications or other channels as they were unwilling to be associated with research that did not meet the top standards of western scholarship.

Access to data proved to be a significant impetus to partner for Southern researchers as well as their Northern colleagues. North–South research partnerships often provide Southern researchers with access to electronic libraries and extensive statistical databases held at Northern universities. At the same time as interviewees stressed the fallacy of viewing North–South research partnerships as exercises in Southern capacity building, access to professional opportunities such as conferences and tailored training programmes for junior staff represented important motivations to partner. Equally, for national-level Southern organizations seeking to expand to the regional or international scene, North–South partnerships are also a valuable source of contacts and advice. Indeed, partnerships can serve as a laboratory for the development and refinement of globalized institutional visions. For example, at Birzeit University in the West Bank, North–South research partnerships prompted new thinking on the ‘internationalization’ of the university, broadening horizons that might otherwise have been foreclosed by lack of resources and the pressure of the occupation. In return for these benefits, Southern researchers contribute their own contacts, linguistic abilities, methodological expertise, and knowledge of local conditions, which often translates into nuanced theoretical insight.

Beyond funding, publishing, access to data, and capacity-building benefits, Southern researchers confirmed that North–South cooperation holds out the possibility of richer learning and scholarly output, particularly when considering truly global issues such as climate change and the spread of pandemics. Partnerships allow researchers to gain direct insight into the diverse manifestations of particular phenomena and open up opportunities for scholars to refine their theoretical approaches. The opportunities partnerships present for international interaction and collegial debate are especially valuable when domestic research communities are isolated or small.
Particularly in conflict and post-conflict contexts, the decision to engage in international research cooperation is often a carefully considered political statement. In dangerous locales, affiliation with a prominent Northern organization can lend a degree of added protection to Southern researchers undertaking sensitive work, while in volatile political environments, trusted Northern partners can provide valuable outside advice and play a critical role in removing barriers to the research process by rallying political and diplomatic pressure against officials obstructing fieldwork activities (Brookings, 2007: 8). Notably, interviewees pointed out that in countries such as Iraq and Iran, affiliation with a Northern organization can have the opposite effect, drastically heightening the risks faced by local partners.

In some cases, partnerships are pursued because they bolster Southern researchers’ political clout and policy influence. This varies according to the partners’ policy target. For example, if Southern organizations aim to amend the policies of Northern governments or United Nations agencies, North–South cooperation often augments Southern researchers’ perceived credibility and access to decision-makers. Northern researchers may also convey their Southern partners’ concerns directly to their political representatives in capitals from Washington to London. However, the leverage gained through partnerships often declines if researchers seek to influence Southern policymakers, many of whom prefer ‘home-grown’ analyses and may be hostile to Northern ‘interference’ in their sovereign political affairs. Indeed, politically prudent Northern researchers and NGOs seeking to influence Southern governments often team up with prominent Southern organizations to benefit from their specialized lobbying expertise and political connections.

Many of the motivations for partnership receive almost universal approval. For example, donors, researchers, and politicians alike are pleased to support partnerships as a means to attract and retain talented researchers at Southern institutions. Partnerships are also heartily welcomed as an opportunity for Northern and Southern counterparts to affirm the strategies developed in their respective communities. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that the motivations for partnership are all equally benign. For example, in highly competitive milieus, interviewees pointed out, researchers may cooperate with their foreign counterparts simply in order to undercut other potential partners. Numerous researchers in the South suggested that, for better or worse, many Northern researchers simply do not know what they are looking for when they approach potential Southern partners, confusing muddle-headedness for open-mindedness to Southern ideas and agendas. To be sure, many Southern researchers in the ‘partnership market’ are equally blurry about their own priorities, despite the fact that experienced partners recognize that balancing a clear set of strategic motivations with readiness to learn and adapt is the best preparation for the many obstacles that complicate negotiations on the collaborative research agenda.
Parachuting partners and mercenary researchers: agenda-setting obstacles and strategies

Obstacles and responses to the challenges of equitable agenda setting are intertwined as reactions to the issue often raise problems of their own. My discussions with researchers in the Middle East and Southern Africa underscored that the difficulties associated with creating equitable, locally appropriate collaborative agendas are inseparable from a number of cross-cutting systemic challenges. As these problems elude easy and prompt resolution, astute Southern agenda-setting strategies often aim to limit risks and hedge bets, with some ‘flag bearers’ challenging the system at a deeper level, either by structuring innovative cooperative relationships in spite of marked structural constraints or by ‘opting out’ of North–South research partnerships altogether.

First and foremost, many Southern researchers’ approaches to collaborative agenda setting are shaped by the structure of the development research funding system, in which partnerships are the primary funding modality; financing is devoted to short-term projects, rather than long-term core support; and donors have predefined substantive interests, which change often enough to be labelled ‘flavours of the month’ by jaded Southern researchers. While the vast majority of researchers hope their work makes a real contribution to improving wellbeing and combating disparity, many of the researchers interviewed stressed the difficulty of crafting agendas that could meet donors’ demands for concrete and ideally immediate results in terms of poverty alleviation.

Many researchers emphasized the difficulty of trying to anticipate the policy relevance of their work at the proposal stage, rather than once their results were clear, and underscored the need for more independent, theoretically demanding research. This is essential to the evolution of a strong research base in the South. As various interviewees stressed, sustainability in the research sector comes from the ability to make well-argued intellectual contributions to national and international debates, not just to churn out studies to match prescribed terms of reference.

In the most extreme cases, donors completely preclude collaborative agenda negotiations by granting money to a Northern institution for collaborative research on a particular set of questions before a Southern partner is even identified. When the research agenda is a fait accompli, Southern researchers are sought out as ‘mercenaries’, a problem that is particularly severe in the case of consultancies, where the terms of reference are set by the contracting agency, with researchers given only minimal time and flexibility to react. While some researchers stoically accept this type of work as an inevitable part of making a living in cash-strapped Southern organizations, others rail against it as a cardinal example of the presumptuousness that makes collaborative research so draining.³

The second major structural factor that frequently affects Southern agenda-setting strategies is the existence of pervasive inequalities between prospective
partners in the North and South. To be sure, Southern researchers do not necessarily enter agenda negotiations disadvantaged in terms of their scholarly and managerial skills. Many elite Southern researchers are not only intellectual leaders, but are also deft negotiators who use their role as gatekeepers to local research subjects to increase their leverage in the agenda-setting process.

Yet organizations’ internal constraints inevitably limit the research agenda as the scope of researchers’ investigations is foreshortened by lack of time, staff, and money. These organizational constraints are often particularly severe for Southern organizations, and hamper Southern partners’ ability to respond to new issues that arise over the course of the partnership. Particularly well-planned partnerships budget extra funds to allow researchers to adapt or expand the research agenda to ensure its continued relevance in light of unforeseen events, discoveries, or political changes. However, the amount of work that can be accomplished on a particular collaborative agenda is limited by the fact that in the vast majority of cases Northern researchers’ time and efforts are extremely costly. On certain agendas, Southern researchers working independently or in cooperation with other Southerners could arguably make more progress than they are able to when arbitrarily tied to a collaborative model.

On the other hand, collaboration has been instrumental to the introduction of entirely new fields of research in Southern countries. For example, cooperation between Norwegian and South African universities was instrumental to the establishment of African research programmes dedicated to the study of fisheries, a longstanding area of specialization in the Nordic countries. In cases such as this, the inequalities that must always be dealt with in a collaborative research endeavour are particularly stark. Experienced researchers suggest that these inequalities should be frankly acknowledged by all sides with the understanding that, as the partners develop new views and expertise, the agenda will be revisited and adjusted accordingly.

The third systemic factor that must be accounted for in Southern agenda-setting strategies is the fact that good partnership practice is rarely rewarded by the academic system. Tenure review committees are prone to take a disparaging view of the policy-relevant, multi-stakeholder, applied research that emerges from donor-funded North–South research partnerships (RAWOO, 2001). Moreover, managing diverse research teams and facilitating equitable, culturally sensitive, yet rigorous agenda-setting processes are specific skills that are under-emphasized in traditional academic training (Ettorre, 2000). Because there is little structured incentive to or expectation that academics will engage in respectful partnerships, harmful collaborative practices persist and are passed down to new generations of researchers.

Beyond these structural challenges, Southern researchers highlighted a number of other factors that both enrich and complicate the agenda-setting process. For example, even when partners agree on the broad content of their research agenda, pinning down viable research questions may be difficult as many partners have been schooled in different academic traditions and theoretical frameworks,
depending on linguistic, cultural, geographic, and religious backgrounds. Agenda-setting processes are often smoother if researchers have comparable educational backgrounds, professional roles, and political views. However, a growing number of partnerships strive to bring together diverse Northern and Southern actors, betting that cooperation between diverse actors will result in richer research questions and more perceptive findings. Researchers involved in these multi-stakeholder initiatives suggest that rocky agenda-setting experiences are attributable not so much to the challenge of melding Northern and Southern interests, but to the difficulty of enabling cooperation between different actors, including academics, grassroots activists, policymakers, and corporate leaders.

Agenda-setting processes can be frankly gruelling in partnerships that aim to advance volatile political processes, such as the Palestinian–Israeli peace negotiations. Changes in the political situation often necessitate revision of the collaborative agenda. Preparing for agenda negotiations by getting each side up to speed on one another’s views and reactions to current events is a valuable process, but a cumbersome one that can drastically cut into the time available for actually negotiating the agenda and moving research forward. Some architects of cooperative projects in the Middle East try to take a proactive approach to this problem by circulating detailed information on partners’ reactions to changes in the political landscape ahead of face-to-face meetings. Even when the researchers are in agreement, negotiations can be protracted due to slow-moving university and donor bureaucracies, which exacerbate the challenge of maintaining a timely, mutually acceptable research agenda.

As many of the Southern researchers suggested, interpersonal chemistry and strong character judgement are essential to sidestepping or resolving these agenda-setting obstacles. Almost unanimously, researchers stressed that partnerships sink or swim on the character and commitment of the individuals involved in them. While many researchers value having shared political views with their partners, even more critical are the attributes of flexibility, modesty, and willingness to learn. Beyond the stated goals of collaborative initiatives, individual partners also strive to move forward ‘silent agendas’, from padding their publication list in advance of a promotion, to increasing the partnership’s advocacy role and theoretical richness. Astute partners recognize one another’s informal interests, and are able to distance themselves from individuals and initiatives burdened by silent agendas they do not support.

Although strong interpersonal relationships are essential, researchers also stressed the importance of ‘institutional chemistry’ to successful agenda-setting processes. While various guides provide extensive criteria for choosing appropriate partners, there is no strict recipe for effective institutional cooperation (KFPE, 2005). Similar management and accounting styles are often beneficial. Various Southern researchers suggest that institutional cooperation is easier when the Northern partner’s country does not have an ‘imperial past’. Institutional compatibility ensures that the partnership provides room for organizational growth, and is critical given that the individual
members of collaborative teams often change over a project’s lifetime. Strong institutional compatibility can smooth these transitions. Researchers increase their institutional stake in research partnerships by ensuring that the collaborative agendas are negotiated by organization-wide teams, rather than only by senior management. This approach recognizes and responds to the fact that competing agendas may exist even among members of the same organization, and ensures that the collaborative agenda is backed not only by the institutional director, but also by the junior staff with responsibility for the day-to-day implementation of the project.

Individuals and institutions who gain the most from North–South partnerships do not tend to describe their partners in terms of specific, short-term projects. Rather, they have nurtured long-term interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships that often span multiple projects, and remain a source of insight and support even in the absence of donor funding. The development of long-term partnerships is an investment with considerable returns when it comes to agenda setting, as negotiations benefit from the trust partners have built up as well as their ability to be candid with one another and draw on past lessons to iron out present difficulties. Creating long-term partnerships requires dedication and ingenuity as neither donor funding systems nor academic promotional frameworks are set up to reward sustained commitment between Northern and Southern partners. Long-term commitment is especially fundamental in unstable conflict and post-conflict locations where ‘parachuting partners’ typically do not remain on the ground long enough to earn the trust necessary for locals to share their views. In fact, parachuting partners can erode local actors’ willingness to trust those Northerners who are committed to the long haul. Even between longstanding partners, difficulties can emerge if Southern researchers remain committed to a particular line of research while the Northern partners’ interests change. If Northern researchers decide to move on to new issues, they often ‘take the money with them’, limiting their former partners’ ability to advance the research agenda independently.

**Strong Southern institutions: the lynchpin of successful agenda-setting processes**

In light of the abundant obstacles to equitable agenda setting, the strength of the Southern institution in a North–South partnership emerges as the foremost factor affecting the successful negotiation of a research agenda that is both mutually beneficial and rooted in Southern concerns. Currently, many partnerships are premised on the assumption that all those involved are well-intended, informed, culturally sensitive people, and that these qualities, in combination with due regard for ‘good partnership principles’, are sufficient conditions for equitable, effective agenda-setting processes. While good intentions and respect for Southern concerns on the Northern side can facilitate smooth agenda-setting processes, they cannot substitute
for the advantages enjoyed by strong Southern organizations in partnership negotiations.

In the context of North–South research partnerships, strong organizations are characterized by a realistic awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, sound administrative systems, and relatively stable finances. Most importantly, they have a clear institutional mandate and agenda. Albeit critical, the question of how strong Southern research organizations emerge and evolve is largely outside the scope of this paper. Preliminary discussions with Southern researchers suggest that, in certain cases, North–South partnerships aimed at capacity building have supported the development of strong Southern research centres, but this is certainly not the only contributing factor. Concerted leadership from driven, well-trained, and well-connected Southern researchers is typically essential to the creation and maturation of Southern institutions. IDRC’s experience confirms that cooperation between Southern institutions can be instrumental to the emergence of strong research centres and, in turn, vibrant national research communities.

Strong organizations exist in both the North and South, but articulating and sticking to clear institutional goals is often a serious challenge for Southern institutions struggling to withstand economic and political instability or stagnation. Northern institutions and coalitions are also often unsure of their own agendas. Support for North–North cooperation is in some fields even scarcer than funding for North–South interactions, despite the fact that interaction between diverse Northern communities and institutions is essential to establishing and refining solid advocacy and research agendas. Consequently, Northern researchers from large and heterogeneous countries such as Canada may struggle to fully appreciate the scope of national experiences with issues such as indigenous self-governance and resource management. This limits Northern partners’ ability to contribute to the development of rigorous North–South research agendas.

In some cases, interviewees pointed out that Southern organizations may appear to have clear agendas, but upon closer examination the ‘organizations’ are only individuals whose agendas have not been enhanced through collegial debate, and who do not necessarily enjoy the support of community members. Even where Southern organizations have clearly defined agendas, they may be pressured by donors and local actors to disregard their chosen mandates. Many strong Southern organizations receive regular invitations to participate in a variety of partnerships unrelated to their goals. While these invitations may represent valuable opportunities for Southern organizations to expand their scope and skills, they may also detract from their focus and efficacy. Some specialized, driven Southern organizations perceive as an affront persistent pressure from donors and other actors to take on activities outside their carefully defined remits, reflecting a lack of respect for the decisions the organization has made for itself. As the frustrated director of a prominent Middle Eastern research centre expressed it, ‘It should matter what [our Institute] does. We should be able to say, “This is what we do.”’
Armed with a clear conception of their own motivations and agendas, strong Southern organizations also have a cluster of tools and strategies they can apply to increase the likelihood that their partnerships yield the desired benefits. Where organizations are unclear about their own institutional strengths and goals, capacity assessment exercises can play an important clarifying role, both for donors and for the research institutions. These exercises can help determine whether partnerships should focus primarily on capacity building, in-depth research, or a mixture of the two. Open and honest assessment exercises may well conclude that North–South partnerships are not as relevant to the Southern organization's institutional and scholarly goals as other funding modalities, such as core funding or South–South cooperation.

For example, many robust Southern organizations cultivate close connections with grassroots groups, which help them ensure that their agendas retain local relevance. Locally connected Southern research institutions then serve as gatekeepers to grassroots populations, a role they use to increase their leverage in agenda negotiations. Close grassroots connections can also alert Southern researchers to ethical concerns associated with particular lines of research that could escape the attention of foreign review boards. By carefully establishing their credibility beforehand, strong Southern organizations may have the latitude to challenge assumptions and attitudes prevalent at the grassroots level and among policymakers, taking on agendas that are unpopular because they are seen to be donors’ ‘turf’. Equally, researchers working within reputable Southern institutions may be well placed to advance agendas critical of donor governments because their institutional clout can mitigate the risk of funding being withdrawn in reaction to researchers’ criticisms.

In many cases, the senior staff of savvy Southern organizations prepare their colleagues for the challenges associated with collaborative agenda negotiations, and mentor them throughout the process. This has often proven more effective than the default approach of learning in the saddle. The leaders of robust Southern institutions also ensure that their researchers enter into collaborative negotiations with clear minimum criteria that they expect the partnership to meet, which serve as a guide throughout the agenda-setting process.

To be sure, innovative, reputable Southern organizations face challenges of their own in collaborative research. These include the need to balance the desire for equity among partners with the pragmatic recognition that leadership is required if partnerships are to move forward. Some participants in this study suggested to me that even leading Southern organizations tend to operate in responsive modes where the creation of new partnerships is concerned, waiting for invitations from Northern parties rather than initiating collaborations themselves. Taken in total, however, the attributes discussed earlier strengthen Southern parties’ hands in agenda negotiations, and limit the cost to the Southern organization if a partnership does not materialize. Indeed, many researchers are proud of their ability to be selective in their partnerships, pursuing their own priorities even when
they did not meet with outside support. Among leading Southern research organizations, walking away from unsatisfactory partnerships is virtually a rite of passage. However, the researchers interviewed did not underestimate the difficulty of turning down partnership opportunities for struggling Southern institutions. The price of refusing or pulling out of North–South research partnerships is often not only financial, but also reputational, as organizations that step out of troubling partnerships may be labelled as belligerent or uncooperative, thus hindering their ability to secure new collaboration opportunities and influence decision-makers in the future. While recognizing the validity of these concerns, interviewees questioned whether nascent institutions could ever transform into successful, locally relevant organizations by simply going along with agendas forged in the North and divorced from local priorities.

**Conclusion**

Although strong Southern organizations are instrumental to successful, equitable North–South agenda-setting processes, in many fields of development research there is only a limited number of organizations involved, with strikingly different levels of capacity. North–South collaboration can certainly strengthen partnering institutions, and exciting research questions often emerge through the training and capacity-building exercises that are part of many North–South partnerships. However, even the most successful partnerships have their limits; it is virtually impossible for a partnership to develop the capacity of an institution that lacks key resources and a firm set of priorities while also pursuing a cutting-edge, collaboratively developed research agenda.

The challenges associated with collaborative agenda setting are deeply rooted in academic politics, intercultural misunderstandings, and the structure of the international donor system, wedded as it is to a model of short-term, project-based collaborative financing. While bilateral donors such as the Netherlands and the UK have met with modest success in challenging the strictures of this model, their endeavours have inadvertently underscored researchers’ and bureaucracies’ resistance to change, even change which they rhetorically and morally support.

Strong Southern organizations are best placed to navigate the numerous obstacles associated with collaborative agenda setting, but the magnitude of these obstacles is illustrated by the fact that some of the most reputable and well-skilled Southern organizations simply sidestep the issue, eschewing North–South research partnerships altogether. For the minority of organizations that can rely on the more flexible, direct funding offered by independent donors, the benefits of partnership often cannot outweigh the management burden and complex agenda negotiations that partnerships almost invariably entail. This calls into question the salience of the wide range of guidelines and principles that aim to reform the partnership experience (KFPE, 1998; 2005).
It is perhaps overly optimistic to hope that careful planning and laudable ideals can neatly avoid the entrenched problems that have complicated international research collaboration for decades.

The cross-cutting, structural nature of barriers to equitable agenda setting and successful partnership should not dissuade researchers, donors, and policymakers from tackling these issues. Partnerships make an essential contribution to understanding and responding to transboundary development challenges. For this reason, it is critical that the practice of partnership improves. This is an inescapably long-term endeavour, however. In the meantime, donors and researchers alike are well-advised to candidly recognize the limitations of partnership and ensure that a broader range of funding modalities are applied in support of the creation and application of knowledge for development. Before settling on North–South partnership as a funding modality, detailed organizational assessments and negotiations between donors and researchers are in order. In these discussions, donors and Northern researchers should be willing to heed Southern researchers' calls for different forms of support, including greater levels of direct, core support. While this undoubtedly poses a challenge for those donor agencies formally obliged to exclusively support North–South partnerships, a commitment to respecting Southern perspectives and priorities must encompass not only the substantive research agenda, but also the modalities through which development research funding is distributed. This type of flexibility is critical to ensuring that struggling Southern institutions can evolve into strong organizations well equipped to hold their own in North–South agenda negotiations and to assist in strengthening other Southern organizations.

Northern researchers’ critical reflections on partnership often stop short of this conclusion, focusing instead on how partnerships may be modified or improved, while retaining Northern researchers’ place at the table. This may be in Northern researchers’ short-term interests, but the goal of equitable collaborative agenda setting would be better served if North–South research partnerships were initiated and financed more judiciously, alongside other approaches to supporting the creation of knowledge for development, including significantly increased core funding for Southern organizations and South–South partnerships. This is not to suggest that South–South research partnerships are immune from agenda-setting debates. As several Southern researchers suggested, all too often these partnerships mimic and even amplify the negative power dynamics associated with North–South research partnerships.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Recommended discussions of North–South research partnerships in a variety of fields include Barrett et al., 2011; Muldoon et al., 2012; Hynie et al., 2014; Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2015.
2. For further discussion of WOTRO’s role and evolution over the past 50 years, see WOTRO, 2014.

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**About the author**

**Megan Bradley** is Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Development Studies at McGill University. She is the author of *Refugee Repatriation: Justice, Responsibility and Redress* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and the editor of *Forced Migration, Reconciliation and Justice* (McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2015). She holds a doctorate in International Relations from St Antony’s College, University of Oxford.