The role of international research collaborations in fostering research capacity development in low and middle-income countries.

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The Global Health Network

URL: https://tghncollections.pubpub.org/pub/xpyqwio3
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Introduction: International research collaborations (IRC) represent the most common form of institutional link between research institutions in HIC and LMIC. They are designed around the idea of promoting partnership where the different actors contribute to reaching common research goals by sharing ownership and responsibilities as equals. Nonetheless, the persistent unbalance of power that still characterises the global health space places IRC at the centre of the debate about coloniality and epistemic injustice. This impact the effectiveness of IRC to foster health research capacity development (HRCD).

Methods: In-depth interviews were performed with 21 healthcare workers in 5 institutions in Brazil, Thailand and Zambia within the context of a research on the use of a capacity development tool. Participants, with a wide range of job roles, were asked about their perception of the impact of IRC on their research environment.

Results: Evidence of the need to look separately at the experience of low-income countries and middle-income countries emerged clearly. Participants from Zambia reported reputedly the persistence of a sense of dependency on IRC in their research environment. Participants from Brazil and Thailand, where the locally-supported research environment is more structured, highlighted how local research struggle to be recognised as a source of knowledge on a wider scale.

Conclusion: IRC should be designed with higher awareness of the persisting dynamics between north (doners) and south (recipients) participating institutions. The goal of promoting HRCD by setting up IRC requires a deliberate choice of giving equal value to HRCD outcome and research outcome and should be obtained by setting up effective mechanisms of shared ownership between HIC and LIMC institutions participating in IRC.