

Africa-based Migration Research

Experiences from a collaborative programme

International
Migration
Institute

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The African Perspectives on Human Mobility (APHM) programme was a collaboration between the International Migration Institute (IMI) and four African universities in Ghana, Nigeria, Morocco and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), funded by the MacArthur Foundation. IMI coordinated and supported the development of the research projects which were conducted entirely by the four teams in Africa. IMI also drew up a coherent and overarching analytical framework based on their findings. This resulted in four original research projects, where each of the partners took advantage of the opportunity to pursue new research questions which were not seen as priorities for many of their usual donors. The programme has extended the boundaries of research for each of the partners.

This brief is for anyone interested in North-South research collaborations – including researchers based at universities or in other organisations conducting research, such as NGOs, businesses or international agencies, as well as donors. It contains some lessons from the APHM programme which are useful to bear in mind when initiating and conducting such collaborations.

Building and drawing on research capacity

The partners came into this programme with different levels of research capacity and experience. As the coordinator of the programme, IMI provided different inputs to support the partners including intensive feedback on project documents, telephone and email tutoring and face-to-face meetings.

Ensure ownership of the project remains with partners

As Loren Landau has recently pointed out, carrying out North-South research collaboration inevitably raises the question: 'How, if at all, can groups with fundamentally different and inequitable endowments interact in ways that are just, sustainable and mutually beneficial?'¹

The APHM programme was partly designed to address this dilemma. Throughout, IMI attempted to ensure that the ownership of each project remained with the partner. From the onset, the four teams were given the opportunity to develop their own research proposals, rather than having an agenda dictated from above. The teams decided on their own research topics and methodologies, and carried out their individual projects with their own staff. A high degree of responsibility, not only for carrying out the research, but also for the planning and conceptualisation of the projects, was held by the partners. IMI refused to steer any of the projects, and such expectations were dealt with in discussions with the partners to help them develop their own agenda.

Recognise the different characteristics and capacities of partners

Some partners were slightly uncomfortable with this open approach and initially preferred being given more direct instructions from IMI on the contents and conduct of their research project. The first phases of the programme therefore required some adjustment to the kind of partnership envisaged for the programme. From the perspective of IMI, the difficulty

of the 'hands-off approach' consisted in trying to synthesise the findings of four highly divergent projects drawing on very different methodologies.

Facilitate direct exchange between partners

A vital part of building research capacity has come from the interaction between the research partners. They were able to draw on each other's insights and exchange advice on their research projects, as well as learn about the kind of research being carried out elsewhere on the continent. The mutual exchange throughout the programme has been invaluable and far beyond anything that could be offered from Oxford.

Create a strong advisory committee and use it

The programme drew on the support of its advisory committee, consisting of migration experts from around the world. Its members offered very constructive feedback on proposals and reports. They added a valuable outsider's perspective on the research activities and their objective opinion was particularly helpful when dealing with problematic or sensitive issues during the process of collaboration.

Involve junior researchers and students in projects

The four teams were encouraged to involve junior researchers and students in their projects. Several Master's and Doctoral students carried out fieldwork on the APHM projects as part of their degree programmes, and the programme provided an incentive for the researchers involved to give lectures on migration topics.

Provide opportunities for dissemination and publication

All outputs from the APHM programme have been published on the IMI website (www.imi.ox.ac.uk/research-projects/african-perspectives-on-human-mobility). IMI has also invited the partners to present their research findings to diverse international audiences, including at the IMI African Migrations Workshop (Dakar 2010), panels at the annual conference of the African Studies Association in the UK (Oxford 2010) and at the bi-annual European Conference for African

¹ Landau (2011) 'Communities of Knowledge or the Tyranny of Partnership: Reflections from a South African University on Research Networks & the Dual Imperative', Conference paper presented at IASFM13: Governing Migration. Kampala, Uganda.

Studies (Uppsala 2011). Several publications are emerging from these presentations. The individual teams have also taken their own initiatives to disseminate and publish their findings, for example in the form of conference papers and book publications with the teams' university presses.

Accessing resources

Look far and wide for data sources

One of the biggest challenges to the success of the programme was the lack of resources at the four universities – for some the situation was more critical than others. The limited access to literature was a major constraint, particularly in the DRC, where archives were burnt down during the war, and where there is no possibility of inter-library loans due to the unstable situation of the country.

However, there is data locked in many different studies that are either unpublished, not available online, or which haven't been widely disseminated. This includes studies conducted by local research institutions and individual researchers and academics in the partner countries and significantly, dissertations and theses across African universities.

Ensure partners know about available resources

Several online databases such as JSTOR and Google do provide free access for African universities. IMI has also identified a number of other free online resources, which are listed on its website (www.imi.ox.ac.uk/themes/african-migration/free-academic-resources-on-african-migrations).

The APHM programme has contributed to widening access to and dissemination of Africa-based research on human mobility. During Phase 1 of the programme, the partners compiled bibliographies on migration literature from their respective countries, which included grey literature that has not been published and/or is not widely accessible outside the African institutions where it has been produced. These bibliographies are available on the IMI website (www.imi.ox.ac.uk/research-projects/african-perspectives-on-human-mobility/african-perspectives-on-human-mobility).

Recognise partnerships in home institutions

Formal recognition of partner institutions may bring benefits – not only in terms of enhancing their profile, but also in terms of providing access to resources. For example, IMI was able to give the partners Virtual Academic Visitor status at the University of Oxford, which provided them with free access to the online resources of the University libraries for the duration of the research collaboration.

Ensure regular face-to-face meetings

A fundamental problem for African scholars is the lack or failure of infrastructure and public services. Frequently, the partners could not make use of online resources because of slow internet connections or the unstable supply of electricity on their campus and in their countries in general. In Nigeria, for example, generators are often used as a back-up when the general power supply fails, and this constantly interrupts emailing and downloads. In addition, researchers often struggled to access secondary data that was available but had to be obtained from uncooperative public authorities.

One way of overcoming such constraints was for the collaborating teams to exchange information and provide advice to each other, either during workshops or over email. The personal motivation driving the members of the four projects and the supportive network of the collaborating

partners were crucial to the success of the programme. It is common to hear many anecdotes about the problems of working with partners in developing countries, who are beset by so many other pressures on their time and a persistent lack of resources. Often the institution co-ordinating the programme struggles to get the work out of the partner or there are concerns that the resources have been misused. This has not been a problem in this programme. While we may have had some doubts at times about research strategies, we have been consistently impressed by the energy and enthusiasm that all the partners have put into these projects.

Enhancing research collaborations

Select strong partners

In the future, IMI will ensure that partners participating in a programme such as this will derive maximum benefit from such a hands-off collaboration. This entails identifying partners who have a clear idea of the kind of independent research they aspire to conduct, and who will make the most of the opportunity to explore conceptual and theoretical questions, instead of the usual rather narrow policy issues. This could be done by putting out an open call for research partners as part of the first phase of the programme, rather than pre-selecting the partners before the start of the programme. However, this would require an even more open type of funding, if the research participants are not identified before the granting of the funding. This is a highly unlikely scenario; the funding we obtained from the MacArthur Foundation was already a very generous and brave commitment, compared to the more conservative funding priorities of mainstream donors.

Ensure high-quality results

More effort could be put into enhancing comparability across the projects and improving the analytical synthesis of the different projects. One way of doing this could be to streamline the questions or methodologies of the different research projects in the programme; this is not a particularly compelling solution, as it implies more centralised control of the different projects and could impede the originality and individuality of the contributions from the different partners involved. To avoid the reproduction of North-South power imbalances, while insisting on an academically high-quality end result, a different solution might be to dedicate the final phase of the collaboration purely to theorising and synthesising the research findings. This could be achieved through writing workshops, exchange visits, and presentations at international seminars and conferences.

The APHM programme was unique in having dedicated budget lines and time set aside for the pre-fieldwork activities, including the development of research proposals and literature reviews. However, more time and resources could be dedicated to the post-fieldwork phase, to allow the partners to take their research to a higher level, beyond largely descriptive analysis. Such an approach could potentially strengthen the theoretical output of collaborative programmes and contribute to redressing the striking North-South imbalance of global academic discourse.

