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# Negotiations of Engaged Scholarship and Equity Through a Global Network of Refugee Scholars<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Research partnerships are the foundation of successful engaged scholarship, which typically unites partners across disciplines, institutions, sectors, and countries. While rewarding and generative, these partnerships can also be challenging due to differences in expectations, power, and culture, and difficulties in trust and communication. This article reports on interviews with members of an international refugee research network about participating in global partnerships. Responses are interpreted in light of community-university partnerships and South-North partnerships and suggest that both face many similar challenges arising out of structures and norms that privilege Northern, theory-based scholarship, institutions, and outcomes. Vigilance and awareness regarding context can help to confront these challenges. Moreover, global partnerships can benefit from strategies developed in the area of community-university partnerships to facilitate trust, communication, and shared ownership of international research projects.

## Keywords

Collaborative research; Refugee research; Network; Engaged scholarship; Partnership

## Introduction: Engaged scholarship, collaborative research, and partnerships

Traditional scholarship typically involves academics engaging in basic research in order to contribute to theory development and to publish findings in academic outlets, which are then read only by other academics. In contrast, engaged scholarship moves

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beyond traditional scholarship to encompass a broader range of scholarly activities, harnessed to the goal of addressing social issues. Ernest L. Boyer (1990) argues that the scholarship of engagement includes not only the traditional *discovery* of knowledge but also the *integration* of knowledge across disciplines and contexts; the *application* and creation of knowledge to address complex social problems; and the *teaching* of knowledge in ways that transform the knowledge and challenge both the teachers and the students. These different aspects of scholarship are then all harnessed to respond to and address complex social issues.

A pillar of most models of engaged scholarship is the notion of collaboration. This includes collaboration between universities and communities, but also collaborations between academics from different institutions and disciplines (Boyer, 1996; King, Servais, Forchuk, Chalmers, Currie, Law, Specht, Rosenbaum, Willoughby, & Kertoy, 2010; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Both of these kinds of collaboration involve the building of meaningful research partnerships. Indeed, funding bodies have increasingly recognized the value of such collaboration for generating relevant new knowledge and for ensuring that this knowledge is applied to practice and policy. For example, one of Canada's largest academic funding bodies, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), has been increasingly encouraging research partnerships that are cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary through the development of specific partnership funding streams. Indeed, promoting multisectoral partnerships and international collaborations are explicitly identified as priorities in its most recent strategic plan (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014). Understanding the challenges of building partnerships across sectors and countries is thus becoming increasingly relevant to how research is conducted.

The focus of this article is to reflect on this partnership building in the context of a particular kind of academic partnership, namely an international research network between the Global South and North.<sup>2</sup> The challenges encountered in developing meaningful partnerships between Southern and Northern academics can mirror some of the challenges that have been observed in building collaborations between universities and community partners. In this article we will report on how the challenges of achieving and maintaining meaningful North-South academic partnerships are similar to, and different from, those of building community-university collaborations, and how these challenges shed light on structural issues in how Northern academic institutions approach partnership. Finally we will reflect on how lessons learned in each sphere might inform endeavours in both.

### **The Refugee Research Network**

In this article we will reflect on the challenges experienced by members of a global research network. Research networks differ from other kinds of research collaborations in that they are relatively unstructured, loose affiliations with very little hierarchical structure (Baud, 2002). These come with their own challenges, including a greater difficulty in establishing shared goals and long-term commitment, but also with the possibility of more egalitarian relationships between members. Under development since 2006 and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) from 2008-2015, the Refugee Research Network (RRN) was envisioned as a global network of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers that would generate and mobilize knowledge to

benefit people who have been forcibly displaced. The goal of the project was to build a network of networks of researchers and organizations that would produce, share, and consolidate knowledge across space, as well as globalize knowledge production.

Through its work, the RRN aims to provide a systematic and dedicated space for the sustained interactive engagement of three sectors: Canadian and international researchers, NGO partners, and government policymakers. This cross-sector approach is intended to ensure that the issues identified are relevant to the refugee field, that the relationships to sustain the research are in place, and that the dissemination will be timely and appropriate. The network aims to be grounded in the experiences of refugees and forced migrants and in the practices and policymaking of those who seek to support them; responsive to emerging ideas among new and established scholars and practitioners; and flexible, able to form research teams appropriate in size, skills, and perspectives to the issues being examined. This intensive animation of the field is intended to cultivate a multiplicity of new research groupings resulting in more dynamic and responsive research projects. These include what we have termed “research clusters” that focus on particular issues like detention and asylum or international refugee law, and regional networks like the Latin American Network for Forced Migration (LANFM) and the Canadian Association of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (CARFMS). Through a dialogical and participatory approach, we have sought to contribute to the improvement of the well-being of refugees and forced migrants around the world by: 1) expanding our awareness of the global knowledge regime concerning refugee issues and forced migration, 2) improving communication concerning this knowledge within and between academic, policymaking, and practice sectors in the Global South and North, and 3) alliance building and active policy involvement in the development of national and international policy frameworks and humanitarian practices affecting refugees and forced migrants. We seek to engage and integrate participants through relationship and association building and the development of interactive mechanisms.

The RRN is currently comprised of 12 institutional partners that, primarily, are also research centres focused on migration issues:

- Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, Toronto, Canada;
- The Group on Political & Legal Theory, Faculty of Law, Javeriana University, Bogotá, Colombia;
- Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt;
- Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata, India;
- African Centre for Migration and Society, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa;
- Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK;
- Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA;
- Division of Population Research, Institute of Social Studies and Research, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran & Australian National University, Canberra, Australia (one partner cross-appointed to both institutions);
- Refugee Law Project, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda;

- Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia;
- Center for Forced Migration Studies, Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston, USA; and
- Refugee Law Initiative, School of Advanced Study, University of London, London, UK.

Beyond this network of institutional partners, the RRN has mobilized the Emerging Scholars and Practitioners on Migration Issues (ESPMI) Network – a global association of 377 graduate students, practitioners, and new scholars. Finally, the RRN maintains an interactive website that engages and supports over 1,500 individual members, has a Facebook page with over 2,700 participants, and a Twitter account with over 1,600 followers. With a philosophy of open source and open access, it is designed to encourage online collaboration, networking, and information sharing among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

The RRN is committed to working across the sectors of academia, practice, and policy, but the engagement of policy actors and NGO practitioners has proved elusive. Consultations have been held with Canadian policy actors to identify how best to reach them. They asked for brief summaries of the research findings to be “pushed” to them via email messages about every six weeks or so. They are also interested in annual policy roundtables with leading scholars in areas of interest. Globally, a network of scholars working in the policy field was organized in December of 2012 to address policy issues that are of interest to policy actors, such as refugee status determination practices. In June 2013, RRN members attended the UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs, organized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva, and held meetings with the attending NGOs. Research questions of interest to the NGOs have been identified and representatives have agreed to sit on the RRN management committee so that there is ongoing participation in the setting of goals and strategies.

The RRN has less than two years of the current project left and discussions with the partners around sustainability have been initiated. The focus is on strategies that will more fully engage partners across the South and North and recognize and respect the resource imbalances. The Network has committed to utilizing the remaining resources to strengthen knowledge mobilization activities and practices, and to address barriers such as language.

### **Challenges in community-university partnerships**

There is now a substantial body of literature that reflects critically on the building of community-university partnerships and collaborations, and on the difficulties genuine partnerships face. The report of the Commission on Community-Engaged Scholarship in the Health Professions (2005) identified a number of challenges to community-academic partnerships for scholarship, most of which emerge from the emphasis that academia places on academic products (i.e., academic publications) in lieu of the more applied and widely disseminated products of engaged scholarship. Institutions associated with academia, such as high-impact journals and major funding agencies, have a tendency to reinforce these values (see also Kassam & Tettey, 2003).

A number of authors have described these challenges and suggested ways of addressing them. One comprehensive model has been offered by Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar, Gary Harper, and Rhonda Lewis (2005) who identified three stages to building collaborative relationships between community and university. These are: gaining entry to the community, developing and sustaining a mutual collaboration, and recognizing benefits and outcomes of community-university partnerships. Within the second stage, Suarez-Balcazar and colleagues proposed that six interactive factors predict successful community-university collaborations: trust and mutual respect, adequate communication, respect for diversity, a culture of learning, respect for the culture of the setting, and developing an action agenda. Although these six factors are identified as being part of developing and sustaining a collaboration, they play a role in each stage. For example, successfully entering a community entails learning about the setting and building mutual trust, which requires learning, communication, and respect for diversity. These factors also play a clear role in the ability of partners to recognize the benefits and outcomes of their partnership. Moreover, each factor influences the others, such that changes in one area are likely to affect the other areas. Thus, say, a strengthened learning environment is likely to enhance respect for both diversity and the setting, and result in improved communication.

The authors also identified four major challenges to successful community-university partnerships. These are power inequality, time commitments (and timelines – community-based organizations are often working on tighter timelines and expect faster turnaround than academic researchers do), conflicts of interest, and funding issues (budget cuts and end of funding). These challenges are a result of academics and community agencies working within different systems, systems that value different activities and outcomes (cf. Minkler, 2005). Partners must find ways to bridge the cultural divides that emerge from the distinct contexts within which community- and university-based researchers work (Shields & Evans, 2008, 2012).

Successful community-university partnerships reflect strategies that recognize and address the sources of these four challenges. For example, the lack of trust that can exist between community and university often emerges from academics having used the community to achieve their own research agendas rather than responding to and meeting community needs. Relationships that have been initiated by community partners, rather than academics, may be perceived as better reflecting community needs (Kassam & Tettey, 2003; Mountz & Walton-Roberts, 2006). Strategies that strengthen mutual collaboration by enhancing the six elements identified by Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2005) are particularly important. Partnerships that recognize the diversity and value of the knowledge of community members, and partners who are able to avoid imposing their cultural values on one another are better able to develop and sustain a successful collaboration (Chernikova, 2011; Minkler, 2005; Shields & Evans, 2008). Moreover, actions need to be taken to directly address the underlying potential challenges in community-university partnerships. One source of difficulty comes from the unequal distribution of resources – both material and human. This inequality needs to be acknowledged while community strengths are recognized, and truly collaborative decision-making processes must be established despite these inequalities. Partnerships must also recognize that community-based organizations are often struggling for funding and may need to shift their attention to finding more

resources (Chernikova, 2011). In this case, providing early results and working on new funding sources can help maintain the project and the collaboration.

Elena Chernikova's (2011) review of collaborative university-civil society projects in Canada describes similar processes in the development of partnerships, and highlights similar challenges. However, Chernikova also places particular emphasis on the importance of the process of negotiating goals to the "success" and sustainability of collaborative research. These goals do not necessarily need to be mutual but rather there needs to be a "commitment to find a fit for different goals pursued by different partners that is essential for effective collaboration" (p. 75). What is valuable about Chernikova's analysis is the recognition that a successful partnership can support and meet different goals for the partners, but that success is contingent on the partnership valuing this diversity of goals. However, respecting this diversity is challenged by the context in which community-university partnerships occur.

In effect, community-university partnerships face challenges because the value and reward structure of universities tend to reinforce the historical power imbalances between university and community partners, thereby undermining their abilities to build and sustain mutual trust and meaningful partnerships. Many of these challenges can be reduced through strategies that deliberately recognize and address the sources of mistrust and imbalance (cf. Shields & Evans, 2012). Some of these challenges, however, are structural and require strategies that extend beyond the immediate partnership to the larger institutions within which the partnerships exist, and these changes may be more difficult to achieve. While some research organizations (e.g., SSHRC, the Canadian research funder described above) are now explicitly identifying the value of non-academic outputs to research that is of greater benefit to the community and policy makers, the overall culture of academia has not yet mirrored these shifting values.

### **North-South collaborations**

The literature reviewing North-South academic partnerships raises some distinct challenges, but also some very similar issues to those confronting community-university partnerships. Before outlining some of these similarities and differences, it is important to explain the terminology used here. Social science research tends to frame the reality of global income, resource, and power inequalities in the language of the "Global North" versus the "Global South" to differentiate between wealthier and less wealthy countries, respectively. We recognize that this delineation appears arbitrary and that there is a need for a more nuanced framing of the complexities of global power relations. We use the terms, however, to speak to earlier literature on these global imbalances. In this literature, the terms are used as shorthand for the fundamental inequalities between institutions based in generally wealthier, hegemonic countries and those based in countries characterized by widespread poverty that have historically held less power on the global stage (and in most cases continue to do so). At the same time, we acknowledge that the concept of the Global South is mythical, as there is no single homogeneous "South," but rather a complex diversity of countries, often with histories of colonization by countries of the "North."

Located in the context of these global inequalities, research collaborations between institutions in the North and South face a range of challenges and opportunities. Many of these challenges arise from similar sources to those associated with community-university research partnerships, namely expectations regarding the kinds of outputs that are valued and expected in Northern versus Southern institutions; the role played by funding agencies in shaping how projects unfold and who controls decision-making; the importance of developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; managing capacity building goals and other project deadlines; cultural differences among partners in terms of research, partnership, and communication; and giving greater value to some kinds of skills and knowledge over others (Barrett, Crossley, & Dachi, 2011; Samoff, 2009; Tomlinson, Swartz, & Landman, 2006). There is a systemic privileging of Northern values with respect to collaborative research.

As is the case for university-community partnerships, the locus of funding determines power. Funding is usually given by Northern or international funding agencies to Northern institutions and/or academics, thereby giving them greater decision-making power and often making them the conveners and drivers of the collaboration (Barrett et al., 2011; Jentsch & Pilley, 2003; Tomlinson et al., 2006). Similarly, international funding agencies tend to privilege approaches that are valued more highly in the Global North, thereby ensuring that it is Northern knowledge and methods that dominate in international collaborative projects (Baud, 2002). The voices of Southern partners are further silenced in the context of multinational projects, where the very different agendas and needs of the different countries reduces the likelihood that their individual concerns will be met, and the central goals of the Northern research leaders can continue to dominate. From the beginning, a hierarchy is established where scholars from the Global South feel disadvantaged. They become taciturn and their compatriots in the North become baffled. Things get lost in translation, sometimes twice.

The discourse around capacity building also echoes criticisms that have been made in the area of community-university partnerships, namely that the notion of capacity building is often predicated on overlooking the existing knowledge and skills of the less powerful partner. On the one hand, there is a discussion of the need to recognize and respond to opportunities to build capacity in Southern institutions and the genuine needs that may exist there (Baud, 2002); on the other, the assumptions about capacity often fail to recognize or value Southern academics' knowledge and methods, and subsequently reproduce neocolonial relationships between the Global South and North (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2007; Jentsch, 2004; Lor & Britz, 2005). Capacity building should be understood and practiced as multidirectional, recognizing the benefits that accrue to Northern institutions, and the skills and knowledge that they also develop through these partnerships.

There are also some interesting tensions that are unique to North-South academic partnerships. Academic institutions from the Global South and North are both engaged in research, teaching, and the application of research to real-world settings. However, those in the Global South are more likely to be conducting engaged scholarship. Academic systems offering less secure employment or inadequate salaries tend to push academics to make greater contributions to local policy and social issues, and this pressure in part comes from the opportunity of engaging in nationally or internationally

funded research projects (Castles, 2012). Those who are working in countries that are dealing with urgent social issues on a large scale may also feel a greater need to prioritize responding to these issues as part of their work (Banerjee, 2012). As is the case for university-community partnerships, there is an assumption that one party – in this case academics of the Global North – is engaged by the goal of theory development and the knowledge of discovery, whereas the other – academics from the Global South – brings context, participants, or the application of theory to a particular setting (Landau, 2012). Critically, it is theory development that is viewed as the more valuable contribution and the greater level of engagement of the Southern partners is seen by some primarily as an opportunity for Northern academics to test their theories (Banerjee, 2012).

As is the case in university-community partnerships, North-South collaborations can face a number of challenges that arise out of inequalities in available resources, including access to, and knowledge of how to apply for, research funding (a summary of these challenges is found in Table 1). While several strategies can be undertaken to minimize these imbalances within any given partnership – such as ensuring evenly distributed decision-making and Southern leadership in a given project – larger structural variables exist in academia and international research that can make it difficult to overcome, or even recognize, these challenges. Finally, while relationship building requires the establishment of trust between differently situated partners (as with community-university partnerships), this process is impeded in North-South collaborations by the inescapable challenges of distance and technology. While technology is envisioned as a means by which to overcome time and space, in fact many partners find it lacking when compared to in-person communications. In particular, technology is not seen as an alternative to face-to-face interactions in the South.

**Table 1: Comparison of community-university and Global South-Global North academic partnerships**

Challenges	Community-university	South-North
Expected approaches & outputs	Academic vs. applied research & products	Academic vs. applied research & products
Power & resource inequalities	University holds funds & leads decision-making	Northern partners hold funds & lead decision-making
Relationship building	Trust	Distance, technology
Time commitment & timelines	Community has less time & requires faster turnaround	Southern partners have less time & require faster turnaround
Differential valuation of skills & knowledge	Community viewed as recruiters/interpreters rather than full research partners	Capacity building often viewed as North → South

### **Evaluating the Refugee Research Network**

In fall of 2009, the RRN commissioned a preliminary study with key stakeholders regarding participation in and perceptions of the RRN. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to evaluate stakeholder goals for participating in the RRN and in



the research and regional clusters: perceptions of communication with the Management Committee; goals for participation in research and regional clusters; and barriers to participating in the RRN and research. Here we will focus on expected benefits from participation in the network and barriers to full participation in the network.

A total of 21 members of the research clusters were identified, two from each of the eight regions represented in the RRN cluster and another five from among other key committee members. Of these 21 individuals, 12 agreed to participate (one by providing email responses rather than a phone interview), of whom three were from the Global South.

All interviews were conducted by phone with a female interviewer who was unknown to the members (excluding the program leaders and coordinator), except for the one email interview. To the fullest extent possible, confidentiality was assured for all participants. Interviews took approximately 90 minutes. The interviewer took notes during the interviews and also recorded the interviews in case additional information was required. The interview notes were then subject to thematic analysis.

## RESULTS

### *Expected benefits of participating in RRN*

Participants were asked to reflect on their participation in the RRN and what long-term benefits they expected to gain. Five main themes emerged in respondents' discussion of the benefits of participating in the RRN, all of which reflected different aspects of knowledge mobilization, whether to other scholars, the public, NGOs, or policymakers. A summary of the themes of participation and where the benefits accrue between the Global North and Global South is presented in Table 2. These benefits included

1. *Production/sharing of research resources*: Respondents noted several concrete benefits from participating in the RRN that reflected the potential for the network to facilitate the sharing of information and resources between sites and individuals. Participants looked forward to sharing tools or frameworks to create research resources; accessing information that might not be available elsewhere; and providing learning opportunities about conducting research as valuable benefits of participating in the network.
2. *Networking and collaborating with people in the network*: Another benefit that respondents highlighted was the opportunities the network provided to interact with other members of the network. Several respondents mentioned the benefits of having a network of scholars with whom they could meet, have interdisciplinary interactions, and collaborate. They also highlighted the importance of networking opportunities for graduate students.
3. *Reaching out to relevant people/organizations*: Knowledge mobilization was seen as a key benefit in a number of ways. The other kinds of relationships that the network was expected to support were with non-academics. The opportunity to attract new members to the network and to reach out to policymakers and NGOs was seen as a strong benefit. This may be particularly valuable to re-

searchers in the North; past reviews of North-South partnerships suggest that this connection is particularly attractive for Northern partners (Landau, 2012).

4. *Long-term benefits:* Reflecting on another aspect of knowledge mobilization, and why it matters, respondents commented on the long-term impact that the RRN could have through its support of knowledge mobilization activities. This potential impact included influencing policy, increasing the public’s awareness of refugees and forced migration issues, and developing long-term relationships with NGOs and INGOs.
5. *Improved visibility and endorsements:* A final theme that emerged was the benefits through association with an organization with a strong reputation. This association with a reputed organization was linked to increasing impact. Specifically, participation in an international network like the RRN might help improve access to funding and to policymakers, and increase the impact of members’ research. Literature on North-South partnerships suggests that relationships with Northern academics and institutions particularly increases the academic impact of Southern scholars’ work, suggesting that this may be particularly important for scholars from the global South (Lor & Britz, 2005).

**Table 2: Summary of benefits of participation**

Theme	Who benefits?
Production/sharing of resources	North = South
Networking & collaborating	North = South
Knowledge mobilization	North > South
Long-term impact	North = South
Strengthened reputation	North < South

*Barriers to participating and attaining benefits*

Participants were asked about barriers to achieving the benefits they had expected or hoped to achieve, and to their participating more fully in the network. Five themes emerged in the discussion of barriers to accessing the potential benefits of the RRN, several of which were particularly relevant for North-South partnerships. A summary of these barriers to participation is presented in Table 3. These barriers are:

1. *Resource limitations:* All respondents observed that a lack of time was a constraint to attaining the perceived benefits associated with participation in the RRN. Academics in the South in particular tend to have heavier teaching loads and greater administrative responsibilities than their Northern colleagues, with fewer resources in terms of staff and technological assistance.

Others also noted that a lack of financial resources could be a barrier to participation. While this was raised by members of both Northern and Southern institutions, the relative financial resources available are greater in the North,

making this barrier particularly acute for academics in Southern institutions, as has been reported elsewhere (Barrett et al., 2011). Several people noted that financial benefits such as course releases could facilitate their participation, but these benefits were only available to participants at the lead (Canadian) institution. The importance of funding also emerged in respondents' comments about their disappointment with the RRN's primary function as a space for discussion and exchange of ideas. Many felt that it had been defined as a source of funding, which led to disappointment, suggesting that access to funding through the network was important in many participants' choice to be a member.

2. *Differences in regional needs:* The challenges of North-South collaboration and a lack of awareness of how to deal with these challenges were mentioned several times. Respondents commented on the challenges of not knowing how to build trust between the Global North and Global South as a reflection of not understanding regional differences. Although members perceived some benefits from contributing to the RRN, many noted that the benefits needed to be more tangible and relevant to their own agendas. Consistent with observations in other kinds of North-South partnerships (e.g., Landau, 2012), participants also noted that different kinds of financial resources were available in the Global North and Global South with sustainable long-term funding only available in the North while the South was largely limited to short-term funding. As a result, institutions in the Global South were unlikely to partner on larger long-term projects unless there was funding attached to them.

Another regional difference had to do with the intended recipients of information, with some centres being more interested in dissemination to local or regional audiences and thus being less concerned with participation in an international network.

3. *Communication problems:* Numerous communication challenges were identified by respondents. These included concrete problems such as the need for translation services to overcome language barriers. In the case of language, it was noted that the network operated primarily in English, which has the effect of facilitating the participation of Northern academics. Participants also noted cultural differences in how research is conceived, conducted, and prioritized in different regions, while identifying that the approaches of the North are the standard against which other methods were compared. Also noted were the challenges of working across disciplines, although this interdisciplinarity was also seen as a strength.

The interpersonal nature of communication, such as the amount of time and effort required to build networks, was frequently raised. One respondent commented on "the tyranny of distance" when describing the inherent difficulty in finding times to meet across multiple time zones. These communication difficulties may have contributed to some participants' reports on the challenges of interpersonal tensions between members and lack of group cohesion. The importance of communication speaks to the need to build mutual trust, and the challenges of finding sufficient time and procedures for building both that trust and the requisite interpersonal relationships. Some have suggested, however,

that interpersonal relationships may not be as critical to the building of successful international partnerships as other, more concrete, aspects of the partnership (Chernikova, 2011).

4. *Technological barriers:* The maintenance of ongoing communication across distances is greatly facilitated by technologies that support easy and affordable connections. Unfortunately, the technology available to the network has not always lived up to the network's needs. Respondents reported some frustration with the technology relied on by the RRN, including the challenges of virtual meetings, a need for both more direct access to and more technical support for the website, and a perceived generation gap with respect to using social media. Younger academics connect more comfortably and easily, whereas older academics felt that they could not and probably would not learn to use newer technologies. While it was not raised exclusively by the Southern partners, the relative differences in Internet accessibility (e.g., differences in bandwidth) create greater barriers for Southern partners who would like to participate in virtual meetings, download resources, or view materials online (Etim, 2006). While Internet technology is rapidly improving, the improvements are still happening at a faster rate for institutions of the North than the South, thus creating conditions that foster greater ease of communication for Northern than Southern partners.
5. *Lack of clear goals/follow through:* The RRN was perceived as lacking clear goals and focusing too much on process and technical issues rather than on content or substantive ideas. There was concern that the policies and goals of the RRN were not clear, especially with regard to how the RRN could strengthen regional hubs. Some participants were concerned that the RRN was essentially a reflection of the interests and goals of the Canadian centre that held the funding. This may be a reflection of a common finding in North-South partnerships, where Northern partners take the lead in the development of funding applications because their presence in the North gives them better access to and better knowledge of the application process for international funding (Baud, 2002).

Some respondents observed that the network had not developed from the bottom up, based on existing interpersonal activity, but rather was a top-down, artificial construct, and thus lacked "the deep affection" a successful network requires. Some felt that their participation was primarily as a token representative of their region. Several respondents reported being very passive in their participation in the network, essentially waiting to be asked to participate or offer ideas, which may reflect their sense that the network was not created to meet their goals. There was also some sense that the RRN has not followed through on suggestions or intentions, and that it exists more as an abstract or remote concept than an active body. The lack of a sense of having developed clear goals may have been a much greater challenge to the project than difficulties around communication. Chernikova (2011) noted that clarity and collaboration in the development of project goals is one of the most important predictors for successful international partnerships. However, as a network rather than a research project, the RRN's goals and action plans may necessarily

have been more abstract, so this may be a characteristic that is inherent in the development of networks rather than other forms of collaboration.

**Table 3: Summary of barriers to participation**

Theme	Who struggles?
Resource limitations (time, administrative & technical support, funding)	North < South
Not understanding different regional needs	North = South
Communication and relationship challenges	North = South
Technology	North < South
Goal clarity	North = South

### Conclusions

The resonances between North-South and community-university research partnerships are striking, with Southern and community-based organizations facing many similar challenges related to resources. These differences in resources become institutionalized when funding is acquired and managed by Northern institutions and universities. To a large extent, these inequalities are embedded in the larger global institutions that determine how and why global funding is distributed. This even applies in the case of the Refugee Research Network, which was funded through a program intended to support these kinds of partnerships. Although they may be difficult to avoid, navigate, or even identify, we must pay attention to the values that are built into international partnerships: we say we want to do engaged scholarship, but the way that institutions/systems require scholars to work maintains an imbalance that reinforces a particular mode of research and dissemination – peer-reviewed articles, funding bodies, the way funding flows (i.e., through universities with restrictions on who can access it and how). There is a systemic privileging of Northern values through collaborative research partnerships and much of it is grounded in unvoiced and unchallenged assumptions about the relative value, quality, and strengths of Northern and Southern institutions and academics.

Particular challenges for North/South collaborations lie in geographical distances and the attendant language, cultural, and time differences. Although there have been significant improvements in telecommunications, including video conferencing, they are not always reliable and do not replace the experience of face-to-face meetings that university-community partners can use to help build trusting relationships. Stronger relationships are formed among those who have regular personal contact. Like most Northern-based projects, the language of the RRN is English and this can limit the participation of partners for whom English is a second, third, or fourth language. The timing of the meetings accommodates the majority of the partners, which means that those in Asia are staying up late in order to join in, usually from their homes.

Our experience in negotiating the Refugee Research Network suggests several correctives that might help to address the inequities attendant in doing engaged

scholarship through North-South collaborations. These come in the areas of leadership, project development and planning, and knowledge production and mobilization. Joint leadership of projects will increase trust among the Southern scholars, as will building relationships with groups that have established contact with forced migrants themselves (in the case of the research focus of participants in our network). Consistent with this, John Shields and Bryan Evans (2008), in their evaluation of knowledge mobilization in the Metropolis Project, suggested that collaboration played a large role in building the trust that allowed members of this large-scale multisectoral partnership project to overcome cultural differences in perspectives on knowledge generation and sharing. Partnerships must understand and accept the uniqueness of each region, and start from there when formulating projects. Partners should be taken on board from the project's formulation stage and made equal stakeholders. They should be consulted, informed, and engaged face-to-face whenever possible. There should be built-in budgets for holding meetings in the Global South as well as the Global North. Finally, projects that stress qualitative rather than quantitative research might better address the complexities of the North-South relationship. Scholars at institutions in the North, who will most likely be leading the projects due to the strictures of funding arrangements, must accept that scholars at partner institutions in the South have unique theoretical interventions to offer (Banerjee, 2012; Landau, 2012).

While efforts have been made by the RRN to address the inequalities among partners through the distribution of resources, global relationships are typically more complex than university-community partnerships as they involve a larger number of institutions, both national and international agendas, and they are influenced more by the changing political landscapes. Moreover, countries of the South differ widely in terms of their own capacities, resources, and contexts (Castles, 2012). Refugee issues are inherently focused in regions of civil conflict, mainly in the South, and the affected countries look to the North to provide funding support to care for large numbers of people who have been displaced and to resettle those who have no hope of return. This adds another layer of structural inequality to research partnerships that are being developed in the area of forced migration. Similarly, academics in countries with high populations of displaced people typically have fewer resources and significantly lower incomes than their counterparts in countries with more stable economies, potentially exaggerating the existing North-South differences observed in many partnerships. Deep structural inequalities are not going to be altered through research partnerships. However, research can witness these disparities and knowledge workers can generate new understandings of how societies can be made more equal and just. These goals can be shared whether working with partners in the same community or in another country. As the "resource rich" partner, universities need to continue to work to address the barriers to the equal engagement of their colleagues, wherever they are located.

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### **Notes**

1. See the appendix for a research snapshot of this project.

2. We acknowledge that the terms “Global South” and “Global North” are oversimplifications that mask more nuanced understandings of the power relations involved in fundamental global inequalities. We discuss the challenge of terminology in more detail throughout the article.

## Websites

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Emerging Scholars and Practitioners on Migration Issues (ESPMI), formerly the New Scholars Network, <http://epsminetwork.com>  
Latin American Network on Forced Migration (LANFM), <http://www.refugeereseach.net/lanfm-network>  
Refugee Research Network (RRN), <http://www.refugeereseach.net/>

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# research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



## What Impact Can a Global Network Have on Collaborative Research?

### What is this research about?

The Refugee Research Network's (RRN) goal is to create and share information to help people who have been forced to leave their home countries. They are working towards this goal by:

- 1) Gaining an understanding of refugee issues on a global scale.
- 2) Helping to share information easily among practitioners, researchers and community members.
- 3) Working to inform policies and practices that respond to refugee needs on national and international levels.

The paper contrasts the benefits and struggles of doing collaborative research locally and internationally. The authors describe in detail the challenges faced by the RRN to demonstrate how these challenges and benefits are experienced in an international network. Global power differences among international partners need to be looked at in collaborative and engaged research just as they are in community/university partnerships. For example, international funding opportunities often result in wealthy countries (North) having greater control over funding and project goals than partners from less wealthy countries (South). This mirrors the imbalance often

### What you need to know:

There are a number of barriers to doing collaborative research in a global context. The Refugee Research Network has been trying to support collaborative research. Their members still experience challenges in building relationships and collaborating. People working on global projects should remember that partners have access to different resources, communication may not always be easy and shared goal development is needed but difficult to accomplish.

observed between university and community partners. However, not all solutions for community and university cooperation can be adapted for North and South collaborations as these situations are not identical.

### What did the researchers do?

A literature review was completed exploring common issues found in community and university collaborations. Members of the RRN were interviewed by phone about the benefits and barriers to participation in the network. Twelve members of the RRN were interviewed, nine of whom were from the North and three from the South. The interviews were then analysed to find common themes.



### What did the researchers find?

The RRN members indicated common themes; however, the impact of some were experienced more strongly by those in the South than in the North. Among the common benefits listed below, those with an asterisk differed between the Northern and the Southern members.

- 1) Creating and sharing new information.
- 2) Networking with other people working on refugee studies.
- 3) \* Reaching out to groups who would benefit from the information (more important for North).
- 4) Having a greater social impact.
- 5) \* Connecting to the RRN created better reputation (more important for South).

Common barriers to participation expressed by RRN members are listed below. Those that differed between the North and South are identified with an asterisk.

- 1) \* Different groups have access to different resources, such as time and funding (more of a problem for the South).
- 2) Awareness of the needs of different groups as the environment and resources change.
- 3) \* Issues with people communicating, such as when language and time zones change (more of a problem for the South).
- 4) \* Access to needed technology to engage with other groups (more of a problem for the South).

Clear goals will help groups engaged with RRN to know what to expect.

### How can you use this research?

Researchers who plan to do global collaborative research will benefit from the experiences of the RRN. The paper outlines barriers that must be managed to have a successful cooperation with global partners.

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### Keywords

*Collaborative research, Refugee Research Network, Engaged scholarship, Partnership*

### Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC.

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