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## How the global North marginalises local researchers in the global South

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Academic research involves the collaboration of actors at different levels, across international and local spaces. Although collaboration is an integral part of a researcher's job, researchers based in the global South often find themselves locked into imbalanced power dynamics, which can have negative impacts on the quality of work and on researchers' well-being.

*The **Bukavu Series** seeks to give space to those who often remain invisible in the production of knowledge.*

*Translation by Sara Weschler*

The core of the problem is that there is often no contract of collaboration to bring together these two poles – that is, the researcher from the global North and the researcher from the global South. And when there does happen to be one, in many cases, it does not take into account certain key ethical issues related to the local researcher's security challenges and visibility in the course of knowledge production. This leads us to propose that future collaborations be built upon a set of protocols that provide protection for, and recognise the importance of, research assistants. Such an approach will not only allow for better protections but also for a true decolonisation of the process of knowledge production.

Numerous research projects, sponsored by a wide range of donors, are oriented toward the global South. Within this framework, researchers from the North often turn to locally-based research assistants to facilitate their access to data. Indeed, we all realise that mastery of a given research setting is a major asset in the production of high-quality work.

Unfortunately, Northern researchers do not always realise the risks that these research assistants must face while carrying out this work. Thus, little (or *no*) thought is given to safety measures for these 'rare walking brains' doing research. What's more, due to the power dynamic between Northern researchers and Southern research assistants (which often plays out as a boss-to-employee relationship), Southern researcher assistants are generally not viewed as full-fledged collaborators with the same rights as their Northern counterparts.

Let us take the example of a particularly striking case, namely the murder of the two UN experts in Kasai on 12 March 2017. While the killing of the two researchers from the global North was widely debated in both the national and international press, very little was said about the

accompanying local research assistants. Another example involves a colleague of mine who went to do research at the Mai-Mai Kirichiko rebels' military base. In the end, while going through his research materials, soldiers realised that he had been taking notes on his findings and exchanges with them, as dictated by his research protocol. A rebel leader forced him to chew up and swallow all of his notes. Luckily, my colleague had some acquaintances within the group that saved him.

One might ask certain questions about what protocols are in place for such researchers' protection. Who would take care of their families if something terrible were to happen? Who would pay the ransom for a researcher assistant kidnapped in the field? Are there plans in place for an airlift out, if war catches a researcher by surprise or they find their entry route under the control of armed groups?

Also, although the researcher assistant may collect data in often critical contexts, their role in the analysis of this data and in the write-up phase of the study remains limited. Once the data is handed over to the 'boss', the research assistant is left with a very narrow margin of input on what becomes of the material. This creates two major problems:

First of all, the research assistant loses any chance of involvement in decisions as to how the data ought to be analysed, published and disseminated. While on the ground, the research assistant remains the face of the research project in the eyes of the local community, as well as in the eyes of political authorities and armed leaders who may be displeased with the resulting analysis. They may even risk finding themselves subject to prosecution after the publication of the data they provided, and may have to contend with various expectations from one group or another.

Secondly, the research assistant is rarely acknowledged in the publications that result from analyses of their data. Now, why should those who do the writing and analysis have a greater claim to authorship than those who negotiated the access to the field and gathered the actual data? Just because one has the funds, does not mean that one knows how to access the data. Such access is predicated on entry into the field. And the same goes for ensuring the reliability of data. Just because one might be able to reach the field, does not mean that one will gain the trust of local communities. Both these elements require mobilising the expertise of researchers rooted in the local context. Thus, reducing the role of the research assistant to that of a mere data collector does a disservice to the entire project. Moreover, this logic reinforces the imbalance of power between the 'funding' researcher and the 'implementing' researcher. This dynamic evokes a sort of academic colonialism that fails to treat the research assistant as a collaborator whose rights are equal to those of their counterparts from the global North.

It is for these reasons that we call for the inclusion of the research assistant as a researcher in their own right, throughout the project cycle: from the outlining stage, to the development of research questions, to the design of methodologies and researcher approaches, to analysis, all the way through the write-up and publication. This would also enable him to raise certain ethical questions with regard to the safety and security of local researchers. All of this would need to be laid out in a collaborative contract signed by both parties. It is in this way that we will be able to decolonise research and recognise the importance of local researchers in the research process. And such recognition can only enrich the already-rich exchange that is possible between researchers of different backgrounds.



The '**Bukavu Series**' is the result of a collaboration between the *Institut Supérieur de Développement Rural de Bukavu*, and three partners of the Governance in Conflict network: the *Université Catholique de Louvain*, the *Groupe d'études sur les conflits-Sécurité Humanitaire* and the LSE **Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa's** partner institution, *Ghent University*.

*Photo: Returnee Children in Ezo. Credit: UNMISS (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).*

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