

The power of knowledge in collaborative projects across North and South: empowerment or epistemological dependency? (0160)

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Background

While education has been high on the development agenda for years, universities have been recognized only recently as key drivers for societal growth in Africa. Some twenty years ago, the World Bank recommended closing universities in the region and instead sending graduates overseas for training (Obamba, 2013; Brock-Utne, 2002). With the co-called knowledge economy the tides have changes and capacity building of the African higher education sector has become widely included in donor policies in the 'North'. The question is how international collaboration and capacity building projects in African universities affect their knowledge production. The type of institutions and knowledges promoted worldwide are the outcome of development in learned institutions in the 'North' over the past 200-300 years. Furthermore development assistance, internationalisation, and other global trends lead to academic dependency as argued by a number of African researchers (e.g. Arowosegbe, 2016; Teferra, 2014). Few, however, have shown what this dependency entails (exceptions being Breidlid, 2013; King, 2008). In this paper we analyse the paradoxically ways in which collaborative projects can be a means to independence while reinforcing dependence at the same time.

Knowledge as universality or contextual

The debate about dependency in Africa's knowledge production dates back to 1990, when the Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji published his article 'Scientific dependence in Africa today'. In this he applied concepts and theories from development research such as dependency, centre-periphery and world-system to argue that research in Africa was 'extroverted' and 'dependent'. By that he meant that research was dependent on the 'North' in a number of ways and not related to the situation in Africa (Hountondji, 1990). Still today, African universities are dependent upon external actors through funding and collaboration as seen for instance in capacity building projects.

Universities and the scientific knowledges they hold are often seen to have ubiquitous qualities; therefore, capacity building projects in higher education can appear straight forward in the 'North'; it may become a matter of 'teaching them what we know' as we have experienced ourselves (see Adriansen and Madsen, 2013). At the same time, schooling and the 'colonisation of the mind' has been debated in the South (e.g. Fanon, 1968; Wa Thiong'o, 1987) and it has been described how schooling entails the 'crossing of epistemological bridges' (Breidlid, 2013). When schooling is based on 'Northern' knowledges and ways of thinking, epistemological dependency occurs. In recent years, this critique of the perceived universality of knowledge has been spread to academia, and simultaneously with the increased understanding of knowledge as situated and contextual there have been calls for a decolonisation of methodologies (Chen, 2010; Smith 2012) and theories (Connell, 2007). These scholars show how 'North' is seen as a place of theorising and thus represents the universal, while 'South' is perceived as a place for collecting empirical material and thus represents the particular. However, when knowledge production is based on theories and methods developed for and in other historical and geographical contexts that knowledge will be ill-suited for solving local problems (Adriansen et al., 2016a).

The cultural production of an (African) academic

In a study with and of an Senegalese climate change researcher, Cheikh Mbow, we have shown how capacity building projects can both create dependence and assist African researchers in becoming independent (Adriansen et al. 2016b). In the first years at university, the dependency in terms of an inherited curriculum was quite clear: 'I knew all about the geography and biology of France but nothing about that of Senegal'. Later, Mbow participated in capacity building programmes some of which targeted individuals through scholarships, and others targeting institutions through joint research projects. During studies in Denmark, Mbow was exposed to a new 'cultural production of an educated person' (concept from Levinson and Holland, 1996). In Denmark, the cultural production of an academic was closely related to issues of academic freedom, questioning what was taken for granted even when it entailed questioning older professors. Mbow found that much of the schooling he had been exposed to in Senegal was reproduction of knowledge, rather than creation of new knowledge, and therefore adopted the Danish cultural production of an academic. This can be seen as a subtle type of dependence. Paradoxically, the Danish cultural production of an academic also enabled Mbow to become an independent researcher in the sense that he became aware of how knowledge and methods inherited from the 'North' were conveyed as universal. Consequently Mbow began to question this so-called universality.

Methodological hegemony in collaborative projects

Together with Mbow, we were involved in a North-driven capacity building project concerning climate change, land use, and water resources using satellite remote sensing and GIS techniques. We have analysed the power of knowledge inherent in this North-South collaboration (see Madsen and Nielsen 2016). The choice of methodology was a prerequisite from the 'North' based on their research expertise and an interest from the 'South' in building up such an expertise. Our analysis showed that the negotiations of scientific knowledge production and the choice of methods were embedded in implicit agreement from 'North' and 'South' of relevant methodology. Hence, the partners could question the topics, the content of the PhD-courses and even the composition of the project itself, but the methodological approach i.e. using remote sensing and GIS was not negotiable. This methodological hegemony situated the African partners in a dependency relation. At the same time, the very access to this methodology meant that the African partners became more independent in their knowledge production – because they had been empowered with the access to knowledge and methods previously inaccessible to them.

Future implications

Many collaborative projects approach scientific knowledge as universal and transferable whereby context often is ignored. Consequently collaboration with universities in the 'North' not only results in *economic* dependency for African universities as argued by Arowosegbe (2016), but can also lead to *epistemological* dependencies. We have shown how collaboration projects both can be a means to independence and reinforce dependence at the same time. More research is needed into how collaborative projects can approach collaboration in non-hegemonic ways.

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