

Dismantling knowledge hierarchies

Why the world needs global governance for science cooperation

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Social justice is an integral part of sustainable development. At global level, this means that power inequalities between countries need to be removed if social equity is to be more than a distant dream. While applied transnational research cooperation can be effective at solving specific sustainability problems, for instance, by means of research-based innovation for climate-neutral urbanisation or integrated water management, it continues to have a blind spot to global justice, rarely ever touching upon global knowledge hierarchies.

This is a pity, as research cooperation could help in this context to dismantle existing systemic inequalities. When researchers work together across national borders to create knowledge and share their insights, in principle they are engaging with one another on an equal footing. This contrasts with development cooperation, which is based essentially on a hierarchy of knowledge in which expertise flows from a 'developed' to a 'developing' partner country.

At its best, research cooperation increases visibility and respect for *all* participants in the global knowledge system. In this way, joint research and publication activities offer an opportunity to disrupt the predominance of knowledge shaped in the global North and challenge related imbalances in power. However, doing so requires fair cooperation models.

„Research cooperation should aspire to help reduce systemic global injustice through fair, peer-to-peer cooperation.“

Imagine a scenario where South Africa (or China, Peru or any other nation in the global South) publishes a tender for transnational research projects in order to investigate and solve a sustainability problem in Germany. The object of research is determined by South African researchers and political decision-makers. The South African Government does not consult with the German Government to jointly delineate the problem area or, building on this, create a transnational funding line. There is no co-financing arrangement for the German partners. Accordingly, roles are clearly allocated within the project team. The South Africans head up the project, specify the conceptual framework, analyse results and ensure that the right conclusions are drawn, while the Germans are responsible for establishing local links and delivering empirical data.

A strange and indeed unlikely scenario. The proposal of such an initiative would most likely be considered presumptuous and appalling by the German policy-making and research community. Nevertheless, the example shows, albeit in reverse, the common approach of German research funding

projects to cooperation with partners in the global South. This is illustrated by a current German tender for water management research in South Africa. For all the talk of peer-to-peer cooperation, tenders are usually produced unilaterally, with co-designed funding policies remaining the exception. This is not what an equal balance of power looks like.

The problematic design of research policy also has a practical impact on projects. Even consortium partners keen to interact on an equal footing have few options for evening up in a practical cooperation setting the power imbalance inherent in the policy design process. Partners with no funding and no basic scope for co-designing content priorities are by definition not equal. This is why solutions cannot revolve solely around researchers shaping cooperation arrangements in a sensitive manner, but rather must begin at political level.

An analysis of research programmes and tenders in recent years shows that mainstream German research policy on transnational cooperation is geared to both the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to German priorities (in particular the High-Tech Strategy as an instrument of economic promotion). A public debate on conflicting goals is just as needed as a discussion of the partner configurations resulting from these premises. However, there is no evidence of such dialogue. The 2030 Agenda itself excludes the topic of the global distribution of power and provides no proposals for designing research partnerships. And even the international principles of effective development co-operation cannot be considered a model for research policy as a policy area that insists upon independence.

Research cooperation should not content itself with implementing SDGs locally or reflecting scientifically upon sustainability issues. It should also aspire to help reduce systemic global injustice through fair, peer-to-peer cooperation. This requires binding global governance mechanisms for research cooperation that provide a basis for policy-makers to design fair transnational research programmes that are subsequently shaped by researchers to be sensitive to power relations. The partnership principles must go beyond effectiveness as the paramount ideal of development cooperation. Establishing mutual respect and justice by means of jointly designing the policy framework, the topic selection and research practice would not only be effective, but also fair in the long term.