



# Key Features of Sustainable North-South Funding Instruments

## Towards an equitable landscape for global research partnerships

North-South research partnerships are essential for addressing global challenges. To ensure equitable and effective collaboration, funders must establish supportive environments that address gaps in funding, capacity building, and institutional support. This factsheet provides practical recommendations for enabling conditions, fostering balanced partnerships, and achieving meaningful results. Key considerations include co-creating research agendas, promoting targeted capacity development, reducing institutional disparities, and adopting transparent evaluation practices. Funders are also encouraged to support outputs and communication efforts that align with societal and policy needs. These measures can help foster partnerships that are grounded in equity, shared goals, and mutual respect.

### Swiss funding instruments for research collaborations

Research collaborations have immense potential to advance scientific understanding and tackle complex global challenges by integrating diverse perspectives, knowledge systems, and resources. Switzerland offers a variety of funding instruments<sup>2</sup> to support North-South and equitable research partnerships. Many of these instruments encourage to consider KFPE principles<sup>1</sup> as a guiding framework for equitable and effective research collaborations. However, many funders fall short in operationalizing, evaluating and enforcing these principles in practice. Achieving equitable research collaborations requires an enabling and supportive environment, which cannot be addressed by the KFPE Guide alone. Structural issues in fund-

ing and academia necessitate the development of structured mechanisms, tools, and indicators to uphold these principles as core values in research partnerships. Without such measures, partnerships risk being equitable in name only, rather than genuinely collaborative in nature.

In view of this, it is crucial to design funding instruments that create an enabling environment for research partnerships to fulfill their intended purposes and goals. To draw on the available experiences of collaborative research funding, scholars have emphasized the need for funding mechanisms that empower Global South scientists to lead high-quality, context-relevant projects.<sup>6</sup> These mechanisms not only foster transdisciplinary research for sustainable development but also empower local leadership as part of broader capac-

## Research partnerships: importance, equity, and sustainability

Research partnerships are the cornerstone of addressing shared global challenges. They must address contextual differences, conflicts, and diverse priorities to ensure equity and fairness in research engagement. Switzerland has made significant efforts to promote global and equitable partnerships through various funding instruments and initiatives.

### Why global research partnerships?

Understanding complex global problems and developing appropriate, applicable and scalable solutions require the consideration of different knowledge, perspectives and priorities. Global research partnerships improve the quality of research and contributes to sustainable development. Such collaborations strengthen research systems in both high- and low-income countries to provide a basis for informed decision-making.

### Why equitable collaborations?

Power imbalances in collaborations tend to over-emphasize powerful voices over others resulting in one-sided analysis of global problems and development of single-edged solutions. Equitable collaborations ensure that different knowledge, perspectives, priorities, concerns, ideas and agency are genuinely included in the research process. Such collaborations not only balance sharing of resources and benefits but also contribute to the long-term sustainability of research outcomes and investments.

### What contributions from Switzerland?

Major funders in Switzerland for global research partnerships are the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), State Secretariat for Research and Education (SERI) and private foundations. Switzerland has global research collaborations reaching to all corners of the world. The total volume of the main Swiss funders for global research collaborations amounted to approximately CHF 100 million in 2023.

### What to consider for sustainable funding instruments?

When designing funding instruments, it is important to consider fundamental questions that underpin North-South research collaborations, which leverage local expertise in the Global South with support from the Global North:

- What type of partnerships should funders foster with and in the Global South?
- Should funders foster initiatives led by Southern partners?
- Should funders promote collaboration with organisations on a rotational basis?
- Should funders work together to complement one another's efforts?
- Should knowledge be viewed primarily as an outcome, or as a transformative tool for development and capacity building?

ity-building efforts,<sup>4</sup> ensuring alignment with local needs, values, and sustainability goals.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore important that funders not only promote locally-led initiatives that are relevant to the context in which the research is conducted, but also strategically incorporate long-term capacity development and institution building efforts to strengthen the agency of Southern partners in addressing societal challenges.<sup>5,7</sup> This involves creating the necessary conditions for long-term human capacity development and institution-building in the Global South, as well as establishing the conditions required in both the Global North and South to enable true partnerships.

The following sections build on this need by highlighting key features of sustainable funding instruments and providing recommendations for funders. These focus on setting enabling conditions for promising collaborations, supporting balanced and equitable partnerships, and creating relevant outputs and outcomes. Recommendations are informed by findings from a multi-stage process involving Southern partners, project and programme coordinators, and representatives from major Swiss funding institutions and programmes.

## Setting enabling frame conditions for promising collaborations

To foster successful and sustainable North-South research partnerships, it is essential to create enabling conditions that go beyond just providing financial support. This includes setting appropriate funding conditions, timeframes, and key considerations for the submission and evaluation process. The following recommendations outline important factors for setting these enabling frame conditions.

### Funding conditions

**Include pre- and post-research phases:** Limiting funds to the research process alone may hinder productive partnerships by cementing power imbalances between Northern and Southern partners and may also prevent transfer and contextual application of innovative research findings. These dangers can be counterbalanced by enabling preparatory phases through seed money and/or a two-step approach in the submission phase that includes preproposals and full proposals, particularly for larger grants. Additionally, reserves could be set aside to fund promising transfer and applications activities in a post-research phase.

**Promote enabling financial base for Southern partners:** Financial resources should be well balanced between Northern and Southern partners, ideally with equitable shares. However, even if this is given, many promising and innovative Southern partner institutions face tremendous problems in meeting the funding conditions, e.g. in relation to cost-sharing, in self-financing of basic infrastructure and logistics, or in involving non-academic partners in stakeholder processes or in contextual transfer and application processes. Provision and transparent regulations on in-kind contributions, overhead costs, as well as costs for involving non-academic partners are therefore strongly recommended.

## Timeframe

**Find pathways between requirements and realities:** In most cases, only a long-term engagement of five to ten years will lead to build trust, foster highly productive partnerships, and achieve significant contextual outcomes and impacts in research and capacity development. However, with the sole exception of the NCCR North-South, this time requirement is unrealistic within most funding calls. Funding baskets may therefore strive for structures that enable sequences of projects that continuously build on achievements. At the same time, research partners from the South and the North should jointly face the responsibility to build sequences of projects into a long-term joint programme by strategically trying to tap on a broad variety of funding opportunities.

## Submission and evaluation process

**Strengthen the role of Southern partners:** A key feature is how to ensure strong participation or even lead functions by Southern partners in the initial phase of a research project. Aspects such as targeted information on a call, possibilities of coaching, options of multi-lingual submission, as well as seed funds for preparatory work are deemed important.

**Ensure transparency and adequate evaluation competencies:** The development of a partnership-based project proposal is demanding, costly and time-consuming. Therefore, there is a strong demand for more in-depth feedback on the evaluation and the reasons for acceptance or rejection. In addition, there is a need of a composition of reviewers that do not only embrace thematic but also contextual competence, including competencies in transdisciplinary research, North-South collaborations, and the inclusion of evaluators from the Global South.

**Balancing long-term versus new partnerships:** Building productive and innovative North-South partnerships is demanding and requires long-term engagement. However, newly formed partnerships may open new thematic or contextual avenues, but also pose more risks of failure or shallowness. Funders who focus solely on fostering competition risk undermining established, promising long-term partnerships without necessarily gaining innovative new collaborations. Striking a good balance between the two options of partnerships can be reached by factoring in past successes of partnerships in the evaluation process.

## Supporting balanced and equitable collaboration in partnerships

To ensure balanced and equitable collaboration in North-South research partnerships, it is crucial to create conditions that foster mutual learning, respect, and capacity building. The following recommendations highlight key considerations for promoting equitable collaboration, with a focus on the agenda-setting process, human resource management and capacity development, and support for institutional building.

**Strive for co-creation between novelty and continuity:** Research themes, questions, concepts and approaches must

be co-created and co-designed by the partners. At the same time, the needs and requirements by the concerned context and its stakeholders should guide this process. However, experience shows that the cumulative influence by Northern funders and researchers on the agenda tends to override Southern perspectives and needs. The search for novelty in the Northern reference system leads to frequent thematic shifts, be it in setting themes of calls or be it in the evaluation process of open calls. These frequent and abrupt shifts may hinder developed competences on core issues of Southern contexts to come to fruition and enforce imbalances in North-South partnerships. Northern partners and funders must be highly sensitive on striving for a better balance between novelty of themes and the novelty in continued pursuing of relevant core problems and challenges. Allocating time and resources for the respective search and negotiation processes is pivotal.

**Combine mutual learning and targeted capacity development:** Mutual learning between partners and across hierarchies is key to the success of projects and requires allocation of time, resources and tools. However, for most research institutions, particularly from the Global South, formal capacity development, e.g. at master and PhD levels, is seen as a key component of engaged empirical research and the building of respective competences. Not all funders support this vital link between research and capacity development, thereby challenging research partners to source for complementary support. At the same time, major funders are called upon to include this dimension into their calls.

**Find approaches to reduce institutional disparities:** It is a fact that most Southern partner institutions are more restraint in terms of overheads, equipment, research infrastructure, financial flexibility, etc. than their Northern partners. These disparities increase imbalances and limit Southern participation. Whereas most funders cannot be expected to stand in for institutional deficits, tailor-made and flexible approaches should be inbuilt in major calls to at least partly address institutional disparities. These could include, for example, provisions for overhead costs, financial contributions to research infrastructure such as laboratories, hardware, and software, flexibility in adaptive financial management, and support for networking activities and events.

## Creating relevant outputs and outcomes

To create relevant outputs and outcomes in North-South research partnerships, it is essential to focus on both high-quality research and development relevance. This section presents recommendations for enhancing output and communications, as well as for achieving relevant outcomes and impacts.

**Strive for outputs and communications that foster outcomes:** North-South partnerships in most cases strive for both, high-quality research and development relevance. The first implies scientific publications with balanced shares from Southern and Northern partners. The second calls for products and communications that target multiple societal and policy levels relevant to the development theme and context. To enhance the uptake of outputs, the target audience

should be included in the research process from the outset, such as during the agenda-setting phase, to ensure the production of targeted, relevant information and foster ongoing dialogue. Funders should ensure early output and communication planning with shared responsibilities between partners, as well as interactions with relevant communities, stakeholders, institutions, and scientific communities. This paves the way for scientific and/or societal uptake and outcomes. This is challenging and requires thorough planning, resource allocation, as well as flexibility.

**Take responsibility in partnerships beyond single donor contributions:** Researchers participating in North-South partnerships are mostly not only interested in quality research but share a strong development engagement and strive for respective broad competence building. Achieving impacts in all these three dimensions goes in most cases beyond single donor projects. Research partnerships therefore must take the responsibility to systematically draw on the diversity of funders and other supporting structures, in order to combine projects and contributions into a comprehensive endeavor with significant impacts in all three dimensions.

## Conclusion

This factsheet offers key recommendations for funders to design funding instruments that foster effective North-South research partnerships, emphasizing the importance of long-term capacity development and institution building for Global South partners. The relevance of these recommendations varies based on the funding instrument's context and goals. While not universally applicable, they serve as a catalyst for funders to refine their approaches. To design or revise funding instruments effectively, funders should consider a collaborative process. This includes developing instruments in partnership with funders from Global South Countries, coordinating with other funding mechanisms to address gaps, and seeking advice from North-South and local experts, especially when focusing on specific regions.

In implementing such approaches, it is important to note that not all enabling conditions, such as longer timeframes or support for pre- and post-research phases, will suit every funding instrument. However, recommendations on balanced collaboration and mutual learning remain broadly relevant and can strengthen partnerships in diverse contexts. For development-focused programmes, prioritizing outputs with societal and policy impact is critical, whereas academic-oriented instruments may focus on advancing scientific collaboration. Together, these considerations provide a practical set of recommendations for creating equitable, effective, and impactful partnerships.

### SDGs: The UN's International Sustainable Development Goals

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«Reduce inequality within and among countries», «Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development» and «Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development».

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### ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

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