



# Unpacking “Relevance” in North–South Collaboration

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**I**nternational collaboration often assumes a variety of forms and delivery mechanisms. While diverse motivations and circumstances might underpin collaboration between, or among, North and South partners, the issue of relevance stands out as one of the most salient features in a collaborative arrangement. One of the underlying issues in international collaboration is the lack of a common understanding—beyond an academic definition—of what is relevant.

In general, relevance relates to how the operation and outcomes of a certain intervention align with the needs, requirements, and priorities of beneficiaries. It is directly related to the objectives of a collaborative project, and is often about the degree to which objectives are in keeping with the priorities and needs of users. And relevance has also to do with expediency—a typical issue for key stakeholders, especially funding parties.

What this means in practice in terms of academic collaboration remains vague. Whose needs and interests are to be prioritized? Who establishes the priorities? Who sets the criteria against which the relevance of a project or program is to be measured? Who makes the assessment (often loaded with value judgements)? How, by whom, and from what sources is data obtained to assess relevance? How are the temporal and spatial realities

## Abstract

“Relevance” is a prevalent term in the lexicon of international academic collaboration. Yet, its true practical meaning remains elusive. Who determines what is relevant? How is relevance assessed? What underpins the notion of relevance in different contexts? These are some of the questions that emphasize the difficulty in having a shared understanding of relevance in academic collaboration. Any attempt to address this challenge will first have to explore the factors contributing to it.

of relevance understood and treated? These are some of the questions that highlight the difficulties in developing a shared understanding of relevance in academic collaboration.

### **Inequality, the Common Evil?**

Rhetorically, it is often argued that the needs and priorities of the South should be the basis for establishing cooperative partnerships between partners in the North and the South. However, inequality in resources and the relative positions of partnering institutions in the global structure of knowledge production and dissemination have been blamed for creating a structural problem where one party wields significant leverage to influence—or even dictate—what happens within collaborative relationships.

In reality, such supply-oriented power dynamics commonly result in northern institutions dominating the dialogue when setting the agenda and defining the main areas of interest and relevance, including for their southern partners. More often than not, North–South partnerships fail to accommodate multiple voices to establish goals and performance indicators based on the local realities of all partners. Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging that relevance is always relative to multiple stakeholders even within a region or an institution.

### **Rankings Set Boundaries**

Power disparity presents itself in the relative position of partner institutions in global, regional, or local rankings. On the one hand, institutions tend to form collaborations with their peers, as defined by their position on the ranking tables—institutions at the top tend more often to collaborate with those in their own league.

On the other hand, those who are positioned lower in the tables still tend to prefer collaborating with those higher up, even at the risk of being considered “junior” partners. This can be traced back to the perceived advantages that a presumed “senior” partner may bring to the partnership in terms of resources, expertise, experience, and visibility.

### **Omnipresent Bias and Inequity**

Power relations are affected by epistemological realities that often promote one form of knowledge as superior to another, as well as by economic imbalance resulting from material and financial inequality between the partners. For a variety of reasons, including those outlined above, funding agencies appear to be predisposed toward specific types of institutions to lead collaborative initiatives. This includes, but is not limited to, the role of managing and disbursing funding and other resources. It is common for collaborative relationships to be organized in such a way that institutions in the Global North are primarily responsible for managing and disbursing funds—a key role in the collaboration scheme. When privileging this type of arrangement, funding agencies reinforce, through their bureaucratic processes, structural inequality in academic collaborations—which in turn breeds hegemony.

These forms/sources of inequality produce power imbalances between partners, which affect how and by whom relevance is defined, shaped, and measured in a collaborative engagement.

### **Established Priorities**

The [third HEFAALA Symposium in Addis Ababa](#) in April 2022 explored various trends and future paths that could alleviate obstacles in academic collaboration in relation to relevance. (HEFAALA stands for Higher Education Forum for Africa, Asia and Latin America.) One approach to address the contentious issue of relevance in collaborative engagements is to align activities and goals with already established priorities. For instance, priority areas such as the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations and Agenda 2063 of the African Union offer frameworks of established priorities within distinct focus areas that can be cascaded from the continental all the way down to the local level.

### **Networks as Mediators of Partnerships**

Collaborative partnerships between networks of institutions with comparable aspirations and goals are considered to be one way to mitigate the impact of rankings. Networks can facilitate collaborative relationships between diverse member institutions and provide

a framework or a governance structure to define how collaborations operate. It is crucial to emphasize that networks are also vulnerable to the challenges of inequality and power dynamics mentioned above. However, because of their long-term nature (as opposed to one-off projects) and broader institutional mechanisms, they tend to provide a more suitable structure for balanced collaboration.

### **Aligning Research Goals**

Collaborative initiatives integrated with research goals are cited as good ways of generating relevant activities and outcomes. The research component is expected to generate evidence about which concerns should be addressed and which practical measures are likely to function best in various contexts. This has become a growing area of attention among funding partners. As a result, structuring collaborations in such a way that problem/goal identification, execution, and project evaluation are based on evidence, helps ground collaborative initiatives on local realities, and hence mitigates the challenges associated with relevance.

### **Reforming Funding Regimes**

Finally, reforming funding mechanisms and instruments has been proposed as a possible way of addressing the inherent inequities and bias that exist in resourcing and operating collaborations. As a platform for policy dialogue, the HEFAALA symposium recommended this issue in particular as one of its future thematic foci. Furthermore, HEFAALA was encouraged to continue interrogating the current global structures of knowledge creation and distribution, as well as the methodologies used to define and assess relevance in North–South collaborations. The development of a publication/citation database geared toward knowledge production and dissemination in the Global South was also mentioned as a viable HEFAALA project to explore, as was the promotion of localized centers of excellence and indigenous knowledge and culture. ▲

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