Building Fair Research Partnerships to Fast-Track the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Key Insights from the Cambridge Global Challenges Workshop

On 31 October 2024, the University of Cambridge hosted a dynamic and thought-provoking hybrid workshop, *Building Fair Research Partnerships to Fast-Track the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, organised by the Cambridge Global Challenges (CGC) Interdisciplinary Research Centre (IRC). The workshop brought together scholars, researchers, and institutional representatives from around the world, tackling the complexities of equitable research collaborations, with a particular focus on partnerships between Cambridge and institutions in the Global South, especially Africa. The discussions highlighted pressing issues such as inclusivity, power dynamics, and sustainability in research collaborations. The event produced transformative insights, offering actionable recommendations to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

Here, we share key insights from the workshop's engaging sessions, candid discussions, and actionable recommendations designed to foster more equitable and impactful partnerships.

Session 1: Redefining Research Equity – Empowering Southern-Led Agendas

The workshop kicked off with powerful opening remarks by Professor Bhaskar Vira (University of Cambridge) and keynote address Professor Tassew Woldehanna (Ethiopia), chaired by Professor Pauline Rose (Faculty of Education & Co-Director of the Cambridge Global Challenges, IRC). These addresses challenged the traditional dominance of Northern-led research frameworks, advocating for a paradigm shift that centre on Southern-led agendas to foster sustainable, inclusive partnerships.

Successful initiatives, such as the Mastercard Foundation programme and green jobs projects, were highlighted as examples of transformative co-created research that prioritises indigenous knowledge and community relevance. The session also underscored the importance of recognising non-traditional knowledge systems, such as those from refugee camps or indigenous communities, and their valuable contributions to research and development.

Key Insights:

- **Mutual Respect and Co-Creation:** Integrating local expertise and fostering equal collaboration leads to impactful and sustainable outcomes.

- **Addressing Historical Inequities:** Participants discussed the colonial legacies embedded in research funding and advocated for reparative measures, such as equitable funding structures, long-term support, and transparent intellectual property (IP) frameworks.

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A lively Question-and-Answer session expanded on these themes, emphasising the role of institutions like Cambridge in influencing funders, addressing historical inequities, and promoting reparations through equitable research policies. The discussion concluded with a call for universities to codify their commitment to equity through clear guidelines and enforceable accountability mechanisms.

Session 2: Navigating Risk and Equity in Global Research Partnerships

Chaired by Professor Yusuf Sayed (Faculty of Education, Cambridge), this session focused on the practicalities of managing risks and ensuring fairness in global research collaborations. Presentations by Dr Daniel Wunderlich (Research Operations Office) and Dr Maja Wallberg (Strategic Partnerships Office) emphasised the importance of transparency, accountability, and mutual trust in partnerships with institutions in the Global South.

Dr Wunderlich highlighted the role of due diligence in contracting, stressing the need for early identification and mitigation of potential challenges. Dr Wallberg presented an actionable checklist of equitable practices to guide researchers and institutions in fostering fair collaborations. The checklist included strategies for addressing complex issues such as intellectual property and resource allocation, all while promoting a culture of mutual understanding and shared responsibility.

Key Takeaways:

- **Proactive Risk Management:** Addressing cultural and structural challenges early strengthens partnerships and prevents conflicts.

- **Equity in Resource Allocation:** Transparent funding and contracting practices are crucial to building trust and ensuring reciprocal benefits.

The session concluded by reflecting on institutional barriers to equity and the need to codify equitable practices into actionable guidelines. The participants stressed the importance of prioritising long-term collaboration over short-term outcomes.

Session 3: Voices of the Global South – African Scholars' Perspectives on Building Equitable Partnerships

Chaired by Dr Carol Ibe (Cambridge Global Challenges IRC), this panel session brought together African scholars and Cambridge alumni to discuss how to foster more equitable and effective collaborations between Cambridge and its African partners. The distinguished panel included:

- Dr Lyn Kouadio (University of Oxford)

- Dr Siyabonga Njica (University of Cambridge)

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- Dr Francis Wamonje (National Institute of Agricultural Botany, NIAB, UK)

- Dr Faith Kandie (Moi University, Kenya)

- Molly Jerono (Moi University, Kenya)

The panellists provided candid reflections on the opportunities and challenges of building partnerships that go beyond short-term projects. They stressed the importance of increasing African representation at institutions like Cambridge and fostering long-term, sustainable collaborations.

Key Themes and Insights:

1. **Amplifying African Voices:** The need to increase African representation at Cambridge to better reflect the perspectives and priorities of African researchers.

2. **Long-Term Fellowships:** The value of long-term fellowships (5-7 years) for early to mid-career African researchers was highlighted, as they enable deeper institutional relationships and sustained engagement in research.

3. **Digitising and Sharing African Archives:** Making African archival resources accessible to researchers could enhance local research capabilities and protect cultural heritage.

4. **Capacity Building:** Training in areas like grant writing and research management is essential to empower African researchers.

5. **Networking and Policy Advocacy:** Increased networking opportunities and stronger policy advocacy are crucial for fostering equitable research practices.

The session ended with a call to reframe Africa's role in research collaborations, moving beyond narratives of need to one of leadership and innovation.

Session 4: Enhancing Cambridge's Equitable Partnerships Guidelines

This interactive session focused on refining Cambridge's guidelines for equitable research partnerships with institutions in the Global South, particularly Africa. Participants explored two central themes:

1. Identifying gaps in the current guidelines, particularly in terms of aligning them with Global South research priorities and the SDGs.

2. Addressing barriers such as funding limitations and power imbalances.

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Gaps and Challenges:

- **Lack of Implementation and Governance Structure:** Current guidelines are aspirational but lack detailed action plans, which reduces their practical applicability.

- **Missed Capacity-Building Opportunities for Southern Researchers:** The absence of mechanisms to empower early-career researchers limits long-term partnerships.

- **Limited Reciprocity:** One-sided partnerships reduce the potential for mutual learning and innovation.

- **Underutilisation of Cambridge Resources:** The potential of Cambridge's colleges and alumni networks remains untapped, limiting equitable collaboration.

- **Funding Imbalance:** Funding structures favouring North-based institutions disadvantage Global South researchers.

Recommendations for Improvement:

- **Develop a Comprehensive Implementation Framework:** Create an action plan with clear steps for monitoring and evaluation.

- **Enhance Fellowship Programmes:** Launch long-term fellowships for Global South researchers to build leadership and retain talent.

- **Promote Reciprocal Collaborations:** Encourage mutual exchanges to foster shared learning.

- **Foster Long-Term Partnerships:** Focus on sustained engagement to build continuity and shared growth.

Conclusion: A Call for Action and Reflection

The workshop underscored the critical need to adapt research practices and guidelines to address historical imbalances and ensure equitable partnerships. By refining Cambridge's guidelines, advocating for systemic changes, and addressing barriers such as IP, funding, and capacity building, the University can play a pivotal role in fostering partnerships that are inclusive, impactful, and aligned with the SDGs.

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Key Reflections:

1. **Advocacy Power:** Cambridge must leverage its influence to champion reforms in funding models and policy frameworks.

2. **Strategic Investments:** Seed funding for partnerships and capacity-building programmes will lay the groundwork for lasting impact.

3. **Realistic Equity:** Equity is an aspirational goal that requires incremental progress and the recognition of systemic barriers.

Next Steps:

1. **Detailed Recommendations Report:** CGC will publish a roadmap for equitable research partnerships.

2. **Collaborative Stakeholder Meeting:** Convene Cambridge academics and funders to align on roles and responsibilities.

3. **SDG-Focused Events:** Continue hosting events on decolonisation, co-creation, and equitable funding models, while strengthening Global South institutions.

Ultimately, the *Building Fair Research Partnerships* workshop demonstrated Cambridge's commitment to advancing inclusive, equitable collaborations that benefit both Global North and South institutions. The insights and strategies discussed will help guide the University's efforts in achieving the UN SDGs and creating a more equitable global research landscape. Together, we can transform partnerships into powerful catalysts for global change.

Note: A full report from the event will be available on CGC-IRC's website shortly.

For questions or feedback, please contact coordinator@gci.cam.ac.uk.

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