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Carving Out Space for Equitable Collaborative Research in Protracted Displacement

MAHA SHUAYB

Centre for Lebanese Studies, Lebanese American University, Beirut 1102 2801, Lebanon

CATHRINE BRUN

Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford OX3 0BP, UK cbrun@brookes.ac.uk

M.S and C.B. Equal authorship, contributed equally to the work.

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Research collaborations between global north and south have a long history in studies of forced migration, and discussions of power relations in such research relationships have existed for a long time. We are two researchers working across the global south–north divide, and this article reflects on our attempt to navigate the research industry amid the 'Syrian refugee research complex'. We discuss our attempt to carve out a space for more equitable research collaborations across the north–south divide and between partners. We unpack the existing power dynamics and the systems attached to them, e.g. institutional constraints, funding regulations, budget restrictions, and residues of post-colonial power dynamics. We then reflect on how these dynamics help to maintain the north's hegemony in the research and knowledge production cycle. We argue that collaborative research can gain from a reflective practice that focuses on the relational aspects involved in research. This can be achieved through a 'friendship approach' rather than 'tick-the-box guidelines'.

Keywords: north–south collaboration, Syrian refugee research complex, collaborative research

Introduction

Network, partnerships, and collaborations have become a prerequisite in funding calls for research on forced displacement (Bradley 2008; Landau 2012). Global north academic funding agencies (such as the UK research councils, EU, and the Research Council of Norway) often require an academic partner from the global south. Such initiatives increase the opportunity for south–north collaborations but the conditionalities and embedded power relations tend to cement global inequalities rather than challenge them (Sukarieh and Tannock 2019). Prior to the Syrian refugee crisis, there was already a rich critique of knowledge production and power dynamics in refugee research between global north and south where the scale tips in favour of academics in the global north (Nagar and Ali 2003; Barrett *et al*. 2011; Landau 2012; Dolan *et al*. 2016; McGrath and Young 2019). The Syrian crisis and increased movement towards Europe led to more research interest, funding opportunities, and numerous research projects addressing the Syrian refugee crisis. But academics have been increasingly questioning the power dynamics in this 'Syrian refugee research complex' (Sibai *et al*. 2019, p. 1598; Sukarieh and Tannock 2019). Research on Syrian refugees and accompanying funding from the global north is situated in the industry (humanitarian, research, and policy) that has a partial motivation to control refugee movements and solve the situation closer to home. We have seen this in our own research. For example, during an interview conducted by one of the authors with a senior UN official, the latter mentioned how the international donors stressed that funding is not an issue as long as the refugees stay in Lebanon.

What, then, must be in place in order to transgress south–north divisions and create collaborative spaces? In this article, we reflect on our shared experiences of conducting research on the Syrian refugee crisis and protracted displacement in Lebanon and Jordan. We focus on how the global south and global north distinction is reinforced through the structural and institutional conditions in which our collaboration takes place, and how—with varying degrees of success—we have navigated the systems. Yet power imbalances do not only exist across the north–south divide, as it can be experienced within the collaborators and team members (academic and non-academic partners) within the north and south. In this article, we address these power dynamics. We aim to promote discussion that can lead to more ethically sound research collaborations across the global south–north divide and between partners in the context of protracted displacement. To begin, we grapple with the notions of global south and north in research collaborations on forced migration.

Collaborative Research on Migration—Trapped in the Global South–North Divide?

We apply the concepts of 'global south' and 'north' uncomfortably. While patterns of inequality, one-way flows and skewed power relations between the global south and north can easily be identified, the concepts are problematic because they conceal complex hierarchies within the south and the north, and risk presenting the south and north as homogeneous spheres in which academics are only members of one or the other. Yet some scholars move frequently between the two spheres. For example, a scholar might be trained in the north but work in the south, or she might conduct most of her research collaborations in the south but be employed in a northern institution, or otherwise be tied to the northern knowledge production cycle (especially with regards to publications) while living in the south.

Despite these complexities embedded in the global south-north distinctions, the prominent critique of the dichotomy in the academy (Mohanty 2003) and more emphasis on localized initiatives and involvement of refugee-led organizations in policy and practice, the divide is still potently alive in refugee research. The funding streams for forced migration research, and which we have access to, contribute to reinforcing the ways in which the south–north divide takes on a rigid or dichotomous nature. Our collaboration constantly encounters this division, with each of us positioned in the global south and north, respectively. These positions have provided opportunities and challenges for how we pursue our research and work together. We are deeply embedded in hierarchies, power relations, and positionalities, but we see it as important to interrupt the south–north division to show inequalities within and across regions.

As we show below, within the Syrian refugee research complex, the divide interferes with the potential for creating more equal collaborations and efficient knowledge production. Based on our experiences, we thus ask how can collaborations transgress these divisions and help unsettle the divides between global south and north in research on forced migration? Nagar and Ali (2003, p. 65) suggest that post-colonial and transnational feminist praxis 'focuses explicitly and deliberately on (a) conceptualizing and implementing collaborative efforts that insist on crossing multiple and difficult borders; (b) the sites, strategies, and skills deployed to produce such collaborations; and (c) the specific processes through which such collaborations can find their form, content, and meaning'. We follow these post-colonial feminist theory themes here and propose to view the global south as a flexible and mobile marker that draws our gaze to the operation of imperial power, manifest in complex inequalities articulated at local and global scales (Piedalue and Rishi 2017).

Our collaboration—which can be seen as a global south–north collaboration but where we have constantly attempted to challenge this divide—started with a more or less accidental meeting at a conference on refugees. We realised our joint interests and politics across the disciplines of education and humanitarianism. Each of us had for several years been researching various aspects of the refugee experience in two different disciplines: Education and Geography. Our multi-disciplinary backgrounds tempted us to collaborate to better understand the implications of the refugee crisis on providing education under the humanitarian umbrella. We started communicating, shared ideas, found ways of meeting in the UK and in Lebanon and established a shared space for thinking and creativity. From the outset, we both felt the need and urge to implement ideas around the challenges, limitations, and injustices of adopting a humanitarian model in protracted displacement: where a short-term approach is used to solve a long-term problem.

The focus of our research was to unpack humanitarian education often referred to as 'Education in Emergency'. While including education in the humanitarian response can be deemed as progress in the humanitarian discourse which tends to be focused primarily on saving lives, we could hardly trace a discussion around the purpose of education and its long-term objectives. The oxymoron nature of education which is a long-term process and humanitarianism which is concerned with the short term and the now, remains unresolved. As we have pointed to elsewhere (Brun and Shuayb 2020; Shuayb and Brun 2020), education in a humanitarian setting seems to have less purpose outside keeping people in education and with less emphasis on education for the future. Thus in this study, we wanted to examine the link between education and employment in protracted displacement as one dimension that may link education with the future. While employment is just one outcome of education, we are situating the study in one of the main transitions of youth to adulthood among young refugees.

We played with ideas for about eighteen months before we landed a grant. The successful proposal was called: 'From Education to Employment. Trajectories for young people in Lebanon in the context of protracted displacement' and was submitted to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), a call from the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) on 'Inequalities and skills acquisition in young people'. Since December 2018, we have jointly run this project and secured additional funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) for work on the same theme in Lebanon and Jordan.

We both had experienced very challenging south-north collaborations in the past. In developing our joint ideas, we were geared towards equal collaboration and developing joint ideas. We were both conscious about these existing inequalities and thus wanted to think and design our research collaboration to address these issues. Yet, our success in finding funding for our research was partly due to our locations in the global south and north, respectively, as the funders required such a collaboration. Importantly, the success was also due to our privileged positions in academia. We had already conducted much of the groundwork and had time to write a proposal where our ideas of co-production and democratic spaces for knowledge creation were part of the approach, yet not completely fulfilling our ideas and ideals. The dialogical process of proposal writing had started more than a year prior to the call. We were able to develop a proposal that we felt answered some important questions derived from our experience and immersion in the field, especially as one of us was based in the global south. Working together for a few short periods in Lebanon enabled us to explore our ideas with civil society organizations, we hoped to collaborate with in our research. We were able to build our collaboration over a long period, thanks to the freedom of our career stage and our access to institutional resources in our respective institutions, which allowed travel between Lebanon and the UK. However, our commitments and time constraints limited us in involving representatives from refugee communities in developing our research. While the development of the research was based on mutual exchange and sharing of ideas and cross-fertilization of existing knowledge that led to new and original questions, the next steps of formalizing the research collaboration as a result of funding proved to be more challenging in terms of maintaining the equality as we demonstrate later on.

In what follows, we continue to reflect with a loosely autoethnographic approach on the development of our collaboration within the Syrian refugee research complex.

Conducting Research in the Syrian Refugee Research Complex

Forced migration research is situated in geopolitics that follows a south–north divide. Chimni (2000) shows how humanitarianism has strengthened this divide in the ways refugees are assisted and the type of research conducted. This south–north divide can also be identified in the securitization of migration policies after the Cold War and post 9/11 (Raghuram 2009), including the externalization of asylum to contain refugees in the global south. The Syrian refugee crisis is a continuation of these policies; refugee policy and knowledge production are closely tied together with the ways in which national agendas are part and parcel of research councils' funding schemes.

Conducting research on Syrian refugees in Lebanon is situated in relation to these geopolitical trends, the north–south divide, and national policies that dominate policy and knowledge production and what and whose knowledge counts. Funding is a key area that affects research collaboration; there are limited possibilities both for joint funding of global south and north institutions, and for researchers in the south to lead on international research collaborations (Baker and Thompson 2020; Bradley 2007; McGrath and Young 2019). That is, while funding calls emphasize partnerships, it tends to be on unequal terms.

Our current research collaboration is funded by the GCRF via the ESRC and the IDRC. The GCRF, part of the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA), is a £1.5 billion fund announced by the UK Government in late 2015 to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries (https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/). Noxolo (2017, p. 343) describes the GCRF as 'disturbingly colonialist' as the agenda is drawn up in the North and is focused on value for money for UK taxpayers. Beyond the language of partnership and participation, the short deadlines and conditions for how the funds are distributed make it difficult to pursue equal partnerships and power sharing. The funds are part of UK development policies with the ambition for the UK to be '"driving" global development initiatives, and "tackling" challenges, with an unabashed focus on "the national interest"' (Noxolo 2017, p. 343) which emphasizes a humanitarian and security focus rather than longer term development (Barnett 2016, cited in Noxolo 2017).

We have not been able to establish how many research projects funded by the GCRF are about Syrian refugees, but the GCRF has helped many UK-based institutions to conduct research on this population, adding to what Sibai *et al.* (2019, p. 1598) termed the 'multi institutional Syrian refugee research complex (...) where institutions in high-income countries are incentivized to be the conceptualizers and producers while Middle East partners become facilitators and executers' (see also Buhendwa Nshobole 2020). In refugee research, the south–north distinction is reinforced through the funding's geographical focus and limitations in conducting research across south–north contexts. The GCRF has an explicit aim of 'using the strengths of the UK to address and have development impacts in one or more ODA countries' (https://www.ukri.org/files/legacy/international/gcrfodaguidance-pdf/). 'ODA' refers to Official Development Assistance and countries that receive ODA are listed by OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC). The GCRF states that significant costs should not go to a developed country, but where institutions in a developed country are involved: 'We strongly encourage international co-investigators from countries not on the DAC list to make a significant contribution to their own research costs' (UKRI 2019). Hence, GCRF funding, while well intentioned to favour developing countries, also strengthen divisions between ODA recipient countries and other countries. Limiting the possibility of comparative research between ODA and non-ODA countries ends up restricting our understanding of settlement and refugee experience in non-ODA countries.

In 2018, we became part of the Syrian refugee research complex by taking GCRF funding and jointly running our project. We also secured funding from the IDRC for additional work on the same theme in Lebanon and Jordan. Aware of the critiques of the GCRF, and while encountering the institutional constraints in pursuing an equal collaboration, we found opportunities to challenge and transgress the limitations. We now reflect on the various challenges that undermine collaboration and equal partnerships, and how we manoeuvred these challenges in formulating research agendas; creating spaces for equitable collaboration and building partnerships.

Finding Our Way in Transnational Research Collaborations and Co-creation

We have been inspired by senior colleagues who, during the early stages of our careers, generously shared their own networks and partners with junior colleagues to sustain long-term partnerships and help foster new careers. We aspire to live by these principles. Termed 'friendship work' by Girgis (2007), this does not necessarily refer to a relationship between friends, but indicates a relationship between individuals that is personal, constructive, and recognizes the value in each individual. As Girgis writes 'It recognises that the other person possesses an alternative knowledge, and that this can be supplemented with external knowledge' (2007, p. 257). Our starting point is thus to acknowledge the different capacities and competencies that come together in a collaboration and acknowledge the diverse ways in which we can contribute. At the same time, we suggest that any collaboration needs to have an open and reflective process of acknowledging power relations and inequalities that operate in the multiple relations established in the research.

Partnerships and friendships forged through collaboration may be difficult to sustain. Competition and rapid turnover in what are deemed relevant themes, cases and locations for research contribute to what Nagar (2002) describes as 'footloose researchers'—the inability of partners to talk across worlds. Yet the literature on research collaborations concludes that long-term partnership is the key to more equitable relations (Chu 2014). Our friendship and partnership is in its 4th year, and has allowed us to track together the re-emerging issues and the developments of the response to the refugee crisis in the region and the progress of the research that has accompanied this crisis. The approach has helped us avoid these 'hit and run' field visits that researchers and institutions in the global north often end up making in order to have a snapshot of the needs of refugee communities, while hardly capturing the complexities of the challenges facing them. Yet, limited funding and short proposal deadlines prevent researchers from taking a long-term perspective. For us establishing this friendship and having long discussions helped us carve our research focus gradually and in response to the current needs.

The friendship approach as we pursued it, can be considered at the interpersonal level between the two of us, but does also extend to the overall project and a more general approach to managing research. First, for the two of us, we were building the work on areas of common interest: we, the project leaders, came from different backgrounds yet we had a mutual interest in understanding the outcomes of education in humanitarian settings. With genuine interest in each other's fields and with an openness for learning from each other's experiences, we found that we were able to develop new ideas and generate new insights in our work. With multiple cups of coffee, cake, and importantly time spent to understand each other's way of thinking and working, we were able to formulate ideas and run a project together. Sharing experiences of management, research, and everyday life have been key dimensions. Often daily contact on WhatsApp for checking in, supporting, and advising each other on work-related processes resulted in a productive working relationship that has gone beyond project deliverables. This trust embedded in a friendship approach to research collaboration then demanded time, respect, and care. In this approach, it is also a clear gender dimension - it is difficult to know if the process had been different if we were not two women working together.

Similarly, the friendship approach meant for us the aim to build trust between project staff and collaborators. It also made us more conscious about equitable collaboration whether in using resources, authorship or how we address challenges on the ground. It was important for us to create awareness and recognition of what a diverse set of collaborators can bring to the table. For the project staff, we were concerned with bringing together different people with different competencies at different career stages to which we return below. We aimed to develop a democratic and collaborative approach where we had enough time to work together and where everyones' careers could be developed and where co-authorship was a central part of our work. Restricted by the COVID-19 pandemic, our time together face-to-face as a team has been more limited than planned. We sometimes struggled with the geographical distance but project members went a long way to find modes of collaborating in person online. These limitations of collaborating extended to a more limited degree to our collaborating non-governmental organizations that we were working with from the outset. In the following, we address some of the key dimensions of our collaboration.

Creating Collaboration across Boundaries: The Challenges and Opportunities of Budgeting

A crucial starting point in our equitable research collaboration was the budget. First, some negotiating and tweaking of budget requirements had to be done in the proposal process to allow as equal participation as possible. A transparent and fully participatory process of formulating the budget took place. All participants including NGOs were consulted and their budget concerns were addressed in the project budget which was explained and shared with all parties. In the proposal, we had three strategies for developing the proposal and integrating the budget with the NGOs: first, we did joint costings and linked it closely with the project activities. Each organization did their own detailed costings to reflect all the anticipated costs to reflect their activities. Importantly, the principle was that the NGOs would manage their own budgets related to their activities. Second, we jointly developed ways of integrating the organizations' costs into the running of the overall project. For example, the organizations were located in the neighbourhoods where we were planning to do our interviews with young people, hence, the organizations represented a resource for us to be more integrated into the research environment. We developed a system where we rented some office space from them, with our researchers working in their offices, and we covered the costs of using that infrastructure in order to make a basis for developing the organizations. Third, we developed a system for the advisory committee where the organizations were involved in discussing the project during the implementation of the project. However, the funding requirement prevented NGOs in Lebanon from being equal partners and they had to be listed as consultants in a limited proportion of the budget.

One way to establish a space for equal collaboration according to a friendship approach was to ensure that the majority of the research team were from Lebanon and Jordan, and to then give agency and co-ownership of the data to the research team so they could publish and author papers from the outset. The distribution of staff allowed all organizations to build their research capacities and spend as much time as possible in the local community during the data collection period and also enabled researchers in the south to come to the global north for writing retreats, data presentations, and briefings. Postdoctoral researchers in Lebanon and in the UK were budgeted for. Yet we faced many limitations that we could not overcome. For example, the GCRF grant required that team leadership be restricted to one academic in the north and hence prohibited equal leadership between institutions. Other donors are shifting this practice by insisting that the principal investigator is in the south in an attempt to address the power imbalance. However, doing so sustains unequal research partnerships in the research industry by preventing true collaboration. Other donors are attempting to structure a more equitable approach to partnership. A recent British Academy call, for example, allowed joint applications from global south and north to have equal leadership of the project. (https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/education-learning-in-crises?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=fun

dingcall%20%7C%20edu-crises%20%7C%20%20%7C%20International&utm_content=International&utm_term=20190822) We hope that our discussion here can contribute to rethinking how equal leadership might be approached.

Despite the limited spaces for the researchers on mass displacement and refugee communities in the global south to exert equal relationships in the field of research, there are attempts by the displaced and refugee communities to inject some voice. Examples of that include the Global Refugee-led Network (https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines_Web.pdf), but in research, these attempts are still scarce and their impact on shaping the research funding bodies is yet to be realised. We are also currently working in partnership with a number of other research institutes and universities and donors to formulate guidelines for more equitable research collaborations in the field of refugee studies.

Building Partnerships with NGOs and Research Participants

The starting point in any research collaboration is identifying the focus of the research and the questions and problems it seeks to address. Ideally, this research is relevant to the needs of local communities and of some value to the country where the study is to be undertaken, as well as academically innovative (Jacobsen and Landau 2003). This is even more pressing in the context of mass displacement and should be the starting point for building partnerships with NGOs and research participants. Part of the south/north research funding agenda is the requirement that research should make an 'impact' but there are challenges in the agenda-setting process and the possibility of establishing partnerships that take into account the diverse interests that come together in such partnerships (Bradley 2008).

In order to build fair and egalitarian partnerships, it is essential to have an early discussion between the researchers and the local community where both parties can co-create and collaborate on the most meaningful research collaboration. From the beginning, an important aim in our project was to involve the communities we are working with by: (1) partnering with local NGOs where our researchers would be based; (2) involving research participants in co-analysis of data; (3) disseminating knowledge and research findings through accessible media outlets, such as theatre, a documentary, and an art exhibition; and (4) engaging participants in co-production of the dissemination materials.

We partnered with two NGOs, both working with young refugees and nationals in Lebanon. We started the collaboration by agreeing on core ideas, aims, and processes. At the time of writing, we are still in the implementation process. One challenge is that while we tried to co-construct the research design and dissemination with our partner NGOs, we have come to realise that we overlooked the research findings our partners found most useful and how they wanted to use them. Some of our research conversations and findings were less relevant to their programmes and agendas. While we as collaborators had plenty of time to discuss our research plans prior to the proposal phase, we ought to have had a longer conversation with our partners to understand their needs and desired outcomes from this study. Hence, the extent to which we were participatory or allowed for a dialogical conversation was somewhat limited to the kind of research we already had in mind.

Here, it is helpful to think of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation when reflecting on our relationship with the NGOs we are working with. Arnstein describes three levels of participation, the highest includes partnerships and delegated power and control, the second is consultation and information and the third, which is not considered participation, is manipulation and therapy. Our collaboration with NGO partners swings between levels one and two and varies depending on the different aspects of the project we are addressing. For example, in the creative production, leadership is given to the NGOs to facilitate the dialogues with youth and produce a play and an exhibition based on the experiences of young people. In designing the research methodology, data collection and analysis, we had more of a consultative relationship where the NGOs provided entry points to the society.

A lesson learnt is that we did not spend enough time on discussing what participation means to the different partners. We took our joint understanding of participation for granted (Cooke and Kothari 2001) and overlooked existing politics of participation within the collaborating organizations. This posed an issue later on during the study as not all our partners had a similar understanding. For example, our plan was to have creative productions that are co-constructed and based on youth narratives and stories in which the youth represent different legal statuses in Lebanon. We had hoped that young people would participate in the play or the exhibition. However, our understanding and interpretation on the degree of youth participation varied between different partners. With hindsight, a clearer discussion about participation might have helped manage expectations and address challenges.

Another aim was to involve NGO staff and researchers in the research conceptualization and development process. We agreed, as mentioned under budgeting above, that an NGO whose offices are located in the area where we conduct fieldwork would host one of the researchers in our team who would use the NGO as a starting point for conducting interviews and to become more integrated in the neighbourhood. In our case, the researchers who would work with the NGOs were early career researchers whose position was named 'community researcher'. They had recently completed their Masters degrees, and would be full members of the research team, involved in planning the research and conducting fieldwork, analysing data, and writing up material. The idea was that the community researchers would represent a day-to-day link with the NGOs and would strengthen research capacity in the NGOs. Yet, this has not been entirely successful. It has been difficult for the organization to see how to benefit from the researchers. At the same time, the community researchers want to be academics and be with their colleagues in the university. While our common objective was to contribute to building the research capacity of the NGOs, the latter had other priorities, such as using the technical skills of the researchers to help them with their report- or proposal writing. These different interests were sometimes challenging for the community researchers.

We have concluded that the more experienced researchers in the project (such as doctoral and postdoctoral researchers) find it more interesting to be situated in and work with the organizations. They have the confidence to contribute to and learn from the organization. Postdoctoral researchers were more perceptive about the relationships, networks, and roles of these organizations in the community where the research is taking place. Possibly the post-doc researchers have had more experience conducting ethnographic work as part of their PhDs and are more aware of the importance of informal and formal relationships within and between the NGOs and the community to which the NGOs cater. Their anthropological and sociological training enabled the postdoctoral researchers to appreciate the local dynamics and contexts (different socio-economic and political backgrounds) which youth come from and how these contexts shape their education and employment trajectories. As for the junior researchers, more time for mentoring needs to be allocated to support them in developing their research and writing skills.

Research partnerships with NGOs may easily fall into the trap of being an instrumental and tokenist collaboration based on the researcher's need to tick the impact box that is now a requirement in most south–north research collaborations. The experience again is that such collaboration would require more equality in finding mutual interests and creating structures where both parties contribute on their own terms. Current research funding in south–north collaborations can do more to strengthen more equitable collaborations not only between academic institutions but also between academic and non-academic institutions.

Professional and Career Development

An underestimated factor in our project was professional development for the team members. Our project brought researchers from different backgrounds, locations, and levels of experience to work together in three different geographical locations all of which put a demand on professional development. Yet before we delve into these, we first stop at what professional development in a context of migration studies and global north-south collaboration entails.

Capacity building is a buzzword used to please funders and managers (Eade 2007). The Department for International Development (DFID 2008, p. 3) defines research capacity as 'the ability of individuals, organizations and systems to undertake and disseminate high-quality research effectively and efficiently'. Serious capacity building would have to disturb existing power relations in the research process and contribute to transgressing the south–north divide. Batliwala (1993) criticizes the use of empowerment as a solution to social problems, such as poverty, overpopulation, or the low status of women. She defines empowerment as a process of transforming power relations by challenging the ideologies and institutional structures that justify and produce social inequality. What we need is to change prevailing patterns of access to and control over economic, natural, and intellectual resources. However, 'capacity' in the context of the Syrian refugee research complex is often associated with what is needed to carry out a northern-funded research project, based on deliverables determined by the funding agency and governed by the 'project owner': the northern partner. The capacity development of the researchers in the south tends to be on a lower technical level: researchers in the south conduct the fieldwork while the knowledge production is made by scholars in the North (Sukarieh and Tannock 2019).

There are many challenges that undermine professional and capacity building. At one end, there are opportunities the partnership offers in terms of learning and development, while at the other end are the needs and agency of the stakeholders. Language is a barrier that can make excellent researchers who lack good English more disadvantaged. We wanted to hire local researchers who are fluent in Arabic and have experience and knowledge of the local context. However, this meant all but one of the team members had English as their second or third language. The team had varying levels of experience in academic writing in English which we consequently supported with professional training.

Career development takes place at all stages of careers, but funding opportunities do not always permit the costing of research skill-building, such as proposal and academic writing, data analysis, and publishing. Few research grants allow funding of PhD studentships as part of research in the South. For example, in Lebanon, there are less than a handful of universities that offer PhD programmes. Postdoctoral opportunities are also scarce especially in the social sciences. However, the recently founded Arab Council for Social Sciences has begun a postdoctoral fellowship programme.

We sought to recruit postdoctoral researchers as well as junior researchers in global north and south. However, finding researchers with strong research experience and knowledge in education and refugees was very challenging. This meant the more experienced researchers had to develop the research capacities of junior staff, so we built into our collaboration professional writing and NVIVO training workshops. We also split the senior team into small writing groups to work on papers together with the junior researchers. Additionally, we learnt that it is important to focus on how capacities can be shared and developed in the project rather than how some members should have their capacity built by others. We realised that different members have different interests in the development they wish to achieve during the project. Yet we did not allocate funding for professional development. Moreover, we felt that our time allocated to the project was too tight to provide the mentoring needed for a team in three locations, Lebanon, Jordan, and England. In this way, we struggled to always bridge the geographical and south–north divides.

Conclusion: Towards More Equitable Collaborative Research in Protracted Displacement?

The quest for quick turnaround and results in research tied to humanitarian crises, such as the Syrian one creates challenges in transgressing power relations across boundaries in collaborative research—across the south–north divide as well as between different partners. In this article, we have attempted to address some of these challenges. First, by seeking to disturb the south–north distinction, we have shown how our locations and the systems attached to them—such as institutional constraints, funding regulations, and budget restrictions—all maintain unequal power relations in displacement studies. Existing power dynamics maintain the hegemony of the north over the south in the research and knowledge production cycle. When we attempt to create more opportunities for the global south, we often bump up against or even reinforce differences and inequalities.

Second, we have shown that it is too simplistic to treat the south and north as homogeneous entities and to reduce people and scholars to these two spheres. The south–north division becomes a pressing issue to unpack as the majority of displaced people (our research population) are in the global south, while the research industry operates out of the north. In addition to our university collaboration across the south–north divide, we have analysed the researcher's collaboration with non-governmental organizations that bring in additional considerations and needs further unpacking in the refugee research complex where there is so far very limited analysis (Brun and Laskar 2021). We need more focus on whose knowledge and perspective counts in research funding, and how lived experiences need to be mapped and made visible across geographical divides. This is a crucial issue for challenging the divide and disturbing hegemonies.

Third, the exploration of power dynamics in research remains on the periphery, often an individual exercise that has not expanded to reach the structural set-up of the research industry. We cannot rely on individuals' efforts to resist the hegemony. The ethical research lens has advanced in focusing on researchers and research participants, but it should be widened to include the power dynamics involved in developing collaborative research across boundaries. What is needed is a more holistic understanding of ethically sound research conducted with a 'friendship approach', and more emphasis on research training. There is too little research on south–north collaborations: more systematic documentation and better guidelines and theorizing is needed. Not guidelines that act as another box-ticking exercise, but ways of promoting a reflective practice that focuses on the relational aspects involved in research. Ethically sound research requires constant negotiation and confrontation of the numerous constraints described above. We suggest it can be achieved through a 'friendship approach'.

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