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# Equitable North-South partnerships for ethical and policy relevant research in times of uncertainty: a collaborative autoethnography from Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the contribution of North-South partnerships in conducting ethical and policy-relevant research in times of uncertainty. Using collaborative autoethnography, we critically reflect on our experience conducting two related research projects in Ethiopia during the COVID-19 pandemic. We discuss how our research has adapted to take account of changing policy priorities in response to the crisis, how we implemented careful research practices, and which strategies we adopted to ensure providing timely and quality evidence for the governments, schools and parents. Importantly, we reflect on how our North-South partnerships and our close engagement with the Ethiopian government play a pivotal role in overcoming the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and adapting our research to meet the needs of key stakeholders. Grounded in our reflections, we provide a set of guidelines to establish equitable research partnerships in times of uncertainty.

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Ethical research; research partnerships; global south; ethics of care; Ethiopia

## Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ethiopia had far-reaching consequences on all aspects of society, including health, education, and the economy. Many households saw their incomes either substantially or completely reduced, while a combination of rising unemployment, school closures and limited access to social services had a negative impact on physical and mental health and wellbeing (Jones et al., 2020; Wieser et al., 2020). The effects of the pandemic were not felt evenly, and those who were already vulnerable and marginalised faced the most severe impacts, including those living in poverty, girls and women, and persons with disabilities (Harris et al., 2021). The education sector was one area where the COVID-19 pandemic has a devastating impact, and related school closures left over 26 million Ethiopian students out of school for approximately 6 months. Despite the government's efforts to support students' distance learning, while schools were shut, early evidence suggested that the impacts of the COVID-19 would reverse many of the gains made in education over the past three decades and would widen inequalities between the advantaged and disadvantaged (Wieser et al., 2020). Within the context of growing uncertainty and change, important questions were raised as to if and how research should continue ethically and

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how research could generate policy relevant evidence that helps to mitigate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the uncertainty heightened due to the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges, it also helped to open discussion of the possibility of a more sustainable and equitable future. As Scoones and Stirling (2020) discuss, the increasing uncertainty that mirrors much of today's world problems challenges our ideas of modernity, which are based on notions of linear progress and development. Similarly, Leach et al. (2021) explain that the uncertainty of COVID-19 has exposed fractures and contradictions in conventional ways of thinking and acting, but at the same time it has suggested new ways forward. They suggest that to respond to this increasing uncertainty requires a reevaluation of how knowledge is produced and valued and embracing a more collaborative approach that considers multiple perspectives. It also requires us to recognise the complexity and context specificity of processes and experiences, to pay attention to structural inequalities, and to engage in deliberative efforts that envisage different futures.

In agreement with these authors, we suggest that research has an important role in responding to uncertainty by providing timely, quality evidence about what is happening and what can be done to mitigate the potentially adverse effects of crises and identifying pathways to more transformative and sustainable futures. In this paper, we suggest that North-South research partnerships in particular may have an important role in responding to uncertainty, especially during the outbreak of COVID-19 started in 2020. This includes responding to the unexpected ethical and practical challenges of conducting research in the Global South. While a growing literature has focussed on the dynamics of North-South research partnerships (e.g. Asare et al., 2022) and on how research can inform social policy in international development (Georgalakis & Rose, 2019), the contribution of North-South research partnerships in times of uncertainty has received limited attention.

Using a collaborative autoethnography approach, we reflect on two inter-connected education research projects in Ethiopia – the Early Learning Partnership (ELP) and the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia. Each of these projects involved international and local research teams made up of researchers in the Global North and South and both have established strong partnerships with the government and donors in Ethiopia even before the projects started. Both were commenced in 2019 right before the pandemic hit. The original aims of these projects were the evaluation of the large-scale basic education reforms in Ethiopia, known as the General Education Quality Improvement Program for Equity (World Bank, 2017). However, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related school-closures, the two projects faced uncertainty in terms of the focus and continuity of the research. In reflecting on how our two projects adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic, we draw on an ethic of care framework, a critical feminist theory that foregrounds the role of interpersonal relationships and attention to context and circumstance, rather than on universal ethical principles (Gilligan, 1982; Robinson, 2020; Tronto, 2015). The ethics of care framework can help to guide *careful research practices* which involve reflexive responses to communities, and attention to how research approaches impact participants and co-researchers (Brannelly, 2018). By exploring the contributions, challenges, and shortcomings of our North-South research partnerships, we aim to provide concrete evidence for researchers seeking to conduct ethical and policy relevant research in the Global South, particularly in times of uncertainty.

To set the background for this paper, we review evidence on Global North-South research partnerships and consider some of the important factors for conducting policy relevant research in the Global South in the next section, before introducing our two related education research projects in Ethiopia.

## Literature review

### *Global North-South research partnerships*

Research in international development is increasingly undertaken through partnerships between researchers working in the Global South and Global North (Bradley, 2017), which is linked to the

proposed benefits of such partnerships. Southern partners bring a range of strengths to international partnerships, including an in-depth understanding of the historical and socio-cultural context, which is imperative for designing and implementing ethical and policy-relevant research and for achieving greater engagement and impact of the research amongst policymakers (Fransman et al., 2019; Matenga et al., 2019). From the perspectives of African-based researchers, international partners are beneficial in helping to support the development of quality of the research, in helping to provide access to funding and helping to increase the visibility of their work (Asare et al., 2022; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020). As we will explore in this paper, bringing together these different sets of skills, knowledge and experiences of northern and southern partners may have certain benefits in the context of uncertainty. This includes combining different types of knowledge to respond to complex problems, facilitating access to ad-hoc research funding and complementing in-depth contextual knowledge with an understanding of the international context. This in turn can help to ensure the production of high-quality evidence in a timely and efficient manner, that has an even greater impact on policy (Matenga et al., 2019; Saric et al., 2019).

However, North-South research partnerships have been criticised as being defined by inherent power imbalances between partners (Crawford, 2003). For Cornwall and Brock (2005), ‘partnership’ is one of several buzzwords that is often used to conceal rather than confront power asymmetries. Some evidence does suggest that certain types of North-South partnerships may be unequal. For example, although partnerships initiated by African researchers identified as being more equitable, Asare et al. (2022) found that out of 26 identified education research partnerships based in sub-Saharan Africa, almost two-third were initiated by northern-based researchers, whereas just under one-quarter were initiated by researchers based in sub-Saharan Africa. The authors have suggested that when partnerships are unequal, the research agendas are likely to be driven by northern partners and the skills of southern researchers are unlikely to be fully utilised, thus there may be inequalities around data ownership, analysis and publication, which limits a genuine collaboration (Matenga et al., 2019). Others have noted how funders may affect collaborative agenda-setting, whereby southern researchers are required to partner with northern counterparts to receive funding and/or the interests of northern funders are prioritised (Bradley, 2008, 2017; Flint et al., 2022). It is unlikely that partnerships characterised by such power imbalances can result in benefits for research and policy, especially in times of uncertainty and change.

Addressing power imbalances between researchers based in the Global North and South engaged in research partnerships is therefore imperative. Several elements have been identified as important for more equitable research partnerships, including building mutual trust and support, joint decision-making, co-establishing the research agenda, reciprocal accountability, transparency, and long-term commitment (Asare et al., 2022; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020; Matenga et al., 2019; Saric et al., 2019). Some authors also note the importance of recognising and accounting for inequalities across contexts, such as the disparities in access to research infrastructure and facilities, as well as the complex institutional and political environments that some (southern) partners must navigate (Grieve & Mitchell, 2020).

### ***Important factors to conduct policy relevant research in global South***

Achieving policy impact is complex and depends on a range of factors. Some challenges of achieving policy impact include the different paced worlds of academia and policy and the fact that research does not easily translate into policy solutions. Several factors have been identified as essential for achieving greater policy impact, including ensuring the relevance and quality of the research, communicating the findings in an accessible manner, and timing and opportunity. It is also agreed that singular strategies focused on the linear dissemination and communication of research are insufficient to connect it with policymakers (Fransman et al., 2019; Oliver et al., 2022).

Relationships between researchers and policymakers have been consistently identified as one of the most important factors in creating policy impact (Fransman et al., 2019; Oliver et al., 2014). In

**Table 1.** Conceptual framework based on Tronto's (2013) ethics of care framework.

| Tronto's Ethics of Care Framework |   | North-South research partnerships  | Engaging with government for policy impact            |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Trust and solidarity              | Coming together and take collective action  | Investing in equitable North-South research partnerships                         | Building and sustaining relationships with government |
| Attentiveness                     | Recognising the needs of others             | Identifying topics of social relevance   | Responding to changing policy priorities              |
| Responsiveness                    | Responding to vulnerability and inequality  | Privileging the experiences of vulnerable groups and addressing power imbalances | Identifying and                                       |
| Responsibility                    | Taking responsibility to bring about change | Collaboratively designing research methods                                       | Identifying pathways to policy impact                 |
| Competence                        | Taking action to bring about change         | Implementing careful research practices  | Engaging in action to bring about policy              |

international development settings in particular, Georgalakis and Rose's (2019) suggest that effective research-policy partnerships for societal change, require establishing a common understanding of the policy problem (*bounded mutuality*); engaging with government from the very start of a research project (*sustained interactivity*) and adapting the research to changing policy environments (*policy adaptability*). At the same time, they suggest that researchers should weigh up the considerable investment required for engagement, which may otherwise have been at the expense of other activities, such as publishing academic outputs.

Politics may also have an important role in shaping how evidence is valued and used (Leach et al., 2021; Porter, 2010). Within the context of Ethiopia, Mulugeta et al. (2019) suggest that researchers and government may sometimes have different understandings of the research purpose. Although the government places a strong emphasis on policy-relevant research, researchers are expected to contribute to government-led development rather than critique it. Therefore, to achieve policy impact, researchers must understand how politics shapes the choices and incentives of policymakers, which may have relevance for the design of research and for engagement with policymakers, as noted by Porter (2010).

### **Conceptual framework: North-South research partnerships during uncertainty**

Despite the potential benefits of North-South research partnerships, little research has explored the role of North-South research partnerships in conducting equitable and policy-relevant research in times of uncertainty. In this paper, we discuss how our two existing research partnerships have evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic to conduct ethical and policy-relevant research during the crisis. We draw an *ethics of care* framework, a critical feminist theory that calls for identifying and addressing inequality and marginalisation, emphasises the role of relationships and underlines the importance of paying attention to context and complexity (Brannelly, 2018). Other authors have shown the value of an ethics of care framework for drawing attention to the fact that research is a social practice and to highlight the situational and relational challenges of research and the complex and messy world in which research is situated (Brannelly & Boulton, 2017; Groot et al., 2019).

Specifically, we utilise Tronto's (2013) second-generation ethics of care framework, which has five elements: 1) *trust and solidarity* to come together and take collective action; 2) *attentiveness* to the needs of others; 3) *responsiveness* to vulnerability and inequality; 4) *responsibility* and 5) *competence* to take action to bring about change. Guided by this framework, we outline how each element of the framework relates to our North-South research partnerships and engagement with government for policy impact (Table 1). We closely look at the benefits and challenges of these partnerships and how we adapted them in the context of COVID-19, drawing upon our experience in two research projects in Ethiopia.

## Research methodology

### ***Research sample: two related international education research projects in Ethiopia***

The Early Learning Partnership (ELP) Ethiopia is a longitudinal research project launched in 2017 to promote increased investment in pre-primary education through research, policy planning, and finance (World Bank, 2017). By evaluating the effects of preschool participation on children's learning outcomes amid a rapid, massive expansion of pre-primary education in Ethiopia, the research aims to provide evidence on how to deliver pre-primary education equitably, cost-effectively, and at scale. As the ELP project launched in multiple countries, it has contributed to building international evidence on how to promote quality pre-primary education for all, as set by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Target 4.2.

The Research for Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia research adopts a longitudinal and mixed methods approach to follow the implementation and impact of large-scale government education reforms aimed to improve equitable learning in Ethiopia since 2018. The aim of the RISE Ethiopia study is to help understand how the school system can deliver better quality education for all, especially those who are most disadvantaged.

Both research projects are led by researchers from Addis Ababa University and the Policy Studies Institute in Ethiopia in collaboration with the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge. There are several commonalities between the ELP and RISE Ethiopia research projects: both were built upon strong North-South partnerships, and each adopt a systems-lens, which takes into account the complexity of the education systems at the pre-primary and primary level respectively using longitudinal mixed methods research designs. Furthermore, to ensure the policy relevance of the research, engagement with the Ethiopian government is a core component of the two research projects.

### ***Research methods: shifting from in-person to distance research during uncertain times***

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the RISE Ethiopia and ELP projects came to a standstill. After discussion amongst team members and with key stakeholders, the focus of the two research projects shifted to understanding the impact of the COVID-19 school closures and which factors should be considered to determine the timing and approach to school reopening. To conduct our research during the COVID-19 pandemic, we shifted from in-person to distant research methods involving mobile phone surveys, which were conducted in August-September 2020. Our shift to phone survey allowed us to rapidly collect data on what was happening in response COVID-19 on the ground, while minimizing risk of safety and health of our fieldworkers and participants. Considering the main purpose of each study, the ELP research undertook phone surveys with 480 parents and primary caregivers, 48 school principals and 48 teachers, largely living in rural areas. With its focus on school-based reform, the RISE Ethiopia research carried out phone surveys with school principals and teachers in 168 primary schools. Both projects sought to inform the Government's COVID-19 response strategy, including remote learning strategies (online/off-line) and school re-opening.

### ***Research approach: collaborative autoethnography***

To capture our research adaptation in the context of COVID-19 crisis, we make use of collaborative ethnography. This is a qualitative research method whereby (two or more) researchers work together to critically reflect on their experience, identify commonalities and differences, and analyse and interpret their data collectively, so that this process can reach a meaningful understanding of socio-cultural experience in a collective and cooperative way (Blalock & Akehi, 2018; Chang et al., 2016; Chang, 2013; Denzin, 2003). Collaborative autoethnography is a branch of autoethnography, which combines socio-cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details (Chang et al.,

2016). Collaborative autoethnography helps to overcome some of these challenges by lending itself to greater rigor than autoethnography, by eliciting multidimensional perspectives on the research and by balancing the individual narrative with the greater collective experience (Blalock & Akehi, 2018; Chang, 2013; Lapadat, 2017). Each researcher creates their own narrative and responses and analyses the stories of others. As noted by Ratnapalan and Haldane (2022), collaborative autoethnography is an important method toward providing greater insights into the experiences of multidisciplinary teams conducting research amidst complexity and intersectionality. This approach particularly fits well to the context of the two large-scale mixed methods research projects in Ethiopia.

The ELP and RISE Ethiopia research projects each consist of seven and 20 of Ethiopian and international researchers, respectively. The authors of this paper include two Ethiopian researchers and two Northern researchers based in the UK, all of whom are members of the two projects. As part of the larger team, we do not claim to represent the views of all researchers involved in these partnerships, and we acknowledge that others may have had different experiences depending on the extent and nature of their involvement. Importantly, our reflections and analysis are inevitably subjective, shaped by our positionalities in terms of race, gender, class, education, and upbringing in different social, geographical, and political contexts. Nonetheless, our collaborative reflections helped us to pursue more ethical and policy relevant research, drawing upon solid research partnerships both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The application of collaborative autoethnography allowed us to systematically capture our reflections as authors on some key topics related to conducting our research projects in times of uncertainty. Although there is no blueprint for this approach, we decided to undertake a flexible and iterative process recommended by Chang et al. (2016). As with other ethnographic approaches (Chang et al., 2016), our writing began early in the process and continued throughout the data analysis and interpretation. The specific steps that we undertook are as follows:

- (1) Identify the research topic of mutual interest and determine each of the author's roles in the study.
- (2) Select the key four areas, which co-authors collectively identified as important to critically reflect upon including:
  - (a) Global North-South research partnership: the partnership between the international and Ethiopian teams that made up the two research projects;
  - (b) Key stakeholder engagement: the relationship that the two research projects have established with the Ethiopian government and key stakeholders;
  - (c) Defining uncertainty: the types of uncertainty faced by the research projects during COVID-19
  - (d) A collective response to uncertainty: the challenges encountered and the adapted approaches to overcome uncertainty.
- (3) Reflect upon these four areas in relation to the specific research project(s);
- (4) Compile the individual reflections and conduct thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006);
- (5) Hold group discussions on emerging themes from our reflections – the data was transcribed and integrated into the ongoing analysis;
- (6) Prepare a draft based on our reflections and discussion to elicit feedback from the wider research team;
- (7) Integrate any further feedback into the analysis and circulate the draft among co-authors to reach a consensus on our collective reflections.

Ethical considerations in collaborative autoethnography include making sure that participation is entirely voluntary, that the focus is mutually agreed upon and that the collaboration is non-hierarchical and non-coercive (Lapadat, 2017), of which we complied as co-authors. We each consented to engaging in the full process and ensuring that the research was participatory and

inclusive. One benefit of collaborative autoethnography is that it lends a greater degree of anonymity for researchers involved in the process than an autoethnographic approach would allow (Lapadat, 2017).

## Findings

In this section, we present our findings from the collaborative autoethnography guided by the ethics of care framework. We first discuss our North-South research partnerships and relationships with the government prior to the pandemic. We then consider the factors that enabled us to conduct ethical and policy-relevant research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, we reflect on the strategies that we undertook to ensure the impact of the research.

### ***Building blocks for collaborative research partnerships prior to the pandemic***

#### ***Striving to create equitable North-South research partnerships***

The ELP and RISE Ethiopia research projects were both initiated by our Ethiopian colleagues in response to international funding calls. In the case of the ELP project, our Ethiopian colleagues from Addis Ababa University attended a workshop where the aim of the funding call was announced. The Ethiopian team then submitted a proposal in collaboration with the international team, which received funding. An important part of the ELP projects was that the government was involved from the beginning and the project aimed to build government capacity. A similar process followed with the RISE Ethiopia research project. Our colleagues from Addis Ababa University responded to a funding call, which was initially unsuccessful. The Addis Ababa University team then teamed up with the University of Cambridge team, and together submitted an updated proposal, which later received funding. The coming together of the two research partners was facilitated by existing links between researchers located in Ethiopian and the United Kingdom. Across these two partnerships, the expertise of the partners, the reputability of the different institutions and the relationships amongst and between different partners was a key in establishing the research and securing funding. Both the ELP and RISE projects were funded in such a manner that ensured that we were able to adapt to the changing priorities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In reflecting upon the value of our research partnerships, we agreed that together we were greater than the sum of their parts and that each research partner contributed important skills and knowledge. In addition to being experts in the field of education, our Ethiopian partners had a strong record of conducting research in Ethiopia and had a close relationship with central and regional governments. Importantly, this included a wealth of knowledge of the historical, political, and socio-cultural context of the country, and the diversity of the regional states. This was imperative for designing and implementing the research, both prior to and during the pandemic, and also for engaging with the government, as we discuss in more detail below. The extensive expertise of our Ethiopian team in coordinating large-scale fieldwork, helped to ensure the efficiency of the fieldwork and the quality of the data collected. In relation to the strengths of our international team, this included an accumulated experience in conducting research in countries in the Global South, including Ethiopia, prior to the research partnership. In addition, the experience of the wider global education landscape was helpful in situating the research within this context, and for helping to ensure the research was relevant both within and beyond Ethiopia. Furthermore, our international partners had a good network with donors and research communities, experiences of securing funding and strategies to disseminate research to the local and global research community. Overall, while each of the partners brought important strengths, we agreed that the research could not have been conducted by one partner alone.

While the two projects were initiated by the Ethiopian researchers, each step of the research process involved joint decision-making and collaboration between the northern and southern



partners. Responsibilities were shared amongst the different members of the two partnerships, maximising on their different skills and knowledge. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ethiopian and international teams of the respective projects would come together regularly to meet in person in either Ethiopia or the UK. During these meetings, in designing different strands of the research and also in analysing and preparing outputs (e.g. papers and presentations), we engaged in an iterative process that involved discussing ideas, preparing drafts and proposals, providing comments and feedback and producing the outputs. This helped to establish mutual trust and understanding amongst the partners, and to establish a conducive mode of working that took account of the different needs of team members. This approach facilitated the creation of strong research partnerships but it also required the investment of considerable time and resources.

### ***Sustained engagement with the government***

In addition to the strong research partnerships, the two research projects were defined by a close partnership with the Ministry of Education. The government has participated in each of the two projects since the beginning and also became a key target audience of the research. This process was led by our Ethiopian partners who are based in Addis Ababa, which is where the federal Ministry of Education is also based, which further helped to facilitate this ongoing interaction with the government. Our first step in engaging the government in the research was to identify who the important stakeholders. Different members of the Ethiopian team had long-standing relationships with a number of government officials working within the Ministry of Education, having worked within the same education space for many years. The status of our Ethiopian colleagues was very important, especially in establishing trust with certain 'gatekeepers' within the government, which otherwise would have made the research very difficult. This was also helped by the reputation of the international team, including a number of researchers who had considerable experience conducting research in the Ethiopian context. Furthermore, the fact that the ELP and RISE Ethiopia teams involved a number of researchers, meant that our engagement did not rely on one person alone. The initial connections that we had within the government were helpful not only for establishing acceptance of the research, but also for gaining access to other important stakeholders within the education system through referrals. In addition to these processes, as part of the RISE Ethiopia research we carried out a political economy analysis of the education system, which involved stakeholders mapping key informant interviews. This helped to deepen our understanding of whom the important actors were within the system and what their level of interest and influence was within the system (Asgedom et al., 2019).

Recognising that singular strategies would not be sufficient for sustained engagement, we pursued a number of different formal and informal strategies for engaging the government through the course of the two research projects. This involved establishing an advisory board within the Ministry of Education, and holding regular meetings, seminars, and workshops, as well as more informal processes, such as arranging to have coffee or lunches to share updates. Nevertheless, our engagement with the government was not straightforward and sometimes encountered challenges. First, we invested significant time and resources engaging with the government, which perhaps could have been spent on other activities. The government also devoted significant time to our research in addition to their existing responsibilities, which increased the importance of ensuring the research had an impact. Another important challenge was the frequent turnover of many government officials, including five different Ministers of Education during the two projects. This often required us to form new relationships and update new staff about the objectives of our respective research projects. In many cases government officials were very knowledgeable and interested in the project and issues, but in other cases they often had competing priorities, which sometimes led to meetings being rescheduled or limited information being received. Another challenge was that our engagement was mostly limited to federal-level government officials – although this reflects the nature of the policy process in Ethiopia as identified through our research

(Asgedom et al., 2019). Overall, engaging with the government required significant investment and a level of flexibility and adaptability to maintain.

Despite a number of challenges, the relationships that we established with the government were mutually beneficial. For the two research projects, our engagement with the government helped to identify important government priorities. The acceptance of our research by the Ministry of Education was crucial for implementing the research and gaining access to the research sites and to required data and documents. Sharing emerging findings of the research with government stakeholders – for example, through stakeholder dialogue workshops – allowed us to validate and improve emerging research findings and subsequently helped to increase the quality and uptake of the research. An additional benefit of this close engagement was our ability to identify and navigate potential sensitivities of our research. For the government, the research was able to respond to their needs, and they had access to emerging research findings in a timely and efficient manner. Our research findings had a direct impact on government for example, by helping to inform strategies for ensuring the successful implementing of education reforms and, in the case of the ELP project, in helping to increase the capacity of government in relation to assessment tools.

### ***Adapting to our research to the COVID-19 uncertainty***

#### ***Trust and solidarity: maintaining our North-South research partnerships***

Our investment in building solid partnerships before COVID-19 paid dividends when we were hit by the global health crisis. The level of trust between our partners, our clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and the good working relationships that we had established were crucial in our ability to continue our research during this time. Without the existing partnership, it would have been nearly impossible for our research projects to continue. Each team member's role became more specific given that Ethiopian colleagues could still communicate with the governments, schools, teachers and students and had a better knowledge of the COVID-19 status and relevant policy measures in the country. Northern researchers worked on collecting information about distance research methods, existing evidence to respond to the previous shocks (e.g. earthquake, Ebola virus, etc.), and the latest updates on COVID-19 research from the international education community.

Yet, we also faced several challenges in maintaining our North-South research partnership during COVID-19 as we could no longer come together to meet in person. When we had to shift to meeting online, live time collaboration became more challenging since our Ethiopian colleagues had difficulty working from home due to limited internet connectivity. For our Ethiopian colleagues, travelling outside the home to access the internet could potentially lead to a greater risk of catching the virus. Continuing our research partnerships during the pandemic, therefore, required us to be more adaptable and responsive to each other's needs. It helped us build resilience in the research by retaining flexibility and reflexivity throughout the partnership.

#### ***Attentiveness and responsiveness: shifting the focus of the research to reflect policy priorities***

Although we faced uncertainty about whether we could continue our ELP and RISE research during COVID-19, several factors were important in our decision to adapt our research to be more context-relevant and policy-oriented. First, we understood that having access to contextual information at the local level would be crucial to help the government mitigate the negative impact of the school closures and to help them plan safe school re-opening. Second, our studies were well placed to achieve an in-depth understanding of what was taking place in response to the ongoing pandemic, both within the education system and at the school level, building on our existing research since 2018. Third, given the equity focus of our research, we would be able to include the perspectives of the vulnerable and marginalised (i.e. girls, students living in rural areas or disadvantaged households, and students with disabilities), those who were more likely to have been more adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourth, our established relationships with the

government meant that we would be able to inform them of important findings from the study in a timely and efficient manner.

Having decided to continue our research, our ability to reorient the focus of our research was facilitated by our North-South research partnerships and sustained engagement with the government. The ELP shifted its focus to the implications of COVID-19 on young students' learning and well-being from the perspectives of parents and caregivers. At the same time, RISE changed its direction to the effect of COVID-19 on primary education in Ethiopia from the perspectives of school principals and teachers. Access to up-to-date contextual information facilitated by our Ethiopian research partners was critical for our ability to adapt the research, as the international team were not in the position to understand the extent to which COVID-19 hit the education systems and schools due to travel restrictions. Second, our sustained engagement with the government was invaluable in allowing us to identify their policy priorities to respond to the pandemic, including a Concept Note for Education Sector COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). Third, the international partners were up to date with the global education response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed us to draw on the shared learning among the international community.

Drawing upon the diverse skills and knowledge of North-South research partners, we navigated which methodological approaches would be most suitable for continuing our research during the pandemic. Among the various distance research methods that have emerged since the outbreak of COVID-19 (e.g. Lupton, 2021), we decided to use mobile phone surveys. Phone surveys offer an alternative approach to data collection for crisis monitoring when face-to-face collection would not be feasible due to external shocks (Dabalen et al., 2016). It allowed us to undertake rapid and high-quality data collections from households in both urban and rural locations and enabled us to collect data in high-risk environments without risking the safety of either the fieldworkers or the participants included in the ELP and RISE research. To elicit policy-relevant implications from our research, the sample was selected among vulnerable groups (e.g. rural households only included in ELP research), and the phone survey instrument underwent iterative revision processes within the team intending to fill the information gaps the government had. In addition, the previous success of the research teams in generating funding for research was an important asset, and both research projects were able to secure additional financing for conducting research related to the COVID-19 pandemic during the crisis.

### ***Responsibilities and competence: implementing careful research practices***

Undertaking distance research during the COVID-19 pandemic required careful research design and vigilant ethical considerations. In designing our research, we benefitted from knowledge exchange and shared learning across the ELP and RISE Ethiopia research projects. During an iterative process of phone survey instrument development, we defined the boundaries of our surveys, which involved limiting the length of the surveys (max. 45 min), selecting a reduced number of topics (max. Six topics), and avoiding the inclusion of sensitive research topics to overcome some of the shortcomings of the distance research. We also carefully designed the survey items, seeking to ensure comprehension and enable comparison across the surveys. It required a collaborative process of discussion and refinement. We engaged in extensive pre-piloting and exchanged lessons learned across our two projects. This careful research practice required substantial time and effort from all research partners, especially when we could not meet in person. Once the design of the two studies was finalised, the fieldworker training and the data collection were conducted in parallel. Although training the fieldworkers at a distance was challenging, using the same pool of fieldworkers across the two studies – all of whom had previously been involved in the research – helped to facilitate the efficiency of the data collection. Our contextual knowledge of Ethiopia also helped us anticipate and prepare for potential challenges in implementing the research, such as limited electricity and unstable phone connections.

Prior to conducting the phone surveys, ethical clearance was obtained from the ethical review board of Addis Ababa University and the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. In

terms of key ethical issues in conducting distance research in times of uncertainty, we benefitted from our extensive field experience, while also applying more strict risk assessment tools and fieldwork criteria required by the two universities. Recognising that many of the participants would be living in precarious circumstances due to the pandemic, we undertook steps to reduce the burden of the research on the participants including scheduling the interviews at a time that suited the participants and taking time to put the participants at ease at the start of the interview. We obtained verbal consent from participants, which is an established practice in Ethiopia, only once we were sure that participants fully understood what they were consenting to. During the interviews, fieldworkers were advised to engage in active listening and cross-checking to respond to the loss of important cues and body language. We provided compensation to all school-level stakeholders and parents through the provision of phone credit, which was suitable in the Ethiopian context. Overall, our deep contextual knowledge enabled us to respond to these ethical issues.

### ***Achieving greater research impact***

The findings and evidence generated through our research were widely disseminated in a timely and efficient manner. Our phone survey was conducted in August 2020, and we worked together to analyse and release a report that contains our findings within a month. Our Ethiopian partners presented these findings in a workshop organised by the Ministry of Education in September 2020 where the government sought information to prepare for the school's re-opening. Our research highlighted several urgent issues: first, very few students had benefitted from distance learning or home-based learning, and second, health, hygiene, and safety issues remain critical in many Ethiopian schools, which raised concerns about hastily prepared school re-opening. For example, we found that more than one-fifth of schools do not have adequate handwashing facilities. Our findings were highly influential, and several recommendations from our reports helped to inform government strategies for re-opening schools. For example, the government had a six-week make-up class when the schools were reopened. Our findings also highlighted several important areas for future research, including the importance of students' mental health and well-being in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, we conducted research on students' socio-emotional skills in 2021 by securing additional funding for research (Bayley et al., 2022). Our findings were not only relevant at the national level but were also highly relevant at the international level. We disseminated the findings from our COVID-19 research through multiple channels, including blogs, research reports, journal articles, and online meetings/workshops to achieve greater dissemination and uptake of the research (see Kim et al., 2021; Yorke et al., 2021). For instance, we coordinated research communication with a wide network of researchers who conducted distance research in Ethiopia during COVID-19. In attendance of government officials and donors, the ELP and RISE research were jointly presented with other institutions, including the World Bank Ethiopia Office, the British Council, Young Lives, and Gender & Adolescence Global Evidence (GAGE).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In this article, we have discussed the contribution of equitable North-South partnerships for conducting ethical and policy-relevant research during times of uncertainty. Using collaborative autoethnography, we have reflected on our experience conducting two interconnected education research projects in Ethiopia. In line with the existing literature (e.g. Brannelly & Boulton, 2017; Groot et al., 2019), we have demonstrated the value of Tronto's (2013) ethics of care framework for reflecting on our research, which foregrounds relationships and contextual knowledge to respond to the needs of those who are most marginalised. From our experience, we revealed the central role of relationships – both concerning our North-South research partnership and our engagement with the government – in our ability to re-orient, adapt, and implement the research during COVID-19. We also attempted to ensure this had an impact on policy with a careful, ethical approach. In

**Table 2.** Guidelines for adapting research to uncertainty.

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| (1) Invest in equitable North-South research partnerships | Trust and solidarity |
| (2) Build and sustain relationships with government       |                      |
| (3) Identify topics of social relevance                   | Attentiveness        |
| (4) Identify (changing) policy priorities                 |                      |
| (5) Privilege the experiences of vulnerable groups        | Responsiveness       |
| (6) Identify and address power imbalances                 |                      |
| (7) Collaboratively design research methods               | Responsibility       |
| (8) Identifying pathways to policy impact                 |                      |
| (9) Implement careful research practices                  | Competence           |
| (10) Engage in action to bring about policy               |                      |

Table 2, we summarise the strategies for building equitable North-South research partnerships and develop policy-oriented solutions corresponding to Tronto's (2013) ethics of care framework.

### ***Trust and solidarity***

Our research partnerships were initiated by our Ethiopian colleagues, which may have helped them to be more equitable (Asare, Mitchell & Rose, 2022), although our research partnerships still required the significant investment of time and resources and greater flexibility and adaptability. Established partnerships helped to ensure a number of benefits in times of uncertainty, including our shared skills, knowledge and expertise; the ability to combine in-depth contextual knowledge with an international perspective; access to resources and funding; and the ability to achieve greater research impact. Our sustained engagement with the government enabled our ability to respond to (changing) government priorities, to increase the quality and validity of the research and to ensure the timely communication of research findings for impact. This was also important in helping to navigate the potential sensitivities of the research. Our Ethiopian colleagues greatly facilitated these relationships, building on their existing relationships established over many years. However, it was also necessary to engage the government through a range of strategies (formal and informal) throughout the research and adapt to the needs of the government. Based on our reflections, we suggest that that resources and infrastructure for building research partnerships should be built into the research design and adequate funding should be allocated for this purpose.

### ***Attentiveness and responsiveness***

In identifying topics of social relevance and responding to (changing) policy priorities, it was important for us to balance our alignment with the needs of government with the need to respond to the needs of those who are most marginalised, whose perspectives are often missing from the policy process. Our North-South research partnerships put us in the position to be able to integrate knowledge of the priorities of the government, facilitated by our sustained engagement, as well as our knowledge of the global education response to the pandemic in informing our research. In addition, the focus on improving equity central to the two projects, meant that we could respond to the needs of those who are most marginalised in the context of COVID-19. Although Mulugeta et al. (2019) suggests that the government and researchers may have different priorities and different understandings of the purposes of the research, our close relationships help to negotiate these tensions and ensure that our research was both focused on government priorities and also on the needs of those who are most marginalised. We propose that researchers should actively seek to balance these concerns, which in turn can help to identify more transformative and sustainable pathways for social change. Similarly, funders should budget for extra funds to allow researchers to adapt in times of uncertainty (Bradley, 2008).

## **Responsibility and competence**

While relatively few guidelines on how researchers should respond to the COVID-19 pandemic existed at the time, our North-South partnerships helped to navigate these challenges. Our shared skills, knowledge and experience, our in-depth contextual knowledge and our connection to the international domain allowed us to secure additional funding to carry out the research and to carefully design and implement the research in the context of uncertainty and respond to important ethical concerns. This was further facilitated by knowledge exchange between the ELP and RISE Ethiopia projects. Our North-South research partnerships helped to achieve greater engagement and impact by quickly disseminating our findings through a broad network of channels, particularly within the Ministry of Education. Our experience reflects a discussion in the wider literature about the importance of relationships in creating impact (e.g. Fransman et al., 2019; Oliver et al., 2014).

Finally, the collaborative and reflective research we pursued will be of interest to researchers in both the Global North and Global South, who are planning to engage in research partnerships. Since our research was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, it may not be generalisable to other forms of crisis, such as natural disasters (e.g. drought and earthquake) or human conflict and wars. In this light, we conclude that critical reflections on ethics and policy relevance should be an integral part of research in various contexts and future unforeseen circumstances.

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