

Cultural Consideration in International Research Collaborations between Africa and the Western World

Elias Wondimu, Tsehai Publishers, Loyola Marymount University

Africa is the world's second most-populous continent, yet it remains to have a low percentage of global research output¹. Many western nations have attempted to foster the growth of Africa's research through collaborations and grants. However, some individuals have brought the efficacy of these programs into question². Research collaborations between Africa and the Western World are vital to the continent's academic growth, but the motivations of both parties must be understood and reconciled.

Western nations and the private sector have worked to strengthen Africa's knowledge systems. In 2008, the European Union created a grant program, offering a total of €33 million to Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific in order to "boost their ability to compete for international research funding"³. The money was not intended for research itself, but to provide resources for scholars who may otherwise be unable to win funding. The United States also plays a major part in providing Africa with resources. As the leading international collaborator, the US is home to a number of organizations that aid research in Africa⁴. One such institution is the *Society of Research Administrators*. According to its mission statement, the SRA is "an international organization dedicated to the education and professional development of research

¹ Christoff Pauw and Taurai Imbayarwo, *Tracking Research Collaboration and Research Output in Africa A Case Study of Stellenbosch University*, presented at INORMS 2010.

² Damtew Teferra, "African Research Collaborations Must Be Fair and Equal," *Science Development Network*, 13 January 2009, <http://www.scidev.net/en/opinions/african-research-collaborations-must-be-fair-and-e.html>.

³ Linda Nordling, "EU Money to Help Southern Scientists Compete for Funding", *Science Development Network*, 4 December 2008, <http://www.scidev.net/en/news/eu-money-to-help-southern-scientists-compete-for-f.html>.

⁴ Christoff Pauw.

administrators, as well as the enhancement of public understanding of the importance of research and its administration”⁵. Other organizations- the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) for instance- work closely with the government, addressing “critical national issues” and directing international research funds⁶. Africa has its own resources for international research collaborations. The Association of African Universities (AAU) is a non-governmental network of schools that promotes “cooperation among themselves and between them and the international academic community”⁷. Such institutions seek to standardize African education and research. Still, 20% of active African researchers work beyond the boundaries of academia and “traditional research bodies, usually for international organizations, foreign intergovernmental bodies and NGOs”⁸.

Research collaborations are prevalent throughout Africa. According to Nelius Boshoff, “80% of Central Africa’s research papers are produced in collaboration with a partner from outside the region”⁹. Almost half of the papers are published in collaboration European countries as the only partner, and 35% in collaboration with former colonial occupants¹⁰. France (32%), The United States (14%), Britain (12%), and Germany (12%) are the top collaborators¹¹.

According to data from Stellenbosch University, 52% of the 201 of partnerships and collaborations studied were research-based¹². The region of Eastern Africa is home to the majority of partners (approximately 170). To put that into perspective, Southern and Western

⁵ John M. Carfora and Denise Wallen, “Building Toward Successful International Research Collaborations,” April 2008: 3505, 42.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Christoff Pauw.

⁹ Nelius Boshoff, “Neo-Colonialism and Research Collaboration in Central Africa,” *Scientometrics* 81.2 (2009): abstract.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Christoff Pauw.

Africa both house approximately 70 partners each. The four most common disciplines are Humanities, Social Sciences, Clinical Medical Sciences, and Agricultural Studies.

Criticisms of International Research Collaborations

Research collaborations have helped to overcome the marginalization of Africa's intellectual output, but some individuals have called the practices of the Western World into question. In an opinion piece for the *Science and Development Network*, Damtew Teferra argues, "Research collaborations with African Institutions must be equal, fair and meaningful"¹³. He notes that these partnerships are often dismissed as "donor-driven, unstable, and inappropriate"¹⁴. Donors often change their agendas without concern for local needs, creating a fragmented research climate. Uganda alone works with 21 donors, "each with their own projects, budgets, and administration requirements"¹⁵. In 2006, 38 African countries worked with 25 or more donors¹⁶. The process of reporting back to these donors is rife with complexities. Tanzania submits 2,400 quarterly reports every year, contributing to a poor use of resources¹⁷. Donor partners have also aired their grievances. Projects are often delayed by bureaucracy, poor organization, and labor strikes. Some researchers have noted a lack of academic freedom and the difficulty of renewing grants¹⁸. This has caused a number of western institutions to lose interest in African partnerships.

Regardless of who is lodging the complaints, Africa is suffering from one-way collaborations that favor the west. This is due to a number of complications between

¹³ Damtew Teferra.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

collaborators, mainly: cultural differences/ biases, a lack of communication, legal misunderstandings, and poor infrastructures. Research administrators from abroad have often expressed their frustration with U.S. colleagues who “‘assume’ that the culture of research administration outside the United States is mediocre and thus in need of ‘American’ direction, supervision, and control”¹⁹. Cultural predispositions often taint discussions between researchers and administrators when they negotiate the terms of “meaningful international research agreements”²⁰. The American methods of research are often referred to as a kind of measure by which other international methods are judged. This of course creates one-way collaborations in which African researchers are expected to grow by external standards rather than the demands of the research itself. Western researchers therefore have a habit of parenting- as opposed to collaborating with- their African colleagues.

The publication of articles is an important part of any academic institution. Collaborations with the West have helped African researchers to see their names in print, creating greater international visibility for the institutions they represent. Still, Africa’s share in the world’s knowledge production is less than 1% ²¹. There are a number of roadblocks that prevent collaborative research from increasing the African body of knowledge. One of them is language: research is almost always published in the language of the Western donor. According to the Nelius Boshoff data cited above, this often means the language of a country’s former colonial occupant. Collaborative research is seldom published in the first language of the African collaborator. Thus, an African colleague’s research has a lesser impact on his/her country of origin than it does on the West. Another roadblock is the lack of a physical means of publishing

¹⁹ John M. Carfora.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Damtew Teferra, “Striving at the Periphery, Craving for the Centre: The Realm of African Scholarly Communication in the Digital Age,” *The Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 35.3 (2004): 159-171.

or distributing the research. Many countries do not have the technology, the resources, or the funding to share research internally or with neighboring governments. According to “Academia in Africa” the continent also lacks the language skill, education, and technological capacity to access online journal databases, a prominent medium for distributing knowledge in the West.

The culture-centric mindset that afflicts research collaborations precipitates downward from the U.S. research administrators and donors themselves. The inane amount of Tanzanian quarterly reports (as noted above) demonstrates that many Western research administrators do not give Africa the space to research. While collaborations may help some African countries to publish more articles, the knowledge systems are not growing at the proper rate. The increase in intellectual output, which the collaborations provide, does not benefit Africa as much as it does the West. This, according to a recent report from *Thomson Reuters*, is due to a “chronic lack of investment in facilities for research and teaching”²². The West grants money to the continent and benefits from the research without ensuring that Africa has gained the necessary resources.

All the while, Africa is being drained of talent. According to a 2004 study, over 23% of America’s physicians are trained outside the country, mostly from low-income or lower-middle income nations. More than 5,000 physicians from Sub-Saharan Africa practice in the U.S., “a number that represents more than 6 % of the physicians practicing in Sub-Saharan Africa”²³. As a result, Africa’s medical professional-to-population ratio is shrinking. Citing a 2007 UNESCO report, *Thompson Reuters* points out, “science and technology are critical not only to the continent’s economic prosperity but to such matters as food security, disease control, access to

²² Jonathan Adams, Christopher King, and Daniel Hook, “Global Research Report: Africa 2010”, *Thompson Reuters*, April 2010, researchanalytics.thomsonreuters.com. Emphasis added.

²³ Amy Hagopian, Matthew J. Thompson, Meredith Fordyce, Karin E. Johnson, and L. Gary Hart, “The Migration of Physicians From Sub-Saharan Africa to the United States of America: Measures of the African Brain Drain,” *Human Resources for Health* 2.17, 14 December 2004, human-resources-health.com/content/2/1/17.

clean water, and environmental sustainability”²⁴. When collaborations favor the West, African institutions cannot grow. Weak institutions cause skilled researchers emigrate due to a lack of incentive, while those who aim to be researchers are prevented from reaching their potential. Thus, poorly conducted research collaborations have a negative impact on Africa’s health and general wellbeing.

Research “Aid” vs. Investment

Part of the problem with African research collaboration stems from the fact that the majority of Western research funding comes in the form of grants and donations. This reflects the Western predilection to give aid to- rather than invest in- African institutions. In *Dead Aid: Why Aid is not Working and How There is a Better Way For Africa*, international economist Dr. Dambisa Moyo argues that foreign systematic aid- in other words “aid payments made directly to governments”- has produced many adverse effects on the continent ranging from increased inflation to government corruption²⁵. Despite growing opportunities to invest in Africa, projections of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) are remarkably low. Citing data from the *Economist*, Moyo notes, “global FDI inflows are projected to grow at an annual average rate of 8 per cent between 2006 and 2010, whereas for Africa the share will remain at around a depressing 1.4 per cent”²⁶. This contributes to a lack of competitive wages and deprives Africa of capital to invest in machinery, hardware and advanced research. Moyo also touches on the concept that Western aid is a form of paternalism that constantly keeps Africa “in its perpetual childlike

²⁴ Jonathan Adams.

²⁵ Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way For Africa*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2009).

²⁶ Ibid, 113.

state”²⁷. In a similar vein, ineffective collaborations, made possible by grants and donations, keep African learning from growing out of its own childlike state. The obsessive oversight of the Western donors indicates that they do not trust the African researchers to the fullest extent. And the culture-centric behavior of the US collaborators can certainly be viewed as an extension of the paternalist outlook.

Western research administrators should be investing in Africa’s academic future. While collaborations with the Western World are contributing to the increase of Africa’s intellectual output, resources are limited. The donors’ distrust of African capabilities counteracts their donations- mainly by preventing the growth of knowledge systems and institutions. Weak institutions mean low wages, less opportunity, and more incentive to leave for a country of higher economic standing. The absence of high-skilled individuals is a terrible loss for Africa’s scientific and economic development as well as the health of its people. Through poorly conducted, culture-centric research collaborations, Western academia is contributing to the brain drain that afflicts Africa today. However, this type of workshops that dare to examine the core elements of international collaboration might also add to a solution for this troubled engagement with African institutions and scholars.

What is Next for Africa and International Research Collaboration?

In “Turning Brain Drain into Brain Gain: Personal Reflections on Using the Diaspora Option”, Uwem E. Ite notes, “attracting and retaining competent staff is still the biggest current problem in African Universities”²⁸. After all, approximately 1/3 of the most highly qualified

²⁷ Ibid, 32.

²⁸ Uwem E. Ite, “Turning Brain Drain into Brain Gain: Personal Reflections on Using the Diaspora Option,” *African Issues* 30.1 (2002): 79.

African nationals live outside their country of origin²⁹. As a scholar in Diaspora, Ite asserts that it is unrealistic to expect that large groups skilled emigrants will return to Africa. Rather, he advocates the creation of scholarly networks between African expatriates living in the West and their home countries. He verifies his method with descriptions of the international networks he has worked to establish and other networks that have had degrees of success. In his own programs, he tries to accommodate southern perspectives. Through overseas placement in African institutions, he provides “an opportunity for [Western] students to tap into the local knowledge base” of the country they visit³⁰. This helps Southern researchers distribute or publish their findings and compete with “experts” from the North- the same people who “set the standards and agenda for what is publishable and what is not”³¹. Thus, scholarly networks can help reverse the effect of high-skilled emigrations, provided a sufficient degree of emphasis is placed on the strengthening of local research and knowledge production. This will ensure that local regions benefit from the research they produce.

There are also more concrete approaches to stem the South-North migration of high-skilled labor and boost knowledge production in Africa. In “Transnational Scholarship: Building Linkages between the US Africanist Community and Africa,” Paul Tiyambe Zeleza claims that American universities need to focus on building new international partnerships with an emphasis on mobility between the West and Africa³². He notes that most American academics are on a “tenure-clock” that encourages the mass-production of articles³³. Universities in the West should encourage professors to take leaves of absence and develop other projects that “create

²⁹ Soumana Sako, “Brain Drain and Africa’s Development: A Reflection,” *African Issues* 30.1 (2002): 25.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 78.

³¹ *Ibid*.

³² Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “Transnational Scholarship: Building Linkages between the US Africanist Community and Africa,” *African Issues* 30.2 (2002): 74.

³³ *Ibid*, 74.

instructional flow in both directions’, rather than penalize international academic exchange³⁴. The African studies departments of American universities should also incorporate the disciplines that play the largest roles in African academia and the development of the continent itself. Zeleza argues, “fields in the sciences and professions, which predominate in attracting African students to the United States, need better incorporation into African studies programs” in order to “provide [the students] with both the broad humanistic and scientific literacies essentials essential for a pedagogical and scholarly enterprise fueled by developmentalist ambitions”³⁵.

Perhaps the most concrete of all attempts to block the brain drain are those that encourage expatriates to return home. The International Organization of Migration’s (IOM) Return of Qualified Nationals Program has been operating 1983. However, the program has only helped 1,200 people return to six African countries since its creation³⁶. In “Brain Drain and Africa Development: A Reflection”, Soumana Sako bluntly asserts, “emigrating professionals and academics will not return to their home countries out of patriotism”³⁷. He then points to many changes that need to occur if Africa is to hold a greater share in the World’s total knowledge production. Overall, working conditions need to be improved: “salaries must reflect market conditions, tertiary institutions of learning must provide facilities for teaching and research, and doctors and medical personnel must work in well-equipped hospital and medical centers”³⁸. In addition, political leaders on the continent must work to improve living conditions. This includes

³⁴ Ibid, 73.

³⁵ Ibid, 74.

³⁶ Sako, 28.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

the cultivation of peace, as well as initiatives to strengthen the political, economic, and social environments in each country³⁹.

Publishing systems need to be revamped if Africa is to contribute a larger share to the world's total knowledge production. Africa must be able to receive and release information more efficiently, and in a way that benefits those who do the research (and their home countries). Much of the continent has trouble accessing the electronic databases that have become so prevalent in the academic community. Damtew Teferra notes, "access to these databases is critical, but the costs and the necessary infrastructure are prohibitive"⁴⁰. Many institutions come across the same problems: low bandwidth, unreliable power, and a shortage of technological expertise⁴¹. There are a number of initiatives underway to combat these problems, but "much of the emphasis has been on access and delivery of finished products manufactured elsewhere"⁴². Sadly, little attention is paid to the development of "locally generated knowledge"⁴³. The findings of African research need to be published so as to benefit the home country of the researcher. If research collaborations continue to produce information solely for the West, Africa will not gain the footing to research independently; it will remain an unattractive working environment and the brain drain will not stop.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Damtew Teferra, "Striving at the Periphery, Craving for the Centre: The Realm of African Scholarly Communication in the Digital Age," *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 35.3 (2004): 164.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 165.

⁴³ Ibid.