

Knowledge-based North-South Partnerships: an effective model for promoting development in higher education?¹

Mary Goretti Nakabugo and Peadar Cremin - *Mary Immaculate College, Ireland*

Goretti.Nakabugo@mic.ul.ie; Peadar.Cremin@mic.ul.ie

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Summary

This article illustrates the perceived benefits of partnerships in Higher Education that stress capacity building in both north and south. The challenges associated with the model and the need to imbed capacity building programmes into such partnerships to enhance shared understandings of mutuality is also highlighted.

Several development agencies have recently invested large amounts of funds in facilitating north-south partnerships involving Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to build human resource capacity for poverty reduction. Agencies such as the Department for International Development (DFID), the Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Irish-Aid have developed programmes that engage universities in the north and south in collaborations to tackle global issues such as ill-health, illiteracy, conflict, human rights abuse, and environmental degradation that largely affect poor nations. The overriding rationale for most such partnerships has been to address capacity gaps in the south (King 2008). The learning and building of capacity within northern counterparts has been mainly a byproduct of trying to develop capacity in the south, rather than a primary aim in itself. Such partnerships have been noted to have contributed significantly to research capacity building and strengthening in the south, particularly in instances where the south has had ownership in initiating and implementing the research conducted [see for example Chege 2008 and Velho 2002 and 2004]. However, it is also clear that there is considerable room for improvement as far as fostering genuine partnerships where the learning is mutual and attaining a situation where HEIs in the north and south are viewed as equal actors and contributors to the global knowledge economy.

This article draws from the analysis of views of over 300 staff in 13 HEIs participating in the Irish-African Partnership for Research Capacity Building (IAPRCB), a programme supported by Irish Aid to build capacity for development research in Irish universities and in health and education in the four partner African universities. The unique aspect of the IAPRCB is that it attempts to build research capacity both within Africa (south) and Ireland (north). A major stakeholder consultation was undertaken, between June and September 2008, to document existing capacity in all 13 institutions and to identify what the stakeholders viewed as the added-

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value of participating in an Irish-African research partnership. A comprehensive presentation of the findings is reported in Barrett and Nakabugo (2008).

It was agreed among African and Irish stakeholders that an Irish-African research partnership would broaden research funding opportunities. Most development research funding agencies are interested in North-South and South-South initiatives. With funding in place, it would be possible to engage in collaborative research activities. This would not only provide a cross-cultural learning dimension, but would also build the capacity of Irish and African researchers as a result of joint hands-on experience. Both Irish and African counterparts saw the Partnership as a great learning experience that would improve the quality of their staff and students in various ways. African partners hoped to benefit from resource and equipment sharing as well as accessing Masters, PhD and Postdoctoral fellowship opportunities that might exist in Irish institutions. Similarly, Irish academics considered the prospects of getting good doctoral students, sharing research samples and accessing student placements where necessary. The Irish partners also view the IAPRCB as an opportunity for them to participate actively in global development.

The above findings illustrate the perceived benefits of partnerships that stress capacity building in both north and south. On the other hand, they also highlight the challenges associated with the model. The fact that the African counterparts regarded the partnership as a means to access resources, equipment and scholarships, while the Irish saw

Velho, L. (2002). North-south collaboration and systems of innovation. In Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, *North-South Research Cooperation*. An international conference, December 2001. <<http://www.knaw.nl/publicaties/pdf/20021020.pdf>> Accessed on 30.05.2009.