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Addressing power imbalances in collaborative research

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Working relationships between researchers from the global South and North, are often predicated on hidden power imbalances which can subjugate researchers from the global South to a subordinate status, despite contributing equally comparable amounts of research.

Focusing in on the collaborative fieldwork experience of two researchers, Josaphat Musamba and Christoph Vogel demonstrate that long-term relationships are possible despite the prevalence of power imbalances and 'domino-centrism' between the global South and North.

This, based on continuous work and reflection, can then form the basis for more equitable relations between researchers from different backgrounds.

This post was produced as part of the 'Bukavu Series', a series of blogs highlighting the premeditated violence that persists in the process of academic knowledge production.

Umoja ni nguvu: towards more equitable collaborative research

We first met in late 2012, rather by chance and over a drink with mutual friends, when one of us (Josaphat) was working for a Congolese research centre in Bukavu. Thereafter, we maintained an ongoing discussion until early in 2013, when the other one (Christoph) returned to work with a project on ex-combatants. At that point, Christoph suggested doing 'fieldwork' together and our collaboration began. A year later, having in meantime embarked on his PhD research, Christoph asked Josaphat whether he would be interested in joining a larger project that he was a part of. Contracted directly by the University of Zurich, Josaphat became a 'research associate'. Through this project, as well as other endeavours here and there, we have gradually grown together ever since.

So, how did we approach the tendencies and structural patterns of imbalance that colour North–South collaborations in academia? What are some strategies and techniques to make these relations a bit more balanced?

In our case, this has been an ongoing but fairly incremental process since we began working together and got to know each other. We agreed early-on that our safety; our cooperation; and our ability to foster a participative, joint approach to data collection and knowledge production were priorities to both of us. Moreover, given that most of our research focuses on areas considered 'conflict zones', we believed that basing our approach on mutual agreement might be the best bet for us to progress.

First, our collective security was and remains the top priority. Since we usually travel by motorcycle or on foot, comprehensive safety assessments designed to minimise any risk always have always been a *sine qua non*. Hence, we would tour military and civilian authorities and consult other intermediaries and contacts to enrich our own security briefings on the areas where we worked. While that came somewhat naturally, it was also a balancing act, for instance when it came to constantly complementing each other by taking on respective roles that were not always predictable but depended on situation and context. Hence, we were obliged not only to be flexible, but also to anticipate and 'read' each other, in order to navigate as a team. The same was the case once on the road: during trips, we always opted for balancing different responsibilities but also prerogatives. Josaphat was the 'captain' who could often set the course as to how to proceed. We even shared budgetary responsibilities. This cooperation allowed us to work more closely and equally as a team, and to level perhaps not all but certain inequalities.

Second, carrying out interviews (our main method) we worked either in parallel or as a pair. This means that we both interviewed and participated the same way, instead of letting the Northern researcher conduct the interview, relegating the Southern researcher to a mere 'fixer' or translator. This, we are convinced, is a first step towards a truly joint knowledge production. All that translated into our joint papers, reports and other collaborations (for example [Suluhu](#), a website providing neutral, impartial, and independent analysis on current affairs in Central Africa). Based on that, we argue that when developing a paper jointly (researching, analysing, writing) in one way or another, all those involved should have an inalienable right to be included as authors, if they so wish.

This, amongst other considerations, has allowed us to break down certain power dynamics and try to show that two people of different

backgrounds can indeed collaborate beyond individual interests. In our frequent debates, we have tried to transcend these cleavages and devise a constructive and truly collaborative agenda. As we have tried to manage our differences and limitations, the notion of *kuchukuliyana* ('supporting, tolerating each other') has been a useful guidance. In case of misunderstandings or tensions, our golden rule remained for both to reflect on their respective and agreed responsibilities and talk through differences over a drink. Conceiving of ourselves as brothers in some sense ('kaka, ndugu'), we found mutual support was as central as the mutual criticism to our improvement.

Although we have constantly sought to make power relations between us a topic, we are aware that our efforts in that regard remain partial, despite our friendship all these years. First of all, the salaries we earn have been and remain different. While Christoph was able to work on more stable contracts with higher wages, Josaphat was often paid on temporary contracts. In that sense, it was a step forward when we were both awarded a monthly salary at the University of Zurich based on our specific contribution to the project and, in Josaphat's case, a contract not dependent on Christoph's 'goodwill'. Moreover, we kept trying to engage in other collaborations and joint projects, often also including other colleagues. In so doing, we are thankful to have made gains both in terms of experience and subsistence.

Poised at different points in our respective trajectories, we've gotten the chance to take a step back and reflect. Eight years after our first beer in Bukavu, Josaphat started his doctoral thesis while Christoph finished his. Throughout the years, our relationship has deepened and is slowly consolidating in terms of sociological, ontological, epistemological, and interpersonal alignment. Still, many of our views and visions remain starkly different, not to mention our respective socio-economic contexts, that require continuous work to better understand each other, as colleagues and as friends.

Hence, despite the opportunities we've had to 'work together', we certainly are not on an equal footing. Eight years in, we are only beginning to fully understand that working together does not automatically give us the same capacities, opportunities, and possibilities to de-centre ourselves. This, however, leads us to believe that reflection on research ethics needs to account for mutual positionalities, unequal relationships as well as practical strategies to question and target the structural factors that weigh so heavily on collaborative research, particularly in contexts marked by contestation and violence. Because, in the end, only *umoya ni nguvu* ('unity is strength').

About the author



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