

Communities of Knowledge or Tyrannies of Partnership: Reflections on North–South Research Networks and the Dual Imperative

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Networks and north–south partnerships have become prerequisites for much forced migration research funding. The objectives vary but usually include levelling the scholarly playing field, improving research quality, building southern capacity and relaying southern perspectives to northern policymakers. Reflecting on a decade’s work in Southern Africa, this article suggests such initiatives often fall short of their objectives due to both mundane reasons and fundamentally unequal resource endowments and incentive structures. Moreover, by pushing southern researchers towards policy-oriented research, filtering the voices heard on the global stage, and retaining ultimate authority over funding and research priorities, these networks risk entrenching the north–south dichotomies and imbalances they purport to address. While inequalities are rooted in an intransigent global political economy of knowledge production, the article nonetheless concludes with a series of practical steps for improving southern-generated research and future collaborations.

Keywords: Networks and partnerships, research uptake, political economy of knowledge

Introduction

Much as ‘participatory development’ gained prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s (see Cooke and Kothari 2001), networks and north–south partnerships became prerequisites for much social science research funding a decade later. Motivations vary, but are typically about levelling the scholarly playing field by enabling marginalized partners to shape a global research agenda, improving research quality, and building southern capacity. In many cases, partnerships intend to relay southern research and perspectives to northern policymakers and scholars (see Bradley 2006; Katz and Martin 1997; Baud 2002; Zingerli 2010; for more general critiques, Zeleza 1996). These are

important and worthy objectives, all the more so if they can improve the quality of data and research, help address imbalances in the global funding for social research, and potentially enable southern scholars to satisfy the 'dual imperative' in refugee research: to make an academic contribution while meeting an ethical obligation to assist the often vulnerable populations on which we build our professional success (see Jacobsen and Landau 2003).

As with other academic networks and partnerships, those related to refugees and migration often fall short of their promise. The explanations for these shortcomings are both mundane and fundamental. In many cases they come down to insufficient funding, administrative hiccups, shifting interests or an ill-informed choice of partners. More profoundly, international research partnerships enact and expose the inequalities, structural constraints and historically conditioned power relations implicit in the production of knowledge. These include unequal resource endowments and discordant incentive structures and funding schemes. As Zingerli (2010: 222) suggests, 'research partnerships are not an easy remedy for inherent asymmetries and inequalities...' Indeed, partnerships risk entrenching some of the north-south dichotomies they seek to overcome (see Standing and Taylor 2009).

With increased pressure for collaboration due to northern funding regimes and a southern need for recognition and resources, we find ourselves in a situation where southern partners regularly surrender their most valuable international resource—legitimacy, 'street cred', and local insight—for financial resources, travel opportunities, and prestigious associations with northern partners. Despite efforts to the contrary, these exchanges often unwittingly reinforce structural inequalities and may work against the long term success of southern partners in satisfying the dual imperative.

Any discussion of this kind begins by recognizing that knowledge is always the product of hierarchies and domination and we must treat with suspicion anyone who claims otherwise (for a broader discussion of this theme, see Haraway 1991). As such, many of the challenges we face in refugee or displacement research networks echo north-south academic relations generally. Nonetheless, each field and sub-field stumbles on these challenges in its own way. Ironically, one of the field's most compelling facets—its close ties to a practitioner community dedicated to humanitarian action and social justice—works to reinforce two enduring inequalities and shortcomings within the field as we forge partnerships and transnational collaborations. For one, the structural position of northern and southern researchers means that northern researchers have the luxury of turning data generated through policy-oriented projects into scholarly outputs and offering fundamental critiques of policy debates. However, the premise of many partnerships pushes southern scholars further into an exclusive, policy-only space. Of course many northern scholars fail to exploit their relative freedom, but instead intellectually reinforce aid agencies and governments by structuring their research in terms set by policy priorities. Nonetheless, this is a choice. For those working in the south—particularly in deeply under-resourced African

universities—funding pipelines effectively reinforce a dependence on policy actors and external partners. Secondly, the field’s emphasis on global governance and donor policies positions northern partners as a voice for a panoply of southern actors whose language is too fragmented and particularistic to be globally legible. The rest of this article explains the dynamics behind these configurations and relationships.

Off the Cusp: Perspectives and Methods

I write from a position of geographical and professional uncertainty, located somewhere between the north and African universities and leaning both towards scholarship and policy engagement. Ten years ago I completed a doctoral degree at a top-tier American university. Despite my fascination with humanitarian politics in Africa and a couple of years spent around the continent’s Great Lakes, I had thought little about how or why we produce knowledge on such themes and places. More precisely, I had assumed that my motivations—furthering a scholarly corpus and my scholarly profile—were universally shared among university colleagues world over.

After graduating, I found myself in a surprising position for someone who had been so entrenched in the ‘northern’ academy: responsible for managing a small refugee research unit at a South African university. Initiated during the Mellon Foundation’s population and migration funding heyday (approximately 1998–2006), the programme had money but lacked an intellectual agenda and the people to conduct innovative research. Yet, potential international partners were lining up. I begin my analysis with this seemingly incongruous state of affairs: why was a centre doing almost no substantive work the object of such international interest?

My comments here are intentionally general and imprecise to better allow myself a basis for broad and critical volleys. If successful, they will elicit more robust, informed and nuanced retorts. For my purposes, northern universities are schools in Europe, Australia or North America. Southern ones are pretty much anywhere else, although I refer largely to the sub-Saharan African universities I know best. Based at a South African university, I sit somewhere between two extremes and rightly recognize that there is enormous diversity within both north and south (see Mouton 2010). Nonetheless, I hope others from the continent will consider this something of a southern perspective on partnership, perspectives that are yet ‘few and far between’ (Bradley 2006: 4). As for the kind of research, I am concerned largely with social science—anthropology, sociology, geography, and political science—and little with practically oriented fields (e.g., social work, law, and engineering). Lastly, while I largely avoid referring to particular universities, scholars, and partnerships, I nonetheless apologize for causing offence to anyone who recognizes themselves (or thinks they do) in the text.

Revisiting the Dual Imperative in Refugee Research and the Political Economy of Knowledge Production

In 2003, Jacobsen and I argued that most displacement-related research seeks to influence agencies and governments to develop more effective responses. Indeed, few publications within the broad ambit of refugee or humanitarian studies exclude policy recommendations for NGOs, the United Nations or national governments. This orientation stems in part from our research subjects, whose experience of violent conflict, displacement and human rights violations compel us to work—whether from compassion, charity, or self-interest—to reduce their burdens and vulnerability. We may be discouraged by how little we change, but few overtly reject Turton's (1996: 96) admonition that research into suffering can only be justified if alleviating that suffering is an explicit objective. While concerned with refugees' rights and welfare, university-based scholars typically serve many masters. Indeed, for those facing disciplinary tenure committees, scholarly audits, or publication demands, policy recommendations are never enough. Similarly, for universities to offer critical reflection on the societies of which they are part, simple description and policy recommendations are inadequate; they must also reserve distinct space for non-policy oriented research, theorization and provocation (see Rodgers 2004; Bakewell 2008).

In revisiting this dual imperative, the argument deserves qualification. While academic researchers must consider both imperatives—scholarly influence on one hand, practical reform on the other—our geographic and institutional settings greatly shape the incentives and opportunities for meeting these goals. Whereas northern social scientists often try to work to improve conditions for the displaced, success is measured largely against scholarly metrics. Conversely, many African scholars' professional legitimacy (and salaries) depend far less on academic achievements than policy engagement. In many cases, the balance is skewed so significantly that whole careers (and whole departments) are oriented to a single imperative: producing work that aid agencies and governments recognize as policy relevant or, more accurately, are willing to finance.

I take it as self-evident that this relative absence of southern voices from Africa and elsewhere not only diminishes our understanding of the world but allows a relatively privileged, geographically concentrated group of scholars to set global academic agendas. So while we know that the majority of the world's refugees and migrants (and the bulk of the humanitarian interventions) are located in the south, southern-based scholars are hard to find in the leading (i.e., most broadly cited) scholarly journals on the topic. Indeed, in the last year of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* (ending with March 2011) there is not a single article about displacement in Africa written by an African scholar. (There is one written by northerners based at an African University.)

Even the occasional appearance of African-based scholars in the *JRS* or *Refugee Studies Quarterly* does little to counter their almost absolute absence

from top disciplinary journals. Where they appear, it is usually through country case studies or as secondary authors. Rarely do they proffer multi-sited comparative studies, especially ones including multiple countries. So while northern scholars may struggle to justify practically-oriented work, African-based researchers often do little but case studies and policy reviews. If networks intend to shift these terms, they must address the origins of this orientation.¹

The limited scope of African research on refugees can be explained by two interrelated sets of factors. Even if not unique to refugee-related research, they are often particularly pronounced in our field. The first relates to the conceptual vocabulary and orientation across many African universities. This in itself is due to at least three factors: (1) extended isolation from global scholarly publications and dialogues; (2) the limited amount of course work required to complete advanced degrees, particularly for those who have conducted work within the British system; and (3) the practical orientation of many African universities and state-funded research organisations. As such, scholars trained and working in African universities often express a limited impulse to produce for anyone other than a local audience or audience concerned with the particularities of specific cases. When provided with chances to define questions that are more conceptual or theoretically promising, few of the scholars with whom I have collaborated take the opportunity to do so. (This is particularly pronounced with those from outside South Africa.) Instead, their inquiries are typically framed by policy issues or immediate normative concerns. The idea of conducting ‘demand led research’, in which southerners are asked only to drive research that can solve pressing social problems or otherwise ‘unleash southern potential’, risks reinforcing this tendency (see Nair and Menon 2002).

The strict policy focus compromises one of African scholars’ most significant comparative advantages: the ability to identify what might be invisible or inexplicable to outsiders. (That said, we must be suspicious of relatively elite southern scholars who make exclusive claims to ‘local’ knowledge.) Consequently, collaborations often take the shape of southern scholars generating data on narrowly defined topics while northern scholars are left to synthesize, analyse and theorize (see Zeleza 1996; Chimni 2009). Schweigman and van der Werf (1994) outline one of the dilemmas this raises, a situation they term the Ganuza dilemma, where the absence of a strong, southern intellectual agenda (or a highly fragmented one), often creates the space/necessity for northern partners to dominate decision making and research directions. At an immediate level this may satisfy all involved, but it does little to overturn northern dominance of global academic discourse. As discussed below, a range of institutional factors further reinforce this *status quo*.

Conceptual and theoretical narrowness are not unique to forced migration research, but the topic naturally limits the scope of our inquiry. Our tendency to see refugee rights and welfare as the sole important outcome also leads us

to ignore interests and actions that may indirectly prejudice (or promote) the displaced. Rather than careful empirical research driving new research questions and theorization, the close connection with short term policy goals tends to create conceptual recycling. Chimni (2009: 20) disagrees, fearing that refugees are becoming just another category of displaced people (thereby serving state interests by watering down demands for protection). Ferris (2011) and others similarly question the expansion of humanitarianism into development and broader social interventions and would, given the chance, ask our scholarship to avoid such promiscuity. Hathaway (2007) calls on the academic field to similarly refocus. As scholars, we should ask ourselves if such conceptual and normative boundaries unduly align us with aid agencies' agendas and perspectives. We must also ask whether an exclusive focus on protection gives us enough reason to remain within the academy. Van Hear's (2009) promise of the intellectual gains from nesting forced migration in other forms of human mobility, and the costs of failing to do so, suggests otherwise.

I expect that the most fruitful scholarly engagements will come when displacement is interjected, as issues of gender were 10 or 20 years ago, into other debates: about the nature of community, state power, or public administration, to name a few. Ideally this would be a dialogue that can prevent the field from remaining a world unto itself, discovering issues (e.g., livelihoods, gender based violence, health care) and building up a corpus of literature on them with little regard for work done elsewhere. A starting point within disciplinary fields could provide an invaluable set of conceptual, methodological and even empirical foundations for policy oriented work. By continuing to define ourselves as refugee studies centres or refugee-research networks, we work against such innovations. For southern scholars already incentivized towards policy oriented work, such arrangements further retard efforts to address the dual imperative. In the long term, continued alienation from mainstream disciplines will help establish a vicious cycle in which we will be less able to attract strong students or publish in strong scholarly journals. For a field, and for scholars, already struggling for academic legitimacy, this is an unwelcome and unfortunate direction.

For forced migration scholarship in Africa, the narrowness and circularity described above reach a whole new level thanks to regimes of research funding and a broader political economy of knowledge production. As this is an area too broad to summarize in anything other than a schematic outline, I will make a few points here that apply (albeit unequally) to many of the African universities with which I have worked, including my own.

The starting point for understanding the orientation and motivation of southern based researchers is the material, professional and personal incentive schemes within which they work. The most pressing point is the insecurity of financing and research funds. It also stems from the role of African universities in their respective countries. While tertiary institutions the world over are under pressure to conduct socially relevant research, these demands are

often an intrinsic and explicit part of African universities' mission. In many places, it is better to understand universities as technical training institutions or trade schools rather than parts of semi-autonomous spaces for critical reflection. Those working within them are encouraged to behave accordingly by generating socially and immediately relevant accounts, imparting useful, practical skills, and raising money. Indeed, the domestic ladder for professional advancement often depends on it.

When it comes to funding, African-based scholars rarely have access to the national funding programmes or private foundations that support social science in Europe and North America (see Gaillard 1994). While a number of countries maintain research foundations, the available funds are typically earmarked for work in single countries and bound by relatively narrow parameters. African scholars could do far more to compete for international funding opportunities—something that a research network might facilitate—but there are structural obstacles they must overcome to do so. First of all, many northern funders (public and private) are unwilling to fund African universities directly, even on grants dedicated to improving 'southern' research. Whether due to fears of corruption or poor quality outputs, the willingness to consider support for African universities—and the amount of money proffered—works against scholars based there. So while American and British universities may be able to access foundation funds to support African doctoral students or conduct projects in Africa, African universities may not.

There are additional obstacles to African-based scholars' efforts to finance research that requires substantial fieldwork or long-term intellectual engagement and exchange. Foremost are salaries which often depend less on university budgets than on grants and other soft money. Even people in permanent academic positions receive salaries too low to meet their financial needs or expectations. Almost nowhere will they have access to university funds to buy books or conduct even the most preliminary research. When research funding comes through, it will often only pay along the sub-standard university-established salary scale. The result is that attention wanders to what pays: short-term, high profit research. Indeed, many scholars undoubtedly gravitate to refugee studies precisely for the chance for consulting exercises or as an *entrée* into international humanitarian organizations. This enables some to make ends meet, or more, but has also fostered what Mamdani terms a 'corrosive culture of consultancy.'² Where such orientation is the norm, northern institutions have little choice but to lead intellectually any collaborative relationship.

It is also worth considering how donors' demands for centralized financial control and accountability implicitly establish a hierarchy of power with research networks. Many northern partners are uncomfortable with these relationships. Others undoubtedly accept it as necessary for protecting their own credibility with donors unimpressed by southern partners' levels of efficiency and transparency. I sense that for all of its unintended by-products,

there is little that can be done to get around first world donors' preference for accounting via first world partners unless African universities can prove themselves ready and able to manage funds and deliver the goods.

Who holds the money is less important than the consistency with which it is allocated. In some instances this is also a donor requirement, an effort to pay in tranches so as to ensure targets are met and partners are held accountable. Elsewhere, it results from elaborate negotiations, irregular funding cycles or seemingly arbitrary decision-making by northern scholars and administrators whose priorities may shift. Where institutions have multiple income streams and scholars have secure salaries, such unpredictability is an annoyance. Where scholars are almost fully dependent on a variable, external funding stream, such insecurity undermines southern capacity and commitments and scholars are rarely able to commit to a strong and critical intellectual agenda. For reasons outlined earlier, most African scholars are effectively 'piece workers'. The inability to plan and commit in advance means that people will be easily turned to other projects. Moreover, without long-term funding commitments, southern partners may be unable to retain qualified people (or keep them long enough to get them qualified). The transience that such piece work promotes consequently generates additional imbalances, reinforcing southern weakness and the necessity for northern managerial control.

Two other funding-related factors work against the successful incorporation of southern-based scholars and students in research collaborations. First, due to heavy financial dependence on aid agencies, scholars tend to reproduce the kind of knowledge and analysis aid agencies hope to see. Doing otherwise risks losing future contracts and funding sources by biting the hand that feeds. (It also means that the data generated, and possibly the reports that come from them, may be proprietary or inaccessible.) This not only impoverishes the quality of scholarship we see, but puts northern-based scholars in the professionally rewarding position of being the ones to offer the most trenchant critiques. Ironically, greater pressure on southern partners to engage directly with policy processes only helps forge an epistemic community shaped by mores and norms determined by aid and humanitarian agencies, political institutions and donors.

When considering the quality and breadth of scholarship, it is important to note the incentive for an individual to 'own' a field (or multiple fields) in a country. Given the shortages of research skills and substantive knowledge across Africa, a particular country may have one or two 'experts' who, for reasons discussed above, are drawn to an array of consulting and research projects not always related to their ostensible expertise. This provides profit, status and influence for those lucky and shrewd enough to secure such positions. It also generates incentives to shut others out. Where the northern academy provides aspiring academics multiple pathways to success, limited options in many African countries encourage senior scholars to suppress their future competition: younger, less experienced or less known colleagues.

The result is doctoral and masters students working in a kind of invisible peonage where individual profile and profit means leaving their country. Beyond the injustice of such arrangements, they also limit the range of people, skills and perspectives available for collaborative initiatives. Partnerships with northern institutions often unintentionally reinforce these hierarchies by repeatedly working with ‘reliable’ partners rather than taking chances on others who might benefit from greater mentorship or approach issues less conventionally. This is understandable and predictable inasmuch as conservative and reliably delivered research is the primary goal. If building capacity, avoiding stagnant and recycled analyses, or creating autonomous space for scholarship are desired ends, then change is surely needed.

North–south collaborations that fail to account for these incentives are unlikely to promote sound academic work or build the field’s strength and diversity. Instead, they may unwittingly reinforce a global division of labour where southerners become data collectors while northerners produce knowledge and offer scholarly and policy critiques. Because of their dependence on and often complacency for the powers that be, these relations can contribute to reinforce existing policies, however bad they may be.

Thinking Locally, Acting Globally?

Beyond generating scholarly work, many north–south partnerships aim to channel information from where refugees are (i.e., the south), to the northern policymakers and organizations behind the global humanitarian enterprise. This is an important function and one potentially well served by collaborations with strategically placed representatives. Nonetheless, such relationships are not without shortcomings and risks, three of which I raise here. First, they presume research is a powerful tool for achieving policy change. Second, they typically suppose substantial and unproblematic gains of channelling southern voices to northern policymakers. Third, inasmuch as the previous two points are true, they effectively generate institutional configurations where northern scholars identify and shape southern voices that are projected outside their regions. While overlapping with points raised earlier, they warrant further (if superficial) consideration here.

First, does research influence policy change? Sound research design, representative sampling and objectivity may be the hallmarks of good academic and policy-oriented research, but many of us quickly discover the weak correlation between research quality and influence on policy and practice. This can be particularly galling when research is commissioned or funded by governments and aid agencies or explicitly designed to shift policy and practice. This should come as little surprise: given the pace at which humanitarian interventions are planned, who has time to read carefully? Moreover, by the time good research is ready to share, we are often left fighting yesterday’s policy battles. Research (like all forms of data and information) will most likely be used when confirming existing principles

or furthering policymakers' and advocates' interests (Argyris 1982; Feldman and March 1981). Consequently, careful research is often so transmogrified by policy discussions that it becomes unrecognizable while 'shoddy' research—clever if inaccurate summaries making clear (and convenient) political statements or offering handy buzzwords—is often celebrated and uncritically adopted. Recognizing what it takes to get our work heard and used, we often unwittingly refine or harden existing policy parameters rather than establish ourselves as the autonomous challengers we ostensibly hope to be.

Faced with researchers' frustrations at their work being ignored and funders' anxiety that their investments are coming to naught, we typically respond by spending more money on dissemination and developing ever more elaborate strategies for getting policymakers and researchers in the same room. This has produced a number of successes, but precious few given the time, energy and money put into it. Indeed, there are reasons to doubt whether research initiatives can produce targeted policy change during their lifespan. When positive change is achieved, it is often by capitalizing on opportunity windows opened by circumstances well beyond researchers' control (e.g., xenophobic violence; a cabinet reshuffle; the appointment of former colleagues to government posts). That African policy making is often so obtuse, personalized and arbitrary means that the kind of forums and initiatives employed in Europe or North America are likely to be more symbolic than substantive. As such, they may help legitimize government decisions. In some instances, they have also been a tool for northern policy influence (via southern partners), something we have seen regarding the dissemination of particular norms around trafficking and border management (Segatti 2011a). The use of the media to mobilize public opinion may be equally unsuccessful where the press is controlled and inaccessible or public opinion is largely irrelevant in shaping public policy.

Rather than throw more money at dissemination, we should shift thinking about research uptake in important ways, by first getting a grip on policy making processes. There has already been some work on policy making around refugee concerns in developing countries (see, for example Schmidt 2008; Handmaker 2001; Segatti 2011b). This is a start, but we must go further. As with many other aspects of refugee related research, we are overly bound by our focus on displacement and the humanitarian space. In many instances, the policies that matter will not be about migration, *per se*, and may only tangentially mention refugees and migrants. Consequently, we must complement our work on humanitarian issues with analysis of housing, agriculture, security, and a range of other issues and an effort to understand (a) how these policies intersect with our concerns and (b) how those policies are made and how they might be proactively reformed. This means not only nesting forced migration research within broader migration studies, but actively identifying and exploring intersections between forced migration and other fields of inquiry.

Channelling Southern Voices

Scholey (2006) argues that research on peace building and human security is typically framed by global or northern policy concerns, rather than the immediate, concrete problems facing communities grappling with armed conflict. Our field is similarly inclined, with discussions of UN reform, resettlement, international legal frameworks, and the global aid regime shaping research agendas in ways that exclude local meanings of those terms. This is understandable given the northern origins of most large-scale research projects. Inasmuch as southern partners remain dependent on research collaborations, this framing generates a kind of coercive isomorphism: we either fall in line with others' agendas or we risk losing much needed financial support.

The concern here is not only one of relative scholarly influence, but also of positive policy influence. If we want to achieve change, we may be barking up the wrong tree. While many of us enjoy participating in high level dialogues—if only for the chance to travel and collect generous daily allowances—we must recognize that international laws and policies (and even domestic ones) often make little difference to migrants. More than a decade ago, Chimni (1998: 352–356) persuasively argued that the field been wilfully apolitical and asocial in its approach to improving refugees' lives and refugee-related scholarship. While there have been some improvements, we could and should go further. In short, local politics, not global principles, are what typically matters most and we must do more to understand them. This means looking closer by complementing global generalizations with local or regional perspectives.

A call for increased attention to local political processes and other local dynamics (social, economic, and so on), gives cause to question just how useful networks and efforts are to influence global policy making. Returning again to the symbolic value attached to information reveals an additional dimension of collaboratively generated knowledge. In some instances, northern institutions' imprimatur enhances a finding's credibility and the likelihood that it will be considered. For many years, the City of Johannesburg hired British and American consultants to provide models from London, New York, or other first world cities. More recently, UNHCR in Pretoria has begun building intervention programmes based on a two week research project by the Women's Refugee Committee while largely ignoring years of locally generated research. If policy influence is the goal, there may be instances where southern researchers must reinforce the northern experts' power in global debate, swallow their pride and hand over results to those who will get heard.

While we can accept partnership and invisibility as the price we pay for influence, the issue here is a simple one: as long as partnerships depend on northern partners to set the research agenda, manage funding and provide legitimacy, southern-based scholars will rarely have the opportunity to

participate in global dialogues on their own terms. That information is so frequently relayed via northern partners (or synthesized and then presented by them) only furthers the imbalance. Most obviously, northern scholars are in a position to act as gatekeepers, filtering out ‘noise’ by silencing those who work against their agendas and presenting only that information which they find convincing, relevant, or otherwise suitable. (As a scholar working in South Africa I admit explicitly excluding local and regional voices where I felt they were misguided.) While refugees and others may benefit in some way from engagements done under these auspices—notwithstanding the points raised above—the work of southern scholars inadvertently confirms northern scholars’ position as experts, theorists, and the most powerful critics. It is, after all, northern scholars who choose and shape the southern voices that are being heard. Given the increasingly powerful position that experts play in international humanitarianism (see Barnett 2011), these further not only academic, but global political hierarchies.

I am increasingly convinced that effective policy influence demands a two-fold adjustment. On one hand, we need to understand and work to influence policy at the intersections of the ‘humanitarian space’ with other policy fields, whether urban management, environmental science, or health and nutrition. On the other, we need to ‘go local’. International law, global policy, and multilateral donors are important, but substantive policy change in that realm is hard to achieve and its effects are dilatory and diffuse. The ‘low hanging fruit’ are often at the national or even sub-national level where change is both easier to achieve and more likely to produce immediate effects. In doing so, we must be acutely aware of how partnerships towards these ends can both endanger our efforts to influence policy and marginalize the voices and autonomy of southern partners.

Meddling on the Margins

If we are serious about building southern capacity and influence—a big ‘if’—we ought to consider carefully the nature of interaction and the intended and unintentional outcomes of our north–south partnerships. The following are a series of practical steps that can help improve research generated in the south and the success of future collaborations.

- *Take Small Steps Wisely.* Research consortia partners are often selected more for their geography than their intellectual interests or endowments. The results include motley crews that lack focus and have little personal rapport. More energy spent in selecting partners and greater upfront openness about objectives, resources and expected outcomes can help ensure more fruitful collaboration. Even in existing networks, there are benefits of starting small with concrete projects involving a relatively small number of partners. This may help avoid a ‘lowest common denominator’ approach to research and the kind of pressure where southern partners are

overwhelmed by a dominant ‘northern’ or comparative agenda that marginalizes the value of small scale research. Successful small scale collaborations can be the base of a ladder for broader projects managed by people who have established functional and productive working relations (The British Academy 2006). Forging partnerships should be done as early as possible to avoid including partners once the conceptual die has been cast and the project’s parameters already established.

- *Open the Gates.* Partnerships should be at once more specific and more broadly conceived. Collaborations between a refugee studies person in the north and a refugee studies person in the south risk reproducing existing knowledge and presuppositions. Given the close connection of policy and the field, this limits the work’s audience and its potential scholarly impact. It may also reinforce a global hierarchy of knowledge production. Both enhancing our research agenda and broadening our policy impact demands building links with people outside of the humanitarian field. These people can provide both technical expertise and insights and, equally importantly, connections to policymakers outside our comfortable stovepipes and silos. In the long term, this can open up new funding sources and break the close and potentially damaging dyads of refugee researchers and practitioners.
- *Fences Make Good Neighbours.* Too many north–south collaborations are shrouded in the politically correct language of partnership, a fiction that disguises inherent inequalities in the relationships and differences in objectives and endowments. To address these, there should be a full assessment of the participants’ resources and objectives from the outset. Where objectives differ substantially, project leaders should walk away or consider devolving financial resources to allow individuals or small groups to continue work. If this is not possible, partners should define their roles from the beginning. If this means southern partners are expected to work as research assistants, so be it. At least they know where they stand and the risks and benefits associated with their position. Full accountability and transparency in budgeting and planning will also help southern partners to assess the degree to which they are partners or participants.
- *Live within Our Means.* In securing funding, applicants often exaggerate their projects’ scholarly and practical impact. This may win grants, but it often makes unrealistic demands on overcommitted partners who are expected to do much of the legwork. A series of smaller projects requiring less ongoing participation may have better chance of success and be more cost effective.
- *Pay the Bills; Pay in Advance.* Partnerships must recognize that southern partners’ participation in research collaborations are often as much (or more) about securing financial resources as intellectual inquiry and policy impacts. To encourage substantive collaboration and scholarship, budgets must consider the full cost of involvement. Where long-term partnership is desired, support must cover scholars’ university salaries and other opportunity costs associated with such participation. It must also

provide the research infrastructure required to conduct the work (e.g., travel, logistics, printers) and the somewhat extortionate overheads African universities typically charge on funds they manage (in exchange for managing them poorly; see the British Academy 2006: 10). If such payments are prohibitive, alternative arrangements may be considered such as short-term and highly focused writing retreats or other fora in which partners are able to dedicate their full attention to a given project or collaborative initiative, albeit for a short period.

- *Buy Local*. Inasmuch as policy influence remains an objective, greater emphasis should be placed on building relationships with local advocacy organizations and with partners outside of the refugee field. Although there may be reasons why southern scholars may not wish to be publicly associated with policy critiques, where the options for such associations exist they are likely to produce more immediate change and at least partially avoid channelling information to northern institutions in ways that enhance their expertise and voice.
- *Replant and Replenish*. Senior scholars across Africa have strong incentives for monopolizing fields in their respective countries. It is typically these people who attract international attention and get drawn into global or multi-region partnerships. This both fortifies their dominance of local scholarship and lessens the likelihood of full participation in collaborative initiatives. By insisting on the independent participation of doctoral students and early career scholars, northern partners can help multiply the voices being heard both in and out of their respective countries. As with other aspects of collaborations, selection for participation should be done carefully and transparently to avoid providing senior scholars with further patronage opportunities. Care must also be taken as such arrangements are potentially paternalistic and risk creating imbalances where senior scholars in the north are working with less established scholars elsewhere.
- *You Get What You Negotiate*. African and other southern scholars often underestimate their importance to northern researchers' legitimacy, research funding, and ability to do research. While there are some risks to doing so, African scholars could do more to play on northerners' liberal sensitivities and genuine desire for collaboration to assert their interests and demands. If unsuccessful, scholars should walk away or be clever enough to realize what they are getting into. If ensuring benefits requires slyness or the occasional subterfuge, so be it. Some of the most effective and radical forms of social change have started with little more.

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1. Although Chimni (1998) remains sceptical of refugee scholarship in the south generally, more general Indian (and other South Asian) scholarship has demonstrated an ability to be analytically sophisticated and significant in influencing (or at least challenging) northern scholars’ perspectives.
2. These comments were made during a speech in early 2011 at Makerere University in Uganda. Portions of the remarks are reported in Freschi 2011.

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Response to Landau

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Loren B. Landau's article 'Communities of Knowledge or Tyrannies of Partnership: Reflections on North–South Research Networks and the Dual Imperative,' claims that North–South research networks reinforce many of the hierarchies that they are meant to challenge. With increasing pressure to collaborate due to northern funding imperatives, the research centres of the north are forced to find partners in the south who often have limited capabilities. Landau cites reasons why he considers social scientists of the south may be of limited capability. One reason is that their salaries are often near