Centre for Care

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

FUNDED BY NIHR | National Institute for Health and Care Research

Working Paper 6 / July 2025

Developing equitable international research partnerships: principles and values to guide the Centre for Care

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SUMMARY

In our increasingly interconnected world, cross-country and regional research collaborations provide an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to work together towards common research goals and agendas. While the benefits of research collaborations are far-reaching and have implications for effecting changes on the ground, they also run the risk of perpetuating inequalities and power imbalances between resource-poor and resource-rich settings. Through a critical review of the existing literature, this Working Paper focuses on a specific type of research collaboration - between global North and global South - and considers how existing research collaborations often mimic colonial relationships by adopting approaches that sideline Southern epistemes and situated knowledge(s). In consideration of these challenges, the Working Paper proposes a set of core values and principles that could underpin the establishment of equitable research collaborations between the Centre for Care and global South partners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Engaging in interdisciplinary, cross-country research is increasingly viewed by funding bodies as a way to respond to 'global issues' like climate change, non-communicable diseases and poverty reduction (Obambaa and Mwema, 2009). The promotion of international partnerships is rooted in ideas about the 'fourth age' in which knowledge is no longer generated in silos by individuals but through networks of people spread across varying countries and regions (Molosi-France and Makoni, 2020). Engaging in international partnerships, however, can also be challenging, especially when the power imbalances among research partners are stark (Hoekstra et al., 2020; Voller et al., 2022a; Lehuedé, 2023). It is in recognition of these imbalance(s) in power that a significant number of studies have sought to find more equitable pathways for 'doing research' in the global South, in particular. This Working Paper (WP) discusses why international research partnerships are considered by many as inequitable and proposes a way forward by recommending a set of core values and principles to help address the underlying issues.

1.1. RELEVANCE TO THE CENTRE FOR CARE

The proposed principles, and the core values underpinning them, are designed to guide the Centre for Care (CfC) in developing equitable international partnerships. A commitment to learning from diverse contexts is embedded in the CfC's work, and is reflected in its existing international academic partnerships[1]. There is a need, however, to expand this network of partnerships to include contexts which may be different in socio-economic and political character and histories to those in the OECD region, especially since these contexts and histories are intertwined with how care is practised and understood in the present day. While creating and/or expanding the space to learn from 'situated knowledges' will help bring to the fore less-heard academic and practitioner voices, it is important to ensure that the CfC's engagements do not replicate or exacerbate existing inequalities and power differences.

1.2. STRUCTURE OF THE WORKING PAPER

The Working Paper is organised into four further sections. The remainder of Section One, explains the importance of focusing on North-South partnerships and how terminology/language can shape the research partnership. Drawing on a literature review of North-South research collaborations, Section Two identifies and reflects on some key issues related to this particular type of research collaboration, including how histories of colonialism and continuing power imbalances shape knowledge production and sharing. Section Three considers what a 'good' partnership entails and draws out some principles from existing frameworks on international collaborations. Section Four identifies a set of core values, principles and recommendations to underpin the CfC's development of equitable global partnerships. The fifth and final section offers some concluding remarks.

1.3. CLARIFICATIONS ON THE SCOPE OF THE WP AND ON TERMINOLOGY

It is important to flag two caveats upfront. Firstly, this Working Paper is based on a literature review undertaken for the purpose of identifying principles to guide North-South research collaborations. This literature is primarily drawn from two academic disciplines: Global Health and International Development. Furthermore, most of this literature focusses on research collaborations with partners in the African continent. When writing the WP it became clear however, that some of the issues highlighted are not unique to international collaborations. There could, therefore, be some relevant cross-learning for CfC academics working solely within a nationally-bounded setting, but across multiple, unequally positioned groups and/or geographies.

Even when working together towards a common goal, research collaborations can be rife with tensions, personality clashes and structural impediments, often shaped by unequal allocations of funds and resources (Meißner,Weinmann and Vowe, 2022). Tensions arise especially when multi-disciplinary teams work together and in collaborations that bring together academics, policymakers and practitioners (Hinchcliff, Greenfield and Braithwaite, 2014; Bikard, Vakili and Teodoridis, 2019; Pinho and Reeves, 2021; McCabe et al., 2023). These challenges are well-documented and scores of studies have provided recommendations on how to address them.

The concern in North-South collaborations specifically is the stark power imbalances that underpin these engagements, especially where colonialism and extraction of material resources have shaped relationships historically, and where they continue to shape how research is conducted in resource-poor settings contemporaneously (Morris, 2015; Stein, 2021; Serunkuma, 2024). Through the use of 'scientific' data, researchers and research institutions based in the global North are at times, implicated in determining the socio-economic and political landscapes in global South countries, oftentimes resulting in worsening social and economic outcomes for the local populations, as well as undermining democratic processes (Kunanayakam, 2018). This is especially evidenced

during economic recessions, when liberalisation of market economies is aggressively pushed onto nation-states (Kunanayakam, 2018) or when a global 'crisis' such as migration is addressed via interventions in the global South (Raghuram and Sondhi, forthcoming). Hence, researchers and research from the global North in particular, are problematised and viewed with suspicion. Therefore, unless approached with a sound understanding of, and sensitivity to, the historical and existing power imbalances, research collaborations can exacerbate existing inequalities rather than respond to an identified 'global' issue, such as those in the CfC's research agenda.

The second and an inter-related issue concerns the limitations of existing terminology to adequately describe analytical approaches. A meaningful way to characterise the partnerships between resource-rich and resource-poor countries continues to elude researchers. In this WP, the terms 'global South' and 'global North' are used to denote the differences, but with the understanding that these terms are nonetheless contested and problematic.

The discourse around terminology further exposes how knowledge systems have shaped how we conceive of differences. For example, the use of the innocuous term 'international' has been criticised for its Eurocentric roots and for implying the establishment of an international global order that replaces, when in fact it replicates, colonial relations (Mezzadri, 2025). The seemingly less problematic terms of global North and South, to replace the more questionable terms of developed/developing worlds, have also been problematised. The main concern is that they imply that the world can be straightforwardly, analytically divided into two geographical spaces with attendant differences in social, economic and political spheres (Patrick and Huggins, 2023). Such simplistic categorisations also obscure the wealth, poverty and inequitable access to public services that are evident across and within both global North and South geographies, as well as the varying political and economic histories that shape different regions of the world (Trefzer et al., 2014; Müller, 2020).

Within such an order too, the hierarchical order of power continues to hold sway. The global North is identified as developed and modern; Western liberalism is considered as 'common sense' to which the under-developed states of the global South must aspire. Such hegemonic thinking is implicated in sustaining the "neo-liberal restructuring of the global political-economy" (Aboderin et al., 2023, p. 10). Research in particular supports in maintaining these binaries by contributing to a western-dominant knowledge system.

Instead of approaching knowledge production as a mutual, globally connected flow of information, the global South becomes positioned mostly as a "forever field" (Kanagasabai, 2023) - a 'testing ground' for interventions and policy prescriptions (Opalo, 2024). Underlying this assumption is the 'presumed power' of global North scholars over academics and practitioners of the global South (Obambaa and Mwema, 2009; Palinkas, 2019). These assumptions of superiority reinforce a hierarchy where "non-western knowledge from the poor world regions [is] systematically relegated to a peripheral epistemic position" (Obambaa and Mwema, 2009, p. 364). It helps "sustain the wider disparities in the global political, economic order" (Aboderin et al., 2023, p. 6) and implicitly, disallows a bi-directional gaze (Aboderin et al., 2023; Kanagasabai, 2023). These assumptions are also reflected in who has access to funding and to research which topics, and the preference, among funders, to seek a global North partner to lead research partnerships that have the global South as the location of the research (Flint et al., 2022).

That said, the adoption of the 'global South' label by some countries and networks of scholars/practitioners as a common platform from which to advocate for their common interests, also demonstrates that such terminology is open to interpretation (Southern Voice, n.d.). In doing so, they recognise the historical drivers that gave rise to such inequities, as well as the "contemporary unjust relations that render socio-economic, political, financial, military, cultural and epistemic dominance to the 'Global North'"(Aboderin et al., 2023, p. 10-11). In response, scholars based in the 'South' advocate for 'southern theory' to challenge the epistemes of the global North (de Santos, 2016; Roy, 2023) as well as to collectivise and lobby for systemic changes in the global order (Southern Voice, n.d.). The active promotion of South-South research and development collaborations by these nation-states and bi-lateral organisations (Gray and Gills, 2016), points to the value in adopting this collective position.

In light of this ongoing debate, the terms global North and global South are used in this Working Paper with the understanding that they are highly contested, problematic and homogenising, but that they can also be used to acknowledge material and non-material differences that each partner brings into a partnership and that complement the partnership, rather than hindering its growth and trajectory. This helps the CfC to consider how the global North and South are conceived of, in its own work.

2. INEQUITABLE RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS - CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS

Much research examines how research partnerships between resource-rich and resource-poor countries have resulted in widening the gap between academics and practitioners of different nationalities rather than bringing them together to work towards a common goal. This section traces some of these issues across the research cycle. It highlights how seemingly apolitical research engagements aimed at a common good can potentially reinforce a hierarchical structure of knowledge production.

2.1. INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The international research funding environment and the demand by funders to 'fit' proposals to their priorities have far-reaching effects on how North-South collaborations are established and developed. Funders typically uphold the notion of the global North as the ideal and work on the assumption that the global South needs to 'catch up'. This thinking mimics historical "colonial trusteeship" behaviour (Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2014, p. 5), where global North actors adopt a paternalistic position of knowing what is good for the people (Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2014). The 'global' priorities identified by funders also tend to serve the global North to maintain its power in the international order (Aboderin et al., 2023). For example, the UK government's research funding agenda, with the stated aim of making the UK a centre for global knowledge, has been criticised for exacerbating existing inequalities:

> "Rather than acknowledging historic global injustices and inequalities (including slavery and colonialism), and related current structural power asymmetries, the emphasis is seemingly less on driving equity in relationships than it is on furthering the national interest by way of charitable endeavour" (Flint et al., 2022, p. 80).

Academic institutions reinforce this power hierarchy and implicitly "privilege Western ways of knowing and Western definitions of development" (Lumb, 2023, p. 113). The academic institutions in the North are thus in a more favourable position to determine how costs, division of labour and resources are allocated across the research project. In the face of limited funding opportunities that primarily target global South scholars, their ability to negotiate local priorities and the terms of the contract are limited. This also acts to constrain the space to question the role of the funder(s), how the data will be used by the funders themselves and to what ends.

2.2. LIMITED ROLE IN RESEARCH DESIGN

Pre-conditions that commonly govern funding calls mean that global South scholars can only tap into these funding streams if they are sought out by their global North peers. Finding themselves side-lined in making key decisions regarding the funding proposal and the design of the study is a common consequence (Dodsworth, 2019; Gunasekara 2020). Instead of a 'meeting of minds' and a discussion among equals, many global South scholars are brought on board once a research project has been conceptualised and designed (Molosi-France and Makoni, 2019). Their roles are generally limited to the data collection phase, in which their expertise and knowledge about local communities are critical to gather research data. But their inability to input into the timeline and scope of the research project creates tensions later, as these timelines (for example, time allocated within a project to carry out a set number of interviews) may not reflect ground realities (for example, sudden changes in local political or security contexts, seasonal work patterns that affect research participant availability) (Bleck, Dendere and Sangaré, 2018). Instead of collaboration, southern scholars become "data mules", bound by a contractual relationship to complete a predetermined set of tasks with no ownership of, or intellectual investment in, the research project (Gunasekara, 2020, p. 508).

A more troubling dimension of these partnerships is the lack of space for local teams to interrogate and shape the key concepts and theories underpinning a project (Raghuram and Sondhi, forthcoming). This lack of space means questions about whether concepts and theoretical frames 'hold up' in heterogeneous and complex historical contexts are not asked (Bleck, Dendere and Sangaré. 2018; Dodsworth, 2019; Gunasekara, 2020). The failure to consider a different frame of reference or an alternative explanation (for example how indigenous faith healers play a central role in serving a community's health outcomes), reinforces the underlying notion that the global North scholars are the legitimate voices in knowledge production (Roy, 2023; Osseiran and Nimer, 2024). This is further complicated when the global South scholars and practitioners receive their academic training in the global North and may seek to transplant knowledge and ways of doing research that further alienate the local communities (Roy, 2023).

The failure to situate a particular research problem in its local context subsequently results in data generation and interventions that do not necessarily reflect the lived experiences of local people (Gunasekara, 2020; Roy, 2023). Such research will generate publishable data but these have "little or no impact on local practice or policy" (Morton et al., 2022, p. 268), which further deepens

the sense of disillusionment in the promise of collaborative research partnerships.

2.3. ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES

An inter-connected issue is the lack of space and time afforded for adequate consultations with the local community, about the research. Local researchers – as the data collectors and the 'public face' of the research – typically find themselves being held accountable to the community. They must contend with community tensions and the distrust created through extractive data collection practices, even after a research partnership has ended (Baganda, 2021). Increasingly, communities question these practices and demand more information, especially as time, labour, travel and engagement are expected from them "with little clear personal reward" (Flint et al., 2022, p. 88). Tensions can be further exacerbated when the research "fits poorly with local sociocultural norms/priorities" (Morton et al., 2022, p. 269), and specifically when the community in question has not been informed or provided a space to be engaged in the design of the project (Bharadwaj, 2014).

Mistrust is further fuelled when research is conducted in highly volatile political contexts and in post-disaster situations (Sumathipala et al., 2010; Bleck, Dendere and Sangaré, 2018; Asiamah et al., 2021). While global North researchers are generally protected by institutional regulations, local researchers are typically expected to navigate these volatile terrains on their own (Gunasekara, 2020; Asiamah et al., 2021). Their experiences underscore how important it is to be able to renegotiate the terms of a research partnership, as well as re-evaluate the methodological approach. In such circumstances, it is unsurprising that global North researchers are commonly referred to as 'mosquitoes' and 'vampires', and the extractive research practices referred to as 'parachute' and 'drop-in, drop-out' research and 'sample safaris' (Bharadwaj, 2014; Chu et al., 2014; Flint et al, 2022; Morton et al., 2022).

2.4. ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION - THE MISSING PIECES

A related concern is the role of global South partners once the data have been generated. Similar to the design phase of the project, global South scholars are afforded few opportunities to engage in analysis and publication/dissemination activities. Personal accounts of global South scholars demonstrate how their roles are effectively terminated once the data are transferred to the global North partner, with little opportunity for them to engage with the research findings (Gunasekara, 2020). When access to the data is afforded, the space and time to work collaboratively with global North research partners is limited. Time differences, geographical distance, limited travel funding and visa restrictions for global South citizens make working together more difficult.

A corresponding concern is how data are disseminated and shared. Global North academics are largely driven by the demands placed on them by their academic institutions. Publishing in high-impact journals and presenting at global conferences are not only tied to individual career progression, but also expected by universities, to sustain their institutional reputations for research excellence (Flint et al., 2022).

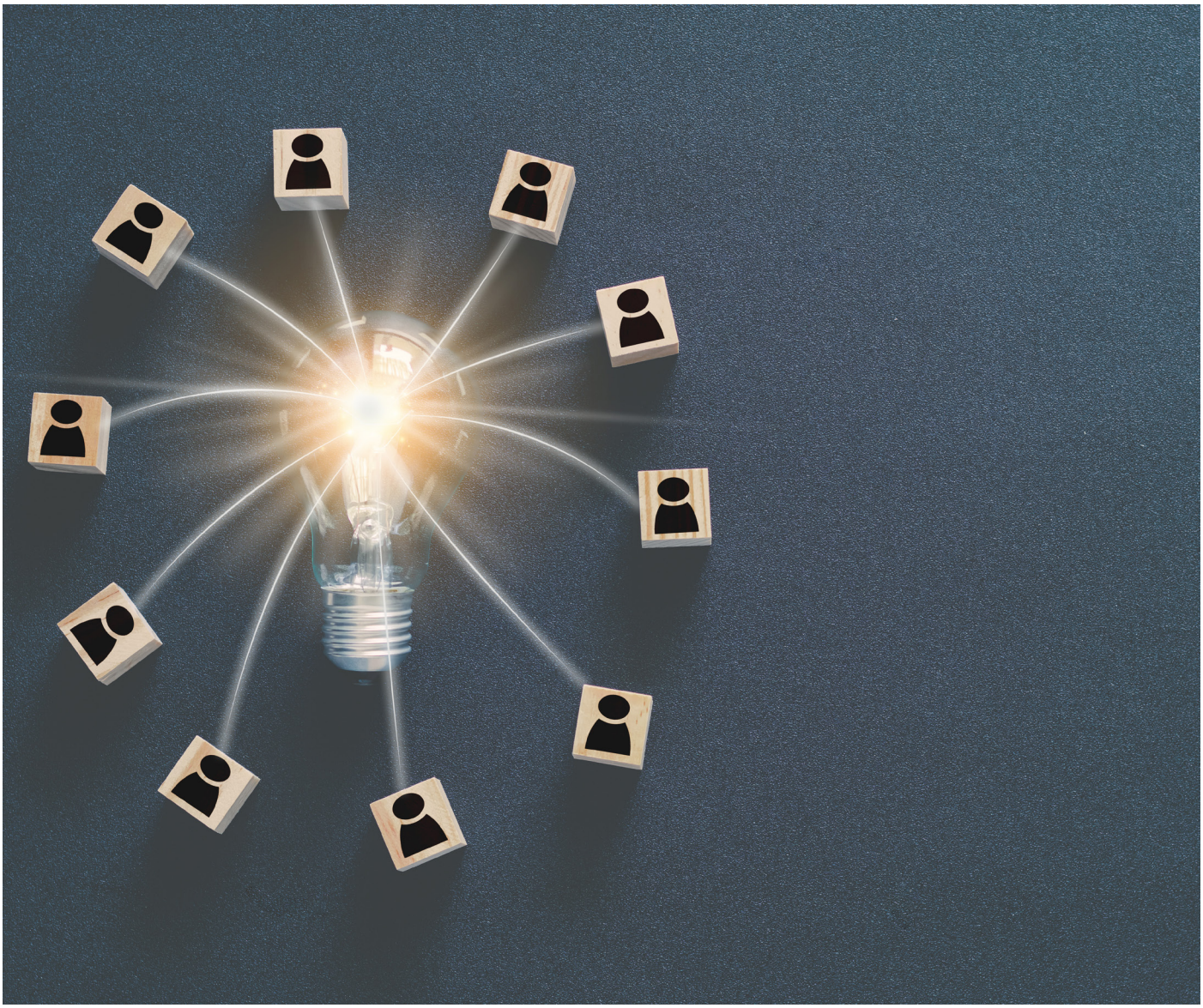
While global South scholars may wish to publish in similar journals (when access to the data is permitted), limited exposure and access to such publications make navigating this process without support challenging (Abimbola, 2019). Funders' well-meaning conditionalities that make open access publishing mandatory, are not always accompanied with funding to support global South scholars to publish in such journals. Differing understandings of what constitutes data and data quality and analysis, may also result in support for local publications being withdrawn by the lead partner. Such decisions create mistrust and tension within partnerships, especially when local knowledge and analyses are treated as sub-par (Fransman and Newman, 2019).

Furthermore, the literature indicates that global South scholars are more likely than their global North-based peers to take a collectivist approach to dissemination (Bharadwaj, 2014; Stein, 2021). Instead of high impact journal publications, they place more emphasis on the benefits for the community from where the data have been generated. Research findings are a community good - a means to help their communities/society reap the benefits of the research findings (Flint et al., 2022). They wish to publish locally and in local languages to ensure that information is disseminated and remains accessible to a wider audience (Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2014). These intentions, however, may not always be realised within a partnership that is skewed towards international publications, and where access to the data is limited by the restricted role assigned to global South scholars.

As previously noted, the issues outlined above are not unique to North-South research collaborations (Pinho and Reeves, 2021; Roy, 2023). However, what is troubling is how these practices in North-South partnerships are reflective of how coloniality - through the maintenance of a highly unequal global economic and political order - continues to operate in the modern world (Obambaa and Mwema, 2009; Zingerli, 2010; Thondhlana and Garwe, 2021; Morton et al., 2022).

When global North researchers operating in postcolonial settings pay scant attention to local perceptions and attitudes and fail to situate data in the specific contexts from which they have been extracted, they echo deeply harmful practices that were routinely adopted during colonial regimes, not only by scholars, but also by supposed welfare providers such as medical practitioners. By continuing to legitimise such practices via seemingly neutral, apolitical research projects and by deploying moral claims about the 'greater good', these partnerships reproduce colonial power hierarchies by placing the interests of a few in the global North above those living in the global South.

In the face of these challenges, we might ask why global South scholars and institutions wish to engage in collaborations with global North researchers. Apart from the personal and professional benefits, research collaborations allow these scholars and organisations to participate in research that has the potential to effect change. The collaborations also have the potential to facilitate exchanges of ideas and to enable access to knowledge that otherwise remains behind a paywall (Dodsworth, 2019). Collaborations provide additional sources of income. They have the potential to increase the capacities of early career researchers and can generate additional material resources that improve research infrastructure in public universities (Woldegiyorgis, Proctor and de Wit, 2018). In light of this substantial potential, this Working Paper now moves on to consider how such research collaborations can be designed within an equitable framework, whereby all parties play an equally important role in shaping the research and its outcomes.



3. POSSIBLE FRAMEWORKS FOR EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS

The literature centred around research partnerships paints a rather grim picture of what global North-South partnerships commonly look like. In this context, developing a framework that 'works' to address these underlying inequities appears a difficult task. The existence, already, of multiple frameworks demonstrates some degree of acknowledgement of the issues, but also points to the inherent challenges of attempting to redress inequities that are structural in nature and – at times - beyond the scope of any one partnership to address. This section considers how to define a good research partnership and the advice offered by some of the most cited frameworks on building good research collaborations.

3.1. WHAT IS A GOOD RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP?

Despite the lack of clarity and agreement on what principles would best suit, there is some agreement on the need to establish partnerships on the value of equity rather than equality (Voller et al., 2022a). The emphasis placed on equitable relationships stems from the issues discussed earlier, especially the need to be conscious of the power differentials and the histories of extraction that have shaped research partnerships.

In an equitable partnership, there is a general understanding by the partners "that the needs and priorities of each member of the partnership are being adequately addressed by their respective partner or partners" (Palinkas, 2019, p. 210). This may result in the development of a set of goals and a programme that responds to their respective needs. The programme would be designed with an understanding of "the organisational culture of each partner and the underlying societal norms within which each partner operates" (Larkan et al., 2016, p. 4). This entails anchoring the partnership on trust and a commitment to maintain it throughout the process (Larkan et al., 2016).

Ideally, an equitable partnership will seek to correct the drawbacks of 'semi-colonial' models of 'doing research' and will include:

> "amongst other characteristics, a jointly negotiated research agenda, integral links with national institutions, nationally led line management, strong influence on local policy makers, dissemination balanced between international, national and regional journals and a role in strengthening national academic infrastructure" (Voller et al., 2022a, p. 523).

A good partnership is also considered to work well when there is "debate and compromise. It requires identification of areas of convergence and a willingness to either eliminate or accommodate divergence" (Palinkas, 2019, p. 212). The aim should be to "support a truly reciprocal bi-directional flow" of knowledge and skills (Gautier, Sielenou and Kalolo, 2018, p. 17) - a feature that is largely absent in current North-South research collaborations.

Most research partnerships are also formed when the key partners share mutual networks and/or have engaged in other research projects (Godoy-Ruiza et al., 2016). Some funders, like the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), have sought to 'operationalise' such relationships by creating networks for early career researchers to work collaboratively on research ideas. The aim is that such relationships would eventually strengthen and enable North-South 'research dyads' to seek funding opportunities together (Godoy-Ruiza et al., 2016). The skills and capacities honed by working together, the IDRC assumes, will provide a successful blueprint for the prospects of future research collaborations. Such relationships, however, could also deteriorate when institutional priorities and other structural factors are too imposing to ignore (Flint et al., 2022).

The aim of a good partnership, therefore, should be to consider collaborative engagement that goes beyond the lifecycle of a formal partnership agreement and remains adaptive to change (Voller et al., 2022). Meaningful collaborations are far more likely to emerge when the partnership sits comfortably with 'difference' and with the acceptance that unanticipated outcomes will be part and parcel of the partnership. It is also important to think of partnerships not necessarily as complete, linear and bounded entities, but as relationships that continue to evolve across time and space (Bleck, Dendere and Sangaré, 2018). As Fransman and Newman (2019) argue, when "personal circumstance, social relations, conflicting agendas, institutional restructuring, and unanticipated geopolitical events" coalesce with aspirational goals of knowledge production and actionable research, it leads to the emergence of "[an] assemblage of people, things and ideas as well as institutions" (p. 540). How far research collaborations can subscribe to such ambitious goals, however, is debatable.

3.2. RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORKS

This section offers a brief overview of three widely cited frameworks that position equity as a core value in global North - global South research partnerships. These frameworks emerged from consultative processes with global South partners but were produced primarily in the global North. The frameworks have strongly informed the development of the core values and principles proposed for the CfC's future collaborations (see

Section 4).

Chief among the guidelines developed is the Guide for Transboundary Research Partnerships (n.d.) developed by the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE). Resembling a step-by-step guide to support a research partnership throughout its life cycle, the KFPE states that all partnerships should be based on three principles: interaction, communication and mutuality. These principles can be applied and adapted according to the local context(s) in which the partnerships operate.

Alternatively, the principles developed for global health research by the Canadian Coalition for Global Health Research (CCGHR) (2015) acknowledge the harm that research can cause, especially by worsening, rather than lessening, inequities faced by communities in resource-poor settings. Echoing the 'Global Code of Conduct to Counter Ethics Dumping' (Schroeder et al., 2019), the CCGHR places emphasis on ethical research practices and on how best to engage in conversations among partners and improve transparency.

The collaborative and consultative process adopted by the Rethinking Research Collaborative (RRC) to develop its 8 principles results in an emphasis on 'putting poverty first' (Newman, Bharadwaj and Fransman, 2019). Similar to the CCGHR, the principles are rooted in a process of reflexivity and engagement (Newman, Bharadwaj and Fransman, 2019).

A common thread weaving through these frameworks is the understanding that the 'problem' in the collaborations emerges from the way in which the collaboration is set up. As such, despite differences in language, these frameworks advocate principles that are not dissimilar in character (Table 1). They advocate for equity to be integrated into all aspects of the collaboration, starting from the identification and setting of research priorities. Though the frameworks promote different principles, these are amenable to change based on the nature of the collaboration, as the KFPE framework in particular emphasises.

Table 1: Key principles governing research partnership frameworks

Key principles governing research partnership frameworks		
CCGHR Principles for Global Health Research (core value - equity)	Guide for Transboundary Research Partnership (KFPE)	Rethinking Research Collaborative (RRC)
1. Authentic partnering 2. Inclusion 3. Shared benefits 4. Commitment to the future 5. Responsiveness to causes of inequities 6. Humility	1. Set the agenda together 2. Interact with stakeholders 3. Clarify responsibilities 4. Account to beneficiaries 5. Promote mutual learning 6. Enhance capacities 7. Share data and networks 8. Disseminate results 9. Pool profits and merits 10. Apply results 11. Secure outcomes	1. Put poverty first 2. Critically engage with contexts 3. Redress evidence hierarchies 4. Adapt and respond 5. Respect diversity 6. Commit to transparency 7. Invest in the relationship 8. Keep learning

A general criticism of frameworks is that they are 'technical fixes' that seek to address structural inequities plaguing the research funding environment and the institutional frameworks in place (Fransman et al., 2021). They continue to reflect a top-down approach (i.e. North to South) seeking to empower the global South whereas the problem lies in how the global North operates in and with global South partners (Llanos et al., 2024). They also tend to focus on a specific partnership, rather than seeking ways to set up meaningful and sustainable research collaborations (Llanos et al., 2024). There is little evidence to show that partnership frameworks actually work to redress power imbalances and inequities experienced by global South scholars - a criticism acknowledged by the frameworks' creators. The lack of clarity on measuring equity, defining mutual accountability measures and what a partnership audit would entail, further complicates efforts to measure the effectiveness of these frameworks. In response to many of these shortcomings, the RRC has disbanded as an expert group and shifted its focus to providing direct support to ongoing efforts of South-based stakeholders (RRC, 2018).

However, these frameworks do offer guidance on how research collaborations can work towards redressing some of these inequities, even if systemic

changes remain out of reach. For the CfC, the goal is not to overhaul the systemic issues that underpin North-South research relations, but to be cognisant of these systemic issues and find ways for incremental change by ensuring that a research partnership operates in an equitable manner.

The next section of this Working Paper proposes a set of core values and principles for guiding the CfC in any future collaborations with global-South based researchers and explores how these values and principles can actively operate to level the playing field in such relationships.

4. DEVELOPING EQUITABLE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS/COLLABORATIONS

As the literature conveys, there is no magic bullet or a readymade fix that can be easily applied to North-South research partnerships to address the plethora of problems that make these research partnerships inequitable. The existing frameworks, however, point to the importance of developing a core set of values and principles to underpin and shape North-South partnerships, so that they could be less inequitable.

The proposed principles for the CfC's future partnerships are drawn from these frameworks and the wider literature reviewed above. The eight principles developed by the RRC are especially drawn upon. The RRC's long-standing engagement in developing a framework for equitable partnerships, and the extensive North-South consultations undertaken in developing the framework, make these principles relevant for the CfC and its aim to engage in exchanges that foster learning in equitable ways.

4.1. ADOPTING A REFLEXIVE PRAXIS

Taking into account partnerships that straddle the academic-practitioner divide, the RRC is also shaped by a complexity-informed context analysis, which is useful in acknowledging the knotty contexts in which partnerships operate. The process involves 'looking back, looking up and around, looking down, and looking forward (Fransman et al., 2021, p. 335-36). It recognises that in practice, partnerships operate in complex settings and must contend with evolving, fast-changing local and international contexts.

It will be useful for the CfC to adopt a similar process to identify and articulate the scope of the Centre's engagements with global South partners:

- By 'looking back', we can acknowledge and recognise how historical patterns have shaped how North-South relationships are now understood, perceived and still operationalised. It helps us assume a reflexive praxis and consider how partnerships can become sites of tension but can also open up spaces for knowledge-sharing and understanding.
- 'Looking around' entails situating the partnership within the larger systems of power in which it operates and recognising how this may influence the roles and the capacities of each of the partners.
- To 'look down' is to consider the local contexts and identify how socio-economic and political contexts in both the global North and South would come to bear upon the partnership.
- By 'looking forward', the stakeholders can develop a roadmap of how to respond to emerging challenges and possibilities.

Rather than approach a partnership in isolation (Newman, Bharadwaj and Fransman, 2019), this process enables the collaborators to understand how the partnership is embedded in systems that could determine its trajectory. While addressing long-standing, historical injustices and frames of thought may not be possible within the partnership, "acknowledg[ing] the effects of different historically formed power relations on research partnerships" (Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2014, p. 15) enables us to recognise how these imbalances are likely to shape collaborations. Carrying out a context analysis also helps to consider how new forms of imperialism may be embedded in how funders prioritise topic areas as well as geographical/regional focus. Adopting this process will also help us develop a 'roadmap' of how the values and principles discussed here need to be embedded, in practical and everyday ways, in the Centre's collaborations with global South partners.

The four key values and the corresponding principles that would contribute towards developing more equitable research collaborations are outlined in Table 2. This is followed by a fuller discussion of the principles and an accompanying set of recommendations on how to practically embed them in research collaborations.

Table 2: Core values and principles to guide equitable research collaborations

Value	Principle
Honesty	Create an environment that promotes openness and trust
Respect	Diverse knowledges, contexts and ways of doing research
Accountability	To each other, individuals, communities and stakeholders
Transparency	Embed in all aspects of the partnerships

4. 2. HONESTY – CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT PROMOTES OPENNESS AND TRUST

Global North and South partners both rate honesty as a key determinant of a successful relationship. This is not surprising; the reviewed literature clearly illustrates how lack of 'truthfulness' leads to a breakdown in trust among the different stakeholders. For some, honesty is couched in terms of openness, which is considered by partners as fundamental to building trust (Palinkas, 2019). They emphasise the importance of having honest conversations about the collaboration and its many

moving parts.

Evidence from global South partners indicates that trust between partners breaks down when the lead partner is not open or transparent about how funding is allocated across the partners (Voller et al., 2022b). Mistrust further festers due to a lack of clarity on roles and the underlying dynamics that ascribe secondary roles to global South partners. This is further fuelled by funders placing trust in the Northern partner as the 'legitimate' actor in the partnership to manage finances and the research project while the Southern partners are "not trusted to deliver quality services" (Molosi-France and Makoni, 2020, p.17).

In practice, honesty means having discussions about aims, objectives, expectations and obligations prior to any formal agreement to collaborate. Clarifying what is possible within a short-term collaboration with limited financial and material resources helps to build trust and manage expectations regarding what can be achieved within the partnership. In short, open discussions around what is possible and not possible to achieve within the collaboration is helpful for all involved.

The following are recommended as discussion topics at different stages of the collaboration:

- **Purpose of collaboration:** As a research team, consider first why you wish to collaborate and identify a clear objective for the purposes of the collaboration.
- **Common research agenda:** Ensure similar discussions are held with the potential partners on their reasons for engaging in collaborative work.
- **Prioritising needs:** Consider how these priorities can be met either completely or partially through the collaboration to ensure there is clarity from the start.
- **Addressing priorities:** During the research design phase, engage in discussions about the potential for identified priorities (e.g. capacity building) to be included in a proposal. If those priorities are not subsequently included in the funding proposal, make sure to discuss the reasons for their exclusion.
- **Impact on communities:** Clarify as much as possible whether the outcomes of the research/intervention will have any tangible outcomes/impact on local communities.
- **Flexibility:** Share as much information as possible regarding timelines, human resources, budget allocations and the flexibility to adapt/revise the agreed-upon terms.
- **Risk assessments:** In response to concerns of local partners who take on most of the fieldwork risks and shoulder the burdens of local accountability, work together to respond in a meaningful manner (i.e. budgeting for insurance, flexibility in timelines etc) to these concerns.
- **Non-discrimination/diversity:** Consider how the collaboration and the composition of the local research team may perpetuate gender/class/caste/ethno-religious and racial discrimination and consider how to address these concerns openly (i.e. by embedding self-reflexivity, instituting institutional regulations etc).
- **Access to data:** Clarify/explain how access to data would be operationalised or restricted and what possibilities there are to collaborate on analysis and publications. This can also include an open discussion on funder requirements and the implications of data sharing.
- **Manage expectations:** Clarify the potential for long-term associations/collaborations. This includes managing the expectations of all team members regarding the nature of future collaborations and ensuring that funding and availability of time are taken into consideration in proposing these activities, including the setting up of research networks and other less formalised research activities.

4.3. RESPECT FOR DIVERSE KNOWLEDGES, CONTEXTS AND WAYS OF 'DOING' RESEARCH

Treating the vastly diverse global South as a homogenous entity is detrimental to working together. Failing to acknowledge that collaborations are formed and implemented in contexts where histories of colonialism and continued extraction of economic resources are lived realities becomes a major source of tension for partners (Larkan et al., 2016; Fransman and Newman, 2019). Hence, respect needs to be broadly defined and should include respect for diverse contexts, situated knowledge(s), and ways of 'doing' research.

Research collaborations can end up doing more harm than good when the overall approach dismisses local concerns and when analysis does not take the local context into consideration (Grieve and Mitchell, 2020). These could be simple acts, such as compensating research participants in ways that are socio-economically and/or culturally inappropriate (Balasubraniam et al., 2018), lack of sensitivity to what issues can be researched in specific contexts, or disregarding global South partners' own research priorities (Grieve and Mitchell, 2020). For example, global North research priorities, shaped by the funding environment, may seek to explore research topics that are considered 'taboo' in the local context (Grieve and Mitchell, 2020). These challenges underline the importance of

developing research proposals in a sensitive, ethical and considerate manner, cognisant of the context and the people being researched.

It is equally important to consider how the design of the collaboration could raise fears of "scientific colonialism" (Lawrence, and Hirsch, 2020, p. 519), especially through seemingly 'scientific' processes of deciding what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge is considered valid and which methods and evidence are considered legitimate. These tensions are compounded when collaborations are established with a highly selective network of global South collaborators trained in the global North who may also adopt the "theoretical hegemony of the North" (Aboderin et al., 2023, p. 7). Paying attention to local contexts and respecting the diversity of local knowledge(s) will help "expand disciplinary knowledge by exposing alternative epistemologies, ontologies and ethics" (Fransman et al., 2021, p. 328). This will also help reduce attempts to transplant policy recommendations that cannot be meaningfully implemented in the local context (Opalo, 2024). Instead, it opens the way to offering policy recommendations that are locally situated.

A commitment to respect means that partners need to be willing to embrace a degree of uncertainty. They need to actively take into consideration concerns of the communities and individuals who are part of the research so that a) they do not feel marginalised and, b) the proposed activities do not perpetuate existing fears of data extraction. A process that facilitates discussion and creates space for multiple and varied voices to be heard is far more likely to produce a sense of shared ownership instead of a sense of being left out or left behind.

The following specific recommendations can help redress these concerns within the research collaboration:

- **Do the groundwork:** Tap into seed grants to engage with Southern scholars, practitioners and communities to identify concerns/local experiences of global issues prior to seeking to develop a larger funding proposal. This would enable partners to understand each other's strengths and the breadth of knowledge and expertise. It also helps expand the range of prospective collaborators working on the ground who, because of their institutional capacity, may not have been considered as potential partners.
- **Broaden subject knowledge:** Gain access to a wide range of scholarly expertise by tapping into locally/regionally published research by both academic and non-academic authors in the global South. Engage with these and consider how commonly used concepts, theories, policy prescriptions are being challenged/ interpreted in local contexts.
- **Develop collaborative funding proposals:** Highlight the importance of 'local' knowledges and alternative methodologies and/or create space within existing collaborative projects to investigate and include this epistemic knowledge.
- **Flexibility:** Approach the research collaboration with openness and flexibility regarding the methodological approach, the timelines and geographical locations of the study.
- **Embed a reflexive praxis:** Within the collaboration, create an enabling space for open discussions and be prepared to be challenged/ questioned on epistemic positions.
- **Mutual learning:** Build in ample time and opportunities for mutual learning during all phases of the research cycle and ensure that adequate funding is available to facilitate such exchanges. Such mutual learning could also help redress the perception among global North scholars that they lack power/agency to effect change (Llanos et al., 2024).
- **Reciprocity:** Where possible, allocate funds for reciprocal visits to global North institutions and for exchange programmes that enrich mutual understanding across all teams. This includes building in sufficient resources for the costs of visas and adequate time for visa application processes. Consider the inclusion of non-research team members in order to improve communication and understanding of how different institutions operate.
- **Well-being of researchers:** Consider how adequate time, rest and follow-up support are provided for local researchers who assume the bulk of the risks of the fieldwork. For the CfC in particular, adopting an ethics of care in such contexts is critical.
- **Capacity building:** Pool resources from all collaborators to provide training/mutual learning for the research team, rather than adopting a top-down, North-South approach.
- **Meaningful dissemination:** Develop a dissemination plan in collaboration with the partners and allocate adequate funding and timing to ensure mutual learning and sharing.

4.4. ACCOUNTABILITY – TO EACH OTHER, INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES AND STAKEHOLDERS

Accountability must be approached as a shared responsibility (Morton et al., 2022). It must be understood in a broader sense: all partners in a collaborative effort need to hold each other

accountable for the activities they undertake and for the outcomes of their collaboration. It can be practised in multiple ways. In an example cited by Zingerli (2010), research partners took a two-pronged approach, focusing on products (i.e. sharing and publishing findings) and processes (through capacity building activities to improve skills and knowledge).

For global South researchers, being accountable to the communities they work with and to the state and non-state actors who may benefit from research findings may be considered as important as accountability within a research team. All partners therefore need to identify ways to share findings and dissemination strategies that promote discussions and debate. Such processes, while time-consuming, are important to counter accusations of global North researchers 'flying in' and 'flying out' of local communities. Paying attention to how accountability is understood and practised in different contexts by different stakeholders (including communities), will help integrate accountability measures at different phases of a partnership. The following steps are recommended:

- **Define accountability:** At the start, consider how accountability is understood by the different partners. While global North institutions may adopt a more instrumental approach, accountability may be imagined differently by Southern scholars and local communities.
- **Develop accountability measures:** Develop these measures collectively at the start of the collaboration, to ensure the research collaboration responds to the concerns of the different partners. For example, administrative and finance team members must work together to consider how financial accountability measures are undertaken; research teams can develop accountability measures at different levels, including for local communities.
- **Clarify roles and responsibilities:** Ensure that Northern and Southern collaborators have clarity about their roles and responsibilities regarding the research process and the project overall. Breaking down accountability measures will ease burdens on specific individuals.
- **Integrate a feedback loop:** Establish a feedback loop so that issues related to the conduct of the research and its partners can be flagged at all stages of the partnership, including by community members and local stakeholders.
- **Grievance mechanism:** Adapt existing grievance mechanisms in operation amongst the partner organisations to ensure that project-specific issues related to discrimination, fairness, research integrity are flagged and responded to, in a timely and responsive manner.
- **Accountability to other stakeholders:** Consider how local collaborators may be held accountable by their respective national government, local governments and/or other political stakeholders. Consider what measures can be taken to help respond to these demands during and after the research project (e.g. rationale for selection and permission to access communities; access to data and findings; dissemination of findings).
- **Develop a post-data collection plan:** Instead of leaving the 'field' once the data collection is completed, consider meaningful ways of engaging with the communities and stakeholders beyond the fieldwork phase. Developing these ideas at the beginning allows for time and funds to be allocated to meeting these accountability measures. This could include visits to the communities by the research team to share key findings. Clarity on how engagement with collaborators could continue beyond the project cycle (e.g. recommendations, introduction to networks and sharing information about upcoming funding calls) are useful in sustaining relationships informally.

4.5. EMBEDDING TRANSPARENCY IN ALL ASPECTS OF THE PARTNERSHIPS

When partnerships lack space to discuss issues in an open and transparent manner, mistrust grows (Voller et al., 2022b). Even when not intended, such scenarios create an environment where the global South partners feel 'unheard' within the partnership, especially when communication is also limited. Lead partners need to be transparent, especially about the allocation of funding, in order to prevent relations from souring in these ways. While global North partners' reticence/lack of transparency may be driven by worries about a global South institution's capacity to manage funds and comply with stringent regulations, their approach reinforces to global South partners the 'low' status accorded to them within the partnership.

Global South partners may be particularly concerned to ensure there is space to make collective decisions, there is local ownership of the research, and there are accountability mechanisms in place for communities (Mwangi, 2017). Unless these and other concerns are discussed openly, there may be a breakdown in relations. When issues remain unresolved, and power hierarchies are in place, Southern scholars might withdraw from communicating openly, leading to Northern partners misinterpreting such silences as agreement. In other instances, due to power differentials, Southern partners may not communicate openly in order to maintain group harmony or might shy away from expressing ideas

that they feel are not refined enough for the global-North dominated academy (Wöhlert, 2020).

A commitment to transparency, therefore, must be accompanied by "unambiguous, and effective communication" (Larkan et al., 2016, p. 4). To achieve this, some recommend putting in place a code of conduct or initiating a Memorandum of Understanding which clearly details the partners' equal access to information to different aspects of the research partnership. How far such an ambitious aim will be allowed due to funder and institutional regulations is rarely discussed, however, and must be considered within the scope of these partnerships.

A commitment to transparency must also be extended to publications, by making the target audience aware of the research context and the underlying power imbalances that may disproportionately favour global North scholars (Abimbola, 2019). In the highly unequal world of publishing, "authorial reflexivity" statements can be a proactive way of exercising transparency and accountability to readers and to the communities from which data have been generated (Abimbola, 2019). The following recommendations will help ensure transparency:

- **Access to information:** Collaborators must work together to set up a forum where information related to the research collaboration is accessible. Take into account the existing infrastructure in the global South, especially in relation to internet access and software licensing.
- **Communication plan:** At the outset, develop a communication plan that includes regular team meetings, cluster meetings among different sub-groups (e.g. ECRs/PhD cohorts/ field research teams), and in-person meetings in neutral, easily accessible locations for all partners.

The four principles considered and discussed here are broad in scope. They are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive and can be expanded or revised, based on the evolving nature of research partnerships. The intention is for them to remain adaptable so as to be relevant and appropriate to any specific collaboration the CfC develops.

5. CONCLUSION

This Working Paper has sought to highlight some of the key issues that prevent equitable research collaborations from being forged between global South and North scholars and, shaped by these, to develop a set of core values and principles to inform the CfC's approach to future collaborations. In light of these challenges, any constructive collaboration by the CfC with global South researchers must pay attention to the inequities, power imbalances and histories of problematic data extraction that will inevitably influence such engagements. By striving to operate according to the values proposed, and to find meaningful ways to embed the principles in future collaborations, the CfC can create enabling spaces, in which global South researchers can provide substantive input into the Centre's work.

ENDNOTES

[1] The international partnerships include: the Centre for Socio-Economic Research on Ageing, National Institute of Health and Science on Ageing (Italy); Centre of Excellence in Research on Ageing and Care (CoE AgeCare) (Finland); Linnaeus University (Sweden); Swedish Family Care Competence Centre; Lisbon School of Economics and Management (Portugal); Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute; Centre for People Organisation & Work, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (Australia); Social Policy Research Centre, the University of New South Wales (Australia); the Norwegian Centre for Care Research, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (Norway) and the Social Ageing Futures Lab (SAGE), Edith Cowan University, Australia

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Prior to joining the University of Sheffield as a PhD candidate, I worked as a Researcher for six years at the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), a research think-tank in Sri Lanka. During this time, I worked with multilateral donor agencies either directly or as part of research teams within CEPA. These experiences, coupled with my time working in Sri Lanka's international development sector, have shaped my own thinking and approach to 'doing research' in resource-poor settings. The literature surveyed for this Working Paper reflects, and at times confirms, some personal and collective experiences in partnering or engaging with individuals and institutions based in the global North.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Working Paper was commissioned by the Borders and Care research group in the Centre for Care. Majella Kilkey (Centre for Care Co-Investigator) and Jayanthi Lingham (Centre for Care Research Associate) provided valuable input in defining the scope of this paper. I am deeply grateful for their insights and guidance throughout and their patience in reading multiple drafts.

The Working Paper was reviewed by a number of scholars and practitioners outside of the OECD region. They cast light on the challenges they have encountered in research collaborations and provided valuable insights on the systematic concerns underpinning research collaborations. I am grateful for their willingness to engage with us and for their honesty - their insights have added considerable value to the Working Paper. I extend my thanks to:

- Vaqar Ahmed, Oxford Policy Management

- Anushani Alagarajah, Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research, Sri Lanka

- Mitchel Dibogo Odhiambo, Stand As One, Sheffield

- Karin Fernando, Centre for Poverty Analysis, Sri Lanka

- Vagisha Gunasekara, United Nations Development Programme, Sri Lanka

- Lily N. A. Kpobi PhD, Regional Institute for Population Studies, University of Ghana

- Justin Espoir Machongo, Stand As One, Sheffield

- Andrea Ordóñez

ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR CARE AND PUBLICATION DETAILS

The Centre for Care is a collaboration between the universities of Sheffield, Birmingham, Kent and Oxford, the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, the Office for National Statistics, Carers UK, the National Children's Bureau and the Social Care Institute for Excellence. Working with care sector partners and leading international teams, it addresses the urgent need for new, accessible evidence on care. Led by Centre Director Kate Hamblin and Deputy Director Nathan Hughes, its research aims to make a positive difference in how care is experienced and provided in the UK and internationally.

This working paper was written by Chandima Arambepola as part of the Centre's work on Borders and Care. The paper was designed and typeset by Dan Williamson.

To cite: Arambepola, C. (2025). Developing Equitable International Research Partnerships: Principles and Values to guide the Centre for Care. Centre for Care Working Paper 6, CIRCLE, Sheffield: University of Sheffield

ISBN 978-1-8382688-6-2

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