
Original Article

A Sociology of International Research Partnerships for Sustainable Development

Claudia Zingerli

University of Zurich, Zurich.

Abstract In recent years, the partnership concept has shaped not only international development assistance, but also the organisation of knowledge production processes in development research. This article looks beyond the rhetoric of the partnership concept by discussing the institutional conditions and individual choices that shape North–South research collaboration in the context of an international development research network. By drawing on ideas from the Sociology of Knowledge, and by distinguishing among three distinct lenses on power, the article analyses discourses and practices shaping working relations between unequal partners. Research partnerships are not a universal remedy for structural inequalities and epistemological hegemonies. However, they can offer important opportunities for direct encounters between people and institutions from different scientific traditions and policy contexts, which can lead to the emergence of more respectful and reflexive forms of knowledge production in contemporary development research.

Depuis quelques années, le partenariat est un concept essentiel non seulement de l'aide au développement international, mais aussi de l'organisation de la production de connaissances dans le domaine de la recherche sur le développement. Dans cet article nous nous situons au delà du discours sur le concept de partenariat et examinons les conditions institutionnelles et les choix individuels qui déterminent les collaborations Nord-Sud au sein d'un réseau de recherche international pour le développement. En s'inspirant des idées de la sociologie du savoir et en examinant le pouvoir de trois points de vue différents, cet article analyse les discours et les pratiques qui déterminent les relations de travail entre des partenaires inégaux. Le partenariat de recherche n'est pas un remède universel aux problèmes d'inégalités structurelles et d'hégémonie épistémologique. Cependant, les partenariats de recherche offrent d'importantes opportunités de rencontres entre individus et institutions ayant des traditions scientifiques et politiques différentes, ce qui peut faciliter le développement de pratiques de production de savoir plus respectueuses et réflexives dans le domaine de la recherche contemporaine pour le développement.

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Introduction

The internal debate in recent development studies indicates that this multi- and cross-disciplinary field of inquiry requires a reorientation. The contributors to this debate are concerned about the 'discipline's' foundations (Sumner and Tribe, 2008) and the loss and only partial regaining of paradigms (Schuurmann, 2000). Fundamental critique also relates to the issues of knowledge and power in international development studies, pointing out hegemonies of epistemologies and dominant forms of knowledge (Powell, 2006; Guttal, 2007). The parameters and rules of development research tend to reflect the epistemological traditions of science at 'Western' universities of the global North

(Olukoshi, 2007). They are contingent upon the changing nature of the global political economy of knowledge that largely controls the type of knowledge that is generated, the extent of autonomy of knowledge production and the way knowledge is delivered (Standing and Taylor, 2007; Maasen, 2009).

Taking this debate seriously means advancing a critical reflection on the organisation of knowledge produced in development research. This involves an examination of forms of collaboration between development researchers and institutions competing in an increasingly globalised research market. A critical reflection is sensitive to the issues of knowledge and power in development studies. It is driven by an interest in finding out more about the organisation of development research and the people who engage in this broad and often controversial field of inquiry, which 'is founded on the very dichotomies it seeks to overcome' (Standing and Taylor, 2007, p. 79).

Following this internal debate, this article concentrates its discussion on processes of collaborative knowledge production emerging under the premises of North–South research partnerships. In recent years, the partnership concept has shaped not only international development assistance, but also the organisation of development research. Research partnerships have become instruments that structure knowledge production processes in the context of a globalised research market. This article looks beyond the rhetoric of partnership in the academic realm. It uses the idea of a sociology of international research partnerships to draw attention to the structural and ideological conditions of the organisation of knowledge production in development research, as well as the power relations emerging in international research partnerships. This article draws on ideas of power and the Sociology of Knowledge and evolves around three questions: (1) Under what institutional, historical and social circumstances do research partnerships emerge? (2) What are the structural and institutional conditions shaping partnership relations in development research? and (3) How do research partners experience and perceive their international research collaborations?

After outlining the details of the approach, methodology and empirical data, the article provides a short review of the literature on research partnerships. It then delves into empirical insights gained from experiences with international research partnerships for sustainable development. The article draws on recent empirical material collected in the international development research network of the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North–South, which conducts sustainability-oriented research for development in partnership between Swiss research institutes and universities and organisations in Latin America, Africa and Asia (NCCR North–South, 2002; NCCR North–South, 2008b). With its focus on knowledge and power, the article reveals the structural circumstances of and motivations for research partnership undertakings between unequal partners. Finally, it draws conclusions with respect to the potential contributions of international research partnerships to a more critical, reflexive and constructive attitude in contemporary development research.

Knowledge, Power and International Development Research

Outlining the Approach

Knowledge and power can be approached in many different ways and from very diverse perspectives. The critical reflection in the field of development research presented here

takes account of the changing nature of the global research market and the political economy of knowledge production. Both the globalised research market and the allocation of resources of its political economy have implications for what is being studied in development research. Moreover, they urge the research institutions to position themselves in order to survive and flourish in this international and increasingly competitive academic field.

The Sociology of Knowledge focuses on the internal and external institutional conditions that shape knowledge production, circulation and communication (Keller, 2008; Maasen, 2009). With respect to development research, it helps to address the political and social structures and processes that influence the flow and exchange of knowledge in international networks of the development sector. Apart from this institutional focus, a Sociology of Knowledge perspective also draws attention to the social role of knowledge carriers – in the present case the researchers – while addressing the societal role and power of knowledge (Stehr and Meja, 2005). The relationships among them emerge and are negotiated against diverse backgrounds of scientific discipline and institutional affiliation, as well as wider social and political contexts.

This article also draws on some of Foucault's ideas on the knowledge–power nexus, which offer conceptual guidance for analysing the organisation of knowledge production and the discursive practices that structure discourses – in this case the partnership discourse. In Foucault's understanding, knowledge is inextricably enmeshed in relations of power, and is always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice. In Foucault's words, '(...) there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (Foucault cited in Howarth, 2000, p. 77). Foucault suggests that power does not function in the form of a chain, but rather circulates and is never monopolised by one centre (Foucault, 1999; Hall, 2001). It is deployed and exercised through a net-like organisation, but always with a direction (Foucault, 1972). Foucault's considerations of the knowledge–power nexus are important for this article because they further the idea that knowledge is linked to power and that power relations only materialise with a *vis-à-vis* – a counterpart – and within a domain. In such a domain a discourse emerges, is being taken up and/or is eventually being replaced.

The combination of strands of the Sociology of Knowledge and some of Foucault's ideas on power relations shapes the analysis of collaborative knowledge production in international research partnerships presented here. The analysis distinguishes among three different lenses on power.

- The first lens addresses power as operating indirectly through dominant values and discourse. Development research conceptualised as an institution as well as a societal event has specific norms and rules. The participation in the institutions and the compliance with norms and rules means execution as well as acceptance of power structures specific to the respective scientific field. This shapes individual preferences and identities. A guiding question that arises with this lens on power relations in development research is under what institutional, historical and social circumstances do research partnerships emerge.
- The second lens emphasises the control of material resources of knowledge production in research partnerships. This sort of power is negotiated through the formal rules and structures, institutions, and procedures that shape the organisation of development research. What are the structural and institutional conditions shaping

partnership relations in development research? This is another guiding question in this respect.

- The third lens emphasises power as important in shaping social relations. It draws attention to the experiences and perceptions of collaborating researchers in relating to each other in joint research projects. A guiding question arising from this lens is that of how research partners experience and perceive their international research collaborations.

Despite the conceptual distinctions among the three lenses on power, the accounts presented in this article show that issues of knowledge and power cannot be explained by adopting just one. In particular, the lenses focusing on power as value and discourse and as control over material resources need to be looked through simultaneously. In addition, as the article places the researchers and their experiences with collaborative knowledge production in international research partnerships for sustainable development centre stage, it does not remain on an abstract, conceptually easy to be separated and impersonal level. On the contrary, the personal accounts and experiences of development researchers show that discourse, values, resources and social reality immediately interconnect and enmesh with each other.

Methodology and Empirical Material

Providing more reflexive insights into knowledge production and power relations in international development research collaborations is not a straightforward task. Neither knowledge nor power can be addressed in a direct manner because they are situated at a meta-level of institutions and individuals' experiences. This has had implications for the research methodology and the discussion presented here.

With a comprehensive literature review on research partnerships, this article draws primarily on empirical data collected in narrative interviews with 24 senior researchers in the field of development research. The interviews were conducted between March 2007 and August 2008. The interviewees have different disciplinary backgrounds, such as veterinary sciences, biology, architecture, sociology, geography, environmental engineering, political sciences and environmental sciences. They range in age between 37 and 60; 14 of the 24 respondents work in a Swiss research institution; 12 originate from the South; and 6 are female. All of them are experienced in conducting research in partnership arrangements, and all of them are today members of the international development research network of the NCCR North–South.

The narrative interviews lasted from 40 min to 2 hours. The interviews were structured into five broad themes. They focused on (i) the researchers' professional biographies, (ii) their involvement in international research collaborations, (iii) their specific experiences with research partnerships, (iv) their communication of research results, and (v) their self-conception as development researchers. The decision to use a narrative type of interview (cf. Flick, 2005) was based on the idea that the researchers would have ample time to discuss their experiences with international research collaborations. In these accounts the element of power in collaborative knowledge production came up almost automatically. If it did not, the issue of power was addressed by asking specific questions on personal opinions about or experiences with international research collaborations.

All interviews were transcribed as accurately and literally as possible. The interview transcripts were structured and organised with the software ATLAS.ti, which is based on

the methodology of grounded theory (Diaz-Bone and Schneider, 2004). This enhanced the possibility to derive meta-level information on knowledge and power issues in development research from the researchers' accounts.

International Research Partnerships

Development studies in recent years have moved from predominantly individual researcher-based projects to much larger partnership programmes, involving increasing numbers of organisations and people in different regions of the world (Standing and Taylor, 2007). Many of them not only conduct research, but are also engaged in policy, advocacy and implementation responding to the challenges of sustainable development. Over the years, various partnership models and principles have been invented and tested (Bolay and Schmid, 2004; Bradley, 2007a; Molenaar *et al.*, 2009). This section provides a short review of key issues related to international research partnerships.

In the field of international academic development collaboration, the call for North–South research partnerships goes back to the 1970s, but gained prominence in the 1990s (Bradley, 2008). The basic rationale behind research partnerships is that they will help to reduce the imbalance between developing and industrialised countries in the academic and education sector. UNESCO (2005b, p. 99), for example, identifies a real scientific divide that sets the 'science-rich countries' apart from the other. While largely bound up with economic inequalities, the scientific divide is also due to specific institutional and political factors. The production and spread of knowledge depend on national systems of research and innovation and the political will to invest in science. Today, approximately 80 per cent of all financial resources devoted to research worldwide is being invested in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. China, India and the newly industrialised countries of Asia account for another 15 per cent. This leaves a share of approximately 5 per cent invested in research in the rest of the world (UNESCO, 2005a).

Various sources have suggested establishing research partnerships between researchers and research institutions from the global North and the global South (KFPE, 1998; Costello and Zumla, 2000; RAWOO, 2001). Britain's development agency, the Department for International Development, has used the partnership modality for many years, and has supported the development of 29 relatively large North–South research programme consortia, with at least 50 per cent of partners originating from developing countries (King, 2007). In addition, Dutch research and development organisations have been using the concept of research partnerships for a long time, such as the 'multiannual multidisciplinary research programmes' (Policy and Operations Evaluation Department, 2007). In these programmes, research partnerships are a precondition for disbursing funds to institutions situated not only in the North, but also increasingly in the South. The power of the partnership discourse is thus directly linked to the material power exercised by funding agencies.

While nobody would deny that partnership is an effective concept for structuring any kind of human and institutional relations, it also involves controversy and critique (Bossuyt and Laporte, 1994; Brinkerhoff, 2002; Mayers and Vermeulen, 2002). On the one hand, the partnership concept implies, if properly managed and supported, synergies, better results, enhanced influence and reputation of the collaborating partners, and higher professional standards and operational efficiency (Franklin, 2009). On the other,

partnership agreements will not automatically change the relationships among partners. Inequalities stemming from unequal power relations, multiple political and economic interests, or diverging norms and values continue to exist. This requires special attention, respect and commitment. In short, the very positive aspects of the partnership concept are intrinsically linked with the need for negotiating social relations, finding solutions to emerging conflicts and searching for common ground.

Within international research partnerships, inequalities, structural constraints and historically loaded power relations are felt directly in everyday social and working relations. This is particularly challenging for the field of development research, which seeks to overcome these inequalities. Although research partnerships nurture the idea of a real change to previous research conducted in developing countries as well as in collaboration among research partners from the global North and the global South, there are many obstacles to overcome (Binka, 2005; Bradley, 2007b; Bradley, 2008). A working group of the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (Maselli *et al*, 2006, p. 35) points out that research partnerships have potential shortcomings, particularly in asymmetric and unbalanced partnerships, for example when the global South merely serves as a 'laboratory of the North' that provides interesting scientific data. It also mentions the often inevitable unbalanced power relations with regard to funding and scientific merit and dominating scientific paradigms from the global North. These conditions tend to inhibit the application and further development of appropriate approaches for the Southern partners.

From this general discussion it can be concluded that research partnerships are not an easy remedy for inherent asymmetries and inequalities in the field of international development research. On the contrary, they involve real challenges for international research undertakings, as the next sections will show. Only a few studies reveal what these challenges mean in practice, for individual researchers and their projects. This article now turns to the sociology and inner life of certain research partnerships, focusing specifically on the issues of knowledge and power in international research partnerships for sustainable development.

A Sociology of North–South Research Partnerships

Study Context

The following sections are based on empirical research conducted in the international development research network of the NCCR North–South. The NCCR North–South is an example of a number of large international research networks, such as the Danish Development Research Network or the UK-based Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, which have been established during the last couple of years. These networks include institutional partners from the global North and the global South, and bring together researchers, practitioners and activists from the development sector. The NCCR North–South explicitly adopts a transdisciplinary approach to development-oriented research partnerships (Hurni *et al*, 2004).

The NCCR North–South is a research initiative commissioned by the Swiss Federal Council and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and participating research institutions. The programme has recently embarked into its third and final 4-year phase (2009–2013).

Each phase had funds of between 30 and 35 million Swiss francs. Today, the NCCR North–South is a network of seven Swiss research institutes and 160 institutional and individual partners in Latin America, Africa and Asia (see also www.north-south.unibe.ch/). Approximately 400 researchers are involved in activities related to the NCCR North–South. The worldwide research network builds onto often long-established research collaborations.

The following account is structured into the three lenses on power outlined above. The sections on research partnership as organising concept and research partnership discourse and strategies speak mostly to the idea of power as control over material resources, as well as to power as value and discourse. The part on the research partnerships' human dimensions then provides insights into power as an issue in negotiating social relations.

Research Partnerships as an Organising Concept

Rationale

The NCCR North–South's point of departure was to contribute to and achieve sustainable development by combining the intellectual, scientific, social, political and economic resources in the global North and the global South to produce sound and critical analysis of the development problems involved and of the means available for solving them (NCCR North–South, 2002). The research network was created to help in conducting the research necessary for understanding obstacles to sustainable development and finding ways to overcome them. The programme responds to the global development disparities and points out that these are extremely pronounced in the research realm (Hurni *et al*, 2004; UNESCO, 2005a). As a research and training programme running for 12 years (2001–2013), the NCCR North–South addresses this problem by establishing research partnerships with institutions in Africa, Latin America and Asia. It thus strongly puts forward the discourse of partnership in research, involving partners from Northern and Southern institutions. Closely linked to this discourse is the question of control of material resources. As Bolay (2004, p. 28) notes, the role of universities in fighting inequality is fragile because of its dependence on the politics that determine financial support and, frequently, the field of action. Despite this note of caution, the objectives of establishing an international development research network and of conducting research in partnerships are strategic. The programme's aim is to work towards the scientific basis for mitigating pressing social, economic and ecological problems in developing countries.

Institutional Set-up and Programme Management

As a consequence of the strategic objective, the research partnership concept is reflected in the institutional set-up and the programme management practice. Great emphasis is placed on a balanced representation of partners from the global North and the global South. In practice, however, this is difficult to achieve. Being a Swiss-funded research network, the management centre is based at the University of Berne in Switzerland. The funds are disbursed via the management centre and the seven Swiss research institutions. This gives the Board of Directors (BoD), made up of the heads of the Swiss institutional partners, and the Executive Committee (the programme director, vice-director and coordinator) direct control over the material resources. While the funds are administered in the North, the programme follows thematically a more or less joint management style. The regional coordinators (RCs) of the nine partnership regions (eight in the South and one in the North, that is Swiss Alps) are members of the Extended BoD

and are in charge of the research programme, projects and training in the respective partnership regions. One of the RCs points out that a joint management style is an essential factor in making research partnerships in large research networks successful (personal communication, 18 April 2008).

(Self-)Criticism and critique

Although the NCCR North–South places great emphasis on implementing research partnerships in programme and management practice, it is also critical of its approach, and confrontation with the inherent challenges of research partnerships is a fact. Regarding the organisational set-up and the research agenda setting, the directors admit that the processes were not purely participatory and that the partners in the North and the South clearly had distinct roles (Hurni *et al*, 2004; Müller-Böker, 2007). During the preparation of the programme, an effort was made to define the research agenda together. For this purpose, a series of workshops were held in Switzerland and the partnership regions in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The regional research agendas reflected shared research interests, but the main themes and the final definition of the overall research concept were largely driven by a small number of researchers in Northern university institutions (NCCR North–South, 2002). After 8 years of intensive collaboration in the research network, the director puts it today as follows: ‘the Programme has developed into a more equitable partnership over the years. The role of the RCs [regional coordinators] in the BoD [Board of Directors] has been continuously furthered, from consultation in Phase 1 (...), [to] association through the [Annual] North-South [Planning] Week in Phase 2, to full BoD membership now foreseen in Phase 3. At the level of senior researchers the establishment of RABs [Regional Advisory Boards] in all (...) [partnership regions] has broadened the empowerment of the South beyond the RCs’ (Debele *et al*, forthcoming).

Despite progress made at the programme level in terms of programme and research management, the partnership mode adopted in the discussed Swiss case is characterised by unequal control over the material resources. Funds are administered and disbursed via the Swiss institutions, which enjoy direct access to funding and science policy agencies. A small number of leading scholars in the Swiss institutions have set up, driven and shaped the research and training agendas of the programme. This is ultimately an expression of the fact that funding for research is still more abundant in the North than in the South. Some respondents point out that ‘the NCCR North-South tried to do it differently, but it is difficult’ (No. N15:69).¹ The funds originate from Switzerland and ‘it is finally the Swiss institutions which are accountable’ (No. N13:34). Another interviewee states that ‘(...) when it comes to money there is a tremendous asymmetry’ (No. N18:70). And yet another one says that ‘with increased finances everybody stands in competition with everyone else; this may impede exchange and collaboration, the very foundations of the partnership concept’ (No. N24:61). The responsibility for financial accountability implies both the power of and the obligation for decision making. This expresses one of the inherent tensions and ambiguities in the concept of research partnerships, explored in the next section.

Research Partnership Discourse and Strategies

Multiple objectives

The partnership discourse and the strategic objectives of the funding agencies not only have implications for the organisation of a research structure, but also influence the

research practice. The development research network of the NCCR North–South has two major funding sources, the SNSF and the SDC, which represent two different policies. The science policy of the SNSF aims at strengthening Swiss and international research structures. Its performance measurement scheme values the classical indicators for scientific excellence, such as number and quality of publications, international visibility, patents or awards. The development policy by the SDC, on the other hand, aims at empowering partners in the South. The contributions of the SDC to higher education and research in partnership with institutions in developing and transition countries are engagements for development *per se*, because this kind of research collaboration implies change (personal communication with an SDC officer, 16 March 2007). Moreover, as an implementing development cooperation agency it is interested in useful results and findings. Therefore, the mixed funding of the programme, with financial means from the SNSF and SDC, includes various objectives and different performance measurement schemes. This is something that is felt strongly by the researchers and more so by the programme management. In this respect, one respondent says, ‘there are different research partners at various levels: in the partner countries, in Switzerland. Clearly, there are different understandings and ideas of research, science, publications. This is not always easy’ (No. N14:41). This implies that the individual researchers should make strategic decisions and set priorities. The same respondent points out that ‘one can put the efforts into either optimising the network, thus contributing to the structural goals of the NCCR North–South, or managing well the projects in research partnership with researchers and institutions in the global South. These are very complex and demanding questions and especially the one regarding accountability towards many partners is thereby usually difficult to answer’ (No. N14:44). Two partners from West Africa point out that ‘It is clearly known that the Northern partners are individually and institutionally more under pressure from the SNSF and the scientific criteria of evaluation: they are more challenged by the publication-driven environment in Switzerland and in the developed world (‘publish or perish’). (...) On the other hand, the southern researchers while trying to reach the same level of efficiency and adaptation to the international science publication-driven orientation are also very much more concerned by the social and political contexts of the burning problems they studied. They need continuity and a minimum of sustainability around the problematic and the themes on which their research projects have been launched’ (Cissé and Boko, forthcoming).

Capacity development

The accounts indicate that the science and development policy objectives are difficult to meet simultaneously. However, after 8 years of intensively collaborating in the international development research network, the statistics show that in both realms considerable efforts have been made. Between 2001 and 2008, 1500 papers were published (including 300 peer-reviewed scientific articles), 150 doctoral theses and an equal number of master’s dissertations were carried out, and approximately 1500 lectures and presentations were given (NCCR North–South, 2008b). More post-doctoral and senior researcher positions have been created over the years. In the third 4-year phase, which started in July 2009, the number of senior researchers and project leaders from Southern partner institutions has grown to 63 per cent. This is far above the Southern leadership ratio of 12.5 per cent in the second phase of the research programme (2005–2009) (NCCR North–South, 2008a). Moreover, the RCs have grown together as a group increasingly facilitating so-called South–South research partnerships and exchange, for which the SDC

has allocated additional means (Upreti *et al*, forthcoming). These figures show that the research partnership arrangements have indeed contributed to the capacity development and empowerment of participating researchers (Zingerli *et al*, 2009).

The accounts of the interviewees indicate that research partnerships are largely uncontested with respect to capacity development. There are usually gains on both sides. The collaborating partners generally benefit professionally as well as personally from international exchange and different work cultures. One of the respondents says, 'I think one of the most positive things that I take from these collaborations is an understanding of a variety of approaches to the question of development. A variety of approaches in the sense of a variety of ways of looking at development' (No. S6:19). Others say that 'the integration of different kinds of knowledge and multiple perspectives leads to considerably new and innovative insights' (No. N22:67), that 'working with researchers from different continents, adopting different perspectives is very useful' (No. S1:14), and that it 'is a way of learning new things, learning how to do things differently' (No. S7:20). A success certainly is 'to see that we are able to strengthen capacity by working with partners who become independent' (No. N26:100). For some of the research partners in the global South the collaboration in research partnership was an opportunity to 'take off' (No. N26), to acquire new funds from other agencies (No. N23, No. S3), and thus to become active players in the globalised research market. Many respondents mention that the capacity development processes go far beyond the actual research themes and involve acquiring essential expertise in research management as well as access to wider networks to find potential new partners (No. N19, No. N22, No. N23, No. N26, No. S3, No. S4, No. S5).

Capacity development is not only individual, targeted at young researchers only, but is also institutional. Partnership arrangements are often not only conducted for research purposes, but also to strengthen a team. A respondent says that 'we are not only doing research for the sake of research but to build capacity' (No. N26:88). Clearly, peer-reviewed publications are a must, but the respondent continues by saying that 'the qualified persons [become] decision makers in their own countries. Therefore our partners [in the global South] can reach much more than we can do [in the research institutions of the global North]' (No. N26:88).

Overall, the partnership discourse shapes the objectives of science and development policy, which are not easy to meet simultaneously in daily research practice. The researchers experience a double accountability to two different performance measurement schemes of the funding agencies, one more oriented towards product and the other more towards process. However, in terms of process the programme development and the personal experiences indicate that something is happening and that partners become stronger, independent and fit to compete in the globalised research market. The next section focuses in particular on the changing political economy of this globalised research market and the implications for researchers in their professional and personal lives.

The Human Dimensions of Research Partnerships

Choice of partners

The respondents' accounts indicate that the conditions for conducting research in partnership with researchers and research institutions from Switzerland and the global South have changed. Until the 1990s, research projects with partners from developing countries were based on individual initiatives and support. In the 1990s a transition took place from

largely individual researcher-based projects to much larger partnership programmes (cp. Standing and Taylor, 2007). What was a real advantage for the establishment of the international development research network of the NCCR North–South was that the participating Swiss researchers brought with them their own long-established networks in the South, and therefore the existing network could be strengthened, consolidated and considerably enlarged.

However, the new possibilities and increased funds for research projects in partnerships place some of the participating researchers in the right situation to actively seek new partners. As other international research networks show, the emphasis on establishing international research partnerships reflects a current trend in Swiss science policy as well as in the globalised research market (cp. Schweizerischer Bundesrat, 2007; Nakabugo and Cremin, 2009). One interviewee states that there is now a political economy of research partnerships: ‘Today, we are required to have partners; we have to spend money in the South. We are in need of partners (...). This political economy sometimes leads to the fact that we accept conditions that we normally would reject’ (No. N25:103). Research partnerships have become an obligation by some of the funding agencies. The research partnership discourse (and rhetoric) can clash with the competition for funds in the research markets. Especially when names of partners are included in the proposals without any previous partnership experience, there is a high risk that the partnership’s dynamic will suffer. Linked to the pressure of the partnership conditionality is the frequent practice of initiating and managing the research projects from the institutions that attain the funding, most likely those of the Northern partners (No. N1, No. N21). Under such conditions, misunderstandings and a lack of trust can produce high monetary and personal costs for research partnerships.

Shaping conditions and negotiating social relations for research partnerships is thus not the same for partners from the North and the South. Overcoming this largely structural inequality with regard to access to funding requires time, mutual respect and learning, as well as trust.

The element of trust

Trust is generally considered a fundamental requirement of international research partnerships. Some respondents who have been able to establish trusting relationships with research partners from other geographical and disciplinary contexts go as far as not being able to distinguish among research partnerships from any other kind of research collaboration. One of the respondents puts it like this: ‘To work in an international partnership means to get involved in a professional environment with different rules of the game. It is necessary to learn how to solve problems and conflicts. With some partners it’s easier than with others. Therefore, I think it is not much different from working relations constellations in general. (...) However, in North–South research partnership there is this kind of exaggeration; it is due to financial flows and the North–South divide’ (No. N14:64).

Clearly, building trusting relationships among research partners is time-consuming and usually takes many years. Investments are considerable for establishing an intellectual platform of language, of concepts, or working together (No. N1, No. N19, No. N25). If a research partnership fails to build trusting working relations, the cost of translation, finding an adequate project management style and producing scientific results can be very high, and can critically affect the scientific and development-related outcome of the research partnership. One of the respondents puts it as bluntly as this: ‘In the end of the

project the fatigue of all partners was such that nobody had the energy to follow up on the project and to publish scientific papers' (No. N1:22). Without the basic element of trust, working relationships are susceptible to being negatively affected by the previously described power asymmetries and misconceptions, often expressed in immature and insufficiently negotiated research proposals. The interviewees from Switzerland report that sometimes they were accused of scientific colonialism (No. N19; No. N25), are perceived as the managerial bosses (No. N25; No. N26) or are considered as a source of funding only (No. N19). The respondents from the South express it more indirectly. They say, for example, that sometimes they make compromises (No. S5), that they do not try to change the collaborators' points of view (No. S5), or that in certain debates there is a sense of politeness that prevents sharper critique (No. S6). The following statement sums up the limits of research partnerships: 'I do not agree with everything they do, they do not agree with everything we do and it was the stage of our lives. We were instrumental for them, I would say, and probably they were instrumental for us' (No. S5:59). While these statements are expressions of stalled partnerships, there are other views that point out moments of endurance and empathy. A respondent from Africa expressed this as follows: 'So for me, the life of the partnership depends a lot on how two persons who are committed to animate that partnership, understand each other, love each other, have an admiration for each other, understand the weaknesses of the other and can (...) forgive some faults. You cannot have one year of collaboration if one does not once make something that makes the other be angry, angry, yeah. But the capability of the partnership to grow, to improve it that, when something wrong happens, you remember that, things happen and then you help each other to learn from mistakes (...)' (No. S3:19).

Motivations and futures

Despite the mixed experiences with research partnerships and the heavy demands to conduct development research in partnership, most of the respondents point out various sources that explain their continuous efforts and nurture their motivation. One of these sources is the possibility of learning and personal stimulation that evolves from working in international research partnerships. There is a sense of intellectual and personal development that acts as an intrinsic motivation to engage in the field of development research, through new understandings, intercultural exchange and physical exposure to foreign places. Indeed, this human dimension of research partnerships and development research is absolutely central in their work. The encounters between people and personalities from the global North and the global South and the experiences that interests can be shared and work can be conducted together, with sometimes brilliant results, are a tremendous source of motivation. And this motivation is absolutely necessary, as the kind of development research conducted also entails great frustration.

Not only are the requirements for conducting research in partnership demanding, but the conditions of work in the respective countries are also sometimes very difficult. One respondent says that 'to be frequently exposed to unsolved global problems of extreme poverty, marginalisation, pandemics, corruption or mismanagement leads to questions such as whether it is worth continuing' (No. N22:25). Another respondent points out that in the kind of development research they are conducting, she and her partners are sometimes extremely occupied with very urgent matters (No. N19). In addition, close bonds with research partners and the desire to contribute knowledge to important questions are essential sources of motivation for continuing to work in the field of development research. The interviewees not only share the sources of motivation, but also the desire to

contribute something useful, to work on issues of global relevance. One of the respondents says 'the disparities between North and South still grow (...). And I collaborate with decision makers (...) we work on a moral level, with potential contributions to solutions of global problems. Therefore I have the ambition to continue (...), although I have had other career options' (No. N21:61).

With respect to the human dimension of research partnerships, to work in the field of development research is a way to conduct engaged research and to contribute something useful. The research partnership arrangements offer room for personal and professional developments and benefits. Through the kind of work they are doing and the structural arrangements with which they are confronted, the researchers are able to reflect on critical development issues and to share different cultural experiences of the global North and the global South.

Providing Answers

The analysis of the empirical material presented in the last three sections speaks to one or more of the three lenses on power outlined above. Before drawing more general conclusions, this section provides short answers to the guiding questions of a sociology of international research partnerships for sustainable development specifically derived from the international development research network of the NCCR North–South.

The first question asked under what institutional, historical and social circumstances research partnerships emerged. In fact, the evolution of the international research network under consideration is an expression of the enhanced partnership discourse that has characterised the entire development sector since the 1990s. The funding scheme of the NCCR North–South reflects this discourse, including the challenge to evolve in an environment that is characterised by unequal access to funding and the accountability of the participating partners from the North and the South. However, despite the unsolved problem of lopsided control over material resources, the accounts of senior researchers show that the experiences with research partnerships go far beyond the current research network. Many of them look back on research collaborations of more than 20 years. Those researchers have thus been contributing considerably to a stronger partnership discourse, while at the same time benefiting from its enhanced programmatic drive. For some, the partnership discourse is thus a norm as well as a means for shaping and strengthening preferences and identities for conducting research for and on development.

The second question asked what structural and institutional conditions shape the partnership relationships in processes of collaborative knowledge production in development research. Conceptually, this second question cannot be separated from the first, as the question of discourse is enmeshed with the aspect of power as expressed by the structural and institutional conditions. What the accounts by the senior researchers specifically highlight is the ambiguity of the research partnership concept with respect to the multiple objectives of the programme (science versus development policy objectives) and the accountability to various performance measurement schemes (product versus process). This requires making decisions with respect to structures and procedures. In terms of capacity development, there are positive signs of strengthened and more independent partners in the South and the North. Basically, the partners continue to be different. This is not only because of different social, political or institutional backgrounds, but also because of different goals, aspirations and objectives.

This entire section actually speaks to the third question, asking about the experiences and perceptions of researchers engaging in international research partnerships for sustainable development. It has become clear that conducting research programmes and projects in international research partnerships is a challenging undertaking, in both a positive and negative sense. There is only a fine line between opportunities and risks. The latter was clearly expressed by pointing out high personal and financial costs when partnership arrangements fail to build trusting relationships. However, even if partnerships are not made for a lifetime, they can be instrumental for the partners involved. Such encounters represent important sources of motivation to continue working on issues with high societal, environmental and political relevance, and in this sense the research partnership concept offers pathways for continuous and respectful engagement in international academic development research.

Conclusion

This article began as an ongoing, internal debate of contemporary development research. This debate is critical of some unsolved problems related to knowledge hierarchies and epistemological preferences still favouring knowledge produced in 'Western' academic institutions and traditions. This article is an attempt to contribute to some parts of this debate. It set out to explore processes of knowledge production in development research emerging under the aegis of North–South research partnerships. The article's approach of a sociology of international research partnership places the researcher centre stage. This allowed discussing structural conditions as well as individual choices shaping research collaborations in intercultural settings. The sociological focus on North–South research partnerships offered a way to look deeper into the working conditions of development researchers, which evolve in contexts of multi-directional power relations.

The research partnership discourse is enmeshed with material resources that shape the power relations between the institutions and the people involved. This connection has created a distinct political economy of research partnerships including various, sometimes contradictory, policy objectives and interests. On the one hand, the partnership conditionality offered new opportunities for strengthening, enlarging or consolidating international research relations. On the other, by overresponding to external demands due to project cycle pressures, research partnerships created great costs and reinforced the inequalities between the partners involved.

However, looking beyond the power relations linked to discourse and material resources, the experiences with research partnerships indicate that research partnerships indeed offer important opportunities for direct encounters and negotiations of social relations between unequal partners representing various academic traditions with diverse audiences. Clearly, the effort necessary to develop these encounters into fruitful exchanges in joint research undertakings is great, and the personal and financial investments can be high. However, especially in research partnerships evolving over longer periods benefits accrue on both sides; unequal partners learn from each other, respect each other and reinterpret their not being equal as a possibility to complement each other. Negotiating social relations in research partnerships can further the acceptance of pluralist views and objectives, aspirations and time concepts. This requires being open to different values and identities. Ultimately, actively negotiating power relations in research partnerships means, in Olukoshi's words (2007, p. 24), 'rediscovering the capacities to study development in its

pluralism and diversity and to tap into the history and cultural context of different peoples'. This involves furthering a reflexive and sensitive approach to contemporary development research necessary in overcoming inequalities in its own academic sphere, where new knowledge on and for development is produced.

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Note

1. Direct quotes from interviews are marked with a code. Although the respondents are anonymous, the code shows whether they are from the North (No. N) or the South (No. S). The numbers indicate the record number and the line in the interview transcript (for example No. N15:69).

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