AcPrac Case Study

The Impact of the Mugabe Education Revolution on Academic-Practitioner Collaborations in Zimbabwe

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Atlantic Fellows | FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EQUITY

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Atlantic *Fellows* | FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EQUITY

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About AFSEE

The Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE) at the LSE International Inequalities Institute is an innovative fellowship programme that is funded through a landmark grant from Atlantic Philanthropies.

AFSEE aims to build a community of changemakers whose work addresses social and economic inequalities across the globe, while supporting them in developing imaginative approaches to their work. Adopting an ethos of collective action, the programme encourages collaborations between a range of stakeholders, including academics, activists, artists, development practitioners, and policymakers.

About the AcPrac Project

This case study is published as part of the '**Exploring the Potential of Academic-Practitioner Collaborations for Social Change (AcPrac)**' project. The AcPrac project has two key objectives: 1) to contribute to AFSEE's theory of change by exploring the conditions that are conducive to developing generative processes of knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners; and 2) to examine the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching inequalities, and particularly how the latter might be reproduced through the research process itself.

The project also makes theoretical contributions by reflecting on the drivers behind the collaborations that different stakeholders pursue and it explores the potential of collaborative research, as a methodology, in challenging knowledge inequalities and in decolonising research.

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Abstract

Set in the context of a country in urgent need of collaborative approaches to knowledge production for national reform and recovery, this paper draws attention to experiences from Zimbabwe that teach us about power relations in academic-practitioner collaborations. The paper argues that power is socially embedded and that society's perception of both academics and practitioners shape the power hierarchies within their collaboration projects. The paper draws on personal reflections, as well as those from development practitioners and activists who have worked with academics on human rights-related projects. I outline how such collaborations provide opportunities to advance knowledge-driven agendas, policies and strategies necessary to help struggling economies such as Zimbabwe, all the while advancing sustainable development. I also draw attention to some of the challenges that arise from this work, particularly how power dynamics can compromise the projects' efficiency and effectiveness.

Introduction

Zimbabwe's economy has been on downward spiral for as far back as the early 1990s, when the government adopted the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme as recommended by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Due to a combination of factors, the country's economic outlook has further deteriorated that many of its citizens would largely agree with branding it as a failed state. These conditions have also fractured the nation's social fabric. Needless to say, the government has attempted to address economic decay through blueprint strategies that have proven futile (Chitongo et al., 2020). While such efforts continue, there is a notable change in their narrative. The Zimbabwean government, which for the longest time had unilaterally implemented economic strategies, finally joined development agencies and many progressive institutions in calling for knowledge-driven and action-oriented collaborative partnerships for sustained growth and development.

As part of a global trend in past decades, integrating research with practice has become more important to produce knowledge in service of sustainable development, recovery and the reformation of developing countries such as Zimbabwe. As a result, there has been an increased call for collaborations between academics and practitioners to advance policy and programming agendas that help provide solutions for development challenges across the globe (Stevens et al., 2013). Zimbabwe is no different; for a country well-endowed with human capital in the academic

and development sectors, the collaborations sound feasible and easy in theory – yet unfortunately, this is not always the case in practice.

With Zimbabwe's worsening socioeconomic and political outlook (Muronzi, 2022), there is undoubtedly an openness towards collaborations between academics and development practitioners. Effective collaborations between them have become more and more important, yet present significant challenges. From a practitioner's viewpoint, they are all too often problematic, and their impact is limited because of underlying issues, including ones related to existing power hierarchies and limitations within trust-building practices between collaborating partners. These factors affect the strategic choices taken by each partner; whether they collaborate, the extent to which they do, and who they select as partners (McDonald, 2012). Indeed, the presence of power hierarchies and trust issues impact the level of commitment to collaborative processes and ultimately towards the standard and quality of outputs.

In this paper, I reflect on my personal experience and attitude towards academic-practitioner collaborations. I draw insights from five academics and development practitioners who are part of my social network within the civic and academic spaces in Zimbabwe. I reflect on the collaborative attempts witnessed between them in Zimbabwe and question the strength of the relationship between the quality of collaborative partnerships, the environment in which they occur, and the distribution of power and trust between the partners.

The discussions I had with peers and professional friends corroborate my personal views and attitudes towards academic-practitioner collaborations, which stem from years of working as an activist and community organiser on a broad array of development issues. Firstly, power imbalances do undermine the development of a meaningful collaboration, as an actor with more power may not be as willing to form collaborative relationships with others, and vice versa. Though, when they do, powerful actors may at times be eager to sustain their position of power and avoid intensive collaboration (Di Benedetto, 2020). Even more intriguing is how the process of power distribution amongst partners is built upon structured perceptions about academics and practitioners. For a country that has a legacy of advocating for education as a panacea to development, academia has been idolised and associated with power. It holds a seemingly irrefutable high social standing.

Academic-Practitioner Collaborations; a Necessary Though Complex Reality

> *'…. The solutions that our government has proposed so far to stop the economic bleeding have so many faults. In most cases the solutions are too academic. They are grounded in some academic theory and sound good on paper but are very*

> *divorced from the reality that citizens are faced with on a daily basis. If Zimbabwe is to recover and regain its status as the breadbasket of Africa as it was in the old days, there is need for organic solutions that are grounded in both empirical research and the lived realities of our people.'* ***(Interviewee 4 - Development practitioner.).***

The sentiments expressed above by a seasoned development practitioner are shared by many Zimbabweans -myself included. The country's political, social, economic and even ecological problems demand a new kind of thinking and doing things. Concerted collaborative efforts provide opportunities to come up with bespoke strategies that can restore Zimbabwe's luster. While these efforts can take various shapes and involve actors from different sectors, academic-practitioner collaborations are undeniably foundational and critical.

The latter hold significant potential to increase the impact and effectiveness of development research and practice in particular (McGiffin, 2020). Academics and practitioners represent two complementary, interdependent and mutually reinforcing dimensions of knowledge, research and practice. With their expertise in producing objective, rigorous and highly trustworthy knowledge, academics are an ideal complement to the applied expertise of development practitioners (Green, 2017). Working together, these two groups have much to gain from one another in terms of delivering programmes and policies that can make a meaningful difference to the lives of people living at the margins or suffering from social and economic deprivation (McGiffin, 2020). Successful academic-practitioner collaborations can be very impactful through contributions to effective research, policy and practice that promotes human rights, poverty reduction and sustainable development (Lahat, 2017). This is exactly what Zimbabwe needs.

While the connection between research and practice has been recognised as very important for numerous reasons, contemporary commentators from both sectors openly acknowledge the complexities and difficulties of forging, galvanising and sustaining the relationships between academics and practitioners. Most commentaries focus on institutional differences and the difference in methodologies between academics and practitioners. While these commentaries give great insights in explaining the challenges and complexities associated with academic – practitioner collaborations, much needs to be explored around the interplay of social perceptions on power and the feasibility of such relationships. This thinking aligns with Teresa Amabile's work, which outlines the following determinants for successful academic-practitioner collaborations:

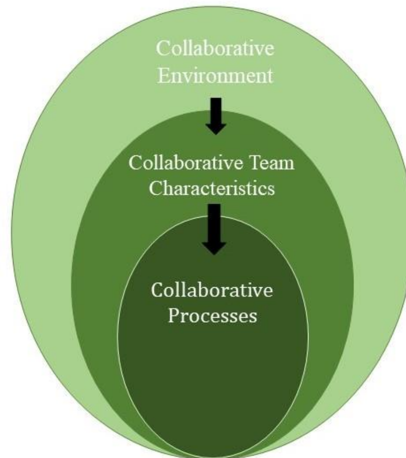

Figure 1: The Layered Approach to Understanding the Determinants of Collaborative Success. **Source:** Amabile et al, 2001

The Mugabe Education Revolution; Zimbabwe's Education Miracle?

To appreciate how social perceptions play a role in ascribing power to academics and practitioners, an understanding of their collaborative environment is necessary. In Zimbabwe, this entails going as far back as 1980 when the country gained its independence from British colonial rule. For much of the first decade after attaining independence in 1980, the government heavily invested in its education sector. The goal was to extend high quality education at all levels and without prejudice, to the previously marginalised and disadvantaged black majority. Under the radical leadership of the late former president and technocrat Robert Gabriel Mugabe, education was seen as essential to socioeconomic development. Education was also seen as a tool to redress the power imbalances imposed by colonial rule. This radical investment in education became popularly known as the 'Mugabe education revolution' (Unendoro , 2018) which helped Zimbabwe achieve a miracle that many African countries continue to pursue to this day.

President Robert Mugabe believed that knowledge was not organically created but rather nurtured through a deliberate investment in building supportive infrastructure and educational systems. In hindsight, his approach on post-independence education was largely shaped by the legacy of colonialism in the country, as well as through his colonial education in Britain, where he obtained most of his academic credentials and accolades. During the colonial times, indigenous knowledge was often demonised and in turn branded as inferior to knowledge generated by the educational institutions introduced by the coloniser. Fast forward to forty years later, the education system is a long way from being decolonised. Instead, Mugabe reinforced the idea that

knowledge generated by academic institutions is far more superior than knowledge stemming from other sources, including local communities. For such a continental icon of revolution, had the Mugabe educational revolution truly benefited the country? In viewing education as a panacea to development and the redistribution of power, was the importance of academic qualifications and credentials over emphasised to a point where those academics are viewed as superior or more powerful than the rest? What kind of national culture was being cultivated through this process? Was it one that stayed true to the Weberian theory of educational credentialism?[1] A culture of social stratification and power prescription through educational expertise? What social perception of academia has accrued over the years since national independence? Do these perceptions reveal power hierarchies and asymmetries that undermine the effective forging of academic-practitioner collaborations?

My Father – a Relatable Story?

My late father emphasised the importance of education to us - his four girls. One would think that his top argument was that obtaining the highest credentials possible would help us lead a dignified life. To this day, what surprises me is that this reason was perhaps third or fourth on his list. Instead, my father would tell us that our household needed people with impressive academic qualifications as this maintains and elevates the family's status within the community. This dream linked to family status and power was what encouraged him as he worked to provide us a decent education. My father is a relatable parental figure to many millennials born in the late 80s in independent Zimbabwe. Like many who had survived the second Chimurenga,[2] my father was heavily influenced by the Mugabe education revolution.

> *One cannot talk about the power academia and academics yield without tracing it back to the god father of education himself - Robert Gabriel Mugabe. He was such an academic himself having obtained twenty degrees[3] including honorary ones in his lifetime. To this day, his legacy lives on in how we perceive academia and academics within our country. To be recognised as an academic or simply possess higher educational qualifications within a relationship translates to automatic power and status that is hard to dismantle.* ***(Interviewee 3 - Development Practitioner)***

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[1] Simply put, the Weberian theory of educational credentialism argues and views competition for educational credentials as a primary determinant of modern stratification systems.

[2] The Second Chimurenga was a struggle fought between the Africans and white Rhodesian government which culminated in the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980. The war started in the early 1960s but took a more militant stance with 1966 at the Battle of Chinhoyi and ended in 1980 after the signing of the Lancaster House Agreement (Pindula, 2022)

[3] According to Zimeye.net,. Robert Mugabe was one of the most educated people from Zimbabwe.

Had the revolution championed by Mugabe (who had five bachelor's degrees, two master's, ten honorary ones, and three doctorates to his name) gone beyond its immediate goal of improving literacy rates? Did it create a nation that idolised academia?

> *True. We are a people who stand tall when it comes to education thanks to how are society holds education dear. Being part of the privileged who have managed to collect numerous post graduate degrees myself, I must attest to the fact that there is some social power and status associated with being an academic. This status impacts and influences how people view and engage me in both social and professional settings…. Often, I feel like it's my responsibility to dispel the power imbalances I often find myself entangled in, in a bid to get people to see me as a person who can also derive value from other people's experiences.* ***(Interviewee 3 - Academic)***

The way my father equated educational attainments with social ranking and status is not unique to him but a sentiment shared across the African region and perhaps across the world to a certain extent. I, however, maintain that some countries such as my Zimbabwe, have a heightened social placing of education -owing to the legacy of historical processes such as the Mugabe education revolution. These socially constructed perceptions and power hierarchies have discouraged me from engaging in collaborations with academics in the past because they meant that I had to first face an inferiority complex that stemmed from a lifetime of subconsciously believing the Foucaultian notion that knowledge creates power and vice versa (Foucault, 1970). Though these ideas are difficult to dispel, I have gained different forms of knowledge from working first hand with local communities. I increasingly feel confident that I have something to bring to collaborations.

Power Dynamics in Academic-Practitioner Collaborations

The most prevalent case of power imbalance is where academic input is dominant in the knowledge–power relationship. In a research by Lahat (2017) titled 'Academics and practitioners: the challenge of collaboration an example from social work and social services in Israel,' an interviewee affirmed a view I share; they highlighted how the world of practitioners need academic input:

> *. . .Who nourishes who? Do I nourish them? It is a matter of power relations. I expect to take academic knowledge and what do I give? Access to data for the research field? Budgets? I give a lot of my knowledge to research. But this is not reflected in the relationship. Because there is the one who is in*

> *need and the one who knows. When you talk about the relationship between academia and practice, why is academia first and practice second? I am the helper and they are in need?* **Interviewee -Lahat (2017).**

Had the interviewee who participated in Lahat's 2017 research been Zimbabwean and not Israeli, some of the questions posed in their statement could be answered by retracing the countries perception of academia back to the Mugabe education revolution, which sedimented how the field's heightened importance in this national context, and particularly why practice-based work came secondary.

Rising Above the Complexities: Mutual and Shared Responsibility to Make AcPrac Collaborations Work

Irrespective of differing viewpoints on academic-practitioner collaborative relationships, two facts remain true: firstly, collaborations between academics and practitioners working in the development space are necessary as they hold significant promise and potential to help tackle national and global development challenges. Secondly, these collaborative relationships can be very complex, with power dynamics as a contributing factor. Scaled together, the need for academic–practitioner collaborations outweigh the related complexities. This reality calls on both academics and practitioners to rise above challenges in order to make such relationships work.

> *Much as I acknowledge the power imbalances that are naturally constructed by the society and environment we live in, academics and practitioners willing to collaborate also have the power to intentionally chose to cancel out any imbalances that the external environment would have imposed. I have collaborated in such a context…. Spurred by our mutual goal, we acknowledged the reality imposed by our contexts and agreed that the outcome outweighed out contextual reality.* ***(Interviewee 1 - Development Practitioner)***

I echo these sentiments shared by a peer. Power imbalances can indeed be mitigated and managed. Differences in approaches can be synched to a point where the different approaches can translate to robust and holistic collaborative outcomes. This requires commitment and a strong sense of responsibility from both parties. In order to get to this point, I propose the following strategies that can and should be considered on both a collective and individual level.

As a departure point, all parties must acknowledge both the presence and source of power hierarchies and imbalances within any relationship. At an individual level, the practitioner should

not merely be perceived as a consumer of knowledge, and they must be encouraged to play an active role in forming the collaboration. Academics in turn must be mindful of this. At a collective level, acknowledging power hierarchies and imbalances within collaborations is not enough to resolve them. Rather, it is a way to direct focus on striving to make partnerships equitable and respectful of the values each party has to offer. Cultivating collaborative mindsets should translate into the practices that help foster a more collaborative environment.

This objective requires partners to take responsible actions, underpinned by an acute appreciation of the benefits of interdependency. Given the predominate narrative of power being skewed in favour of academics, the latter play a major role in building the confidence of their non-academic counterparts. This can be done by supporting them in identifying, owning and exercising their source of power when appropriate (Thondhlana, 2021). Practitioners, such as myself, must embrace the fact that we are not mere spectators that are just there to help. Practitioners have the responsibility of bringing their acquired knowledge to the collaborative space and to help others appreciate the different dimensions of knowledge they bring to the table.

As a collective, all partners must have a willingness to educate one another on their respective approaches and methodologies. This practice offers immediate and long term benefits; in the short term, an exchange of approaches facilitates more critical conversations on the best approach to take (one that is derived from both worlds all the while yielding the highest impact). In the long term, the exchange of approaches narrows the skill gap between academics and practitioners, which makes collaborations more feasible. Beyond teaching each other, caution and sensitivity should be exercised to reduce process-related power imbalances. For instance, information must be shared and distributed in a way that gives sufficient room for internal consultations and reflections to take place. Whatever strategies are adopted, the aim should be to dispel any power imbalances and ensure that everybody's voice is heard and considered, without perpetuating any bias.

Conclusion

Power hierarchies and asymmetries can threaten the efficacy of academic-practitioner collaborations in Zimbabwe. The depth of collaboration is highly shaped by the actors' power positions in society. Indeed, power imbalances may prevent effective and engaged collaboration from taking place, as the socially dominant actors may not be willing to form relationships with others. Powerful actors may also avoid engaging in more intensive collaborative practices, out of a desire to maintain their dominance (Ngwenya, 2021). For academic-practitioner collaborations

to succeed and offer unequivocal developmental benefits to all, these asymmetries must be acknowledged.

Both academics and practitioners need to engage in dialogue over the mutual goals of collaboration and be willing to interrogate prescribed power hierarchies. Armed with a mutual goal to contribute towards Zimbabwe's social, economic, political and ecological restoration and reformation, both academics and practitioners must play an active role in embodying principles of complementarity rather than competition amongst themselves. Such mindsets are instrumental to outlining a clear typology of collaboration, namely its processes, roles and expectations. In spite of historical challenges and complexities in implementation, knowledge-driven and action-oriented collaborative partnerships significantly benefit communities and nations.

Zimbabwe remains a country that holds formal education in high regard because of its founding fathers, who held an unwavering belief in the power of education to generate knowledge and ultimately empower marginalised and alienated people. Indeed, power is based off knowledge, and knowledge presupposes power relations (Lotia, 2004). Much as I concur with the founding fathers of my great rich country in that respect, the development practitioner in me argues that there has been an over-emphasis on formal education and credentials. In this reflective piece, I asserted that the Mugabe education revolution might have been taken further than is good for the country, specifically due to the ways in which it has contributed, over the years, to ascribing social power to academics, who are in turn viewed as the sole bearers of knowledge. This national perception of academics negatively impacts academic-practitioner collaborations, regardless of how the parties interact and engage. Although the national economic demise and global increase in calls for academic-practitioner collaborations have resulted in a significant increase of the latter in Zimbabwe, practitioners like myself have been hesitant to engage due to such perceived power imbalances and their bearing on collaborative processes. There are also practitioners who have engaged in collaborative partnerships with academics, and whose experiences have been fraught with difficulties that have discouraged them from reengaging. Such stories make it difficult for practitioners like me to attempt to collaborate. However, there have been instances were academics and practitioners have collaborated in a functional and impactful manner within the Zimbabwean context. It is from successful examples of collaborative efforts that progressive learning points can be derived and replicated. Zimbabwe is in desperate need of organic intellectuals from both the academic and development sectors to sustain, modify and alter modes of thinking and behaviour for the kind of recovery that the country needs.

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