

# Collaborative Research Across Continents

Members of the African Urbanism Humanities Lab describe the politics, practicalities and promise of research engagements between universities in the Global North and South.

By

[Members of the African Urbanism Humanities Lab \(/users/members-african-urbanism-humanities-lab\)](#)

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For several decades, universities in the Global North—economically, socially and technically well-developed countries—have been seeking to develop and transform their relationships with institutions in the Global South, or lower-income, less developed nations. Part of that has been a [scramble](#) (<https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780801479175/scrambling-for-africa/#bookTabs=1>) to maintain their own status by distinguishing themselves as sufficiently “global,” and part has been an effort to rebrand colonial and neocolonial relationships through the idea of partnership.

That said, many people in Global North higher education institutions have a genuine desire—often inspired by students, faculty and administrators with ties to the Global South—to redefine the aims and methods of research to increase accountability to the communities in which they work and live. This push for innovative forms of North-South and university-community collaboration has also taken on new meaning as higher education institutions seek to examine their role in the histories of [exploitation](#) (<https://progressive.org/latest/how-universities-are-dealing-with-histories-of-racism-180424/>) and the production and maintenance of inequality. But for such partnerships to be truly transformative, faculty, students and administrators will have to think carefully about how to make such significant change happen.

In the spring of 2018, the members of the [African Urbanism Humanities Lab](#) (<https://emb7d1.wixsite.com/africanurbanism>) at the University of Virginia brought together researchers,

scholars, students, musicians, government workers and development practitioners—many of whom have deep connections in Global South communities and who were in the midst of long-term sustained collaborations with one another—to engage in a series of conversations aimed at making those and other collaborations more equitable and effective. The conversations highlighted the importance of strong relationships, equity and flexibility, as we detail below.

They also explored the challenges of building such relationships in communities that have historically been exploited by researchers and universities. Many collaborators cited a pattern of “cricket research” or “hit-and-run research” in which researchers from universities in the Global North travel to communities in the Global South to collect data but fail to return to share the results of the research. Lee Watkins, director of the International Library of African Music (Makhanda, South Africa), noted that in Makhanda, the town-gown relationships has been spoiled by too many years of extractive projects that only seem to serve the university and rarely—if ever—local communities. He identified a prevailing suspicion among local communities that students and faculty to often seem to be just trying to tick the boxes for “community outreach.”

We also found that constraints not only at universities but also at granting agencies based in the Global North can make strong collaborative relationships difficult to achieve. Grant funding is typically unavailable in these early stages of relationship building and problem definition, often leading faculty and students to define their questions prematurely.

Many of these structural barriers can be overcome, but doing so will require important changes to university policies and grant-making guidelines. What follows are key insights about various aspects of successful collaborations, along with some questions universities should ask themselves about how to better support such engagements.

**Design.** Successful collaborations are built around questions that emerge through sustained engagements with community [collaborators \(https://www.dukeupress.edu/decolonizing-ethnography\)](https://www.dukeupress.edu/decolonizing-ethnography). How might your university provide better support, both financially and ideologically, for the open-ended exploratory relationship building necessary to produce collaboratively defined proposals? How might you also allow students and faculty members to adjust their research plans as they go to allow for collaboratively defined questions to emerge? Could grant-making agencies be encouraged to create seed grants explicitly

designed to support such collaborative design projects?

**Compensation.** Too often collaborative projects move forward without giving sufficient thought to the distribution of material resources. Researchers arriving from the Global North often expect Global South collaborators and other academics to give their time and energy for [free](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13696815.2021.1884972) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13696815.2021.1884972>). How might you assess the impact of financial compensation on local job markets? When appropriate, how might your university create mechanisms to compensate local advisers for their time and contributions? How might collaborators and local communities be further compensated through technology transfers, support with the development of promotional materials to amplify local initiatives and support for institutions that benefit the whole community such as educational and health facilities?

**Academic resources.** Many collaborators in Global South countries lack the academic resources necessary for them to fully contribute to projects. How might your university make it easier to extend online library access, for instance, to collaborators both inside and outside academe through the provision of affiliated statuses?

**Technology.** Too often Global North universities require technological resources like laptops and phones purchased with university funds to be returned to the home institution. Once such technology is returned, it is often discarded or rarely used again. What policy changes would be necessary at your university to allow these tools to be left with collaborators, particularly those not attached to 501(3)c organizations, so that they could continue to use them to further their own projects? How might your university invest in enhancing the technological capabilities in sites that researchers visit often? Might initiatives such as the [British Council's Digital Collaboration Fund](https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/digital-collaboration-fund) (<https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/digital-collaboration-fund>) serve as a model for your own institution?

**Publishing.** Collaboration, by definition, entails a multidirectional flow of ideas. Too often, researchers from the Global North fail to return findings to collaborators and their communities in a timely fashion. The academic publishing process is slow, and the time lag can exacerbate the distance felt between collaborators in the Global North and South. Once published, academic journal articles reach a limited audience and are often inaccessible to those outside academic institutions. By sharing regular progress reports and preliminary findings with communities involved in academic research, researchers can elicit

feedback and provide information that communities can use.

Meanwhile, academic publications or the evaluation systems within some disciplines, institutions or professions often don't adequately value or acknowledge the co-production of knowledge. How might your university encourage faculty and students to co-create products such as [films](https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000007205588/the-torture-letters.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000007205588/the-torture-letters.html>), [graphic novels](http://lissagraphicnovel.com/) (<http://lissagraphicnovel.com/>), photographic exhibitions, theatrical performances, [podcasts](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/birth-and-resistance/id1543324187) (<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/birth-and-resistance/id1543324187>), magazines or pamphlets that are designed with and for use by local communities? How might you modify your tenure, promotion and hiring procedures to encourage co-authored publications?

**Connection.** Scholars from the Global North often rely on collaborations to facilitate local connections in the Global South, but it is rarer for them to encourage their collaborators to connect with each other and other scholars and opportunities. How might your university facilitate such connections? Might you consider providing funds for local collaborators to travel to conferences, project sites and or networking venues by making supplementary travel awards to faculty involved in collaborative research?

**Education.** Many local collaborators would like to continue their education but have found the admission system at universities in the Global North difficult to navigate. How might your university create programs to support those who seek to further their education? Might you consider helping prospective students through the GRE process (or waiving it), waiving application fees, providing support for relocation or creating summer orientation programs to help students adjust to American academic norms and expectations before they matriculate? Might you be able to create an exchange of graduate students between your university and institutions in the Global South? Are there opportunities to include local collaborators as paid co-instructors, either in person or virtually?

Collaborative research is difficult, time-consuming and expensive. It requires building and sustaining relationships with people and institutions over many years. It requires negotiation and flexibility when one might prefer to have certainty and fixity. It requires a mutual process of attending to the interests of the other people in the partnership. And it may require changing or clarifying institutional policies and procedures that can stand in the way of successful partnerships. In all of these efforts, we must navigate questions of power and hierarchy with care and attention to particular national and community histories

and strive to keep lines of communication open.

Despite the human and structural complications in these collaborations, we maintain that it is worth getting them right. Collaboration has the capacity to change the questions people ask and the answers they come to. It has the power to change the ways in which research is read and infused into the world. And it can serve as a vital tool for social mobility and social change.

## Bio

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