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A sociology of international research partnerships for sustainable development[♣]

Abstract

In recent years, the partnership concept has not only shaped 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 institutional conditions and individual choices of North-South research collaborations in an international development research network. By drawing on ideas of the Sociology of Knowledge and by distinguishing between three lenses on power the article analyses discourses and practices shaping working relations between unequal partners. Research partnerships are not a universal remedy to react to and reduce structural inequalities and hegemonies of epistemologies. Nonetheless, research partnerships offer important opportunities for direct encounters between people and institutions from different scientific traditions and policy contexts. The necessity to negotiate power and social relations in international research partnerships help developing a more respectful and reflexive conduct of knowledge production in contemporary development research.

Keywords: Development research, North-South research partnerships, Sociology of Knowledge, power relations, narrative interviews

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1. Introduction

The internal debate in development studies of recent years 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 regain 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 in 'Western' universities of the global North (Olukoshi, 2007). They are contingent upon the changing nature of the global political economy of knowledge which 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 serious means advancing a critical reflection about 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: 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 not only shaped 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 as well as 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) In what institutional, historical and social circumstances do research partnerships emerge? 2) What are the structural and institutional conditions shaping partnership relations in development research? 3) How do the 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 paper 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 as well as constructive attitude in contemporary development research.

2. Knowledge, power and international development research

Outlining the approach

Knowledge as well as 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 helps focusing 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 addressing the political and social structures and processes which 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 relations between them emerge and are negotiated against diverse backgrounds of scientific discipline and institutional affiliation as well as wider social and political contexts.

The article draws also 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. It is always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice. In Foucault's words this is expressed by his saying that '(...) 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: 77). Foucault suggests that power does not function in the form of a chain, it 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 which a discourse takes place, is being taken up or is eventually being rejected.

The combination of strands of the Sociology of Knowledge with some of Foucault's idea of power relations shapes the analysis of collaborative knowledge production in international research partnerships presented here. The analysis distinguishes between 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 its 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: In 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 formal rules and structures,

institutions and procedures that shape the organisation and conduct of development research. A guiding question in this respect is: What are the structural and institutional conditions shaping partnership relations in development research?

- The third lens, finally, emphasises power as important for shaping social relations. It draws attention to the experiences and perceptions of collaborating researchers to relate to each other in joint research projects. A guiding question arising from this lens is: How do the research partners experience and perceive their international research collaborations?

Despite the conceptual distinction into 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 of these. Especially the lenses focusing on power as value and discourse and as control over material resources require to be looked through simultaneously. In addition, since the article puts 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

The goal of 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 individual's experiences. This has had implications for the research methodology and the discussion presented here.

Next to 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 informants have different disciplinary backgrounds, such as veterinary sciences, biology, architecture, sociology, geography, environmental engineering, political sciences, or environmental sciences. Their age is between 37 and 60; 14 of the 24 informants work in a Swiss research institution; 12 of the 24 informants originate from the South; 6 of the 24 informants 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 had durations from forty minutes to two hours. The interviews were structured into five broad themes. They focused on i) the researchers' professional biography, ii) their involvement in international research collaborations, iii) their specific experiences with research partnerships, iv) their activities to communicate 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 tell stories about their experiences with international research collaborations. In these accounts the element of power in collaborative knowledge production came up almost automatically. If not, the issue of power was addressed by asking specific questions about personal opinions about or experiences with international research collaborations.

All interviews were transcribed as accurately and literally as possible. The data of the interview transcripts was 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.

3. International research partnerships

Recent years have shown that development studies 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 do not only conduct research but are engaged in policy, implementation, and advocacy that respond 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 has gained importance and prominence in the 1990s (Bradley, 2008). The basic rationale of research partnerships is that they shall help reducing the imbalance between developing and industrialised countries in the academic and education sector. UNESCO (2005b: 99), for example, identifies a real scientific divide which 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, about 80% of all financial resources devoted to research worldwide are being invested in the OECD countries. China, India and the newly industrialised countries of Asia account for another 15%. This leaves a share of about 5% 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 DFID 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% of partners originating from developing countries (King, 2007). Also the Dutch research and development organisations have been using the concept of research partnerships for a long time, such as in the 'multi annual multidisciplinary research programmes' (Policy and Operations Evaluation Department, 2007). In these programmes, research partnerships are a precondition to disburse funds to institutions situated not only in the North but increasingly also in the South. The power of the partnership discourse is thus very directly linked to the material power exercised by funding agencies.

While nobody would deny that partnership is a great 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 hand, partnership agreements will not automatically change the relationships between 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.

Exactly within international research partnerships inequalities, structural constraints and historically loaded power relations are felt very directly in every day 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 between research partners from the global North and the global South there are a lot of 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: 35) points out that research partnerships have potential shortcomings, particularly in asymmetric and unbalanced partnerships, e.g. 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 follows that research partnerships are not an easy remedy to react to 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. There are only few studies that reveal what these challenges mean in practice, for individual researchers and their projects. The article now turns to the sociology and the inner life of some research partnerships, focusing specifically on the issues of knowledge and power in international research partnerships for sustainable development.

4. 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 National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South. The NCCR North-South is an example of a number of large international research networks, such as 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 of the development sector. The NCCR North-South explicitly adopts a transdisciplinary approach for development-oriented research partnerships (Hurni, Wiesmann 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 the participating research institutions. The programme has recently embarked into its third and final four year phase (2009-2013). Each phase had funds between 30 and 35 million Swiss Francs. Today, the NCCR North-South is a network of seven Swiss research institutes and some 160 institutional and individual partners in Latin America, Africa and Asia (see also <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/>). About 400 researchers are involved in research activities related to the NCCR North-South. The worldwide research network builds onto often long-established research collaborations.

The following account is structured by the three lenses on power outlined before. The parts 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 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 to 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 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, Messerli et al., 2004; UNESCO, 2005a). As a research and training programme running for twelve 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 about the control of material resources. As Bolay (2004: 28) notes the role of universities in fighting inequality is fragile because of its dependence with respect to politics that determine the financial support and, frequently, the field of action. Despite this note of caution, the objective to establish an international development research network and to conduct research in partnership is strategic. The programme's attempt 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 setup as well as the programme management practice. Great emphasis is put on a balanced representation of partners from the global North and the global South. In practice, this is however 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, made up by 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 content-wise a joint management style. The Regional Coordinators of the nine partnership regions (eight in the South and one in the North, i.e. Swiss Alps) are members of the Extended Board of Directors and are in charge of the research programme, projects and trainings in the respective partnership regions. One of the regional coordinators points out that a joint management style is an essential aspect for making research partnerships in large research networks successful (personal communication, 18.4.2008).

(Self-)Criticism and critique: Although the NCCR North-South puts great emphasis on implementing research partnerships in programme and management practice it is also critical about its approach and the 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, Wiesmann et al., 2004; Müller-Böker, 2007). During the preparation of the programme, the effort was made to define the research agenda together. For that 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 as well as 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 eight 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 achieved 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. The condition of access has put a small number of leading scholars in the Swiss institutions to set-up, drive and shape 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 informants point out that 'the NCCR North-South tried to do it differently, but that it is difficult' (#N15:69)¹. The funds originate from Switzerland and 'it is finally the Swiss institutions which are accountable' (#N13:34). And most pronounced someone put it like that: '(...) when it comes to money there is a tremendous asymmetry' (#N18:70). Another informant 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' (#N24:61). The responsibility for financial accountability noticeably means both the power of as well as the obligation for decision-making. This expresses one of the inherent tensions and ambiguities in the concept of research partnerships, of which the next section will reveal more.

Research partnership discourse and strategies

Multiple objectives: The partnership discourse and the strategic objectives of the funding agencies, not only has implications on the organisation of a research structure but it also influences the research practice. The development research network of the NCCR North-South has two major funding sources, the SNSF and the SDC. They represent two different policies. The science policy by the SNSF aims at strengthening Swiss as well as international research structures. Its performance measurement scheme values the classical scientific indicators for excellence, such as number and quality of publications, international visibility, patents, or awards. The development policy by SDC, on the other hand, aims at empowering partners in the South. The contributions of 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 SDC officer, 16.3.2007). Moreover, as an implementing development cooperation agency it is interested in results and findings that are useful for SDC. Therefore, the mixed funding of the programme, with financial means from 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 informant 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' (#N14:41). This means for the individual researchers to make strategic decisions and to set priorities. The same informant 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' (#N14:44). Two partners from West Africa point out: '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 be met at the same time. However, after eight 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 masters dissertations were carried out, and approximately 1500 lectures and presentation were given (NCCR North-South, 2008b). More post-doctoral and senior researcher positions have been created over the years. In the third four-year phase, which started in July 2009, the ratio of senior researchers and project leaders from Southern partner institutions has grown to 63%. This is far above the Southern leadership ratio of 12.5% in the second phase of the research programme (2005-2009) (NCCR North-South, 2008a). Moreover, the regional coordinators have grown together as a group increasingly facilitating so-called South-South research partnerships and exchange, for which 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).

Actually, the accounts of the informants indicate that research partnerships are largely uncontested with respect to capacity development. There are usually gains on both sides. The collaborating partners usually benefit professionally as well as personally from international exchange and different cultures of work. One of the informants points out: ‘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’ (#S6:19). Others say that ‘the integration of different kinds of knowledge and multiple perspectives leads to considerably new and innovative insights’ (#N22:67), that ‘working with researchers from different continents, adopting different perspectives is very useful’ (#S1:14), and that it ‘is a way of learning new things, learning how to do things differently’ (#S7:20). A success certainly is ‘to see that we are able to strengthen capacity by working with partners who become independent’ (#N26:100). For some of the research partners in the global South the collaboration in research partnership was an opportunity to ‘take off’ (#N26), to acquire new funds from other agencies (#N23, #S3), thus to become active players in the globalised research market. Many informants mention that the capacity development processes go far beyond the actual research themes but involve acquiring essential expertise in research management as well as access to wider networks to potentially find new partners (#N19, #N22, #N23, #N26, #S3, #S4, #S5).

Capacity development is not only individual, targeted at young researchers only, but also institutional. Research in partnership arrangements is often not only conducted to do research but to strengthen a team. An informant says that ‘we are not only doing research for the sake of research but to build capacity’ (#N26:88). Clearly, peer-reviewed publications are a must but he 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]’ (#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 is more oriented towards product, the other more towards process. However, in terms of process the programme development as well as 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 now focuses in particular at the changing political economy of this globalised research market and the implications for researchers in their professional and personal lives.

Research partnerships' human dimensions

Choice of partners: The accounts of the informants indicate that the conditions for doing research in partnership with researchers and research institutions from Switzerland and the global South have changed. Until the 1990s, research projects in and 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 establishing of the international development research network of the NCCR North-South was that the participating Swiss researchers brought their own, long-established networks in the South with them. So the existing network could be strengthened, consolidated as well as considerably enlarged.

However, the new possibilities and increased funds for research projects in partnership put some of the participating researchers in the situation to actively seek new partners. As other international research networks show, the emphasis of establishing international research partnerships reflects a current trend in the Swiss science policy as well as in the globalised research market (cp. Schweizerischer Bundesrat, 2007; Nakabugo and Cremin, 2009). One informant says that there is now a political economy of research partnerships and puts it like this: '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 lead to the fact that we accept conditions that we normally would reject' (#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 put in the proposals without any previous experience of working together the risk is high that the partnership dynamics produce heavy costs. Linked to the pressure of the partnership conditionality is the frequent practice to initiate and manage the research projects from the institutions which attain the funding, most likely the ones of the Northern partners (#N1, #N21). Under such conditions misunderstandings and a lack of trust can produce high monetary as well as personal costs of research partnerships.

The scope to shape conditions and to negotiate social relations for research partnerships is thus not the same for partners from the North and the South. To overcome this largely structural inequality of unequal access to funding requires time, mutual respect and learning, as well as trust.

The element of trust: Trust is generally considered as a fundamental requirement of international research partnerships. Some informants who have been able to establish trustful relations with research partners from other geographical and disciplinary contexts go as far as not being able to distinguish between research partnerships from any other kind of research collaboration. One of the informants 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' (#N14:64).

Clearly, building trustful relations between 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 (#N1, #N19, #N25). If a research partnership fails to build trustful working relations the cost of translation, of finding an adequate project management style, and of producing scientific results together can be very high and critically affects the scientific and development-related outcome of the research partnership. One of the informants 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' (#N1:22). Without the basic element of trust, working relations are prone to being negatively affected by the previously described power asymmetries and misconceptions, often expressed in immature and not sufficiently negotiated research proposals. The informants from Switzerland report that sometimes they were accused of scientific colonialism (#N19; #N25), perceived as the managerial bosses (#N25; #N26), or considered as source of funding only (#N19). The informants from the South express it more indirectly. They say, for example, that sometimes they do compromises (#S5), that they do not try to change the collaborators' points of view (#S5), or that in certain debates there is a sense of politeness that prevents sharper critique (#S6). A statement that sums up the limits of research partnerships is as follows: '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' (#S5:59). While these statements are expressions of stalled partnerships there are other views that point out moments of endurance and empathy. An informant from Africa expressed it 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 can not 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 (...)' (#S3:19).

Motivations and futures: Despite the mixed experiences with research partnerships and the heavy demands for conducting development research in partnership most of the informants 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 which works as an intrinsic motivation to engage in the field of development research; it happens by new understandings, by intercultural exchange, and by physical exposure in foreign places. Indeed, this human dimension of research partnerships and of 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 bears huge frustrations.

Not only are the requirements for conducting research in partnership demanding, also the conditions of work in the respective countries are sometimes very difficult. One informant 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' (#N22:25). Another informant points out that in the kind of development research they are conducting, she and her partners are sometimes extremely occupied with very urgent matters. She has the impression 'to be too much in the urgent'

(#N19:23) and that the complexity of such as situation is just daunting. Also close bonds to research partners and the desire to contribute knowledge to important questions that require some answers are then essential sources of motivation for continuing working in the field of development research. The informants not only share the sources of motivation but also the will to contribute something useful, to work on issues of global relevance. One of the informants 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’ (#N21:61).

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

Providing answers

The analysis of the empirical material presented in the last three parts all speak 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 case of the international development research network of the NCCR North-South.

The first question asked in 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 characterises the entire development sector since the 1990s. The funding scheme of the NCCR North-South reflects this discourse, including its challenge for evolving in an environment that is characterised by unequal access to funding and accountability of the participating partners from the North and the South. However, despite the unsolved problem of lop-sided control over material resources the accounts of senior researchers show that the experiences with research partnerships go way beyond the current research network. Many of them look back on research collaborations of more than twenty years. Those researchers have thus been considerably contributing 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 relations in processes of collaborative knowledge production in development research. Conceptually, it cannot be separated from the first one since 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 from each and every one to make 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 not to be the same. It is not only because of different

social, political or institutional backgrounds but also because of different goals, aspirations and objectives.

The entire chapter actually speaks to the third question, asking about the experiences and perceptions of researchers engaging in international research partnerships for sustainable development. It became clear that conducting research programmes and projects in international research partnerships are challenging undertakings, both in the 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 do not build on or fail to build trustful relations. However, even if partnerships are not made for a life time they can be instrumental for the partners involved. Such encounters represent important sources of motivation to continue working on issues with a high societal, environmental and political relevance, and in that sense the research partnership concept offers pathways for continuous and respectful engagement in international academic development research.

5. Conclusions

This article started off from an ongoing, internal debate of contemporary development research. This debate is critical about 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 premises of North-South research partnerships. Its approach of a sociology of international research partnership put the researchers 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 which shape the power relations between the institutions as well as the people involved. This connection has created a distinct political economy of research partnerships including various, sometimes contradicting 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 hand, by overly responding to external demands or due to project cycle pressures research partnerships created great costs and reinforce 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 rather big and the personal and financial investments can be high. However, especially in research partnerships evolving over a longer period in time benefits manifest on both side; 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. It also requires to being open to different values and identities. Ultimately, actively negotiating power relations in research partnerships means, using Olukoshi’s words (2007: 24), ‘rediscovering the capacities to study development in its pluralism and diversity and to

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

Notes

¹ Direct quotes from interviews are marked with a code. Although made anonymous the code shows whether the informant is from the North (#N) or the South (#S). The numbers indicate the record number and the line in the interview transcript (e.g. #N15:69).

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