

Beyond the partnership debate: localizing knowledge production in refugee and forced migration studies

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There is a growing recognition in refugee and forced migration studies that research partnerships, especially those that cross geographies of the global North and global South, are both a blessing and a potential curse. They are a blessing as they encourage new approaches to the co-creation of knowledge, build solidarity networks, and leverage support for scholars based in the global South. But they can also be a curse as they typically function within and can inadvertently reproduce deeply embedded structures of inequality. Drawing on the results of a review of forced displacement research centres based in the global South and interviews with the directors of these centres, this article encourages a shift from focusing on research partnerships to an approach that supports the localization of knowledge production in refugee and forced migration studies. This approach seeks to change the structures of knowledge production, including direct funding to researchers and research centres based in the global South, an emphasis on the transfer of power to researchers in the South, a recognition of the diverse forms and sources of knowledge produced within the field, and an appreciation for the diverse understandings of success and impact across contexts.

Keywords: power, research partnerships, knowledge production, inequality, localization

Introduction

There is a growing recognition in the field of refugee and forced migration studies that research partnerships, especially those that cross geographies of the global North and global South, are both a blessing and a potential curse (Landau 2019a; McGrath and Young 2019). They are a blessing as they provide vibrant

opportunities for new approaches to the co-creation of knowledge, building solidarity networks to encourage more inclusive approaches to research and knowledge mobilization, and leveraging support for scholars that do not otherwise benefit from the same privileged access to resources as many researchers based in the global North. Done well, such partnerships can work to ‘establish fair and equitable partnerships that promote engaged and participatory knowledge generation in a context rife with unequal capacities and inequitable access to resources’ (McGrath and Young 2019: 7).

But they can also be a curse as they typically function within deeply embedded structures of inequality. As Landau (2019a: 25) notes, ‘power imbalances are intrinsic to every social relation’, including research partnerships. Despite the best intentions of those involved in the design and conduct of research partnerships, these asymmetries of power condition research partnerships in conscious and unconscious ways, with the danger that partnerships can reproduce the very unequal power relations they seek to reverse (Landau 2019a: 25). While it is important to highlight how research partnerships can create new opportunities for collaborative research, especially involving perspectives from different geographic contexts and disciplinary traditions, they ‘are not a universal remedy for structural inequalities and epistemological hegemonies’ (Zingerli 2010: 217).

These structural inequalities and epistemological hegemonies pose pressing challenges for the discipline. It is increasingly recognized that the field of refugee and forced migration studies faces a collective challenge of ensuring that ‘the literature’ includes the diversity of perspectives and approaches that reflects the diversity and spaciality of contemporary forced displacement. As noted by Landau (2019a: 29), ‘even if the majority of the world’s refugees and migrants and the bulk of humanitarian interventions are located in the south, southern-based scholars are hard to find in the leading (i.e. most broadly cited) scholarly journals on the topic’. In fact, a recent analysis of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* found that 92 per cent of the 167 articles published between 2015 and 2019 were from authors based at institutions in the global North, despite the fact that 85 per cent of the world’s refugees were in the global South (McNally and Rahim 2020). This reflects a similar analysis conducted by the editor of *Migration Studies*, which concluded that ‘the vast majority of migration research seems to be originating in high-income countries’ (Vargas-Silva 2019).

Does this matter? If so, what can be done about it? This article seeks to contribute to the growing literature on the political economy of knowledge production in refugee and forced migration studies by considering an alternative to the partnership model: the localization of knowledge production. Drawing from debates on the localization of humanitarian action (Erdilmen and Sosthenes 2020), localization is generally understood to be the process of transferring power from transnational actors, including international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and agencies of the United Nations (UN), to local actors. In an effort to reverse the long tradition of humanitarian responses being guided by the interests and priorities of external actors, localization seeks to promote local ownership by transferring decision-making to national actors. While recognizing the

many issues raised by localization, as discussed below, could the localization of refugee research help address the structures of inequality that have been observed in the field of refugee and forced migration studies?

We argue that the localization of knowledge production in refugee and forced migration studies is both possible and desirable. By moving away from an exclusive focus on North–South research partnerships and encouraging the provision of direct funding to research centres in the global South, we argue that the localization of research could help bring greater diversity of perspectives into the field while addressing prevailing inequalities. To support this argument, we draw on the results of a collaboration between the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) and the [International Development Research Centre \(IDRC\) \(2021\)](#),¹ which included a mapping of research centres based in various regions in the global South and engaged with issues of forced displacement, in addition to 22 in-depth qualitative interviews with directors or former directors of these research centres. Interviews focused on how respondents engaged with issues of success, impact and sustainability, and illustrated the long-standing and recurring nature of the challenges faced by research centres in the global South. The results of these interviews confirm significant themes in the literature on the political economy of knowledge production, namely in relation to agenda setting, resources, equality, equity, representation, and inclusion, while suggesting new approaches to conceptualizing success, the meaning of impact, and pathways to sustainability.

Based on these results, this article encourages deeper reflection on the opportunities that may be pursued to support the localization of knowledge production in refugee and forced migration studies, mindful of the many cautions to be raised in relation to the notion of localization and the delineation of the ‘local’ (Roepstorff 2020; see also: [Atputharajah and Wanga 2020](#); [Erdilmen and Sosthenes 2020](#)). This approach seeks to leverage commitments to the localization of humanitarian programming to ask similar questions of the localization of research on refugees and forced displacement. This involves changes to the structures of knowledge production, including direct funding to researchers and research centres based in the global South, an emphasis on the transfer of power to researchers in the South, a recognition of the diverse forms of knowledge and means of co-producing knowledge practice in diverse contexts, and an appreciation for the diverse understandings of success and impact across contexts. The article concludes with an emphasis on the need to support a more holistic approach such as the creation of localized ‘knowledge ecosystems’ on forced displacement that includes researchers, civil society organizations, and refugee-led initiatives.

This article builds from Bradley’s caution (2008: 674) that while ‘North-South partnerships can augment individual and institutional resources and skills, they are not a panacea for all the challenges associated with capacity building and the creation of knowledge’ that reflects the agendas and perspectives of researchers based in the global South. She argues (2008: 674) that ‘given the difficulties confronting collaborative agenda-setting processes, donors and researchers alike are

well advised to recognise the limitations of this approach and use it prudently, as North-South partnerships are not necessarily the best way to advance research rooted in Southern priorities'. To this end, this article argues for the potential value of moving beyond debates on the ability to create equitable North-South research partnerships by also considering if, where and how the localization of refugee research can and should be pursued. Based on a review of the literature on the political economy of knowledge production, an analysis of interviews with directors of research centres based in the global South, and a reflection on the literature on localization, this article argues that such an approach can usefully contribute to a more inclusive and participatory global research community, thus helping to ensure that when researchers from the global South enter into transnational research partnerships, they are able to do so from a position of greater equality. Moreover, the localization of refugee research can help ensure that the literature on refugee and forced migration studies is ultimately more fully representative of the phenomenon itself and the diverse conditions in which it is experienced.

Critical reflections on North-South research partnerships

The challenges and opportunities associated with research partnerships have been an increasing focus in the field of refugee and forced migration studies for more than a decade (Landau 2012, 2019a; McGrath and Young 2019). While these partnerships can take many forms (Bradley 2007: 13), there has been a particular emphasis on partnerships between researchers in the global North and those in the global South. In these contexts, researchers in the global North often have the ability to access resources from relatively well-funded researcher councils, while researchers in the global South bring deep knowledge of the contexts in which the vast majority of the world's refugees seek refuge, often coupled with sustained and trust-based relationships with refugee communities and their allies.

Such partnerships bring considerable benefits, especially critical opportunities to co-create new approaches to research. Following the trend from development studies in the 1980s and 1990s (Bradley 2008), such partnership approaches became a priority for research funders in Europe and North America. As noted by Landau (2012: 555), such partnerships increasingly became 'prerequisites for much forced migration research funding'. While noting the many potential benefits of North-South research partnerships, Landau (2012: 556) highlights that they 'often fall short of their promise'. Given the challenges that can arise from the asymmetries of power between partners in the global North and those in the global South, Landau (2012) famously raised the alarm that such approaches, however, well-intentioned, may ultimately manifest the 'tyrannies of partnership'.

The increased practice of North-South partnerships, coupled with the reflections from within refugee studies and the lessons from other fields, including development studies and migration studies, has given rise to a literature that critically engages with the meaning and manifestations of North-South research partnerships. While recognizing the problematic categorizations of 'global North'

and ‘global South’ and the diversity of experiences and realities across these categories, the characterization of North–South is typically intended to mark the differentiation in power between the ‘richer countries’ of the global North and the ‘poorer majority of countries’ in the global South (Binka 2005: 207). Given the historical inequalities between these regions, the global North is often constructed in the role of donor while the global South is presented as the beneficiary (Binka 2005: 207). The significance of this dichotomy is further amplified in the context of forced displacement as 85 per cent of the world’s refugees are currently located in the global South while more than 80 per cent of funding for refugee responses originates from donor countries located in the global North (Loescher 2021).

Just as disparities between the interests of donor states in the global North and hosting states in the global South produce tensions within the global refugee regime (Loescher 2021), differentiations between the global North and global South can produce tensions and inequalities in formal research partnerships. While research partners from diverse contexts may agree to enter into a collaborative process to conduct research and produce knowledge, asymmetries of power between the global North and South can condition research partnerships in conscious and unconscious ways. As noted by El Refaei (2020: 7), ‘this automatically instigates a tension where particular roles and expectations are ascribed to the North and the South, which underlies and informs how their “partnership” proceeds’. A review of the literature highlights how these tensions manifest themselves in the context of roles within the research partnership, setting the research agenda, and the production of certain forms of knowledge.

Roles within the research partnership

Given the diversity of the ‘everyday politics’ in which refugees live and responses are pursued (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017), from the humanitarian spaces of refugee camps (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010; Hyndman 2000) to urban spaces (Landau and Amit 2014), researchers based in the global South are seen as invaluable partners with the capacity to navigate such diverse contested spaces and help secure the many forms of ‘access’ to conduct research. In fact, Landau (2019a: 39) notes that Southern scholars ‘often underestimate their importance to Northern researchers’ legitimacy, research funding, and ability to do research’.

Overlaid with this value, however, is the asymmetry of power between partners, where researchers from the global North bring access to resources, while the value of researchers from the global South is frequently seen, problematically, as primarily bringing access to the communities and contexts to be researched. This leads too frequently to situations where researchers in the global South are viewed as ‘fixers’ and ‘intermediaries’, responsible for facilitating the work of researchers from the global North without being full participants in the design, conduct, and production of knowledge. This led Shuayb (2018) to describe her experience from the perspective of the director of a research centre in Lebanon as being the victim of ‘hit and run research’.

This produces critical issues of trust within North–South research partnerships. El Refaei (2020: 13) draws from the work of Haggerty (2004) and Halse and Honey (2005) to note that ‘when research partners from the global South internalize the feeling that they are not an equal partner but rather an add-on, they may only share information/findings that they know the Northern partner wants to hear to maximize their gains from the partnership, because they know it is not an equal partnership and that it will not bring about their vision of desired change’. More generally, however, the asymmetry of power produces an asymmetry of roles. Despite the granular understanding of context brought by researchers working in and from the global South, their roles within partnerships are too frequently, but not always, reduced to one of service provider to Northern researchers within the partnership. The extent to which these roles are problematic was noted by Appadurai (2000: 4–5) some 20 years ago: ‘one does not have to be a postmodernist, relativist, or deconstructionist... to admit that... the more marginal regions of the world are not simply producers of data for the theory mills of the North’.

Setting the research agenda

These issues of trust and roles can subsequently condition all facets of the research process, beginning with the setting of the research agenda. While some partnerships have tried to address these issues through inclusive governance structures, power typically continues to reside with researchers positioned within the global North. This may even extend to partners from the global South being included only once the proposal has been submitted and the funding secured. This creates structures within which the partnership is conditioned to privilege the priorities, interests, assumptions, and agendas of global North researchers, thus inserting ‘partners’ from the global South in a position of perpetual inequality. This agenda-setting power is typically problematic both for the principles of partnership and for the research the partnership seeks to produce.

More than two decades ago, Chimni (1998: 369) argued that researcher in the global North had been complicit in the production of the ‘myth of difference’: that refugees in the global South represented a phenomenon sufficiently distinct from the Cold War archetype upon which the global refugee regime was premised as to justify a new approach framed around ‘exclusionary policies’. In response, Chimni called for a ‘new new approach’ that would ‘deconstruct and debunk the myth of difference, and will take cognizance of the history of imperialism, in particular the role this has played over the centuries in the forced displacement of people’. Chimni (1998: 369) calls for the ‘new new approach’ to:

Favour genuine dialogue to arrive at a consensus on the changes to be introduced in the post-war regime. It will be especially sensitive to the currently distorted international division of intellectual labour. Thus, it will not view the Third World as an empty space in the field of knowledge to be filled by Western thinking and concepts. In other words, the ‘new new approach’ will embrace a conception of legal

scholarship which has the potential of articulating a comprehensive and humane response to the contemporary refugee problem through dialogue.

Chimni's call has been answered by many researchers based in the global North who have established long-standing, trust-based, and equitable research relationships in the contexts of the global South in which they work. Landau (2012, 2019a) cautions, however, that this call has not been universally answered. In fact, the growth of refugee and forced migration studies as a field, especially since 2015, coupled with the increased interest of donors in supporting research on refugee issues in the global South, may inadvertently reinforce and legitimize the restrictive policy priorities of states in the global North, which seek to contain refugees within the global South. Critically, Landau notes (2019a: 27) how:

In an era where Europe – in particular – is funding substantial research projects across Africa with the goal of preventing migrants and refugees from ‘escaping’ the continent, the risks go beyond entrenching academic inequalities. By responding to Europe’s obsession with containment, cross-continental partnerships risk not only distorting local research agendas but doing so in ways that may ultimately work against the populations we study.

The risk remains that even in partnerships that are acutely aware of the functioning of such deep asymmetries of power, ‘the underlying dynamics of these partnerships subliminally silence research in the global South that is not relevant for policy in the global North’ (El Refaei 2020: 11).

Producing knowledge

These inequalities between research partners and asymmetries of power in defining the research agenda can further condition the kind of knowledge that is ultimately produced. More fundamentally, it can even privilege Northern understandings of what constitutes legitimate knowledge. This ultimately plays a critical role in conditioning what knowledge is present in the most cited literature in the field of refugee and forced migration studies. (Landau 2019a)

In the field of migration studies, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020: 2) recently noted that ‘it has become increasingly mainstream to acknowledge that academic and policy studies of and responses to migration have been dominated by scholarship produced in the Northern Hemisphere’. This has conditioned the geographic focus of migration, with a disproportionate emphasis on South–North migration over the much more prevalent South–South migration. More significantly, she highlights how the Eurocentric bias extends to the frames and concepts through which migration is researched and conceptualized, thus conditioning the knowledge that is produced. Drawing from the reflections of Carella and Quijano, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020: 4) highlights the need to recognize and appreciate the many approaches to the study of migration, including that there are ‘multiple ways of knowing, including epistemological perspectives and methodological approaches that have been marginalized through the coloniality of knowledge’. This was

further reinforced by the report of the [Migration Leadership Team \(2020\)](#) to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), which called, *inter alia*, for a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes ‘knowledge’ and, as highlighted by [Standing and Taylor \(2007\)](#), whose knowledge ‘counts’.

Likewise, [Taha \(2019: 8\)](#) points to the ‘growing body of literature that recognizes the ways that Eurocentrism and the colonial legacy dictate knowledge production and North-South collaboration’ within and beyond refugee and forced migration studies. This echoes the concern of [Schmidt and Neuburger \(2017: 67\)](#) that ‘North-South partnerships and participation... [can] become a label of a rhetorical modernization and legitimization of action, while a prevailing postcolonial, hierarchical, academic knowledge order is preserved’. So long as this order is reinforced through the structuring of partnerships, it is likely that the bias in the literature will prevail and the diversity of perspectives will be limited. As noted by [Landau \(2019a: 32\)](#), the voices that tend to be present in the literature and public discourse are those that are ‘able to offer shiny, cleverly packaged solutions’ that speak to the frames and concepts familiar to the global North and more ‘global’ audiences. In contrast, [Landau \(2019a: 32\)](#) observes that ‘African scholars are rarely able to package their work in these ways—nor should they and their recommendations and critiques often get overshadowed by global perspectives that may have little local relevance’. This reinforces what [Fiddian-Qasmiyeh \(2020: 10\)](#) characterizes as the ‘long history of implicitly and explicitly dismissing the intellectual and conceptual work of people positioned outside the Northern academy’.

This brief review of the literature on North–South research partnerships illustrates just some of the critical issues embedded in such endeavours, and the structures that condition partnerships notwithstanding the intensions of its members. This does not, however, mean that partnerships are not to be valued or pursued. On the contrary, [McGrath and Young \(2019\)](#) clearly highlight how a reflective approach to partnerships from the outset and throughout can address many of the challenges highlighted by the literature. Likewise, [Landau \(2019a: 36\)](#) details the many tangible steps that can be taken to confront ‘the political economy of knowledge production’, based on a careful consideration of ‘the nature of interaction and the intended and unintentional outcomes of our North-South partnerships’.

This is not to argue that North–South partnerships should never be pursued. Instead, it is to argue that they pose particular challenges and should be pursued in a way that is explicitly responsive to the many challenges they raise. North–South research partnerships can be exceptionally vibrant contexts within which equal partners can challenge the very structures of inequality. This opportunity needs to be put in contrast with [Bradley’s \(2008: 674\)](#) caution that partnerships are not a panacea for overcoming the barriers faced by ‘research rooted in Southern priorities’. To this end, this article argues that while research partnerships may be useful and appropriate for particular forms of research, they do not represent the sole means of advancing the priorities of researchers based in the global South.

Methodology

If not necessarily partnerships, then what? This question has been the focus of an on-going collaboration between LERRN and IDRC since September 2018. The collaboration was initiated in response to a growing recognition of the challenges identified in the literature review, as outlined above, and the experience of IDRC in promoting the leadership of national research actors in the global South in other fields. In response, LERRN and IDRC initiated a 12-month project to develop a more systematic understanding of the diversity of research centres across the global South engaged with issues of refugees and forced displacement, to survey the leadership of these centres to critically interrogate how issues of success, impact and sustainability affected the work of these centres and their ability to navigate the political economy of research partnerships, and to consider the extent to which these understandings reflected the themes present in the literature on North–South research partnerships. The purpose of this section is to outline our research methodology before presenting our findings in the following section.

This research began by drawing on UNHCR data on forcibly displaced persons, notwithstanding its limitations (Crisp 1999), to grasp the scale and variance between different regions of the global South, which has hosted between 80 and 85 per cent of the world's displaced persons in any given year over the decade 2008–18. We then drew on publicly available data, to reflect visibility and access, to map the existing research centres working on migration and forced displacement that are located in the global South. The mapping established that while there are more than 100 centres in the global South working on *migration* issues, only 27 research centres or networks had a sustained research agenda relating to *forced migration* issues that extended over two years or more. The distribution of research centres and networks by region varied, with seven centres in South America; four in East Africa; four in South Asia; three in Oceania; three in West Asia; two in Southeast Asia; two in Southern Africa; one in West Africa; and one in Northern Africa. None were identified in Central Asia or in Central America.

Given this geographic distribution, the initiative established an advisory committee to help guide the research. The committee included 12 research experts from different regions. Members agreed to offer their networks and knowledge, including in specific regions of the global South, to identify gaps in the mapping exercise, details of other centres, background on the individual centres, and for contacts and introductions with those responsible for the leadership and management of these centres. They also provided input on the project methodology and interview questions and helped identify key informants from each sub-region to be included in the study.

Based on the mapping exercise and suggestions from the advisory committee, a list of directors of research centres from different regions of the global South was identified to request for interviews. The risk related to participating in this research was minimal for the researchers as they are active in global refugee research networks and have all spoken publicly on the issues of focus for this research.²

Researchers from the list were then contacted with information regarding the project and its intent before asking them for an interview via Skype or phone. Between October 2019 and January 2020, 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted with researchers from Asia, South America, Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and North America, 20 of whom were based in the global South. We interviewed research heads from either centres or networks so we could get a longer-term institutional perspective on the challenges they face such as issues related to setting long-term research agendas, funding, human resource, and research partnerships.

Interviews began by providing more information on the nature of the project and its aim. Interviewees then determined their level of anonymity before the interview started. The interview questions opened with some background on their centre's research agendas, sources of funding, and the main challenges they face. Another set of questions explored their experiences with different kinds of partnerships, especially with institutes based in the North. They were then asked how they define success and impact of work related to forced displacement and what could be done better to ensure the sustainability of research centres in the global South. Responses were analysed to identify prominent themes, including—but not exclusively—those that were shared across regions and that spoke to the themes of the literature, as outlined above.

The positionality of the researchers conducting this study was a significant consideration given the focus of the research on the often tense and imbalanced nature of North–South research dynamics. As both researchers involved in this study are based in the global North, it was important to invest time at the outset of the interview to establish a rapport and gain some trust from the interviewee. As the researcher conducting the interviews is herself originally from the global South, this rapport was sometimes more easily developed, even though remote interviewing. We were mindful of the possibility of a courtesy bias where interviewees could give answers that they think researchers want to hear, rather than what they really feel. During one phone interview, for example, the level of frankness changed after the respondent realised the interviewer is also from the global South and could thus likely relate to the challenges faced.

Findings: what determines success and impact in and from the global south?

Despite the considerable diversity of experiences and conditions across the many regions of the global South, shared themes emerged from the interviews. These themes related directly to those identified in the literature relating to roles, agenda setting, and knowledge production, while also identifying where, when, and how researchers in the global South identified examples of success, impact, and sustainability.

The main challenge identified by respondents was the challenge of securing sustained funding, especially multi-year core funding. Most of the current funding received by centres is reactive after problems emerge rather than being proactive and anticipating problems and issues in advance. Respondents noted that

universities in the global South usually have very little funding for research and governments do not want to fund the topic as displacement is seen as a temporary issue. As a result, researchers have to rely on outside funding which is fraught with problems of competition, access and structural issues. Related to this is the fact that university or research salaries are usually so low that researchers need to work other jobs to support themselves, such as teaching at several colleges or undertaking consulting for international agencies. Respondents stressed that this does not support a vibrant, local research community.

These challenges of salary contribute to the challenge of recruiting and retaining skilled researchers as individuals with those skills do not feel they can pursue a career in the field but are instead drawn to consulting or working with international organizations in an effort to secure a reliable and sufficient income. These challenges are further magnified by hiring freezes by many universities in the global South, and an under-emphasis on forced displacement research. Positions in this field often come with significant teaching loads that further preclude the ability to undertake substantial research.

Roles in research partnerships

Many respondents reported a mix of both good and bad relations with their partners, usually in the global North. Several researchers stated that they have a clear understanding of the expectations of new research partnerships, and that they are able to navigate these expectations. They note that they have a bigger stake on the research agenda if they are a part of the project from the beginning. But if they are contacted only at the end of the design process, especially if the inclusion of global South partners was a requirement of the funder, then power relations are different. They might end up collecting data then exporting the data for the partners in the global North to analyse and write.

Others shared the sense of being exploited and stated that North–South academic imperialism is real. There are examples of people outside the region coming in, using local contacts, getting the data and publishing but missing the local perspective. They are then seen as the expert of the region. Other negative experiences related to the management of partnerships. For example, one group did not pay a substantial sum owed to the partner working locally. Another one came with an agenda and wanted the Southern research centre to almost doctor the evidence to support their needs. When researchers have pushed back, they have sometimes lost funding.

Still others have had more equal relations, but all noted that the funding structures require Northern partners to be leading the projects and money is channelled through them even when actors in the South are doing most of the work in the implementation of the project. Dr Kandilige from the Centre for Migration Studies at the University of Ghana, for example, noted that ‘the relationship between researchers from the North and South is often seen as one of Supervisor and Supervisee, even though many of us were educated at the same universities in the North from which the Northern partners graduated’

(Kandilige 2019). Despite these issues, researchers state that they decide to work with partners, sometimes even though it is exclusionary, as it is a rare opportunity for funding, training, building capacity and a possibility for improved relations for future projects.

Setting the research agenda

For research centres, setting the research agenda depends on several issues including the people involved, their skills and interests, their resources, and available projects. Sometimes calls for proposals or project partnerships come with their own agendas so centres may align their priorities to enable them to compete for opportunities. Many respondents, however, stated that they are unable to set their research agenda, especially for the long term, as they are dependent on funding from actors in the global North, who often bring their own agenda and interests to the research. Since the need for funding is so acute, it is a challenge to nurture and create an autonomous research space that can be critical and scholarly instead of becoming a consulting arm. Also, as a consequence, there is often a mismatch between the research that is produced and the research that is needed in local contexts. Many informants noted that there is a current emphasis on funding for research that answers European questions, not local questions. This point was emphasized by Dr Ahmet İcduygu from MiReKoc, Turkey, who shared that ‘there are wide divisions as the global North wants to dominate the field and research questions to develop theory. We do not want to only be data collectors for them but also want to contribute to the wider field’ (İcduygu 2019).

Success, impact, sustainability

Respondents all noted how their intimate knowledge of local contexts and the ability to leverage strong local networks as critical elements of their ability to succeed. In fact, this knowledge and these networks are precisely what is sought-out by Northern partners to advance and legitimize their own research. Most respondents noted that there are very few research centres in the global South working on forced displacement issues, let alone any seen as successful, that sustaining any form of research centre is in itself a success. In fact, the record on research centres has generally been one of failure or weakness. Many noted the role of strong and well-connected individual leaders as being critical to the success of individual centres.

For institutional sustainability, some stated that there is a need to build out the base with diversification of funding, research, and personnel so the centre is not dominated by one person. Otherwise, they can then end up becoming individual consultants at the cost of the institute. Others also shared the difficulty in finding a suitable successor when founding directors seek to retire, as more junior colleagues may not be well-known internationally, well networked at the home country and region, and less able to speak the language of the donors.

On the issue of impact, respondents stated that impact is usually seen beyond monitoring schemes as it is usually longer-term. Impact can be seen when the

government listens to your work and findings, if there are tangible results on the ground and if people are talking about the issues related to refugees. In this sense, respondents noted how research that was co-created with local community partners can sometimes be seen as more legitimate in the eyes of national and local governments, while research co-produced with external partners can be seen to have been influenced by outside interests and agendas.

Successful centres have also been able to draw on a breadth of expertise to respond to diverse topics, changing realities, engage diverse audience and navigate complex networks, both national and global, especially to access necessary funding. According to Landau, for example, this diversification has been essential for the success of the African Center for Migration & Society in South Africa. He states that even though individual projects can have life cycles, diversification ensures that the overall work of the institute is sustained (Landau 2019b). International connections and access to funds also play a role in the success of a research centre. According to İcduygu, MiReKoc is well connected to many European institutes and the European Union has become their main source of funding over the last 15 years (İcduygu 2019). Likewise, Dr. Sriprapha Petcharamesree from Mahidol University in Thailand agrees that a good reputation is needed to find international funding, which has to be followed by the research capability to gain credibility (Petcharamesree 2019).

University-related vs. independent centres

Another theme to emerge from the interviews was the distinction between research centres housed within universities and independent research centres. Several research centres identified in this study were linked to universities, which usually only provided small funds to them but are still helpful to run the centre when there is no other funding. Some universities also provide research grants that are competitive for the faculty. Several respondents noted that they need to diversify their sources of income with additional short-term trainings to generate income and continually apply for call for proposals. They stated that even when they do receive grants for projects, the university usually does not reduce their teaching burden, which results in them having more work. For centres that are not linked with universities, they do not have access to the limited but reliable support that universities provide. As such, they have stated that they have to spend all their time looking for funding sources and projects to ensure access to even the minimal essential resources needed to ensure their survival.

Networks

Finally, several respondents noted the potential for networks to enhance the capacity and impact of researchers in the global South. In fact, there have been several attempts to create regional networks for forced migration research in Latin America, South East Asia, Australia-Asia, and Africa. These networks, however, proved to be unsustainable in the absence of either secure, multi-year funding or a

centre that was able to assume the role of sustaining the network. Respondents noted that maintaining network activities was difficult without dedicated resources and personnel. In the African context, several centres combined to secure funding for a continental network but decided to abandon the initiative as the interests of centres did not align, their interests were too diverse, and there was a lack of a sense of unifying purpose. In contrast, there were more successful efforts in Latin America and Asia, where greater collaboration exists between researchers and civil society organizations and where the distinction between research and activism was not as stark as elsewhere.

As several networks have failed over time, some respondents stated that a learning from the failure was that there is a need of a dedicated personnel or office to support the functioning of the network. Individual research centres and researchers are busy with their own work and their need to find funds and cannot offer additional time and effort for a network unless someone else is doing the coordinating. A successful ecosystem could be one that supports such a secretariat that does the coordination work for its members. An example could be the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APPRN) secretariat, whose role is coordinating its 400 members through the region, constantly sharing information via email and hosting events for advocacy. Even though the majority of members only meet once every two years, the secretariat is very active in disseminating information and is well networked and has the attention of Geneva, media, and governments, which amplifies the work of its member organizations.

Many respondents pointed to the benefits of inventing in research centres that were equipped to support networked and partnered approaches to research. While there was support for the development of a network of research centres focused on connecting and supporting members, there was no single vision of what such a network would involve. One suggestion was to support summer schools on forced migration research in regions of the global South as a mechanism to build capacity and foster connections, both within and between regions. Another suggestion was to support South–South network connections between the sub-regions without having to go through a Northern partner or network. For example, Colombia and Sri Lanka may have much to discuss and learn from each other on the issue of internal displacement.

Direct funding

A key message from respondents was that it is imperative to develop funding channels that could support researchers in the global South without them relying on partnerships with researchers in the global North. The existing structure has been criticized for its colonial approach that propagates exclusionary practices and unequal power relations. For Southern researchers, there is a sense of being exploited as they are seen as research assistants rather than real partners. Respondents stressed the importance of researchers in the South being able to define independent research agendas that respond to local priorities and realities, independent from the priorities of funders in the global North. Related to this was

the importance of investing in a future generation of forced migration scholars in the global South, through investments in salaries and through the support of early career researchers and for students from the global South to pursue PhD studies in leading centres globally.

Localized knowledge production?

The results from our interviews clearly illustrate the range of challenges that need to be addressed to overcome inequalities and promoting greater inclusion of Southern perspectives in the field. Central to this process are questions of autonomy, authority, and access to resources. This finding echoes the powerful conclusion of the Migration Leadership Team's (2020: 49) report to UKRI: that research councils should provide an 'allocation of resources to build institutional capacities in ODA countries [ie the global South] to enable research leadership from the global South' in addition to providing 'technical advice to support applications from researchers in ODA countries (such as how best to meet due diligence requirements etc)'. The logic follows that if researchers in the global South have direct access to the potential of funding from research councils in the global North, they would be less dependent on researchers in the global North to be essential intermediaries to ensure access to these resources. Despite the fact that this would not address concerns about the perspectives and policy priorities of donors in the global North, this could result in an important step towards the autonomy of researchers in the global South who would then potentially be able to enter into research partnership on somewhat more equal terms.

Such a turn towards shifting power, decision-making, and resources directly to actors closest to the phenomenon in question reflects discussions on 'localization' in humanitarian policy and practice. Through the 1990s, there was a recognition that large humanitarian operations, including those in response to forced displacement, brought substantial engagement from international agencies and NGOs. Given the political economy of humanitarian action and the growth of the 'humanitarian business' (Weiss 2013), these large, externally driven responses dominated the humanitarian marketplace, concentrating funding towards external actors and subsequently drawing local capacity, especially human capital, from long-established local organizations. In the context of East Africa, for example, this process led to the 'eroding of local capacity' (Juma and Suhrke 2002).

While there has been some reflection on this trend over the past 20 years, the discussion has accelerated since 2015, due largely to the manifest inadequacies of the existing model. Central to these discussions has been an emphasis on 'localization': broadly defined efforts to return power, funding and decision-making to local actors. Commitments to localization are prominent in the 2015 Charter for Change, the 2016 Grand Bargain, the 2016 New York Declaration, and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. While there is 'not yet a globally accepted definition of localization', it can be understood as a process that commits to: providing increased direct funding to national and local actors, instead of all funding being directed through international actors; transferring power and decision-making to

local actors; promoting the local ‘ownership’ of the policy process; and, investing in local actors’ networks and capacities (Erdilmen and Sosthenes 2020: 7). To realize these goals, Erdilmen and Sosthenes (2020: 7) note that ‘localization requires a considerable power shift in how the humanitarian field operates’.

Localization has increasingly been seen as both an important principle but also effective practice (Atputharajah and Wanga 2020: 6). Local leadership in humanitarian responses is increasingly recognized as enhancing the impact of humanitarian action due to deeper relations with communities (Al-Abdeh and Patel 2019), improved access (Geoffrey and Grunewald 2017), and deeper relationships of trust based on the knowledge that local actors remain in the context long-after the emergency has passed and international spotlights faded (Green 2018).

There is also a recognition that local humanitarian responses and programming is more ‘cost effective’ than international responses, largely the result of lower wages and institutional overheads (Roepstorff 2020). This begins to raise some of the many concerns relating to localization, namely that it has found favour on the global policy agenda due to its alignment with a neo-liberal agenda of efficiency as it is seen as an opportunity by Western governments to increase ‘value for money’ and, ultimately, reduce aid expenditures (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Fiori 2020). In other words, it could be argued that the localization debate is driven by economic interests to close the gap between the growing costs of humanitarian action and the declining funds being committed by donor states, often without due concern for the implications for humanitarian actors to deliver on their core protection mandates (Kaga and Nakache 2019).

Discussions of localization also raise deeper questions around our ability to conceptualize ‘the local’. Roepstorff (2020: 284) notes how ‘the current discourse is dominated by a problematic conceptualization of the local in binary opposition to the international, leading to blind spots in the analysis of exclusionary practices of the humanitarian sector’. In contrast, there exists a multiplicity of diverse manifestations of the ‘local’, each presenting different constellations of actors and interests. Effacing this diversity ‘risks perpetuating the very issues it wants to redress’ (Roepstorff 2020: 284), namely concerns relating to power asymmetries and the imposition of external agendas and frameworks on diverse and nuanced local contexts.

These cautions and critiques apply in equal measure to a consideration of the localization of refugee research. While discussions on the localization of research must be mindful of the dangers of reifying or homogenizing the ‘local’ and employing localization as a shorthand for outsourcing labour without transferring power, can the current emphasis on localizing practice be leveraged to advance efforts to transfer resources, decision-making and power to local research actors who work in and from the wide diversity of contexts across the global South in which the vast majority of the world’s refugees are to be found? And can this approach accommodate the specificities of the meaning of knowledge and means by which it is co-produced in diverse contexts?

A key finding of our research is that many research communities perceived to be 'successful' and having 'impact' involved a wider range of contributors to the research process than academic researchers. Instead, respondents noted how research with the greatest impact was the result of long-standing local collaborations between academics, national NGOs, other civil society organizations, and refugee-led initiatives. Together, this combination of actors formed 'localized knowledge ecosystems', which, in the context of forced displacement, bring together actors with lived experience, research actors, and practitioners who produce and use knowledge to collaborate in the production and advancement of new knowledge and the translation and mobilization of this knowledge to influence policy, practice, action and public discourse to improve the well-being of the forcibly displaced. These localized knowledge ecosystems are capable of identifying research needs and opportunities, co-producing diverse forms of knowledge, and mobilizing that knowledge in ways that contributed to change. Developing a better understanding of these ecosystems and their potential for impact provides a strong basis upon which the potential for the localization of research can be considered and the case for direct support to global South researchers from global North funders could be made.

Supporting localized research can best capture the heterogeneous 'local' in different parts of the world and funding localized research can change the current discourse by providing bottom-up evidence from different regions. Southern researchers have shared that they want more collaboration between researchers in other parts of the global South as their similar local contexts can support mutual learning. The current funding and institutional support structures promote partnerships between Northern institutes and their choice of Southern institutes. If researchers in the global South have direct access to funding from research councils in the global North and are able to set their own research agendas, we would see more horizontal research partnerships between South–South institutes, moving away from the hegemony of Northern and Eurocentric forced migration studies.

There are sources of both optimism and pessimism for the prospects of such a shift on the part of funding agencies in the global North. A source of optimism is found in the 2021 announcement by IDRC of funding for research chairs on forced displacement in the Middle East and East Africa (IDRC 2021). This initiative will provide four years of direct support to up to four universities (two in the Middle East and two in East Africa) to establish research chairs that will design independent research agendas on issues relating to dynamics of forced migration in their region. Funding will also support the training of emerging scholars, relationships with community partners, the mobilization of knowledge in national and global contexts, and networking between research chairs in other regions. The results of this initiative should be carefully and critically monitored over the coming years as it may provide an example of what other funders can be encouraged to replicate.

Of greater concern, however, are the signs of retreat from investing in research capacity in the global South by funding agencies in the global North, especially in

the context of the economic constraints resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Arguably one of the greatest sources of optimism on this issue prior to the pandemic was the example of UKRI. In recent years, UKRI made significant investments in research capacity in the global South through the Global Challenges Research Fund and supported the pioneering recommendations of the [Migration Leadership Team \(2020\)](#). This commitment changed abruptly in March 2021 when UKRI announced that, due to the reduction of the UK government's Official Development Assistance budget, UKRI was slashing support for this area of research ([UKRI 2021a](#)) and continuing support only for research that was clearly aligned with the foreign policy priorities of the UK government ([UKRI 2021b](#)). While it is too soon to assess the impact of this latest development on the long-term commitment of UKRI to supporting sustainable, independent research capacity in the global South, recent developments clearly illustrate how susceptible such efforts are to the changing interests and priorities of actors in the global North.

Conclusion

North–South partnerships have been problematic to many because of their unequal power relations and structural inequalities. This article calls for a move beyond partnerships to supporting the localization of knowledge production in refugee and forced migration studies. This requires a more holistic longer-term approach to providing support for researchers and research centres and localized knowledge ecosystems based in the global South, which hosts the vast majority of the world's forced migrants.

Researchers interviewed for this article have noted that despite calls for the decolonization of research, it still remains a distant prospect. For researchers and universities in the global South to be able to lead discussions on decolonization of research, there needs to be a move beyond North–South partnerships so that academic research can support and encourage curiosity to examine critical local research questions and move beyond research agendas that respond to the interests and priorities of the global North. The current characterization of what constitutes knowledge also needs to change beyond the production of academic journal articles to include different forms of knowledge that may be more important to non-academic local actors such as the production of infographics or shorter policy briefs. Ultimately, localization involves a shift in power and the ability to shape all stages of the research process. To this end, it is Southern actors who should determine what localization looks like, how knowledge can and should be produced or co-produced, and what research outputs are most useful.

The realities of North–South power asymmetries have been discussed in the literature for more than two decades, along with proposals on how to overcome these challenges (see, *inter alia*, [Chimni 1998](#)). The localization of refugee research is one approach that can help address these challenges that have long affected refugee and forced migration studies. By taking conscious steps to shift power and decision-making to researchers based in major refugee-hosting countries, the field

can help ensure that it reflects a more inclusive, diverse and ethical understanding of the many dimensions of the phenomenon of forced displacement. While these efforts may be supported through research partnerships, we argue that greater reflection on the theory and practice of localizing knowledge production should be central to our thinking on the future direction of the field. While the localization of refugee research alone would not constitute a ‘universal remedy for structural inequalities and epistemological hegemonies’ (Zingerli 2010: 217) that arguably characterize our field, it might just constitute a start.

List of interviewees

1. Itty Abraham, Professor, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, Singapore.
2. Anas M. AlSobeh, Assistant Professor and Director of the Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Forced Migration Studies Centre, Yarmouk University, Jordan.
3. Ibrahim Awad, Professor of Practice of Global Affairs and Director of the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, American University in Cairo, Egypt.
4. Brian Barbour, Regional Refugee Protection Advisor, Act for Peace, and Affiliate, Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.
5. Supang Chantavanich, Emeritus Professor, Asian Research Center for Migration, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.
6. Christina Clark-Kazak, President, International Association for the Study of Forced Migration and Associate Professor, Public and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ottawa, Canada.
7. Amanda Coffie, Research Fellow, Legon Center for International Affairs and Diplomacy at the University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana.
8. Luisa Feline Freier De Ferrari, Assistant Professor of Social and Political Sciences, Universidad del Pacífico, Lima, Peru.
9. Ahmet İcduygu, Dean, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, and Director, Migration Research Center, Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey.
10. Danesh Jayatilaka, Research Fellow, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
11. Liliana Lyra Jubilut, Professor of International Law, Human Rights and Refugee Law, Universidade Católica de Santos, Santos, Brazil.
12. Khoti Kamanga, Associate Professor, Department of Public Law, Founding Co-Director, Centre for the Study of Forced Migration, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
13. Leander Kandilige, Lecturer of Migration Studies, Centre for Migration Studies, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana.

14. Susan Kneebone, Professorial Fellow, Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne, Australia.
15. Loren Landau, Professor of Migration and Development at the Oxford Department of International Development, Oxford, UK, and Associate Professor with the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
16. Themba Lewis, Secretary General, Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, Bangkok, Thailand.
17. Nassim Majidi, Founder and Director, Samuel Hall, Nairobi, Kenya.
18. Dulo Nyaoro, Senior Lecturer Department of Political Science, and Coordinator, Peace and Reconciliation Institute, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya.
19. Linda Oucho, Executive Director, African Migration and Development Policy Centre, Nairobi, Kenya.
20. Sriprapha Petcharamesree, Senior Lecturer, Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand.
21. Beatriz Eugenia Sánchez-Mojica, Professor, University Law Faculty, Universidad Pontificia de Comillas, Madrid, Spain.
22. Maha Shuayb, Director of Centre for Lebanese Studies, Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon.

ENDNOTES

1. For more information about LERRN, visit <https://carleton.ca/lerrn/> (accessed May 2021). For more information about IDRC, visit <https://www.idrc.ca/en> (accessed May 2021).
2. The research ethics protocol form along with these documents was submitted to the Office of Research Ethics of Carleton University. The interviews were conducted only after the Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A granted ethics clearance (# 111588) for the research project. All interviewees cited in this article agreed at the outset of the interview to have their responses attributed to them in future publications.

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