Towards post-colonial capacity-building methodologies – some remarks on the experiences of health researchers from Mozambique and Angola

Em torno de metodologias de capacitação pós-coloniais: algumas notas acerca das experiências de pesquisadores de saúde de Moçambique e Angola

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Abstract *This paper analyzes capacity building in practice, addressing the expectations, imaginaries and experiences of health researchers from Mozambique and Angola. The empirical data stems from the Erasmus+ funded project "University Development and Innovation – Africa (UDI-A)", a consortium established between European and African institutions to promote the mobility and empowerment of African academics, the establishment of North/South research partnerships and the strengthening of African institutions. Through qualitative research methods – semi-structured interviews and a focus group with African participants, and participant observation – this article analyzes the experiences of African academics working in the health field, their perceptions of capacity building and aspirations during their stay in Portugal in 2018. By addressing some of their concerns and achievements, this paper reflects on the performativity of capacity building methodologies, exploring a wide range of issues that emerge within the framework of North/South partnerships, inquiring whether it would be possible to decolonize capacity-building methodologies.*

Key words *Capacity building, Research partnerships, Methodologies, Post-colonialism*

Resumo *Este artigo analisa dispositivos de capacitação na prática, explorando as expetativas, os imaginários e as experiências de pesquisadores de saúde de Moçambique e Angola. Os dados empíricos resultam do projeto "University Development and Innovation – Africa (UDI-A)", financiado pelo programa Erasmus+, um consórcio estabelecido entre instituições europeias e africanas para promover a mobilidade e a capacitação de académicos africanos, o estabelecimento de parcerias de investigação Norte/Sul e o fortalecimento das instituições africanas. Através de metodologias qualitativas – entrevistas semiestruturadas e grupos de discussão com participantes africanos, e observação participante – este artigo analisa as experiências de académicos africanos trabalhando no setor da saúde, as suas perceções da capacitação e as suas ambições durante a estadia em Portugal em 2018. Através da análise das suas preocupações e sucessos, este artigo reflete acerca da performatividade das metodologias de capacitação, explorando um vasto leque de tópicos que emergem no contexto das parcerias Norte/Sul, questionando a possibilidade de uma descolonização das metodologias de capacitação.*

Palavras-chave *Capacitação, Parcerias de investigação, Metodologias, Pós-colonialismo*

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze how capacity building processes are influenced by methodological options; it relies on participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with African Health Researchers in order to explore their expectations and experiences of capacity building. The empirical data stems from our participation as external observers of the project "University Development and Innovation – Africa (UDI-A)", funded by Erasmus+, aimed at strengthening the academic and research profile of Universities in Angola and Mozambique. As social researchers, we frequently reflect on our situatedness as European academics carrying out research in Africa. If, on the one hand, we must rely on an epistemological apparatus deeply entwined with contemporary Academia, under the permanent pressure to publish in high impact journals, on the other hand we must do justice to the perspectives of those we study.

This paper explores our tensions with the epistemological asymmetries pertaining to capacity building activities, enquiring whether it would be possible to develop post-colonial capacity building methodologies. The main research question this paper addresses is the following: how are the experiences and perceptions of capacity-building activities determined by methodological choices? In order to tackle this question, the paper is organized as follows: in the introduction we delve into the history and issues related to capacity building and research partnerships, reflecting on the performativity of research methods. In the methodology we present UDI-A and our research protocol. The results and discussion analyze the experiences of African health researchers according to four topics: expectations and motivations; the virtues of capacity building; capacity building and research partnerships in conflict; contested asymmetries. In the final considerations we inquire whether it would be possible to develop post-colonial capacity building methodologies.

Capacity Building, Research Partnerships and the Politics of Methodology

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "Capacity building has typically been defined as the development and strengthening of human and institutional resources"[1]. It has often been proposed as a panacea to tackle North/South unbalances in a wide range of domains, particularly in the field of health, entailing the training of human resources, technology transfer and the provision of funding for the improvement of health systems and infrastructures.

Capacity building is a difficult concept to define. It is an approach to strengthening organizations that is common to a variety of different sectors, including business and health program management. It is a term that has been used with such frequency and variety of interpretation that its true meaning has become obscured. Capacity building is generally linked to better performance with a commitment to improvement in the health and other sectors to multiply health gains many times over[2].

Over the past 30 years, several programs have been put in place by the World Bank, the WHO and the United Nations to enhance the technical, administrative and R&D expertise of LMICs. Various research funders, such as the European Commission and the European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership, alongside various philanthropies and international agencies, have supported numerous capacity building programs.

The underlying assumption is that the Global South can benefit from the cultural and economic capital of the Global North to attain various social benefits[3]; it has been argued that this scenario leads to the perpetuation of a state of emergency which dictates that LMICs are in a chronic process of subalternity that can only be reverted through Northern interventions[4]. Although, in the post-colonial world, it would be morally questionable to "civilize" LMICs, capacity building often reproduces the modern dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, now sustained by the economic, epistemological and technical "inferiority" of the Global South, leading to various interventions under the guise of contemporary knowledge-based economies[5].

Capacity building is often entangled with research partnerships. The basic assumption is that research partnerships are fundamental to attaining innovation, leading to improvements in virtually every social field. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 17 is specifically focused on research partnerships, including technology transfer – "Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms"[6], and capacity building – "Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans

to implement all the sustainable development goals [...]"[6].

The UN recognizes that research partnerships benefit social development and are fundamental to attaining all the other SDGs. Nevertheless, scholarly work focused on research partnerships often shows how these transboundary collaborations are characterized by a set of asymmetries and hindrances: disregarding the health and R&D priorities of specific countries and regions[7]; agenda-setting is controlled by the Global North[8]; linguistic, cultural and bureaucratic barriers[9]; LMIC partners are not involved at the initial stages[10]; local communities are not involved in the evaluation of impact assessment[11]; partners' contributions are not explicitly clarified at the beginning[12].

This often means that Southern institutions and researchers are tokenized. First, there are currently several competitive funding schemes that require the participation – and even coordination – of an institution from the Global South. Second, Southern researchers are often relegated to the status of field experts, not fully participating in relevant scientific discussions – they are *used* as means to obtain access to specific populations and biological data. Finally, research partnerships result in articles which do not include LMIC partners and are not shared with local communities and institutions[13].

These unbalances are well documented and there have been diplomatic and institutional efforts to tackle them. Over the past twenty years, we have witnessed the development of guidelines, good standards of practice, ethical regulations and recommendations on how to establish transboundary research partnerships[14]. Recently, the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED) developed the Research Fairness Initiative (RFI), an evidence-based tool that implements good practice standards related to three main dimensions of partnerships - opportunities, process and sharing of benefits, costs and outcomes[15-17].

These concerns with fair research partnerships indicate that methodologies *matter*, as virtually all existing forms of evaluation rely on specific practices and indicators to assess the *success* of a specific intervention. Within Science and Technology Studies (STS), we have witnessed a turn from a representational to a performative idiom, resulting in an increasing concern with the performative capacity of practices and methodologies[18] – it has been argued that methodologies perform certain realities, entwined with particular practices and nonhumans[19], with strong political implications[20]. The notion of ontological politics[21] highlights the performative dimension of methodological options, indicating that interventions are always productive.

One of the most emblematic examples highlighting the political dimension of methodologies is Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed[22]. Freire developed a literacy system for adults strongly engaged with the daily life of the lower classes. Freire's method was not limited to literacy in a strict sense: his goal was to develop social and political awareness, what he called "conscientização" (often translated as conscientization) supported by "Circles of Culture", which coupled social transformation with continuous education and social awareness. His work in Guinea-Bissau has been praised as an example of socially engaged education in post-colonial settings[23].

These concerns with the politics of methodology should be extended to capacity building actions and research partnerships; however, that is not always the case. As this paper will show, the methodological choices underpinning UDI-A mattered and were one the main concerns shared by African academics. We contend that this discontent is entwined with a methodological dissonance: if, on the one hand, the project aims at strengthening African institutions, on the other hand African academics argued that it relied on methodological options that overlooked their cultural and geographic specificities. Therefore, this paper will delve into the tensions between expectations and methodologies recruited to enact capacity building, highlighting the political role played by methodological options.

Methods

The project methodology

The empirical material stems from a research protocol developed to analyze processes of capacity building and research partnerships within UDI-A, coordinated by NOVA University of Lisbon and involving partners in Angola and Mozambique (two per country) and European Academic Institutions (Kings College London, Maastricht University, Université libre de Bruxelles).

This ongoing two-year project started in the last trimester of 2017. It is focused on four main intervention areas: economics & management; built environment & infrastructures; health sciences; humanities & social sciences. UDI-A engaged Champions in an International Capacita-

tion Program: the aim was to update their technical and scientific skills through formal training, self-study and non-formal learning initiatives. Overall, UDI-A will attain its impact through three main activities: a) the development of academic and non-academic staff with new scientific, technical and transferable skills; b) The creation of Centers for Academic Development and Innovation (CADIs); c) the promotion of an interdisciplinary approach to social innovation and social entrepreneurship.

Ten Champions (8 academics and 2 non-academics) were selected by each of the African institutions from Angola and Mozambique. These Champions will ideally have a strategic impact on their African higher education institutions through the creation of CADIs, which will be pivotal for the systematic transformation of these institutions and their communities. Champions will recruit junior members for CADIs and guide them in updating scientific knowledge and skills and developing new academic transferable skills. Eventually, champions and juniors should update existing teaching modules and develop collaborative research projects. The promotion of an interdisciplinary approach to social innovation and entrepreneurship aims at bringing together champions and juniors to work alongside local stakeholders in the preparation of a course on social innovation and entrepreneurship, leading to projects focused on the transformation of local communities.

During the first trimester of 2018, Champions traveled to the institutions of EU partners in order to receive training, including pedagogical and soft skills, with a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship and social innovation. They were separated into four groups and placed with EU partner institutions, each dedicated to an intervention area.

Research methodology

Since we work at an institute of hygiene and tropical medicine, our research was focused on the group of seven health Champions. Between March and April 2018, during their stay in Portugal, we carried out participant observation at several project meetings and workshops, had informal discussions with team members and conducted seven semi-structured interviews followed by a focus group with 7 of the African champions. The interviews and the focus group were recorded and transcribed verbatim - the transcripts were anonymized and analyzed through thematic analysis[24], a process which interprets qualitative data by coding it into themes. The coding was carried out by two of the three co-authors after the transcripts were ready. We used different font colors to visually distinguish between relevant themes and after a meeting between the three co-authors it was validated, in light of our experiences during the interviews, focus groups and project sessions. A consent form was prepared, stating the goals of the research protocol, and it was signed by all participants, ensuring their anonymity. The research protocol was approved by our institutional Ethics Council.

A flexible interview script focused on the academic profile of champions was prepared, analyzing: their views on the challenges their countries face, especially in the field of health; how they became involved with UDI-A; their perspectives on capacity building activities and the methodologies used; their perspectives on research partnerships; their views on social entrepreneurship; the expected impacts of the project. The process was interactive and allowed participants to introduce other issues. The focus group further explored some of the topics mentioned during the interviews, allowing the whole group to engage in a collective discussion. It touched upon the following topics: their expectations - fulfilled/unfulfilled; potential barriers to the implementation of social entrepreneurship projects; how to incorporate these experiences in their future work. We also challenged Champions to imagine the scenario of returning to their home countries and having to present specific plans to incorporate their experiences of partnerships with European institutions. We asked them to identify the real possibilities of putting in place the skills learned during the project; implementation difficulties; potential partnerships to establish with actors/ national institutions and other Champions.

Results and discussion

In this section we analyze the experiences of Champions according to four topics: expectations and motivations; the virtues of capacity building; capacity building and research partnerships in conflict; contested asymmetries. We will argue that methodological choices ultimately shaped their experiences, indicating the performativity of capacity building initiatives and their political dimension, supporting our call for the reshaping of these devices.

Expectations and motivations

Nearly all the interviewees believed that one of the virtues of UDI-A was the fact that it coupled pedagogical and scientific aspects, which could have positive impacts on their academic careers. According to a Champion from Mozambique:

When I looked at the proposal what drew my attention were two aspects: pedagogical and research skills [...] *they're actually my two fields of work. That's why I decided to apply* [...]. *First, because there is really a huge deficit when it comes to research. Both an institutional and personal deficit* [...]. *Therefore, I saw this project as an opportunity to have access to more resources, ideas, content. Secondly, I was also interested in the pedagogical aspects.* (C1)

Since all Champions were lecturers also interested in enhancing their research profile, the possibility of receiving training in both fields was one of the main reasons behind their application. As put by another Champion from Mozambique, who has done research on malaria:

When I saw the academic development aspect, and then the research dimension…When it came to research I thought – Yeah, that's what I want! So, what really motivated me was the research component. So, with this training, I will improve my research skills. I will also have more teaching skills, and I need them. [...] *maybe I'll get some inputs to extend my entrepreneurial vision.* (C2)

This coupling of pedagogical and research skills was praised by the majority of Champions. They mentioned that they applied because the project had a strong social dimension, as elicited by the focus on social entrepreneurship. Most Champions had very clear ideas about how they would mobilize the newly developed partnerships and skills to transform their social contexts, indicating that this was a major reason behind their application. According to a female Champion from Angola:

When I had the chance to read the project one of the things that caught my attention was the social entrepreneurship dimension, as well as the innovative approach to education. We would learn from others how to innovate, how to transform, how to establish partnerships with some relevant institutions or academics… how to establish fruitful collaborations that would benefit our universities. (C3)

In sum, Champions mentioned that what drew their attention to the project was this focus on pedagogical and research skills, as well as social entrepreneurship, which would ideally allow the project to attain social impact. However, and as we will see in some of the following sections, there was a disconnect between motivations/expectations and their actual experiences in Portugal, a methodological dissonance which undermined their aspirations of establishing fruitful partnerships.

The virtues of capacity building

In general, Champions believed they greatly benefited from capacity building activities. Younger lecturers, with fewer teaching experience, recognized that the introduction of specific pedagogical methods would strongly impact their work. Champions were introduced to Problem Based Learning (PBL), a pedagogical approach which contrasts with the traditional expository teaching procedure, characterized by Freire as a form of *banking education* - students are understood as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge[22]. Since the project emphasized social entrepreneurship, innovative teaching methods, focused on the resolution of particular social problems, were incorporated. As put by an African Champion with a PhD in chemistry:

It [the PBL approach] *will improve* [...] *my teaching skills. I can even introduce the PBL without telling them [the students] and later they'll see the changes!* [...] *We will provide them with a topic for discussion. We can even send them the program beforehand, one week earlier, to make sure they'll be prepared, right? Not just to listen to the lecturer, because that's how the traditional method works. Students are there to listen, listen, listen… so, if they arrive prepared we will discuss those topics and share ideas.* (C4)

A Champion from Mozambique told us that she had specific plans to incorporate PBL, and considered this methodology particularly well suited to introduce students to new ways of thinking about their research:

Something that I'm thinking about is to incorporate PBL as part of the tutorials and seminars I'm in charge of. [...] *when it comes to seminars, we ask students to form groups of 4 or 5 people, they carry out a specific research project and then present a report. So, that's what I'll try to do, perhaps talking to the course conveners, to make sure that before starting their research students discuss it between themselves… to bring about a new way of tackling those subjects.* (C2)

Another Champion from Angola mentioned that the training courses on innovation and social entrepreneurship helped her realize that some barriers to innovation are cultural. She ar-

gued that, in her culture, there is a great respect towards elders, and their authority sometimes puts a dent on radical social transformation. She believed that, due to her experiences with UDI-A, she would finally be able to *lose her fears* and believe in her own ideas:

I felt empowered by the whole focus on innovation. There are various things we think of or ideas that we don't believe that will work, so we keep them to ourselves. And, thanks to the seminars here, I believe that we need to lose our fears. So, if you have a certain idea, even if it will be rejected several times, at least give it a try, talk, take the first steps! (C3)

Another Champion from Angola, with a PhD in Biology, highlighted the virtues of learning about social entrepreneurship, indicating that the project would help him increase the social impact of his work:

There are so many things we are now realizing when it comes to social entrepreneurship. We attended a set of conferences last week that were extremely helpful. They helped us prepare a social project, to think about impact, evaluation, etc.... so that is something really positive - now I know that it can help me when I return to my country: how to present a project, how to evaluate it, and so on. So…that is good! (C5)

Before they returned to their home countries, all Champions, various work package leaders and external observers attended a one-day session at NOVA's Rectorate. There, they had the opportunity to present some of the social entrepreneurship projects they had been developing during their stay in Portugal, such as the promotion of traditional cuisine at the Island of Mozambique (an initiative inspired by the Popular Kitchen of Lisbon, which they visited as part of the social entrepreneurship course), the improvement of housing conditions of neighborhoods on the Island of Mozambique and the development of a grassroots initiative to collect and provide drugs to impoverished populations in Angola. CADIs were considered an opportunity to improve the R&D scenario of African institutions, allowing them to publish research papers in high impact journals, to foster science communication and to establish fruitful partnerships with foreign researchers and Universities.

Although Champions considered the project to be successful, as they were exposed to a wide range of research and pedagogical skills, they also identified some aspects that could be improved. The following two sections will explore some of the concerns entwined with the methodological

choices of the project team, supporting our call for the development of post-colonial methodologies.

Capacity building and research partnerships in conflict

Although the terms *capacity building* and *research partnerships* are often used interchangeably, we identified a clear conflict between these concepts during the interviews. Most African Champions mentioned that they expected to be able to establish more research partnerships with European institutions; they were instead submitted to a series of capacity building activities focused on pedagogy and soft skills that occupied most of their time. In that sense, we argue that this conflict can be understood as a form of methodological dissonance, highlighting the performative dimension of methodological choices and showing how the excessive focus on pedagogical training – instead of research skills and networking – was a cause of discontent. A Champion from Angola criticized this focus on pedagogical skills:

Health researchers should have spent their time focusing on health. Because if you're a lecturer you must have pedagogical skills…In our country […] all lecturers must have that pedagogical training. Therefore, in my perspective, we should have had training in science, so it could be coupled with the pedagogical dimensions. So we could mix the pedagogical training with the health field. […] We spend all day in Lisbon, perhaps we could have courses on pedagogy in the morning and scientific training during the afternoon. (C5)

This researcher was openly criticizing the fact that the project was overly focused on pedagogical aspects. Although the PBL was praised by most Champions, they wanted to spend more time researching and networking with potential partners. A Champion from Mozambique told us that she regretted the fact that she only had the chance to visit a research center in tropical infectious diseases during the last few days of her stay:

Yes… only now we're having this opportunity of interacting with your Research Centre [The Institute of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine]. *I really had expectations of coming here…*

Interviewer – And contacting researchers working on Malaria?

Yes… For example, If I already knew beforehand I could have prepared something more elaborate…

Interviewer – A protocol? A plan for cooperation?

Yes… unfortunately that didn't happen… (C2)

This experience seems to be common to some of the other interviewees. It reinforces the argument that methodological options decisively affect the perceived impact of capacity building activities. A young female Champion from Angola shared the same concern:

It was good to be trained in pedagogical skills, I actually lacked that sort of training. That was probably something that was not valued by others, but for me it was important. Now…when it comes to research…I actually didn't have access to that. I was expecting to visit research centers, laboratories, something that could reinforce my research skills… that's one of the expectations that weren't met, because there is almost no more time left… (C3)

Although, in the last two weeks, the project management team actually changed the program so that Champions would have the chance to visit relevant R&D centers in their fields, some of them hoped that they would be able to actually establish partnerships, instead of merely contacting other health researchers. In that sense, this disconnect between expectations and experiences was perceived as illustrating an asymmetric relationship between African researchers and their European counterparts, as these informal talks did not result in binding agreements. One of the Champions from Mozambique told us that:

One thing is visiting the Institution, having a conversation with its researchers. The Institution presents its structure within this informal conversation…eventually shows its availability to establish a future partnership. That's one thing. The other thing is actually developing this partnership. Not informally, but through a specific project. There were conversations and so on and researchers are, in theory, willing to establish a partnership. Let me clarify what I mean: this happens everywhere we go! But my expectations were slightly higher. […] I wanted to obtain some experience from these local research centers…to actually create an idea, something written about how a project could be developed, to pave the way for the creation of partnerships. (C1)

In sum, and although there were some visits to research centers, Champions felt that the research dimension was not sufficiently stressed, and no binding partnerships were established. This illustrates a methodological dissonance, a disconnect between expectations and experiences enacted by certain methodological options underlying capacity building: a strong focus on pedagogical training and not enough time allocated to research skills and partnership building. As we will see in the following section, this disconnect was also entwined with the fact that some of the training provided did not cater to the specific profiles of these researchers and their local contexts.

Contested asymmetries

As we mentioned in the introduction, successful partnerships must take into account local contexts and research priorities, and some of the recommendations and models developed over the past 20 years take this aspect very seriously[25]. Moreover, socially engaged pedagogical interventions, such as Freire's approach, explicitly rely on local epistemologies and practices, questioning the teacher/student dualism. More recently, a number of methodological innovations have been developed to allow lay citizens and experts to discuss the potential effects of emerging technologies, still in the making[26].

As previously mentioned, within the social sciences there is an increasing awareness about the situated character of epistemological communities, requiring researchers to question their own situationality in order to better engage with the populations they are researching. According to most Champions, more attention could have been devoted to this aspect and, in some cases, they felt that their motivations and local contexts were not taken into account, which generated some tensions. As put by a Champion from Angola:

The information we received was too much focused on "Me": here I do things like this. We wanted to hear more… "Well, we do things this way, how can you do this there? How would you be able to do it? Or what can you do?" Or… "I think you could act like this". So… people are sitting there and for the first five minutes they are paying attention… then we think: don't you want to know about our experiences? Here we do not feel listened to. We just feel we are receiving information. (C3)

This quote seems to indicate that the project team did not attend to the particular priorities and experiences of participants, thus eliciting an asymmetrical relationship which resembles Freire's model of banking education[22]. This tension emerged while Champions were discussing the relevance of soft skills, which they believed should be focused on their specific context. As put by another Champion from Angola: "We can also share knowledge; we are not here just to listen. We can't just listen and say yes, yes, yes. We

must do things that are focused on our reality. (C4)"

What this researcher stresses is that in capacity building exercises the experiences of participants from the Global South are often overlooked, and their apparent subalternity can only be rescued through specific interventions controlled by the Global North. In order to counter this asymmetry, some researchers have argued for a greater recognition of the epistemological, technological and experiential capacity of African researchers - the notion of *reverse innovation*[27] illustrates the nonlinear characteristics of knowledge production processes. A lecturer from Mozambique believed that a symmetrical relationship would be more beneficial to both parties, thus advocating for the establishment of research partnerships in the field of medicinal plants:

I believe that we can benefit from each other; from my point of view, this [ethnobotany] is one of the areas which can be explored: we can offer an open field of research, since I realize here research fields are much more strict…it could have pharmaceutical applications and in the field of medicinal plants. So I see this as an opportunity for professionals in the fields of medicinal plants or pharmacy to explore. (C1)

According to him, this model of cooperation could be mutually beneficial, and it would certainly suspend the asymmetry which characterized the experiences of some participants. It could also be interpreted as an instance of *reverse innovation*, recognizing that his research experience could be of value to academics from the Global North.

Some of the concerns which were the gist of the previous two subsections reinforce the performative character of methodological options. The politics of capacity building are profoundly entwined with these options, as they determine the degree to which the experiences, knowledge and situatedness of academics from the Global South can be effectively incorporated in training processes. Building on the assumption that capacity building methodologies are political, in the conclusion we enquire whether it would be possible to develop post-colonial alternatives.

Final considerations

This paper argued that capacity building methodologies are performative, enacting specific politics of North/South collaborations. Focusing on the expectations, ambitions and concerns of Champions from Angola and Mozambique, this article reflected on how methodological approaches decisively impacted the development of research partnerships and the engagement of Champions.

Although most participants praised the project, and were eager to return to their home countries to put in place some of the pedagogical and soft skills they learned, greater attention should have been devoted to the local context of participants, their motivations to participate, their specific research fields and their chances of establishing fruitful research partnerships.

In that sense, what could be considered post-colonial capacity building methodologies? We suggest that these procedures could be reconfigured according to three main axes: the suspension of epistemological authority; the development of symmetric methodologies; capacity building as experimentation.

One of the topics that emerged during the interviews was the asymmetry between the epistemological status of participants and course conveners. Historically, epistemological authority was recruited by ethnographers to study populations from the Global South. However, this authority has been questioned by approaches that do justice to the situationality of both researchers and researched; moreover, critical approaches to pedagogy frequently stress that transformative education, with the ability to trigger social change, must be entwined with participants' lived experiences. In practical terms this means that capacity building procedures should be aligned with the context, priorities and situationalities of participant subjects, thus questioning the universality of soft/transferable skills and the relevance of training courses not explicitly focused on their realities.

Second, innovative methodologies should be developed to counter this epistemological and political asymmetry. Ideally they would give participants the opportunity to openly interact with academics working on similar topics, replacing linear/asymmetric approaches to capacity building with devices of research conviviality and empathy which could have a positive impact on their careers and institutions. In order to build a common ground for future collaborations, focus groups and workshops could be organized to allow participants and selected researchers to collectively identify areas where research partnerships should be developed, including not only the needs of the Global South but also of the Global North, thus supporting processes of reverse innovation.

Finally, we believe that more attention should be devoted to the performative and eventful capacity of these encounters between researchers from distinct social and epistemological contexts. By eventful we mean novel social, economic and ecological possibilities that cannot be predicted or anticipated beforehand[28]. In that sense, capacity building must be decolonized: instead of relying on an asymmetric exchange between two sides marked by an epistemological divide, it should become an opportunity for mutual experimentation. Although the North/South divide and the grim socioeconomic context of LMICs usually turn capacity building into a sort of crisis management device, we believe there is room for experimentation, advocating the use of interactive and speculative methodologies - performance, the arts, sandboxes, etc. – as ways of bringing forward novel possibilities of research collaboration with a transformative potential.

Our paper has strong implications for current scholarly work on research partnerships and capacity building, and we hope it will lead to a greater concern with the politics and epistemologies of methodological choices. Moreover, and in light of the current trend towards equity and fairness in research partnerships, we believe it is important that institutions and relevant stakeholders start looking at capacity building methodologies not as a black box[29] but as dynamic processes which decisively impact the outcome of these exercises.

Collaborations

IC submitted our research protocol to IHMT's Ethics Council. AC and IC collected and analyzed the empirical data. All co-authors prepared the research protocol and wrote this manuscript.

Acknowledgments

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