



MIT GOV/LAB

Increasing Knowledge Exchange & Equity between Global North & South Scholars

Scholars from the University of Nairobi, Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, and MIT GOV/LAB explore increased exchange between Global North and South scholars to produce stronger, more innovative research in the fields of development, governance, political behavior, and behavioral science.

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Summary

Over the last few years, MIT GOV/LAB has been collaborating with the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics to build new and sustained forms of engagement between scholars from the Global North and South focusing on political economy and development.

Based in Cambridge, USA, MIT researchers often crossed paths with academics in the Global South, but it was rare to have an opportunity to truly exchange knowledge with local counterparts and to share early-stage research and brainstorm ways to improve the research. Headquartered in Kenya, Busara is a behavioral science hub for applied and academic research in the Global South. In the last year, we have also joined forces with scholars from the University of Nairobi, one of the leading universities in Kenya, to support these efforts.

Shifting the field

MIT GOV/LAB and Busara saw a missed opportunity — to create space for more equitable exchange between Global North-South scholars and to help inculcate a culture of collaboration for better knowledge production. Our vision was one where local experts are the first stop for foreign practitioners and academics working on governance in the Global South and new knowledge, theory building, and learning on governance and political behavior are homegrown in developing country contexts. Based on these shared values and building on MIT GOV/LAB practice of [engaged scholarship](#), we tested out a few initiatives to see how we could start to shift the field.

In 2020, we piloted the [Behavioral Science in the Field](#) practicum course to foster exchange between early-stage researchers from the top institutions in the Global North (MIT, Harvard, Columbia) and Global South (University of Nairobi, University of Dar es Salaam, Makerere University, University of Cape Town). And, in 2022, we launched the *Working Group on Governance and Development* including two informal workshops ([WGAPPE-style](#)), which gathered Kenyan researchers on political economy to exchange feedback for early-stage work in political science and economics.

Reflections and recommendations

Based on these experiences, we wanted to reflect back on what worked and what hasn't worked to bring together Global North and South scholars for improved intellectual exchange and knowledge production. To do so, we asked [Laura Barasa](#) (University of Nairobi), [Channing Jang](#) (Busara), and [Kelly Zhang](#) (MIT GOV/LAB) to reflect back on the opportunities, challenges and recommendations for how to move forward with shifting the field. Channing and Kelly developed the pilot course, of which Laura was a participant, and Kelly and Laura organized the workshops. There is a Q&A with each scholar's reflections and a synthesis of learnings below:

- **Major benefits of Global North and South scholar collaboration?** Both bring comparative advantages to improving the production of scientific knowledge. While Global South scholars bring incomparable local expertise and contextual knowledge,

Global North scholars can have more access to methodological training, journal resources, and funding. Bringing these comparative advantages together would lead to more innovative and more relevant research.

- **Challenges.** Different socio-cultural communications and professional incentives can prevent alignment. The norms for intellectual exchange and providing feedback can take more direct or indirect forms in different cultures, which can create discomfort in discussing all aspects of research design, implementation, and analysis. Furthermore, the role of research and how it relates to scholar priorities around publishing, teaching, salaries, and promotions varies significantly. Funding is also heavily skewed towards Global North scholars and is a cross-cutting challenge to overcoming these differences. Though these differences may not ever perfectly align, better understanding these differences is necessary to designing a collaboration that can be mutually beneficial.
- **Opportunities.** There are groups already working to change the status quo including funding requirements for Global North scholars to include local principal investigators and dedicated funds for Global South scholars, as well as support for training, access to resources and conferences. Creating opportunities for mutual exchange is essential as a next step so that training, research, and the sharing of results can happen in spaces that are co-created and co-facilitated by Global North and South scholars to normalize collaboration.

Read each scholar's Q&A below and your input is most welcome as we think about the next stage of building collaboration and exchange between Global North and South scholars.



*Working Group on Governance and Development in January 2023,
photo courtesy of University of Nairobi.*

Laura Barasa, PhD, Lecturer, University of Nairobi

I. What do you see as the major benefits of Global North and South scholar collaboration?

One of the major benefits of Global North-South collaboration is the exchange of knowledge and ideas. Some of the complementarities include imparting knowledge and skills. There are various ways in which Global South scholars enjoy the benefits of collaborating with Global North scholars:

- **First, considering that Global North scholars are generally in countries that are at the technological frontier**, they have the advantage of learning and using new research and econometric methods that the Global South scholars are not exposed to. As such, Global South scholars are able to learn the applications of ‘new’ research methods such as impact evaluations from Global North scholars. For instance, as a fellow in the Busara-MIT GOV/LAB [Behavioral Science in the Field course](#), I was able to access research mentorship from Global North scholars, which informed my research design as I did not have prior knowledge on lab experiments.
- **Second, there are times when accessing scholarly resources such as journal articles and books has been a challenge.** At times Global South scholars have to request Global North scholars to access these resources, which goes a long way in enhancing research. I have experienced this and one major support comes from the Structural Transformation of African Agriculture and Rural Spaces (STAARS) fellowship that offered access to library resources at Cornell University.
- **Third, it is always enriching to listen to research ideas from Global North scholars in our collaborations.** This helps Global South scholars understand their context from an external perspective. This enriches Global South research work and brings a sense of equality by overcoming socio-economic and cultural biases.
- **Fourth, Global North-South collaboration usually avails opportunities that enhance overall capacity building for Global South scholars.** In the wake of online learning platforms, many Global South scholars now easily participate in online courses offered by Global North universities. This is instrumental in building capacity for Global South scholars to learn methods that tackle socio-economic challenges that are specific to the context of Global South scholars. Personally, I have benefitted from an online course on Impact Evaluation offered by University of Zurich facilitated by the Center for Effective Global Action fellowship.

There are also several ways in which Global North scholars benefit from Global North-South collaboration:

- **First, Global South scholars are instrumental in helping the Global North scholars understand the research context of Global South countries.** This typically informs the research agenda for Global North scholars to engage in research with relevant policy implications for Global South countries.
- **Second, Global South scholars possess important knowledge concerning research in Global South countries.** They therefore play a key role in informing Global North scholars on how practical or feasible a research agenda is, depending on the particular context of interest.
- **Third, Global South scholars understand the complexities of carrying out research in Global South countries.** In general, Global North researchers find that they have to navigate the political landscape and socio-cultural norms which can only be addressed by Global South scholars who typically possess indigenous knowledge.
- **Fourth, Global South scholars are also aware of relevant research networks and stakeholders in their countries.** This knowledge plays a key role in forming collaborative research with skilled Global South researchers. In addition, Global North scholars usually need to engage key stakeholders to for research to gain acceptance, and Global South scholars play a vital role in addressing stakeholder engagement including government, private sector, civil society organizations, and non-governmental organizations,

In sum, Global North-South collaboration avails different forms of benefits for both Global North and South scholars. The complementarities arising from these types of collaboration are key for generating relevant research and knowledge, and overall growth of Global North and Global South scholars.

II. What do you see as the major challenges to Global North and South scholar collaboration?

One of the major challenges comes from socio-cultural, socio-economic, and cultural differences that can certainly impede scholarly work when not addressed appropriately. **Most Global North scholars tend to be very direct in their criticism, while Global South scholars are socialized not to voice criticism directly.** This can cause a rift when Global North scholars are perceived as aggressive while the Global South scholars are perceived as timid. It can easily be the case that Global North scholars dominate discussions, which Global South scholars might not appreciate, but will not voice their opinions anyway.

Another major challenge is that funding is generally skewed towards research teams led by Global North scholars. This may be a result of Global North scholars coming up with cutting edge research ideas, using novel research methods as a result of being in countries that are at the technological frontier. We find that a majority of Global South scholars are in countries that are farther away from the technological frontier. This disparity has undesirable implications

on research collaboration due to technical knowledge gaps and limited research and development funding in the context of Global South countries.

In addition, the scope of collaboration is also subject to limited funding opportunities. **A lot of research funding comes from Global North countries, which implies that Global North scholars are likely to lead the research agenda in Global South countries.**

III. What recommendation do you have for improved knowledge production and exchange?

Mutual respect and understanding among Global North and Global South scholars is crucial in improving knowledge production and exchange. Both Global North and Global South scholars should be aware that socio-economic and cultural differences exist, and work towards overcoming individual and societal biases.

In addition, funding and training opportunities should offer opportunities to Global South scholars to enhance capacity building. This is important for addressing technical gaps and knowledge gaps that Global South scholars might have. One foreseen outcome is that Global South scholars are at par with Global North scholars in terms of research knowledge.

Moreover, more opportunities should be available for scholars to travel between the Global North and South. Global North scholars should make visits to Global South countries for a better understanding of the context. Likewise, Global South scholars should have opportunities to visit Global South countries and to conduct research in Global North contexts as well.

Furthermore, research funding should specifically ask for Global North-South collaboration. This would go a long way in fostering knowledge production and cross-fertilization of skills and capacities. Both Global North and Global South scholars would benefit from learning by 'seeing', 'experiencing' and 'doing' through their interactions.

Lastly, institutions should have tracks of funding that seek to build the capacity of scholars from Global South countries. For instance, J-PAL has specific funding opportunities for Global South scholars in countries in Africa. The uniqueness of J-PAL's funding is that Global South scholars have training opportunities and funding support to write their research proposals, after which they can conduct pilot studies and finally carry out randomized controlled trials. The step-wise manner in which this funding is structured goes a long way in capacity building for scholars in Global South countries.

In sum, Global South and Global North scholars should remain cognizant of the differences in their backgrounds, and foster mutual respect and understanding for each other. Also, opportunities for visiting different contexts and training should be enhanced in an interactive environment. Finally, funding opportunities should seek to enhance the research capacity of

Global South scholars, to level the playing field and foster the contribution of Global South scholars to the development agenda of their home countries as part of international networks.

Channing Jang, PhD, CEO, Busara Center for Behavioral Economics

I. What do you see as the major benefits of Global North and South scholar collaboration?

Better science. On the science side, we already know that too much scholarship is done by, funded by, and prioritized by the Global North. This not only creates a representation issue, but a genuine quality issue. We're not leveraging the combined talent and acumen that we have around the world if we're only focused on the top 1% of people to do research. It's a pretty straightforward numbers argument. There are billions of people in the world, but we're letting scientific findings (and progress) be structurally stunted when we are counting on just a few hundred million to do the work.

II. What do you see as the major challenges to Global North and South scholar collaboration?

Incentives. The incentive structures for Global North and Global South scholars are usually wildly different. This includes both professional (i.e. publishing norms, salaries) and personal (i.e. cultural and communication norms, family and community expectations) incentives to conduct and promote scientific scholarship. I think that if we were to fully understand these incentives, we'd design the systems (and funding) to better leverage the Global South capacity.

III. What recommendation do you have for improved knowledge production and exchange?

Systems change: changing the systems (especially of funding) to incentivize Global South scholars to collaborate with Global North scholars, rather than only incentivizing Global North scholars to collaborate with Global South scholars. This means re-directing funding and power, but also to deeply and slowly work within the systems to promote collaboration.

Start early: Start at the pre-doctoral stage. Behavior change is hard, and it's better to start early than to try to move already entrenched actors.

Promote proximity: My closest collaborators are almost certainly not the ones who are optimal to collaborate with from a substantive or technical perspective, but ones that I've spent time with, trust and get along with. It's underrated how much getting to know each other as people will

create life-long research partnerships, and more time should be spent on fostering relationships between Global North and Global South scholars and institutions.

Kelly Zhang, PhD, Research Scientist, Busara & Research Affiliate, MIT GOV/LAB

I. What do you see as the major benefits of Global North and South scholar collaboration?

Scholars on both sides would benefit from increased exposure to new ideas, as Global North and Global South scholars both have comparative advantages in knowledge.

Global North scholars bring a third-party perspective and knowledge from different contexts, while Global South scholars are deeply embedded in the context and practice of development. Global South scholars can ground the knowledge of Global North scholars about how theories and hypotheses generated in different contexts may apply locally, while Global North scholars offer exposure to a global array of ideas and literature. Both sides expose each other to new ideas and create a space for knowledge innovation through collaboration.

Yet, despite shared research interests, academic research tends to be siloed in the Global North and Global South for a variety of structural reasons, even though increased exchange and collaboration would produce stronger research that is grounded in the local context and innovating knowledge from diverse perspectives. This is a huge missed opportunity, because scholars of political economy from the Global North and the Global South are fundamentally aligned in scientific inquiry and knowledge generation and have similar incentives in terms of academic publications and graduate training. Both Global North and Global South researchers want to produce high quality academic outputs and benefit from broadening their exposure to knowledge and ideas internationally and locally. Building a strong global community of peers with similar research interests is fundamental to producing high quality research, as peer feedback is what helps to refine and define the process of knowledge generation.

Increased exchange between Global North and Global South scholars would be a more efficient system than what exists currently. The current model is for Global North researchers to fly in for field work and to spend months or years trying to understand the local context and how generalized theories might translate. Rather than flying in researchers from abroad, why not work directly with the Global South researchers who are already there and leverage their expertise? Global South scholars can easily recognize anomalies in the data and evaluate if the scope conditions or assumptions of a theory would hold in this context in a way that Global North scholars cannot. This is not to say that there is no value for field work for Global North scholars, but just to point out that there are more efficient ways to understand local context. No matter how long a researcher spends doing field work (and I love my field work), it cannot compete with local experts. Just imagine how much faster knowledge would progress if

Global North and Global South scholars worked together – then any field work would start with a much stronger foundation of local knowledge together with outsider expertise. This is something that you already see happening at a larger-scale in some countries (e.g. India, Brazil), but has tended to be more limited in the African context.

Increasing knowledge exchange would increase equity in access to resources. Global North researchers often have access to international organizations and grants that are not always accessible to Global South researchers. Many large-scale grants based in the Global North assume a skill set and knowledge of a Global North literature that Global South scholars may not always be familiar with. At times, the goals and aims of these grants may not even be aligned with the objectives or aims of organizations and needs on the ground. Who better knows what types of research would be the most relevant to the local context, and address key policy problems in development and governance, than those who have already committed their careers to studying these topics? Yet, these are often not Global South scholars who make decisions about how or where to allocate research funding. Resources for research tend to be concentrated in the Global North. The current system of research grants is excellent in identifying top quality researchers, but it primarily benefits Global North scholars who already have access to a plethora of opportunities through their own institutions and governments. It disadvantages Global South scholars who are not familiar with the literature and methods used by their Global North counterparts, and further exacerbates inequalities in the production of knowledge around the Global South.

This is a problem that is recognized by many of the top Global North research institutions and many have produced programs to try to improve knowledge exchange with the Global South. Most notable is [CEGA's East African Social Science Translation \(EASST\)](#) initiative, which supports exchange between Global North and Global South scholars through fellowships and grants. Initiatives by [J-PAL's MicroMaster's program](#) and [EGAP's Learning Days](#) also provide invaluable resources for researchers locally, in offering training and workshops for knowledge transfer on the quantitative research methods.

II. What do you see as the major challenges to Global North and South scholar collaboration?

There are some high barriers to exchange and collaboration and between Global North and Global South scholars. This is unfortunate, because all scholars love meeting and learning from like-minded researchers on the topics that they are studying. Yet, this type of exchange is inherently difficult because of structural differences in methods, training, and knowledge.

Differences in research methods are significant barriers to collaboration. Yet, the fundamental nature of scientific research is collaboration with other scholars who have complementary skill sets.

- One example is experimental methods. For our behavioral science course, we had difficulties recruiting Global South scholars with training in experimental methods. These have become a gold standard in social science in the Global North, but have yet to gain

as much traction in the Global South. Experiments tend to be expensive and require a large amount of funding and these resources tend to be more limited for Global South scholars. This limits the number of researchers with experience in running experiments and who can share this knowledge with their peers, which in turn also limits willingness to develop experimental research designs and peer feedback.

- Another example is qualitative research methods in political science. One challenge during our workshops was building exchange across quantitative and qualitative methods. Many of the PhD programs in the US have shifted away from qualitative methods in favor of quantitative methods, and largely integrate qualitative methods into mixed methods research. Yet, political science in the Global South tends to be primarily qualitative, which produces different approaches for answering the same question. There is strong potential for complementarities here, but it is not necessarily a natural one, as it requires scholars on both sides to learn and adopt new research methods.

Scholars are often drawing from different bodies of knowledge. Both Global North and Global South scholars benefit from mutual exposure to broader literature. knowledge on both sides.

- Both Global North and Global South scholars tend to cite from within their own research silos. During our workshops and the practicum course, the research that was cited by my East African colleagues was entirely different from citations that I am used to seeing for political economy. Crossing geographical boundaries is similar to crossing disciplinary boundaries, as researchers tend to cite research from peers that they are most familiar with. This results in the two bodies of knowledge around development, one from an external perspective and one from an internal perspective. The integration of both could accelerate the advancement of scientific knowledge around development, but it is difficult when the exchange of ideas is limited.
- One example is the development studies literature. This was rarely cited by Global North scholars during our workshop and practicum course, and more frequently cited by Global South scholars. Knowledge tends to be concentrated within disciplines and many universities in the Global North do not have a department for development studies. Rather, development tends to be a subset of other social science departments such as political science and economics. The research methods differ, which increases friction, as research in development studies is typically qualitative and constructivist, while research in social science in the Global North is typically quantitative and positivist.

Differences in compensation structures. There are differences in compensation norms for Global North and Global South scholars.

- Global South universities often have more limited resources for supporting workshop and conference attendance. We had many discussions while organizing our workshops around paying per diem for workshop attendance. The per diem is not a norm in the Global North, as universities often provide funding to attend workshops. However, this is a norm for Global South scholars, who typically do not have funding to attend conferences and workshops and who are used to being compensated for their time.

- Global South scholars often supplement their salaries through consulting. There is high demand from government and international organizations for local expertise for policymaking. Global South scholars tend to apply their knowledge to practice more frequently and to produce more policy outputs than their Global North counterparts. However, this knowledge can be locked away in non-disclosure agreements. During our workshops, we had a couple of researchers who had NDAs, and they had to seek permission to share their work with a broader audience.

Limitations on time and social networks

- Academics in the Global North and Global South are often incredibly busy with teaching, advising, and research. I have yet to meet an academic in either context, where time is not an extremely precious and limited resource, and researchers often do not have the extra bandwidth or the incentive to resolve these frictions. And while there is funding available for collaborations, the differences mentioned above required a considerable investment of time and effort on both sides, as scholars on both sides learn about new literatures and methodologies.
- A high-level goodwill and trust between research collaborators is also required, and this tends to be concentrated within Global North and Global South social networks. Research collaborations are like relationships, researchers need not only to be aligned on the research ideas and methodologies, but also have interpersonal trust to resolve the conflicts that may arise during the different phases of ideation, data collection, and writing. This is often a natural process, as individuals tend to self-select into co-authorships. However, it also requires the time and space for scholars to get to know each other and each other's work.

These dynamics tend to create research silos in the Global North and Global South. They also reinforce structural inequalities in access to resources and the production of knowledge. For African political economy, the leading experts on African politics and economics should be African. Yet, Global South scholars under-represented in Global North debates around development. Collaborations between Global North and Global South scholars can globalize the expertise of local experts and localize the expertise of international experts. This would make academic and policy research stronger on all sides. And there is a rising recognition within this academic space, as there are increasing collaborations across the Global North and Global South with researchers who are keen to learn from the expertise of their peers.

Building an intellectual community of exchange is critical for knowledge exchange between the Global North and Global South. Yet, as outlined above, there are considerable frictions to collaboration and exchange. These obstacles are possible to overcome, but require open-mindedness, intention, and commitment from both sides to learning and integrating different research methods and bodies of knowledge. Short-term ad hoc solutions will not change the existing dynamics, a concerted long-term effort between both communities is required for this dynamic to change. The reinforcement of systematic differences is the norm, as it is much easier for scholars to find and to collaborate with peers within their own sphere than to cross geographies. In particular, the importance of informal interactions for building trust and

social ties between scholars should not be underestimated, as this requires a high-level of effort for the long term on both sides.

What is needed is systemic and fundamental change in the way that knowledge and resources are exchanged. Increasing collaborations between Global North and Global South scholars could only improve the quality of research produced on both sides, as there are strong complementarities in the expertise and backgrounds of both sets of scholars. In terms of policy impact, the combination of both would be an intellectual powerhouse. Global South scholars are often deeply embedded in policy, with a strong focus on producing policy outputs. Global North scholars bring policy perspectives from a global scale, with a strong focus on learning across contexts. Together, knowledge exchange between these researchers has strong potential to produce high impact policies and scientific knowledge.

III. What recommendation do you have for improved knowledge production and exchange?

Develop a long-term solution by building a local hub to foster an intellectual community of like-minded Global North and Global South scholars. Note that these recommendations come from a positivist view and primarily apply to Global North and Global South scholars who: (1) embrace the scientific method approach (e.g. using data to answer questions), (2) prioritize academic outputs, and (3) have an interest in working on policy-relevant issues. This intellectual hub for Global North and South scholars would enable the free exchange of knowledge and ideas both formally and informally and organically create opportunities for collaboration. This hub would primarily be based in the Global South and consist of three pillars that are designed to increase knowledge exchange and to build a network of scholars that can work together to alleviate some of the frictions mentioned above for the long-term:

- *Workshops* focus on fostering the intellectual community that is already present locally and creating opportunities for knowledge exchange between scholars, with a 80/20 ratio of Global South and Global North scholars. Workshops in the form of local working groups and informal workshops are a low-cost and efficient way of increasing knowledge exchange and social interaction. Workshops provide exposure to new ideas, methods, and literature, and rapidly foster connections to other researchers and their interests. CEGA and EGAP already run workshops locally, but these tend to be very large and on an annual basis. Running smaller and more frequent workshops, with lower proportions of Global North scholars could accelerate exchange much faster, by leveraging the intellectual community that is already there.
- *Residencies/Fellowships* based in the Global South focus on intellectual exchange with a 50/50 composition of Global South and Global North scholars in residence at any time. Residencies build depth to knowledge and relationships, as frequent everyday interactions enable the space for scholars to brainstorm research ideas, iterate on research designs, and to provide active feedback on projects over a sustained period of time. In particular, residents for 1-3 months or predoctoral/postdoctoral fellows in a shared space for 1-2 years have more time and opportunities for collaboration and

co-mentorship and for developing creative and innovative projects than a workshop or email exchange could provide. Typically residencies and fellowships are hosted at Global North institutions for Global South scholars – providing residencies and fellowships based in the Global South embeds Global North researchers within the context and increases the exposure of Global South researchers without them having to leave the country.

- *Project grants* focus on building collaborations between Global North and Global South scholars, where decision-making on these grants is led by Global South scholars. Project collaborations build deeper intellectual engagement over the entire lifecycle of a project. This is where the most important knowledge exchange and production occurs, as coauthors build out a research design together, and go through all stages of the research process together, from ideation and fundraising to paper writing. This is a 2-3 year process and requires substantial commitment and time from principal investigators. These would augment the initiatives already sponsored by EASST, EGAP, and J-PAL and increase the set of opportunities available for collaboration. Project grants fund the most critical part of this initiative – building out long-term research collaborations and relationships between Global North and Global South scholars. An 80/20 ratio of decision-making would also balance out the field in ensuring that Global South scholars drive the research agenda within their own countries.

These pillars work together in building knowledge exchange and an intellectual community. Each component augments the benefits of the other ones and enables minimal to maximal knowledge exchange in building stronger scientific research that is relevant to the local context. Workshops provide a fast and efficient way for scholars to network and meet, and to discover others who are interested in similar topics. However, while this space gathers scholars who are keen to learn from each other, producing research takes considerably more time, and requires a high level of trust and commitment between scholars. Residencies and fellowships address this, by offering an easy way for scholars to exchange knowledge and to improve each other's work without necessarily having to sign on for the entire lifecycle of a project. This provides a space for creation and innovation, without necessitating a high level of investment. Project grants fund deep investment in the co-creation of research by Global North and Global South scholars, and provide the resources necessary for scholars who are keen to build out projects together for the longer term. These produce the strongest outputs from this initiative and have high potential to advance knowledge combining the knowledge of experts locally and globally.