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Global partnerships on paper and in practice: Critical observations from inside a Global Challenge Research Fund capacity-development project

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Abstract

This article describes the bureaucratic processes required to establish and manage a single international capacity-development project that brought together a funding council (AHRC), UK University (SOAS University of London) and universities and other research organisations in Myanmar and Ethiopia. Drawing from ethnographic critiques of the planning and audit practices employed in international development and in the UK University sector, we track the formal certification of partnership as enacted through due diligence and contracts, budgets and timeframes, and reconciliations and reporting. These practices point to pervasive assumptions about capacity transfer and the unequal basis of international research coalitions spanning the Global North and Global South. In this article, we challenge these assumptions by documenting how the allocation of capacity is constrained in hierarchies of time and space. For equitable partnership arrangements to be achieved, we recommend that capacity development be considered a long-term exchange that flows from mutual reflection and learning from one another.

KEYWORDS
audit culture, capacity development, global challenges, managerialism, partnership

1 | INTRODUCTION: ADDRESSING GLOBAL CHALLENGES

This article contributes to an emerging literature on what happens when Universities venture into Aidland.[1] Though mutual benefit may be realised through participation in North–South academic collaborations, these partnerships are not without tensions and challenges. Seeking to decolonise international partnerships, an emerging critique points to the hierarchies and inequalities that have defined relationships between Northern and Southern partners (Istratii & Lewis, 2020; Mormina & Istratii, 2021). The inherent inequalities between partners in the Global North and the Global South—differences in access to funding, resources and networks—allow European or North American partners to dominate research agendas and define the parameters of resulting programmes (see, among others, Barrett et al., 2011; Bradley, 2017; Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2018; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020; Ishengoma, 2016; Mlambo & Baxter, 2018; Tabulawa, 2017). Specialist knowledge and expertise are thereby extracted from the South in an unequal exchange in which limited capacity development—usually in the form of training or transfer of institutional practices—moves the other way.

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) was established by the UK Government in 2016 to 'addresses complex global development challenges and support collaborative research that will improve the economic prosperity, welfare and quality of life' of people living in Development Assistance Committee (DAC)-listed countries.[2] As part of the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) commitment, the GCRF presented opportunities for scholars based in UK Universities to contribute to major international initiatives including the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Combining development objectives with academic research, one of the expressed aims of GCRF funded research was the promotion of two-way/mutual capacity development (Grieve & Mitchell, 2020, p. 516). This is in keeping with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in which partnership and capacity development—targeting knowledge, skills and capacity in a broad sense—are considered a vital vehicle for implementation and for sustaining these achievements in the long term.[3] The Global Challenges Research Fund aims to realise these goals through the creation of partnerships between 'capacity rich' universities in the UK and their equivalents in DAC listed countries predefined as capacity deficient. A central goal of capacity development is transforming participants into autonomous agents. However, as Rajeshwari et al. (2020) highlight, there is often an inherent tension between capacity development and autonomy because capacity development programmes are frequently set up to fill an externally predefined lack in capacity. With schemes such as the GCRF effectively ringfencing part of the ODA budget to be spent by UK Universities, it is incumbent on funders and grant holders to think carefully about the nature of this exchange and the legacy created from working with partners in DAC listed countries.

Though it is important to challenge the assumptions and practices of researchers individually and collectively, doing so requires us to pay proper attention to the institutional arrangements and bureaucratic practices within universities in which these behaviours are normalised. Few would argue with Graeber's assessment that paperwork—designed to be maximally simple and self-contained—is boring. But the *study* of paperwork—the rituals that surround it, the symbolic meanings conveyed and the manner in which it communicates and shapes relationships—are rich in complex webs of signification (Graeber, 2012, p. 108). This article unpacks the complex webs of meaning and

[1] 'Aidland' is a term coined by Raymond Apthorpe; the territory is charted in Mosse's edited collection (2011).
[2] https://ahrc.ukri.org/funding/internationalfunding/the-global-challenges-research-fund/ accessed 12/8/2021.
[3] The SDGs recognise that 'a successful development agenda requires inclusive partnerships—at the global, regional, national and local levels—built upon principles and values, and upon a shared vision and shared goals'' https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/globalpartnerships/ accessed 17/8/2021.

signification, the ritual symbolisms and the social relationships that are bound up in the written documents surrounding a single programme established under the AHRC GCRF funding stream. In doing so, we take Graeber's general point about modern bureaucracy and apply it to the thorny question of establishing cross-national academic collaborations within (post)colonial development relationships.

Responding to a call-for-applications to the AHRC's GCRF Network+ award, in 2017, SOAS anthropologist Emma Crewe led a coalition to apply for funding under the title ‘Deepening Democracy: Networking for historical, cultural and arts research on Parliaments and People’.[4] The application highlighted a need to promote understandings of the relationship between parliaments and people in two DAC listed countries—Ethiopia and Myanmar. Through the provision of grants and other forms of support to scholars, artists and activists in Myanmar and Ethiopia, the proposed project aimed to strengthen civil society engagement in politics by encouraging public enquiry, scrutiny and debate. The AHRC's reviewers recognised the potential of this approach and, in summer 2017, agreed to award a grant of £2 million to Principal Investigator Emma Crewe with SOAS University of London as the host organisation.

And this where the other authors of this article—Beth and Richard—came in. Like Emma, Beth and Richard are anthropologists interested in the study of organisations. Richard, Deepening Democracy Programme Manager between 2017 and 2020, has taught and written about the anthropology of development. Beth, Finance Officer (2017–2020), then Programme Manager (2020–2021), studied for a Masters in Ethnographic Research Methods while working at SOAS. Other members of the SOAS team—Jas Kaur and Amir Massoumian—were also anthropologists, and the project operates out of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. We therefore entred the Deepening Democracy project with a strong brief to inject an ethnographic sensibility into our work: as organisational anthropologists, we continually reflected on the kinds of relationships and processes that constitute international partnerships and the ways in which they are shaped by institutional structures.

This article uses our experiences on the Deepening Democracy project as a prism through which to view the processes involved in establishing, maintaining and managing an international coalition that spanned individuals and institutions across three continents. Methodologically, as participant observers, this required us to face two ways—on the one side, engaging with systems and management practices employed by SOAS and most other UK Universities and, on the other, learning about the difficulties faced by partners, grant-hosting-organisations and grant-holders in Ethiopia and Myanmar as they sought to conform to working practices determined in very different institutional settings. Mutual reflection was embedded in all our activities—from drawing-up contracts to reconciling advances and recording outputs. This was supplemented through in-depth interviews with grant-holders, partners and representatives of host-organisations and UK Universities to learn more about their needs and the restrictions they faced. Out of the intense conversations that emerged, three key questions kept recurring—who has the power to recognise institutions, expect a predictable future and frame the past? We have divided this article into three sections—on due diligence and contracts, on budgets and timeframes and on representing activities and spending—to engage with and address these questions.

2 | DEMONSTRATING INSTITUTIONAL LEGIBILITY

We started the Deepening Democracy programme by advertising the availability of funding to support research in Myanmar and Ethiopia. The response we got was electrifying: The quantity and quality of grant applications demonstrated the capacity of artists, academics and activists from all parts of Myanmar and Ethiopia to carry out important

[4]This coalition included co-investigators Ruth Fox (Hansard Society), Niraja Gopal Jayal (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi), Cristina Leston-Bandeira (University of Leeds) and Mandy Sadan (SOAS) and partnership organisations the Yangon based Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundations (EMReF) and Ethiopia's Forum for Social Studies (FSS) and Setaweet under the directorship, respectively, of Myat Thet Thitsar, Meheret Ayenew and Sehin Teferra. Dr. Jas Kaur joined the programme in May 2018 as communications and policy officer; Amir Massoumian assumed a key role that ensured the successful completion of the programme (2020–21).

and impactful investigations. Individual applicants' research capacity was evidenced in the application form, C.V.s and reference statements that accompanied their proposals. However, the GCRF commitment to institutional capacity building specified that the grants were not given to individuals but instead would be hosted by organisation to which researchers were affiliated. As recipients of financial transfers, host organisations would be expected to oversee all aspects of grant management and reporting and to ensure standards of financial and ethical probity. But before entering into an agreement SOAS required each host to demonstrate that they had the management capacity necessary to support the research programme; that they were financially stable and willing to undergo external audit and that they had policies in place to control risk and detect fraud and corruption. The purpose of due diligence, taken at face value, is to ensure that the institution would uphold its side of the partnership deal. But, underneath this simple claim, it was clear that much else is involved: These checks are the first in a series of rites that define the relationship between institutions and individuals in the Global North and Global South.

SOAS's internal guidance on conducting due diligence policy states 'the extent to which a due diligence will be undertaken will depend on the nature of the partnership, the status of the organisation, their geographical location as well the anticipated role and responsibilities'. This approach might seem sensibly open to difference, but the following sentence makes clear the geographical bias of this flexibility: 'it is not expected to undertake due diligence on UK or European Higher Education Institutions'. From this, we can see that SOAS, in common with other UK funders, models partnership with the expectation that organisational arrangements should conform to those in the UK and Europe. These arrangements are expected to be demonstrated through the possession of formal policies regarding research integrity and ethics; in addition, organisations need to show previous experience of managing research funding and the possession of in-house financial management process. The performance of due diligence—a requirement of funding institutions—establishes 'a relationship of power between scrutiniser and observed [in which] the latter are rendered objects of information, never subjects in communication' (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 59). These 'rituals of verification' have a depersonalising effect by which individuals, relationships and institutions are reshaped according to the image demanded by the inspector (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 72). The ritual collection of documents demonstrating institutional conformity permits little scope for discussion, nuance or taking account of diversity. Disregarding the varied realities apparent in many Asian and African countries, due diligence thus becomes an exercise in creating institutional legibility.

For reasons outlined above—institutional familiarity, legibility and the simplicity of doing business together—it is often the case that international research projects run out of UK Universities will tend to return to the same individuals, departments and institutions when making partnerships in the Global South. With funding skewed in favour of what are seen as higher capacity countries, regions and institutions, international partnerships can end up exacerbating existing inequalities between universities and academics (Fransman et al., 2018, p. 21). As Grieve and Mitchell (2020, p. 524) point out, this seems contrary to GCRF objectives of fostering new connections and networks, 'how can emerging institutions build the track record they need to attract Global North research partners without having the opportunity to engage in such partnerships in the first place?'

For us, the quickest and simplest way to confirm the required checks was when we were tasked with establishing partnership arrangements with organisations whose size and functions most closely approximated our own. But might seeking similarity and uniformity—in organisation, policies and practices—result in the exclusion of difference and diversity? Though academics are employed by universities, this is not the case with many artists who tend to be unaligned with recognised institutions; similarly, civil society organisations may not conform to all the requirements of due diligence checks. In Myanmar, this regularly presented problems when we were required to conduct checks on newly established organisations staffed by talented and passionate young researcher/activists, who, often with good reason, preferred not to register under a government department in case it constrained their involvement in activities deemed political. Other bodies, though recognised by the Myanmar government, would, at first sight, appear unacceptable to UK funders—the education wing of an ethnic armed organisation being one such example.

Institutions, policies and practices that are considered normal in one place may be unfamiliar in another. This was often our experience in Myanmar. We faced a different set of issues in Ethiopia where many of the major universities had long experience of working with Northern donors and, consequently, were able to easily forward the detailed policy documents, research ethics statements, outlines of management structures and institutional practices required for our due diligence checks. Of course, as Mosse (2004) reveals, policy does not necessarily conform to practice: Having a governance statement does not mean that the policy will be implemented. Yet, in a number of these cases, we found the problem facing researchers was not the laxity with which rules were applied but, rather, that they were applied in too rigid a fashion by university authorities. Where universities were selected to host research, we later learned that administrators placed onerous demands on researchers that disrupted and delayed their work. Audit culture leads individuals and institutions to measure themselves against external 'benchmarks', 'performance indicators' and 'ratings'. The applicability of these indicators—and whether conforming to them meaningfully improves performance—is rarely considered.

This performance of due diligence led us to reflect on what these checks communicated about the self-image of Northern institutions and how their counterparts in the Global South were being viewed. We perform due diligence on *them* in order to confirm that potential partners possess sufficient capacity to oversee their side of the research and would complete the stipulated reporting requirements. The need for due diligence and the call for 'building capacity' implies that partner institutions in the Global South lack the kinds of organisational practices and policies that are considered to be present in Global North organisations. To demonstrate proficiency, Global South organisations are compelled to inflexibly adopt top-heavy and bureaucratic management structures. But, as we will go on to describe later in this article, Global North institutions rarely live up to the standards they impose as a basic requirement in others.

Due diligence can turn into a tick-box exercise focusing on demonstrating the formal existence of systems, policies and processes seen to signify good governance and management. The process ritually demonstrates an institution's legibility and provides evidence of its past ability to conform to externally imposed requirements. Such checks have little predictive value for future partnership. Rather, the ritual collection of evidence is intended to create an audit trail of legally required checks so that, should anything go wrong, the funding institution can defect blame onto others. As such, due diligence is about accountability not capacity—responsibility for failure lies with the grant receiving institution, not with the grant giver. The effect of this selectivity does not end after the fund is awarded. As with other audit practices, this method of certification—formalised and subject to independent review—puts at risk the informal relations of trust, flexibility and appreciation of difference that genuine partnerships are built upon.

3 | PREDICTING THE FUTURE

With background checks completed, we could move on to the signing of the contract. The standard award letter authorised by SOAS's contracts team contained multiple clauses outlining Payment Terms, Reporting, Warranties and Liabilities, Start Dates, Transfers, Accounting, the Right to Terminate, Depositing Outcome and Public Output, Communicating Outputs, Ethics, Intellectual Property Rights, and on Transfers of Awards, Extensions to Awards, Changes to the Project, Project Progression and Reporting Requirements. An annex of the award letter defined the budget—allocating separate lines for salaries, travel, refreshment, accommodation and equipment—with overheads limited to no more than 20% of staff costs. The final element of the contract specified the payment and reporting schedules with a defined end date. If due diligence is essentially backward looking and without predictive value, this contract, and the budget outline it contains, works to tie partners into a future relationship with fixed terms and conditions to which the grant holder is expected to adhere. Contracts always come with trailing cultural assumptions (Riles, 2011). A close examination of the content of the SOAS award letter reveals the structural asymmetries that are written into its paragraphs: In this section, we detail these with specific regard first to the fixing of budgets and future spending and, second, to the ways that timeframes for activities and outputs suggest an unachievable degree of predictability.

One of the ambitions of the Deepening Democracy programme was to offer opportunities to those who had not previously be able to access international research funding. Though experienced in conducting research (many applicants had previously worked as assistants or co-investigators on international projects), few had extensive experience managing research projects, and some were completely new to it. Consequently, some of the funding requests we received underestimated the cost of the research activities. Others had budgets that were structured in ways that made evidencing and reporting difficult (potentially meaning that some valid research expenses could not be reimbursed because they could not be evidenced or did not fit under the correct spending line of the original budget). Having been asked to confidently predict the future, they were tied to forecasts that would likely require adjustments as circumstances changed. For Global South institutions, operating with low turnovers and without financial cushions, entering into an agreement on these terms could leave them dangerously exposed.

What is a budget? Usually, budgets are understood as the presentation of an anticipated claim that once confirmed becomes a firm promise. This idea—and the debt relationship it implies—all too often structures ‘partnership’ between those who are giving money and those who are receiving it. Another way to see a budget is as a communication tool that helps to explain activities. We took the latter view—giving less weight to the numbers and more to the thinking behind and around the figures. After grants were awarded, we took the opportunity to explain all this to our grant holders and to review their proposals with them. At this stage, several grantees told us that they had deliberately minimised their funding requests in the belief that their proposals would be reviewed more favourably. Worried that these funding underestimates might jeopardise the completion of the project, we commonly found ourselves encouraging them to reconsider their budgets upwards. At the same time (and reiterated constantly as each project evolved), we made it clear that we understood that it might be necessary to vary budget predictions and vire between lines. We viewed budgets not as perfect forecasts that must be adhered to but as approximations that might be subject to modification according to how the research project developed. In practice, we became brokers of variance.

Contracts and budgets provide institutions with the false reassurance that complex, messy, imprecise, unruly and informal human relationships can be ordered and made predictable. The managerialism imposed by Global Northern donors brings with it an ‘audit culture’ of standard tools, frameworks and reporting procedures. Of course, all human activities are time limited, but the use of overly rigid time frames in development projects has long been criticised—log-frames for programme planning and monitoring too easily turn into lock frames (Gasper, 1997). This applies also to research projects: Powell (2006) and Mougeot (2017) highlight instances when Anglo–Nordic perceptions of linear progress do not readily translate into other languages and notions of temporality held by other cultures. We would go further than this to suggest that understandings of time as predictable, of cause and effect, do not even match the reality in the Anglo-Nordic countries—the key difference being that Northern donor attribute delays in progress or meeting objectives as being due to a ‘lack of time’ while dismissing similar problems for Southern recipients as caused by a ‘lack of capacity’. Applied to GCRF research, Fransman et al. write,

> global challenge research tends to unfold in complex contexts (often involving humanitarian crises). Where funding does not support time to negotiate these contexts properly or flexibility to respond to unpredictable events, it is unlikely that research will extend far beyond the more risk-adverse/accessible ‘usual suspect’ contexts that limit global representation …. Moreover, collaborative research often generates unexpected outcomes that can remain untapped if funding does not support iterative or adaptive practice (Fransman et al., 2018, p. 22).

The standard SOAS contract states that ‘the grantee may encounter circumstances that require the programme of work to be modified. In such cases, prior written approval must be obtained, and a revised programme of work submitted’. Here, the legalistic language, the need for written approval, makes it clear who holds power over time. Grieve and Mitchell (2020, p. 523) quote a Principal Investigator from Ethiopia: ‘projects get delayed, you feel embarrassed, but you do not want to tell your partners because you do not want to shame your university or even your country. Your partner can blame you for non-delivery and I may be considered not a good collaborator from then on'. On Deepening Democracy, we learned of similar dilemmas confronting grant-holders: In one instance, a project leader felt compelled to continue her research even when it was putting her in physical danger. It was only after we visited her, learning of the pressures she faced, that she gained the confidence to ask if she might move her fieldwork to a safer location. Grieve and Mitchell (2020 p. 523–524) place nuanced understandings of 'institutional and political operating landscapes as crucial for a meaningful and equitable research partnership'. This works both ways—the institutional practices and culture of Global North funders must also be communicated, and their flaws acknowledged, to allow both sides of a partnerships to confidently understand where flexibility exists and how budgets, time and uncertainty might be negotiated. Partnerships and successful implementations of programmes are not just dependent on the existence of sensible rules and defined processes, but also on ongoing goodwill and mutual trust allowing both implementation and innovation on what has been agreed. An approach which de-emphasises prediction to favour mutually inductive learning and collaboration is for the benefit of all (Feinstein, 2020).

Predictions about the future—confirmed through proposals, business plans, theories of change, workplans and log-frames—serve to secure support and gain access to funds. Imaginative fictions must be presented as concrete certainties. However, by forever shifting attention forwards, they prevent actors from having to deal with the messy and uncertain contradictions of the present. In reality, different people want different things and have different priorities, and no one can be sure what the outcomes of activities will be or what everyone else, including the government, is going to do in one-, two-, or three-years' time. As the Deepening Development programme entred its final year, the global Covid-19 pandemic brought research to a stop and halted ambitious plans to promote findings on the international stage. Promises of a bright future are confounded by events. Meanwhile, another temporal pull arrives from the opposite direction.

4 | DOCUMENTING THE PAST

Having outlined how partnerships were formed, roles defined and expectations established, in this section, we skip forward to examine the ways in which completed projects were communicated and assessed. Here, the temporal direction of information is reversed—no longer were we as funders requesting predictions about the future from colleagues in Myanmar and Ethiopia; now, the flow of documents we required related to what had happened in the past—evidencing spending, activities and outputs. The need to match initial predictions (about the future) to rigid documentation of what happened (in the past) places severe demands on Global South partners. In this section, we consider the competing pulls of different forms of paperwork and ask how these tensions can be reduced.

Clause 28 of the Deepening Democracy contract states that organisations that agree to act as the host for grants 'will keep accurate and comprehensive financial records of spending associated with the grant awarded to it'. At specified intervals, '[an] expense report must be accompanied by supporting documentation and receipts for all expenses'. Expenditure and other liabilities were tightly defined as extended only to those 'specifically covered by the conditions of the award'. Financial transfers follow *after* the submission of evidence of spending. These requirements—considered standard in UK Universities—caused difficulties for researchers and their organisations in Myanmar and Ethiopia. For small organisations, under-resourced and with limited liquidity, this model of reimbursement makes work extremely difficult. Thankfully, this was recognised by SOAS, and we were able to provide advances against spending so that the award-holders did not have to pay costs from their pockets and wait—potentially for several months—to be recompensed. We learned to be flexible with the timing and size of transfers—proportionately larger advances were needed for small organisations and for projects that had considerable upfront costs. Even so, power over spending, in the sense of ownership of the allocated funds, remained firmly in the hands of the funder. All expenditure—reimbursements or for repaying an advance—had to be accounted for according to strict rules of evidence.

Often, administrative matters are side-lined from discussions and occur only at later stages as fixed instructions passed down from the donor to partners in the Global South. SOAS is constrained by its own rules, and by those of the project funders (AHRC/GCRF), so expenditure by partners in the Global South had to comply with these demands. For spending, we required receipts for single items of expenditure—the phrase 'we report on *actual* spending' was repeated until it became a mantra. But the *certification* of spending is not the same as *actual* spending: one of our Myanmar colleagues laughingly told us that, while appropriate and necessary spending is not always possible to document, fraudulent spending can easily be certified. Paradoxically, the need to enforce strict reporting requirements actually pushed up overall costs—grant holders reported that our inflexible approaches to evidencing spending required them to take more expensive options—taxi rather than bus, restaurant rather than food-stall. Feinstein has shown how development strategies, programmes and projects are designed making assumptions concerning financial variables such as future prices of outputs and inputs, exchange rates and productivity growth. Where knowledge about the future is limited, arrangements are made with the intention to minimise uncertainty (Feinstein, 2020, p. 1105). In practice, efforts to minimise uncertainty require a denial of reality which has the effect of displacing risk onto those least able to bear subsequent losses. As Ballesteros (2021, p. 35) points out, 'where tools, techniques or practices promote efficiency, neutrality, and cost-effectiveness, we might well ask for whom it is efficient, neutral, and cost-effective'.

It should not need emphasising that the context in Myanmar and Ethiopia differs considerably from those in which UK universities developed their practices. Critically reflecting on the demands of financial reporting, we recognised that the gap between *predicted* and *actual* is best accounted for with proper respect to the context in which spending takes places. Taking this a step further, we would agree with Grieve and Mitchell's (2020, p. 523) point that, ultimately, Northern funders should devolve responsibility for monitoring expenditure and reconciling receipts to counterparts in the country in which money is spent. If the necessary human and accountancy systems to do so are properly supported it might allow for quicker, context-specific, more responsive and appropriate fund management. It would also make a clear point about where ownership and control of the project is located.

A second element of reporting—perhaps less consequential than financial reconciliation but, as an academic project, of great interest to us—was the submission of project narratives and details of outputs arising from the research. Again, the wording of the standard SOAS contract established a claim to ultimate ownership of project outputs: 'No later than two months after the end of the project a final report written must be submitted and all relevant materials must be deposited with SOAS for archiving'. One approach to project evaluation is to tick outputs off against predictions made at the application stage, to ask whether the specified goals and objectives have been met and the predicted impacts achieved. Documenting results was one means by which the overall success of the Deepening Democracy programme could be evaluated: We spent considerable time ensuring that the range of outputs were uploaded to the UKRI's ResearchFish portal and highlighting them on our online output library.[5] But, while doing so, we wondered what exactly was being evaluated, and what was left unrecognised.

Within the international development sector, there remains a preference for the setting of targets which are enforced through sets of contractual relations. Many government donors and development NGOs hold a results-oriented approach in which, as Brehm (2004, p. 4) puts it, 'effective partnership relates to clarity about the purpose of the relationship and the quality of the work carried out'. 'Upward reporting' lends credence to a view of development as a set of deliverables, at the end of which development has taken place (Mougeot, 2017, pp. 8–9). The logic behind these measuring methods seems to be that the more that results can be quantified, the more valuable the achievement can be made out to be (Vallejo & Wehn, 2016, p. 1). Questioning the evaluation of results produced through international partnership, Powell (2006, p. 526) has described technocratic measurement tools as appropriate to the 'linear processes of the service industry, rather than the complex interactions of a knowledge industry'. Straightforward bureaucratic reporting mechanisms force conformity to project framings that are limited and pre-determined (Vallejo & Wehn, 2016). With accountability, transparency and good governance reduced to quantitative measures,

[5]https://grnpp.org/output-library/ accessed 15/02/2022.

the salience of local knowledge and professional autonomy is diminished. This can result in the kinds of knowledge held by donors running out of sync with realities on the ground (Smith et al., 2020; Vincent & Byrne, 2006). Time and energy are redeployed from achievement to looking busy and measuring the appearance of hyperactivity.

The demands of upwards, short-term accountability can be to the detriment of locally empowering and longer-term impacts (Mougeot, 2017, p. 17). On the Deepening Democracy programme, we set out to develop a flexible approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capable of capturing the immediate outputs from each project but also able to appreciate the kinds of emergent, unplanned, intangible and 'hard-to-measure' individual and social transformations that commonly are overlooked. To achieve both rigour and depth, and to avoid a superficial public relations exercise, as our project progressed, we came to recognise the benefits of an abductive approach which draws on multiple methods (interviews, participant observations, surveys, collection of quantitative data, case studies and reflection) to chart the development of relationships and the wider impacts of grant giving. This approach we described as being ethnographic in the sense that it builds from long-term continuous interaction and in its attentiveness to intangibility, unanticipated outcomes and the expressed perspectives of interlocutors. Our aim was to recognise alternative modes of evaluating project results, extending the temporal and spatial scope of measurement to accommodate micro (individual and deliverables) as well as macro (policy, social and attitudinal) changes. Taking account of diverse voices and complex causality and attribution, this approach to monitoring and evaluation placed emphasis on mutual learning over and above conventional approaches that prioritise documentation in the service of a pre-determined narrative.

As described above, we made concerted efforts to tailor agreements to specific circumstances—by advancing funds where needed, varying timelines and budget lines in response to new learning and so on. By continually questioning rules and norms, we were able to develop an understanding of which conditions could not be changed and where we might be flexible (while, of course, staying within the rules imposed by SOAS and AHRC). Reflecting on our ability to act in this way brought home the realisation that the capacity to be flexible—the ability to adjust, respond and adapt to context—is central to the formation of the hierarchies that structure relations between funding institutions in the Global North and grant recipients in the Global South. We now turn to this capacity and the control exerted over narratives of time and space.

5 | TRANSLATING PAPERWORK AND PRACTICE

Recognising development practice as bound up in forms of representation, Mosse (2004) recounts a 'development story' in which the complexities of relationships and of conflicting interests are veiled in the commanding narratives of consultant reports, manuals and slogans. These have the effect of 'stabilising and making coherent' complex realities so that they neatly fit within the designs of policy' (Mosse, 2004, p. 155). The everyday practices of audit culture—intended to promote accountability—too often work to shape relationships in ways that are restrictive and contrary to the intention of producing better results (Crewe & Mowles, 2021). Through a series of rites and rituals, funders present their working practices, paperwork requirements and accountability mechanisms as consistent, rational and neutral. Complex donor-recipient relationships are thereby smoothed into coherent paper trails that are retrofitted to the designs of funders and policy makers. Many of the practices critiqued in this article are generic to modern bureaucracies. However, they are heightened and take on specific forms when applied to the context of cross-national partnership for research-capacity development (Crewe & Axelby, 2013). Efforts to impose discipline—to control time and space—prioritise working practices which, at best, do not meet the needs or recognise the capabilities of partners in the Global South, and at worse, which actively replicate racialised neo-colonial hierarchies.

The language of participation, empowerment and partnership has been heard in the development sector since the 1980s, a way of unlocking the knowledges, potential and agency of project beneficiaries. Even so, recipients of funds continue to be bound into commanding narratives that have been imposed from above (Mougeot, 2017,

p. 16). Alvesson and Kärreman (2004) identify structural forms of control working through standardised output measures, standardised operating (work) procedures and a professionalised work force (standardised knowledge). In this way, managerialism—knowledges and practices of organisational governance—circulates through transnational networks of nongovernmental organisations (Roberts et al., 2005). But standardisation does not exist in a vacuum: Such forms of control are cultural phenomena that take on specific meaning according to context. Taken for granted by funders in the Global North, for those in the South, the notion of 'capacity building' can carry echoes of colonial ideas in which the South has to 'catch up' with the North (Carbonnier & Kontinen, 2014, p. 424). The assumption behind the building of institutional capacity is that what is imagined to be the case in the Global North can also be made true across the diverse countries of the Global South. Despite, or perhaps because of, the volumes of evidence documented through paperwork, significant blind spots continue to exist about the specificities of different contexts and ways of working.

Returning to Graeber, what material impacts are attached to the mundane rituals of paperwork? Graeber sees paperwork as primarily about schematization rather than the recording and communication of knowledge: in practice, 'bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae' (Graeber, 2012, p. 119). As we have described, once due diligence is satisfied, budgets agreed and contracts signed, grant givers are relieved of the responsibility of attending to the practical difficulties faced by receivers of funding. *On paper*, bureaucratic procedures symbolise the collection of knowledge, the adoption of consistent and rational practices and the mitigation of risk. *In practice*, reports and checks are used to maintain separations and allocate responsibility away from the funder and devolve risk onto individuals and organisations in the Global South. When the representation on paper matters more than the facts on the ground, it is possible to avoid the kind of debates, communications and negotiations that support genuinely egalitarian partnership arrangements. A focus on documenting the past and predicting the future comes at the expense of maintaining relationships of trust and respect that exist in the present.

Attending to relationships that span continents means navigating profound differences in language, culture and bureaucratic organisations. For bureaucracies to function—to correct their divorce from social realities—Graeber (2012, p. 116) identifies a 'constant and often subtle work of interpretation, of endlessly imagining others' points of view'. Behind the projection of standard policies and institutional uniformity, frantic efforts are required to 'stabilise and make coherent' the complexities and uncertainties of actual practice. In emphasising administrative consistency, funders in the Global North ignore the extent to which their counterparts in the Global South are forced to improvise around systems and policies in order to convert them into practice.

Working on the Deepening Democracy project brought us into contact with a huge range of institutional forms, each with different structures, systems, policies and practices that were relevant to the contexts in which they operated. Talking to colleagues in Ethiopia and Myanmar, we came to realise how well practised they were in creatively interpreting the working arrangements imposed on them, finding workarounds and making them relevant to the contexts in which they were enacted. The difference, of course, is in the way that using such capacity was recognised and evaluated. If a lack existed across these diverse organisations, it was not in ethics, competence or commitment but rather was in the freedom to manoeuvre. Operating out of an elite UK university, we enjoyed a greater sense of entitlement to question the rules that were imposed on us and to creatively interpret forms of discipline. This freedom allowed us to negotiate with funders and thereby to gauge the extent to which orders could be pushed or bent without being broken. This capacity to manoeuvre provided us with the freedom to improvise, to take risks and to be creative. However, we recognised that when we employ these faculties, we see ourselves as skilled brokers manipulating the fictions upheld by disciplinary rites and rituals, but if our partners acted in the same way (applied common sense, recognised diversity of practice and sought to re-establish realities of time and context), then they might be accused of corruption. Limits on the capacity to improvise and apply judgement are characteristic of power relations imposed by funders onto recipients.

In the Global North, many institutions are deficient in their capacity for empathy, for realising different possibilities, of recognising that they can and indeed should learn from their counterparts in the Global South. Moving beyond the fixed relationship implied in the term partnership, new possibilities for mutual learning and dynamic engagement can be realised.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined how commitments to establish fair and equitable partnership in international research coalitions may be constrained by modes of bureaucratic power which work to shape subjectivities, endorse particular forms of information and exclude that which is unfamiliar. Critically reflecting on the practices surrounding due diligence checks, the construction of budgets and the reporting of expenditure and deliverables, we have shown that capacity building is less about building equitable partnerships and more about managing complexity through the imposition of bureaucratic systems of standardisation, separation and measurement. Central to this process is an institutional need to impose order onto time and space: In an attempt to measure progress, *time* is reduced to a value that is predictable, linear and limited, while *space* must be similarly limited so as to pretend away differences in distance and context. Inscribed into the paperwork that structured the Deepening Democracy programme came the expectation that the diverse contexts and capacities of grant recipients could be simplified to fit into commanding narratives predetermined by the GCRF funding scheme. The need to maintain narratives about capacity deficiency—and to match these to the narrow forms of assistance offered by Northern funding bodies—requires that the experiences and expertise possessed by institutional and individuals in the Global South be ignored.

At the start of this article, we reviewed literature that showed how Global South scholars have been marginalised in the instigation, development, management and leadership of research projects. We went on to show the ways in which—anchored in assumptions about the superior institutional capacity of Global North partners—institutional practices of planning and audit are designed to bind participants into unequal partnerships. This article is an attempt to scrutinise the conceits, constraints and collaborations involved in developing international research coalitions that span cultures and continents. Too often, efforts at institutional capacity building and promoting 'best practice' serve to exacerbate divides rather than bridge them.

In on our roles within the Deepening Development programme, we—the authors of this article—came to see ourselves as brokers and translators employed to give the illusion of order to complex and messy relationships. Our privileged position allowed us to manage relationships between individuals and institutions, establish compatible procedures, attune funding streams to multiple realities, unpack different knowledges and communicate complex concepts of impact. To put it another way, we were translating intangible ideas of faith, trust and belief into forms that can be documented and read by institutions and auditors. However, our efforts to create time and space for adaptability and emergent possibilities depended on the continued performance of institutional compliance and the presentation of pre-defined narratives of project success. Though not always successful, we sought to maintain this delicate balance to support partners to fulfil their ambitions, to reach out to global knowledge networks and to communicate the vital insights, knowledge and perspectives they possess. This article reflects critically on what we have learned; a separate policy brief—co-authored with partners from Myanmar and Ethiopia—expands on these learnings with practical recommendations for how UK Universities can build efficient, ethical and respectful partnerships with researchers and organisations in the Global South (Axelby et al., 2021).

Honest reflection and the acknowledgement of mistakes are necessary first steps if we are to reorient the unequal structures of funding, monitoring and evaluation in which we are enmeshed. Engaging in partnerships that span the continents, it is imperative for those based in the Global North to look *outward* to consider stakeholders' positionalities, accountabilities and responsibilities and the challenging contexts in which they were having to operate. Equally important is the need to look *inward*—to be attentive to our own unconscious biases and assumptions, to consider questions of procedure, hierarchies, gatekeepers, visibility and recognition within research funding frameworks. The transformations required in institutional and management practices require donors to shed 'western saviour' attitudes, to unlearn what they think they know, to listen and to transform themselves into allies and supporters. Approaching collaboration with a genuinely open mind involves confronting accustomed ways of thinking, creating opportunities for shared reflection and being open to critique. This is the global challenge that must be met by everyone aspiring to contribute to systemic and lasting change.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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