

(Im)mobility in international research cooperation: knowledge and partnerships between the South and North, East and West

2nd Workshop on International Research Cooperation of “Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer”, 22 June 2021

Introduction

Nowadays, partnerships are state of the art in international research projects but underlying motivations often vary between the mere desire to meet funding requirements and the honest pursuit of more equitable relations between partners. Internationalisation is an important goal and essential tool for strengthening forced migration and refugee studies (FMRS); however, this can only be achieved if inequities among partners from the global South, East and North/West are transparently addressed and participation and inclusive decision-making become part and parcel of cooperation activities.

This workshop provided a platform for representatives of academic and policy-oriented forced migration and refugee studies networks to engage in a dialogue to explore, discuss and critically reflect on questions of structural and content-related cooperation among networks and in international cooperation projects in the field from Southern, Eastern and Northern/Western perspectives. The objective was to identify opportunities and obstacles and to come up with practical steps that we, as a community, can take to work towards more participatory and co-creative approaches in international knowledge cooperation. The event was a logical next that succeeded the joint NWWF and FFVT event “CoNet Connecting Networks – Strengthening international partnerships in refugee and forced migration studies” held on 31 May 2021.

For gaining comprehensive insights from different perspectives on internationalisation issues in FMRS, content-related impulses for the discussions were presented by the FFVT working group internationalisation (Merlin Flaig [DIE], Prof Ulrike Krause [IMIS], Dr Zeynep Sahin-Mencütek [BICC] und Dr Lorenz Wiese [CHREN]), and representatives of various networks and institutions that work in the field of FMRS. Namely, the speakers were Dr Diogo Andreola Serraglio (South American Network for Environmental Migrants, Brazil), Alemu Asfaw (Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia), Rachel Criswell (UNHCR Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network), Dr Maria do Carmo Dos Santos Gonçalves (Migration and Social Transformation Network, Centro Scalabriniano de Estudos Migratórios, Brazil), Roula El-Rifai (International Development Research Centre, Canada), Dr Guia Gilardoni (Research Social Platform on Migration and Asylum, ISMU Foundation, Italy), Dr Olga R. Gulina (RUSMPI Institute on Migration Policy, Germany), Prof James Milner (Local Engagement Refugee Research Network [LERRN], Carleton University, Canada), Dr Irina Molodikova (Central European University, Hungary), Prof Ranabir Samaddar (Calcutta Research Group, India) and Dr Maha Shuayb, (LERRN, Lebanese American University, Lebanon). The first and the final part were moderated by Merlin Flaig (DIE), the second part was hosted by Dr Jörn Grävingsholt (DIE) and Dr Benjamin Schraven (DIE) guided through the third session.

Discussions and results

Part I: Meanings of internationalisation in forced migration and refugee studies

The first part of the workshop was dedicated to general meanings and understandings of internationalisation in FMRS. The preliminary results of a flash survey carried out by FFVT served as a starting point for entering in an exchange with the workshop participants on the topic.

The 33 respondents of the flash survey were predominantly senior researchers and professors (12 and 11 respectively) while the remaining 10 persons were in earlier stages of their career (e.g. junior researchers, PhD students, a research assistant and a student) or in other positions. In 35 out of 63 cases they stated to have received parts of their education either in Germany, United Kingdom, Canada or United States of America, whereas in 12 instances they were educated in 11 different countries of the so-called global South or global East. The location of their 36 institutional affiliations is in 25 cases in Germany, United States of America, Canada or United Kingdom and in seven instances in the global South, namely in Brazil, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mexico, Uganda and Zimbabwe. While the respondents do or did research in 51 different countries, the focus lies on Europe, North America, Australia and the commonly known large-scale refugee situations in Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon and Turkey. When asked about participation in co-authorships and joint research projects, the responses showed a pattern where the more involvement of the “North”, the more likely they were to participate, and the more “South” and/or “East”, the less likely.

This inequitable pattern between the global South, East and North is also reflected in the qualitative responses. A revolving point of critique that multiple respondents considered an integral part of internationalisation in FMRS concerned power imbalances and hierarchies that make it difficult for Southern and Eastern researchers to access or participate in a historically Northern-dominated system of knowledge production. This leaves often proclaimed internationalisation efforts an empty promise without respective actions to address different forms of structural discrimination.

A dominating issue in the responses were funding constraints and difficulties to access funding. Accordingly, some respondents called for processes to decolonise the prevailing knowledge system, e.g. by using existing structures such as the International Association for the Studies of Forced Migration (IASFM) to tackle the issue. The epistemological hegemony and restrictions of Northern and Western concepts do not allow for the South and East to be understood as a place of knowledge and theory. Therefore, various respondents requested more equal partnerships and participatory processes in planning, developing and implementing both research projects and publications transparently. At the same time, respondents appreciated internationalisation efforts in FMRS as a means to sharing and enhancing knowledge and networking, e.g. at conferences, through joint publications, projects, and long-term partnerships. Thus, these opportunities foster reflection and a better understanding of different perspectives. However, academic competition makes it difficult to cooperate. This is further exacerbated by language issues such as the hegemonic position of English and a lack of acknowledgement of publications in other languages that hinder an effective information flow with partners and target audiences. Here, the challenges of accessing data and suitable technologies are additional hurdles. Therefore, some respondents stated that internationalisation requires better coordination, more regular meetings, stronger networks, and more conferences that are hosted in the global South.

In the subsequent discussion the workshop participants complemented the survey results with contributions from their perspectives about the meanings and understandings of internationalisation in FMRS. While most of the issues presented resonated with a vast majority of the participants, additional central points came to the fore. Due to the fact that forced displacement predominantly takes place in countries that are in conflict situations and often governed by restrictive regimes,

this particularity often poses major difficulties to cooperation in general as well as threats to (local) researchers and academic freedom. In addition, the difficulty to research refugees whose reality is characterised by transnationalism is an often underestimated challenge to FMRS. At the same time, prevailing Eurocentrism in defining worthwhile research and favouring research that leans to Northern and Western principles is an issue that has to be dealt with and deconstructed if internationalisation is taken seriously. Furthermore, it was emphasised that internationalisation is not a one-way street from North to South. Instead, it requires research to go both (or rather multiple) ways and to ensure that Southern and Eastern scholars are encouraged and financially supported to research Northern contexts as well. Thus, it is necessary to give more space to research partners from the global South and East to substantially contribute to and shape research agendas and project planning. One participant who identified as a researcher from the South vividly illustrated how skewed and arbitrary the postulations of the Northern/Western dominated academic system can be by sharing that numerous non-English publications were considered worthless in the pursuit of an academic career. In addition, only collaborations with renown Northern institutions and respective funding schemes or publications in top-tier (Northern) journals “count”. This exacerbates academic competition and individualism while only tenured academics can afford to demand for structural change. In consequence, the recurring question was about feasible and practicable steps that can contribute to addressing the bigger issues mentioned.

Part II: (Im)mobilisation of knowledge: creation, dissemination and barriers

The second part of the workshop concerned a practically-oriented exchange and discussion about experiences with the “(im)mobilisation of knowledge: creation, dissemination and barriers” and ways of dealing with the issue from different perspectives.

The impulse speakers emphasised the importance of councils, summer schools, other networks, and the contact to relevant policy bodies for effective dissemination and mobilisation of knowledge. However, the lack of networks and structural support, particularly in the South and East pose a major challenge to knowledge dissemination. Therefore, scholars try to cope with the situation through personal connections and by relying on individual networks. Another point of discussion was the challenge of ensuring academic independence and protection of researchers in restrictive regimes. In these contexts, the generally already politicised debates around refugee and forced migration issues are further exacerbated. These uncertain and often difficult situations can lead to the avoidance of cooperation and a predicament for researchers having to choose between the protection of colleagues by not involving them in research critical of the regime and the risk of deepening their isolation. Furthermore, it was highlighted that European-funded research is entrenched in its institutional and intellectual frameworks and oscillates between policy-relevance and policy-driven knowledge. Hence, it remains within an expectable “standard narrative” and limits the creativity of research and knowledge production. There is a prevailing epistemological bias that considers Northern or Western knowledge as the only really scientific and therefore the only one deserving attention. This was underlined by a comment that the idea of internationalisation itself comes from a Western or European perspective. This links to another major issue regarding the creation and mobilisation of knowledge in international cooperation projects: payment gaps between well-paid Northern researchers and substantially less-paid Southern and Eastern colleagues, even though the workload, knowledge and intellectual effort may be equitably shared. In most cases, this is due to strict Northern funding structures that do not provide for appropriate remunerations for Southern and Eastern research partners. At the same time, the predominantly short term funding contradicts the idea of establishing reliable long-term partnerships that would increase the quality of cooperation and research outputs. An additional challenge concerned the difficulty for Southern and

Eastern researchers to do research in the global North. Restrictions to access, even for fully funded research projects by Southern or Eastern researchers, can lead to the failure of research undertakings because of political or institutional barriers in the global North.

In conclusion of the discussion in part two, many of the participants agreed that better low-threshold support platforms for exchange and mutual support among Southern, Eastern and Northern researchers would be helpful to ensure resilience to interferences to academic independence and to foster knowledge dissemination, in particular for less-connected Southern and Eastern scholars. Therefore, pragmatic and realistic steps should be taken.

Part III: Partnership approach to international cooperation and projects

The ensuing third part provided a space to share insights into perceptions of the underlying structures that foster or hamper international cooperation. Here the objective was to discuss different measures, procedures, tools, arrangements or agreements that can be taken to address inequities among cooperation partners.

A major issue for Southern and Eastern institutions, particularly those with cross-cutting perspectives and regional approaches, is a lack of structural support, even though they are often places that generate both interesting interdisciplinary research and innovative theory beyond Northern intellectual frameworks. This falls in line with difficulties for Southern and Eastern institutions to access funding because they do not fit Northern funding schemes, and following from this, their institutional fragility hampers the development of innovative research. In addition, Southern and Eastern scholars are not included in project development while at the same time the barriers set by Northern guidelines for entering into cooperation and the ensuing bureaucratic procedures make it increasingly difficult for less established institutions to engage in international cooperation projects.

Due to the restrictions and prevailing inequities in international research cooperation multiple participants demanded a fundamental change and thus called for a decolonisation of existing structures. They emphasised that the underlying structures and prevailing frameworks are ill-equipped to deal with the issues raised because the “Geneva-based wisdom” arose in the North under Northern presumptions and therefore lack considerations and understandings from the South. Also, these structures promote and reproduce the knowledge within the limitations of the dominating Northern set frameworks. When these power asymmetries are addressed, epistemological hegemonies can be challenged and stimulating new knowledge that enhances and enriches common understandings can emerge. However, serious concerns were raised by a Southern colleague with a longstanding record of participating in and observing international research cooperation if it is possible to effectively and substantially challenge dominant conceptual frameworks.

Nevertheless, due to the difficulty to effect such a fundamental change, more practical and viable suggestions were shared and discussed. To overcome methodological and theoretical limitations of Northern concepts on a more abstract level, it was suggested to restructure the idea of solidarity and to incorporate this understanding in existing structures. In more practical terms, this means for example to build and institutionalise publication structures in the global South and East.

Regarding international cooperation projects, many participants called for a localisation of knowledge where local experts (including refugees and displaced persons themselves) shape and direct research undertakings and Northern partners are the followers, not the leaders. Thereby, cooperation projects can become actual partnerships. To make this partnership approach more tangible it requires Northern funding schemes to adapt their regulations. In some rare instances such an

approach of shifting power, resources and decision-making to local actors already takes place. Therefore, it was discussed that privileged researchers, particularly those with tenure positions at Northern institutions, should work collectively to build up advocacy power together with Southern and Eastern colleagues to demand state funding agencies but also private donors to change their funding requirements. In this context, showcasing the insightful and enriching results of research projects that apply a partnership approach with shifted tasks and responsibilities can be worthwhile. A practical example where such a joint effort could be pursued and presented to policy makers is at the Conference on the Future of Europe (<https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en>). Yet, the common understanding persisted that even within mindful partnerships structural limitations are present, impeding inabilities of partners to conduct research.

In addition, the participants called for the establishment of structures that facilitate an exchange on issues of internationalisation in the field of FMRS, hence they asked for better networking and more regular meetings for Southern, Eastern and Northern networks and institutions. Here, IASFM would be an adequate existing organisational body that could host these meetings. Also, the existing IASFM Code of Ethics was mentioned as a significant and positive reference document that contributes to better research cooperation because of its comprehensive nature, addressing not only academics but also policy makers, humanitarian workers and gatekeepers.

Part IV: Next steps and possibilities for further cooperation

The concluding session served to synthesise the workshop discussions and to jointly identify next steps and possibilities for further cooperation. Taking into consideration that the underlying inequitable structures are difficult to address and can only slowly be changed in a long-term endeavour, the participants agreed to focus on more tangible and small step efforts.

A central point that the participants agreed to pursue further is a joint effort to advocate for more equitable partnerships and to foster a change of power dynamics in funding schemes. Even though the discussion remained rather unspecific regarding form and content of such a joint endeavour, the support and commitment to the general idea was shared by the persons present at the workshop. In this regard, a proactive and decentralised approach where spaces for dialogue with policy makers and donors are sought to make the issue a point of discussion seems an adequate way ahead for the time being.

Another aspect that was considered feasible and worth pursuing is the question of accessibility of research results. Consequently, the participants agreed to bring the issue of open-access to the table wherever possible to make research more accessible internationally.

Furthermore, everyone underlined the importance of networks for mutual support and exchange in FMRS. Therefore, it is useful to invest in existing organisational structures such as IASFM. Hence, an aspect to build on is to cooperate with IASFM to find a way to codify the requirements and expectations for equitable partnerships. Here, an extension of the existing Code of Ethics with a more elaborate section about partnerships or the development of a standalone Code of Conduct for Partnerships are two potential options to follow.

Finally, it was agreed that the efforts to change funding structures and apply a partnership approach to research is not specific to FMRS. Therefore, it is central to seek exchanges, build bridges and join forces with other fields where similar discussions and efforts are taking place.

Project Info

Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer

The cooperation project “Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer” (FFVT) aims to strengthen interdisciplinary forced migration and refugee research in Germany. To this end, the project, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), brings together research on migration, development, conflict and violence, climate change, health, governance and human rights and other topics. In this way, FFVT supports the networking of researchers and institutes working in all relevant research fields dealing with forced migration. To provide young academics with teaching and training opportunities in forced migration and refugee studies, it plans to establish study and graduate programmes. Furthermore, FFVT plans to promote the internationalisation of German research activities further and, therefore, offers a global fellowship programme, among other things. The dialogue between academia, practitioners, the media and politicians is another key element of its work. FFVT is to contribute to establishing a sustainable infrastructure for research on forced migration and refugee studies in Germany to facilitate excellent academic work in this field.

FFVT is jointly run by the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), the Centre for Human Rights Erlangen-Nürnberg (CHREN, University of Erlangen Nuremberg), the German Development Institute (DIE, Bonn) and the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS, University of Osnabrück).

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Authors: © Merlin Flaig, 2021

Layout: Ann-Christin Komes, Marja Vormann

Publication date: 08 October 2021

Contact

Secretariat
„Flucht- und Flüchtlingsforschung:
Vernetzung und Transfer“
Seminarstraße 19 a/b, 49074 Osnabrück

www.ffvt.net

contact@ffvt.net

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Centre for Human Rights
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