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## Rethinking International Research Partnerships for Just and Equitable Futures

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### ABSTRACT

*International research partnerships are mostly promoted by universities, funding agencies, and international development organizations as pathways for capacity building and global knowledge exchange. In practice, however, some partnerships reproduce coloniality in research through Northern-led agenda setting, extractive data collection in the Global South, inequitable authorship practices, and asymmetric control over funding. This article examines how mainstream research partnership models position researchers, institutions and communities in the Global South primarily as data providers, while epistemic authority, publication credit, and research capital remain concentrated in Global North institutions. Drawing on Ubuntu relationality, I advance an anticolonial framework for rethinking international research partnerships toward just futures. Ubuntu relationality challenges coloniality in research by foregrounding relational accountability, reciprocity, shared governance, and collective ethical responsibility across institutions, researchers, and communities. The article also introduces a guide to support researchers in operationalizing Ubuntu's communal principles in the design, governance, and evaluation of international research partnerships.*

**Keywords:** Coloniality, Global North, Global South, Research Partnerships, Ubuntu Relationality, Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, higher education scholarship has increasingly interrogated how power and colonial hierarchies are reproduced through knowledge production and research partnerships (Mohammed, 2025; Nkansah et al., 2024; Oldac et al., 2025). Despite growing institutional commitments to fostering “equitable” research partnerships, these structural imbalances continue to characterize the global research landscape, particularly those involving Global South and Global North partnerships (Asare et al., 2020; Arvanitis & Gaillard, 2014; Medie & Kang, 2018). Such inequities manifest through funding distributions and institutional power relations (Refaei, 2020).

Over the past two decades, international research partnerships between scholars and institutions in the Global North and Global South have expanded significantly in terms of scalability, funding, and visibility (Asare et al., 2020; Chetty et al., 2024; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020; Nkansah et al., 2024). Often framed through the language of capacity building, sustainable development, and global knowledge exchange, these partnerships are presented as mutually beneficial. Research, however, complicates this narrative. In practice, scholars based in the Global North disproportionately set research agendas, lead projects, and control funding flows (Asare et al., 2020; Refaei, 2020). In contrast, Global South-based researchers and their institutions are mostly relegated to peripheral roles such as data collection, community gatekeepers and facilitators (Tilley & Karina, 2021), while their Northern counterparts receive academic capital through funding, authorship and career progression.

These asymmetries are particularly visible on the African continent, where research partnerships often position Africa as a data-rich context (Ahmed & Gyamerah, 2025; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). As a result, knowledge is extracted, decontextualized, and circulated in ways that consolidate Global North institutional authority and scholarly capital (Nkansah et al., 2024). These uneven dynamics are shaped by long histories of colonialism. For instance, post-independence development aid models reinforced epistemic hierarchies through technical assistance programs and the so-called capacity-building discourses that privileged Global North expertise, marginalizing the epistemic agency of Global South communities (Gyamerah, 2024; Ziai, 2016).

Similarly, the neoliberal turn of the 1980s further intensified these inequalities by destabilizing many Global South economies and enabling North American and European actors, nonprofits and multilateral organizations to dominate education research, funding and agenda-setting processes (Pillay, 2010; Tikly, et al., 2020). Critical researchers have long argued that these arrangements

align research priorities with Western geopolitical interests rather than the needs and aspirations of Global South communities (Ahmed & Gyamerah, 2025; Amin, 2014; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020).

In the twenty-first century, globalization and the open science movement have expanded opportunities for cross-border collaboration, domestic research collaboration and partnership (Oldac et al., 2025) while simultaneously reproducing existing inequities (Koch & Weingart, 2016; Tikly, 2019). Even global development frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030) continue to reinforce neo-colonial research and development practices (Nkansah et al., 2024). While these agendas emphasize equitable partnership and inclusivity, they are largely conceptualized and led by Global North scholars and organizations, positioning them as epistemic authorities and framing Southern actors as recipients of sustainable development solutions (McGlynn, 2020; Medie & Kang, 2018).

Recent scholarship has thoroughly documented power asymmetries in South–North research partnerships (Asare et al., 2020; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020; Refaei, 2020; Tilley & Karina, 2021); however, far less attention has been given to developing actionable, culturally grounded frameworks capable of transforming these relationships. In particular, few frameworks draw on African Indigenous worldviews to guide research partnerships involving African scholars. Against this backdrop, I advance Ubuntu relationality, an African Indigenous ethical framework for rethinking international research partnerships and for gesturing just and equitable research futures. Articulated as “I am because we are,” Ubuntu foregrounds interconnectedness, reciprocity, communal care, and collective ethical responsibility. In research, Ubuntu provides a culturally grounded praxis centered on mutual accountability, codecision-making, and epistemic humility (Bang et al., 2016; Letseka, 2012; Seehawer, 2018).

In this article, the terms *Global North* and *Global South* are used with critical intentionality. While these categories can reinforce the oversimplification of heterogeneous contexts, they remain analytically useful for examining historically produced patterns of power, privilege, and resource distribution within the global research landscape (Mignolo, 2023). Framing these terms relationally foregrounds how research authority, responsibility, and benefit are unevenly distributed and maintained across institutional and geographic lines.

The article proceeds in four sections. First, I situate my positionality and locate the paper within the geopolitics of research practice, accentuating the need for anticolonial, nonextractive frameworks that center Southern epistemic agency. Second, I theorize Ubuntu relationality and its relevance for re-envisioning international research partnerships. Third, I present Ubuntu relationality as a heuristic device for guiding anticolonial research praxis. Finally, I outline future directions and implications for advancing justice-oriented, nonextractive international research partnerships.

## AUTHOR POSITIONALITY

As an anticolonial researcher, I believe it is important to position and locate myself both personally and politically in my scholarly dissemination. I agree with Dei et al.'s (2022) call for researchers to enter the educational research landscape with the understanding that they cannot objectively analyze their work from a completely neutral perspective. Therefore, engaging in any form of critical research becomes a political project (Dei et al., 2022). My lived experiences and connections to the Global South, specifically Ghana, provide an epistemic prism through which I present the arguments in this paper. As a Ghanaian-born scholar currently based at a university in the Global North, my intellectual commitments and scholarly engagements are shaped by my lived experiences within and across both Southern and Northern contexts.

Moreover, I occupy a liminal space informed by the epistemic traditions, cultural values, and collective ways of knowing rooted in African Indigenous cultural traditions while also navigating and contributing to knowledge production within northern academic institutions. This in-between positionality provides a critical vantage point from which to interrogate the enduring colonialities and extractive logics embedded in international research partnerships.

Additionally, my academic and professional identities have afforded me the opportunity to work on transnational projects involving researchers, institutions, and communities across multiple geographies. While these experiences have enriched my understanding of global research ecosystems, they have also exposed the asymmetries, extractive tendencies, and epistemic erasures embedded in many South–North collaborations. I have often witnessed and at times been complicit in the ways in which Global South communities are positioned as mere data sources or beneficiaries of Northern expertise rather than as equal partners in knowledge creation.

Therefore, this article centers on Ubuntu relationality, a philosophy rooted in African communitarian ethics as a critical framework for rethinking international research partnerships. I approach this work as a scholar with stakes in both critiquing dominant narratives and constructing anticolonial, justice-oriented alternatives for global research.

### **Problematizing the Geopolitics of Research Partnerships**

Research conducted by external actors in the Global South often reflects continuities of colonial projects of domination, resource extraction, and epistemic control (Ahmed & Gyamerah, 2025; Chilisa, 2020; Mohammed, 2025; Smith 2012). Early ethnographic expeditions, missionary scholarship, and colonial scientific surveys functioned as technologies of governance through which colonized peoples and their communities were cataloged, classified, and rendered knowable within imperial logic (Mudimbe, 1988; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Smith, 2012). Reflecting on this history from the African context, Zimbabwean historian and decolonial scholar Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) argues that African

universities and research institutions themselves were established within colonial and settler epistemic logics designed to serve imperial interests rather than to cultivate autonomous African intellectual agendas. This coloniality of knowledge continues to shape how research is organized, funded, and evaluated. Drawing on Fanon's (1963) theorization of the *zone of being* (metropole) and the *zone of nonbeing* (colony), the metropole (Global North) is constituted as the site of humanity, rationality, and legitimate knowledge production, while the colony (Global South) is framed as a space of lack, disorder, and raw epistemic site. Extending Fanonian critique, decolonial scholars argue that the Global North continues to function as an epistemic metropole, positioned as the primary arbiter of research legitimacy and theoretical authority, while the Global South is imagined as an inexhaustible repository of data to be collected, processed, and theorized elsewhere (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, 2021; Nhi, 2025).

This asymmetry becomes particularly visible in who is rendered an expert and who is accorded to a disciplinary authority. For instance, a Congolese or Ghanaian historian would be rarely recognized within Canadian, British or U.S. academia as an authoritative voice on Canadian, British, or American history. Regardless of the scholarly training or methodological rigor they bring, such claims to expertise would be subjected to heightened scrutiny, disciplinary gatekeeping and demands for Western validation.

Conversely, northern scholars, often with limited long-term lived engagement in the Global South, are granted expertise or disciplinary authority over African history, Latin American studies, global public health, or Caribbean governance. This asymmetrical recognition reflects what Peruvian decolonial theorist Anibal Quijano (2000) refers to as the colonial matrix of power, wherein Northern institutional affiliation can function as an epistemic passport that confers immediate credibility, validation and legitimacy (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Chakravartty et al., 2018; Mignolo, 2023).

Moreover, language and the politics of naming can reinforce these entrenched hierarchies. For instance, entire research fields such as "African Development," "Black studies" "Global Health," or "Caribbean Studies" have historically been designated and framed by Northern scholars in ways that reflect colonial imaginaries, even when the communities being named have little influence over how these categories are constructed or operationalized. This unearned authority operates as a free pass to expertise, distorting knowledge production and reinforcing epistemicide. Here, northern frameworks and methodologies become the default reference points, even when they flatten, misrepresent, and erase Global South histories and epistemic traditions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

### **The Politics of Research Partnerships and Collaborations**

International research partnerships have expanded substantially over the past decades, particularly through programs funded by Western governments, academic institutions, and philanthropic organizations focused on humanitarian response and international development (Refaei, 2020; Shah et al., 2024). While these forms of partnerships have contributed meaningfully to knowledge

production, they have also generated sustained critique regarding their underlying power dynamics and governance structures (Shanks & Paulson, 2022). Over the past three decades, collaborations between Global North and Global South institutions have been widely promoted as progressive vehicles for inclusive knowledge production, capacity strengthening, and problem solving aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Asare et al., 2020).

Critical scholarship, however, demonstrates that despite equity-oriented rhetoric, many of these partnerships are structured through geopolitical mechanisms that normalize northern control over agenda setting, methodological design, interpretation, and dissemination of research findings, thereby reproducing coloniality and dependencies (Refaei, 2020; Nkansah et al., 2024; Tilley & Karina, 2021). For instance, a recurring concern raised by Southern scholars is the imposition of research agendas (Asare et al., 2020; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020). Empirical studies show that funding project proposals are often designed and finalized in the Global North before Southern partners are engaged, leaving limited room for meaningful co-construction of research questions or methodologies (Choquez-Millan et al., 2024).

Similarly, a central critique within decolonial and anticolonial scholarship is the persistence of research *on* Global South communities rather than research *with* them (Smith, 2012). These dynamics are rooted in longer colonial histories in which Indigenous and southern peoples were rendered objects of inquiry and sites of epistemic extraction (Ahmed & Gyamerah, 2025). As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 2012) famously argues, research has historically functioned as a tool through which European scholars produced deficit-centered narratives of Indigenous peoples. Contemporary research partnerships often reinscribe these dynamics, even when teams are internationally composed, as donor templates preselect fundable questions, legitimate methods, and permissible forms of impact (Refaei, 2020). This results in a patterned relegation of Southern epistemic sites to what can be understood as “data mining” zones for Northern theory and publication, resulting in a dynamic wherein Global South research supplies raw materials for theorization concentrated in Northern academic institutions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Funding architectures also further (re)produce these inequalities. Analyses of large-scale funding programs reveal how conditionalities embed asymmetry into partnership design. Examining the United Kingdom’s Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), researchers have shown that eligibility criteria, thematic priorities, and methodological expectations are largely determined by northern funders, thereby constraining southern agenda setting (Bradley, 2017; Carbonnier & Kontinen, 2014; Grieve & Mitchell, 2020). These decisions tend to predict publication outcomes. In a study, Asare et al. (2020) found that among 480 collaborative publications involving sub-Saharan Africa, only one-third credited an Africa-based first author, with Northern-initiated projects significantly more likely to marginalize Southern intellectual leadership.

In addition, trust and gatekeeping have emerged as key themes in international research partnerships (Tilley & Pallina, 2021). In politically volatile or repressive contexts, Southern researchers often serve as community

gatekeepers mediating access, navigating state surveillance, and absorbing ethical risk (Bellin et al., 2019). While indispensable to ethical engagement, this labor is precarious, as obligations to protect communities may conflict with donor timelines and institutional deliverables (Obijiofor et al., 2018). Building on this argument, Tilley and Karina (2021) posit that gatekeeping labor, including translation, cultural brokerage, and the management of reputational risk, is often rendered invisible in methods sections and excluded from research budgets, despite being foundational to research. These inequalities are further compounded by racialized and institutional hierarchies within academia. Northern scholars, often white and based in elite institutions, enjoy disproportionate access to funding, job security, and publication prestige, while Southern colleagues shoulder unpaid equity labor and administrative burdens with limited institutional recognition (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Beck & Halloin, 2017; Chakravarty et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2020). Furthermore, structural barriers in academic publishing, including high open-access fees, editorial bias, and the dominance of English as the language of scholarship, further marginalize Global South scholars (Bonney, 2022; Zhou & Fu, 2025). Authorship analyses confirm these patterns, showing that first- and last-author positions disproportionately accrue to Northern-based scholars even when research is conducted in the Global South (Asare et al., 2020; Hedt-Gauthier et al., 2019).

Finally, extant research has unpacked the coloniality of methods and associated questionable research practices (Mohammed, 2025). Decolonial and Indigenous methodologists demonstrate how Euro-Western methodologies often privilege standardized instruments, narrow notions of replicability, and individualist logics of causation that misrecognize relational ontologies, communal ethics, and Indigenous theories (Ahmed & Gyamerah, 2025; Chilisa, 2017, 2019; Wilson, 2008). In African contexts, Western-driven methods are likely to bypass local ethical protocols and narrate communities through deficit-oriented frames (Ahmed & Gyamerah; Chilisa, 2020). As such, unless research governance, ethics, and methods are reanchored for community-defined purposes, research will continue to reproduce colonial relationships. The next section introduces Ubuntu relationality and its potential contribution to rethinking research collaborations.

## **UBUNTU RELATIONALITY: TOWARDS AN ANTICOLONIAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS**

This article theorizes Ubuntu relationality as an anticolonial framework for rethinking international research partnerships. While much of the literature has positioned Ubuntu primarily as an ethical orientation emphasizing values such as compassion, solidarity, and mutual respect, I engage it here as an anticolonial framework that directly challenges the extractive logics and epistemic hierarchies embedded in dominant research practices (Chamdimba & Chinkondenji, 2025; Letseka, 2012). Grounded in African Indigenous epistemologies, Ubuntu relationality offers a countervision of research partnership that centers relational ethics, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. Moving beyond reformist calls

for equity, it proposes a fundamental restructuring of how research international relationships are initiated, sustained, and evaluated (Chilisa, 2020).

Ubuntu is articulated through the Nguni maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (commonly translated as “a person is a person through other persons”). Similar conceptions of Ubuntu exist across diverse African contexts, including *unhu* in Shona, *botho* in Sotho-Tswana, and *utu* in Kiswahili. This reflects the continent’s longstanding emphasis on collective ways of being, doing and knowing (Mugumbate et al., 2024). At its core, Ubuntu asserts that personhood and knowledge are constituted through relationships with individuals and the wider community. Applied to research partnership, Ubuntu challenges transactional understandings of collaboration by insisting that knowledge production must be grounded in mutual recognition, shared responsibility, and epistemic respect (Chinkondenji, 2022; Kayange, 2023). Extending Ubuntu from a philosophy into praxis necessitates a shift away from the logics of academic neoliberalism, which privilege measurable outputs and donor-driven priorities by gesturing toward long-term commitments that sustain relationships and collective flourishing. Ubuntu relationality thus reframes partnership as a shared ethical responsibility (Gyamerah, 2024). It calls for codetermined research agendas, values Southern epistemologies as equal to Euro-Western frameworks, and centers community-defined priorities over institutional metrics of success (Bang et al., 2016; Borti et al., 2024). Such an orientation critically resists extractive practices, including helicopter research (Lambert et al., 2024), where data collected in the Global South are taken to the West, analyzed and theorized with minimal involvement of Southern scholars and their communities (Patel, 2015).

### **Applicability of Ubuntu in Research**

Empirical work has demonstrated the applicability of Ubuntu across different fields and contexts (Chilisa, 2020; Seehawer, 2018). In community health research, for instance, Denyse et al. (2022) describe an “Ubuntu Approach” implemented in a U.S. community–academic partnership to address breast cancer disparities among Black women. This approach prioritized shared values, mutual respect, and trust and put the benefit to the community first, and it proved effective in practice, resulting in tangible community benefits while modeling a more equitable form of collaboration (Denyse et al., 2022). In South Africa, the Ubuntu Community Model in Nursing links multiple universities and local communities to improve maternal and child health services through Ubuntu-guided, collaborative interventions (Nyandeni et al., 2024). This project, funded by the National Research Foundation of South Africa, emphasized solidarity and reciprocity in health care delivery and has demonstrated strengthened community engagement and more sustainable health outcomes by leveraging Ubuntu principles in service design. Such cases show that centering Ubuntu’s communal ethics can directly enhance the effectiveness and equity of health research and interventions. Likewise, Chamdimba and Chinkondenji (2025) demonstrate how Ubuntu-guided methodology can reshape participatory research in the digital age.

Their work with youth in Malawi employed the Ubuntu principles of sharing and collaborative knowledge-making to ensure that technology-enhanced qualitative research remains inclusive and community-centered. By insisting on human connection and mutual accountability even in online or remote research activities, their study prevented the marginalization of community voices that often occurs when technological tools are not guided by an Ubuntu ethic (Chamdimba & Chinkondenji, 2025).

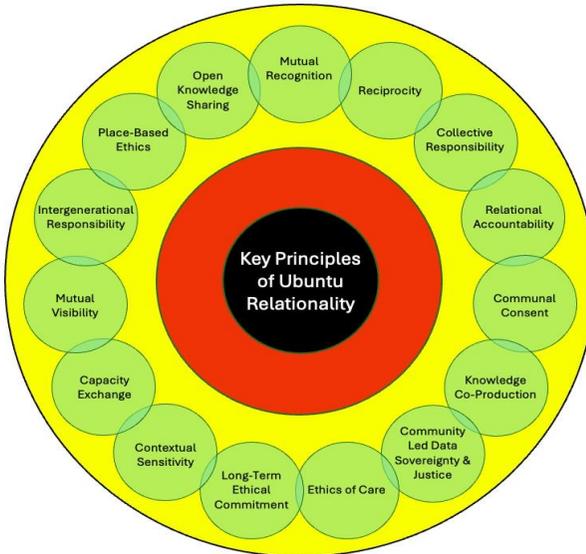
Additionally, Ubuntu-informed principles are gaining traction in education and the social sciences. For example, Ikpeh and Awi (2025) proposed that embedding Ubuntu's relational values into higher education structures could foster mentorship, collaboration, and social capital among marginalized scholars, thereby creating more equitable academic networks. This Ubuntu-centric approach to academia directly challenges the individualistic, competitive norms of Western higher education by prioritizing collective uplift and inclusivity. These diverse examples, which span public health, higher education, and community-based research contexts, highlight that Ubuntu's communitarian approach to research is applicable in multiple settings. It is important to note that although Ubuntu relationality emerges from African Indigenous knowledge systems, its philosophical commitments resonate with collectivist worldviews in other global contexts. For instance, Luschei's (2016) discussion of *convivencia* in Colombian education reflects a communitarian ethic of coexistence similar to Ubuntu's emphasis on community and mutual care.

Similarly, Bell and Metz (2011) identify parallels between Ubuntu and Confucian thought in East Asia, noting that both prioritize relational harmony and the balance of individual and collective interests over Western notions of autonomous individualism. These intersections demonstrate that Ubuntu's core values are not geographically bound; rather, they contribute meaningfully to broader conversations on anticolonial scholarship, epistemic justice, and ethical research practice globally.

Building on these prior studies, I introduce the Ubuntu Relationality heuristic device (Figure 1). This heuristic captures fifteen (15) interlinked principles developed from the Ubuntu philosophy to guide ethical, equitable, and justice-oriented research collaborations. The heuristic aims to offer a sense-making framework to guide researchers in dismantling extractive logics and relational accountability at every stage of the research process. For example, the principle of *mutual recognition* challenges Northern epistemic dominance by positioning Southern scholars and institutions as equal cotheorizers, while *data sovereignty* affirms the rights of Southern researchers and communities to govern the collection, storage, and dissemination of their knowledge. Similarly, principles such as *communal consent* and *shared governance* insist on embedding local decision-making authority within research projects, disrupting the top-down dynamics that often define Global North-led collaborations.

Together, these principles highlight Ubuntu's potential to provide concrete guidelines for enacting anticolonial, justice-oriented praxis in collaborative research. By operationalizing Ubuntu's relational principles using the heuristic device outlined below, this article provides researchers, institutions, and funding

bodies with an actionable pathway to reimagine research relationships in ways that decenter colonial logic and honor the dignity, agency, and epistemic sovereignty of all partners involved in the research ecosystem.



**Figure 1: Ubuntu Relationality Heuristic**

Source: Author

### **Operationalizing Ubuntu Relationality in Global South and Global North Research Collaborations**

There is a growing body of scholarship demonstrating that decolonial and Indigenous frameworks can guide research praxis in tangible and institutionally negotiated ways. In African contexts, Chilisa et al. (2020) and Seehawer (2018) both outlines how Indigenous research methodologies reposition communities as epistemic agents and emphasize participatory decision-making throughout the research process. In New Zealand, Smith (2012) advances decolonizing methodologies that challenge extractive research logics by centering self-determination and relational accountability to Māori communities. Similarly, in Canada, Kovach (2021) shows how Indigenous methodologies embed community governance, collective ethics, and relational responsibility across the research lifecycle. Building on these studies, this section advances Ubuntu relationality as

an anticolonial framework that moves beyond the procedural solutionism most commonly suggested in scholarship on international research partnerships.

While existing critiques have convincingly demonstrated how structural inequalities and power are embedded in funding architectures, authorship hierarchies, agenda-setting practices, and methodological imperialism, they have been limited in articulating a relational, culturally grounded, and operationally detailed framework capable of guiding researchers to ethically develop and sustain such partnerships. Even when guiding principles have been proposed, they often remain at the level of normative ethics, emphasizing fairness, inclusivity, or respect without interrogating the colonial logic that sustains such practices. Therefore, Ubuntu relationality responds to this gap by reorienting the very terms of partnership. In this regard, relationality is not just an ethical framework but an ontological reality. Hence, human existence and knowledge production are understood as organically coconstituted, sustained through reciprocity, mutual recognition, and collective responsibility (see Gyamerah, 2024).

It is also important to clarify that although previous applications of Ubuntu in research have centered on values such as care, dignity, and respect, this article pushes the theorization slightly further by grounding Ubuntu as a philosophical, political, structural, and epistemic framework for dismantling the colonial matrix of power in international research relations. In this article, I argue that operationalizing this vision requires moving to action. Therefore, by embedding these relational principles into the full lifecycle of international research partnership practices, the framework emphasizes long-term commitment, nonperformative reciprocity, contextual relevance, cultural sensitivity, and open knowledge sharing. These principles are anchored to push back against the funding agency-driven mandates that currently dominate the global research landscape

In essence, Ubuntu relationality provides a roadmap for anticolonial research practices by outlining concrete institutional and interpersonal practices that can help avoid the reproduction of inequities documented in the academic literature. It can also help transform the intent of research collaboration and partnership from just *doing research together* to cocreating new knowledge systems, unlocking global opportunities and ensuring that our research practices from individual to institutional levels are delinked from colonial hierarchies. While the heuristic (figure 1 above) provides a high-level visual frame of Ubuntu's interconnected principles, table 1 below operationalizes these commitments by identifying the extractive tendencies commonly reproduced in international research partnerships, the shifts required to disrupt them, and the areas where these changes must occur in practice. For northern institutions and researchers, the framework provides a roadmap for moving beyond tokenistic equity discourse toward research practices grounded in epistemic justice. To meaningfully operationalize this framework, researchers, funders and academic institutions must utilize it as a flexible, context-responsive guideline that can be adapted to diverse research environments and disciplinary practices.

Table 1: Ubuntu Relationality in Practice: Transforming South–North Research Partnerships

<b>Colonial/Extractive Tendencies in South–North Collaborations</b>	<b>What Change is Required</b>	<b>Application in Practice</b>	<b>Key Considerations/Cautionary Measures</b>
Northern epistemic dominance Southern partners relegated to implementers/data collectors.	Treat knowledge creation as coveaving life histories where Southern scholars shape frameworks and theory.	Codesign research agendas; include Southern partners in framing questions and methodologies.	Move away from symbolic “ equity” ; Resist tokenism and framing Southern knowledge as “ inputs” ; Prioritize and equally recognize both western and nonwestern theories and methods.
One-way flow of funding, authorship, and mobility.	Redefine reciprocity as mutual exchange of resources, ideas, and care across time.	Share authorship, outputs, and presentations equally; copresent findings locally and globally.	Avoid reducing reciprocity to numbers. Focus on context, relationships, and justice.
Research benefits accrue to individuals, not communities.	Embed research within community well-being; Southern partners colead defining benefits.	Codesign outputs (e.g., policy briefs, reports) with local input.	Refuse paternalistic “ benefit narratives” . Let definitions of impact emerge from communities and research partners themselves.

<p><b>Key Principles of Ubuntu Relationality</b></p>	<p><b>Mutual Recognition</b></p>	<p><b>Reciprocity</b></p>	<p><b>Collective Responsibility</b></p>
<p>Short-term, transactional projects dominate.</p>	<p>Short-term, transactional projects dominate.</p>	<p>North produces theory; South supplies data.</p>	<p>Southern data stored in Northern-controlled repositories.</p>
<p>Sustain relationships beyond project cycles, centering ecological and human kinships.</p>	<p>Implement layered consent that honors both individual and communal rights.</p>	<p>Treat Southern partners as cotheorists and codesigners of research narratives.</p>	<p>Create cogovernance systems when data remains rooted in its place of origin.</p>
<p>Maintain contact postproject, host reflection circles, and track outcomes collaboratively.</p>	<p>Obtain both personal and collective approvals; share drafts with partners; include community ethics reviews.</p>	<p>Jointly set research agendas; reinterpret findings in real time.</p>	<p>Use Global South repositories for Southern data; codevelop data-use agreements; invest in local infrastructure.</p>
<p>Avoid equating longevity with productivity; create a culture of care, and reciprocal protocols.</p>	<p>Avoid imposing Western protocols; allow opacity when appropriate.</p>	<p>Avoid tokenistic coauthorship that hides authorship hierarchies.</p>	<p>Be mindful of reducing sovereignty to legal ownership.</p>

<p><b>Relational Accountability</b></p>	<p><b>Communal Consent</b></p>	<p><b>Knowledge Co-Production</b></p>	<p><b>Community-Led Data Sovereignty &amp; Justice</b></p>
<p>Ground ethics in restorative, culturally rooted care practices led by the South.</p>	<p>Include funding for translation, local dissemination, and interpretation; produce outputs aligned with cultural protocols.</p>	<p>Watch for “ care-washing”, where care is aesthetic or symbolic but not embedded in timelines or resources.</p>	<p>Avoid institutionalizing “ commitment” as branding; keep relationships responsive and ethical.</p>
<p>Embed research within long-arc ecosystems where relationships outlast project funding.</p>	<p>Share results after funding ends, cocreate interlinked knowledge outputs, and advocate multidecade funding models.</p>	<p>Avoid assuming symmetry; acknowledge that some capacities are context-specific and nontransferable.</p>	<p>Beware of exoticizing or essentializing local practices for Northern audiences; protect epistemic integrity.</p>
<p>Approach knowledge mobilization as place-based storytelling rooted in local epistemologies.</p>	<p>Use culturally resonant mediums, dual local/global formats, and multilingual outputs.</p>	<p>Host skill-shares, two-way learning exchanges, and fund reciprocal training programs.</p>	<p>Reframe capacity-building as reciprocal flows of knowledge, methods, and innovation.</p>

<b>Ethics of Care</b>	Efficiency and outputs prioritized over dignity.
<b>Long-Term Ethical Commitment</b>	Opportunistic, funding-driven collaboration.
<b>Contextual Sensitivity</b>	Universal, decontextualized dissemination.
<b>Capacity Exchange</b>	Northern led “training” models dominate.

Cite Southern work, copresent at international conferences, and support Southern led convenings.	Visibility must be tied to power-shifting; avoid tokenistic inclusion.
Mentor early-career southern scholar partners, archive findings locally, and fund long-term fellowships for early career scholars.	Move away from reducing “intergenerational” to youth-only programs; honor deep community lineages.
Respect local environmental ethics and community custodianship practices.	Be mindful of performative sustainability branding; allow ecological priorities to guide decisions.
Publish open access, prioritize Southern-led journals, and fund free community dissemination.	Desist from extractive “openness” where data is shared without consent or benefit to originating communities.

<p><b>Mutual Visibility</b></p>	<p>Southern contributions rendered invisible.</p>	<p>Ensure Southern scholarship and leadership are amplified.</p>
<p><b>Intergenerational Responsibility</b></p>	<p>Short-termism undermines knowledge continuity.</p>	<p>Create structures for mentorship, archiving, and knowledge transfer.</p>
<p><b>Place-Based Ethics</b></p>	<p>Ecological and territorial impacts ignored.</p>	<p>Embed ecological care and local land/water protocols into research.</p>
<p><b>Open Knowledge Sharing</b></p>	<p>Research outputs hidden behind paywalls.</p>	<p>Commit to accessible, community-driven knowledge circulation.</p>

For instance, academic institutions can utilize the Ubuntu relationality heuristic tool and accompanying table as tools for critically assessing and redesigning their research governance structures, funding protocols, authorship norms, and community engagement strategies. For researchers, this offers concrete pathways to move beyond extractive collaboration by embedding principles such as mutual recognition, communal consent, and data justice across all stages of the research lifecycle.

Importantly, the framework is not intended as a one-size-fits-all tool. It should be used in line with local understanding and contextual realities. Therefore, users of the framework are not expected to implement all fifteen principles at once. They can engage with the ones most relevant to their specific context and partnership goals.

## **Conclusion and Future Directions**

This article has critically examined how international research partnerships often reproduce colonial logic, epistemic hierarchies, and structural inequities. I situate these issues within broader historical, political, and institutional contexts. These inequities prevail because dominant frameworks continue to position the Global South primarily as a site of data extraction, while conceptual framing, methodological authority, and institutional visibility remain concentrated in the Global North.

Against this backdrop, the article advances Ubuntu relationality as an anticolonial framework for reimagining research partnerships. Moving beyond reformist calls for equity, Ubuntu invites us to fundamentally rethink research relationships by centering reciprocity, mutual accountability, and epistemic justice. As the article has argued, Ubuntu reconfigures the very terms of research partnership. The framework foregrounds collective responsibility, codecision-making, and long-term relational commitments. Through the interconnected principles, the article presents the Ubuntu relationality heuristic tool to map out a practical and culturally grounded praxis for transforming how scholars, institutions, and funding agencies engage with research partnerships.

Importantly, Ubuntu relationality challenges extractive research tendencies by proposing actionable practices such as codetermining research agendas, redistributing resources, recognizing Southern epistemic authority, and prioritizing community-driven ethics and consent practices throughout the research lifecycle. As a result, Ubuntu shifts the purpose of partnerships and collaboration from simply doing research together to cocreating knowledge systems that value diverse epistemologies and foster collective flourishing. While Ubuntu has been operationalized as a philosophical orientation in the research literature, recent work has repositioned Ubuntu as a viable framework for reframing research collaboration. For example, African-led groups such as the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) have developed fairer funding models. Partnerships such as the African Research Universities Alliance–UK Research and Innovation (ARUA–UKRI) Collaborative Research Program also show stronger support for African institutional leadership, fairer authorship practices, and regional capacity building. These initiatives demonstrate that Ubuntu-like principles such as but not limited to shared agency, relationship building, and collective benefit can be operationalized within existing systems that are otherwise shaped by neoliberal logics of competition, ranking, and output maximization.

It is important to acknowledge that operationalizing Ubuntu relationality within international research partnerships might come with challenges. These require navigating institutional and funding architectures that often conflict with relational ethics. For instance, grant mechanisms commonly mandate that Global North institutions retain financial control, limiting opportunities for Southern partners to access part of such funding. Moreover, academia's focus on competitive publication and authorship as metrics to research excellence may continue to privilege northern researchers, resulting in reinforcing epistemic hierarchies in collaborative projects. These potential challenges highlight the need

for ongoing negotiation, policy reform, and institutional willingness to reconfigure power relations so that relationality can be meaningfully enacted in research partnerships.

Finally, I conclude that future scholarship must build on this work through empirical inquiry into how Ubuntu-informed praxis can inform ethical research collaborations, authorship norms, data governance, and collaborative knowledge production across diverse contexts. By reimagining South–North partnerships through Ubuntu relationality, we can begin to decenter colonial matrices of power and cultivate research partnership practices grounded in collective human and planetary flourishing.

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