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Visibilising hidden realities and uncertainties: the 'post-covid' move towards decolonized and ethical field research practices

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to move beyond the Euro/North-centrism recurrent in methodological discussions on what we may learn from the COVID-19 pandemic. Such debates often centre on uncertainty and involuntary immobility – aspects which are hardly new for many researchers. In this article, we argue that the pandemic offers an opportunity to rethink research relations between what we term 'contracting researchers' in the Global North and 'facilitating researchers' in the Global South. Such relations are often marked by rampant inequalities in remuneration, working conditions, and visibility/authorship. Drawing upon experiences in DR Congo, Sierra Leone, and India, we argue that the pandemic increased the dependence on – and highlighted the invaluable contributions and skills of – facilitating researchers, in part slightly refiguring bargaining power. We also propose pathways for change, arguing for a strong collaborative approach and the need for institutional change, without discarding the responsibilities of individual researchers.

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Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a surge in methodological debates on what we may learn from the pandemic. At the centre of such debates is the involuntary immobility caused by the pandemic. Various methodological solutions, such as virtual interviews and ethnography and the increasing reliance on cyber-data have been proposed (cf. Krause et al., 2021; Mwambari et al., 2021; Serekoane et al., 2021; Watson & Lupton, 2022). Yet, what is often overlooked in such discussions is that involuntary immobility – but here caused by visa restrictions and limited access to research funds for travel – has for long been a reality for researchers in many parts of the Global South, not the least in Africa. As Aymar Bisoka (2020) concluded, the debate around the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on research has been marked by Euro/North-centrism and 'a sort of Western narcissism' that 'assumes Western and African researchers face the same problems in the same way'.

Another central concept in methodological discussions of what we may learn from the pandemic is uncertainty. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of recognising uncertainties in our research plans and including aspects such as contingency planning as part of research designs (Krause et al., 2021). Such discussions tend to be marked by Euro/North-centrism. They often

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overlook the fact that for many researchers, uncertainty has always been a defining aspect of their work. Fundamental uncertainties, such as 'will my medical costs be covered if I am injured or get sick during field-work?'; 'will I be replaced if I try to negotiate a fairer remuneration?'; 'will I even be paid the sum we agreed upon?'; 'will I be paid separately for travels and accommodation?';'will my contribution be acknowledged at all in the final text?' – constitute a reality of everyday research in many settings, particularly in the Global South.

This article sets out to highlight such experience and address the challenges and opportunities posed by the Covid pandemic beyond the Euro/North-centric focus. It explores the circumstances and experiences of researchers located in or close to research sites in the Global South, here named 'facilitating researchers' who are contracted by more privileged researchers located in the Global North, here named 'contracting researchers'. Both concepts will be further explained below. As we will describe in this article, the relationship between contracting and facilitating researchers is often marked by rampant inequalities in visibility/authorship, remuneration, working conditions and access to basic security.

We argue that the pandemic offers an opportunity to re-think such relations (see also Bisoka, 2020; Mwambari et al., 2021; Myrttinen & Mastonshoeva, 2019). As we demonstrate, in many settings where research could still continue, the pandemic has drawn attention to certain realities in ways which hopefully can pave the way for more ethical research practices. It highlighted the extensive role and capabilities of facilitating researchers and many experienced that the increasing dependence on their/our work during the pandemic increased opportunities to negotiate better conditions. As a minimum, no contracting researchers who will publish research and data collected during the pandemic will be able to take the credit for the work conducted by others, because it will become evident that they were not physically present. This article is based on experiences of facilitating research in three conflict and post-conflict settings, namely the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sierra Leone and Jharkhand, India. Yet, while the focus is on research conducted in conflict or post-conflict areas, we believe that it is relevant for researchers engaged in North-South knowledge production more generally.

The article will proceed as follows. We will first provide a brief account of the research project which the article forms part of and explain the core concepts. After this, we will account for the various ways in which the situation of facilitating researchers is marked by uncertainty, followed by a discussion on the decolonial potential of the Covidpandemic. Finally, the article will discuss possible ways ahead, arguing that a comprehensive approach in which various key actors (e.g. funding agencies, ethics board, publishers) are engaged is needed in order to move towards more ethical field research practices.

Some notes on methodology and concepts

Material and methodology: an imperfect decolonized research project

Let us first explain that the somewhat awkward use of we/they (etc.) in the text simply reflects that the article is written jointly by both facilitating and contracting researchers. The article is an outcome of a wider (beyond COVID-19) research project[1] exploring the relations between facilitating and contracting researchers, with the particular aim to increase the knowledge around the working conditions of facilitating researchers in conflict and post-conflict settings. It had a participatory set up in which facilitating researchers in the three settings: DR Congo (Oscar Abedi Dunia); Sierra Leone (James Vincent) and Jharkhand (Ajnu Toppo) were to identify, interview, and set up workshops with other facilitating researchers in their respective settings. The planned outcome was a book in which facilitating researchers in the three settings account for their experiences (see Abedi Dunia et al., 2023). In both the DR Congo and Sierra Leone, the workshops were held at the end of 2019. In the DR Congo the workshops were organized in two settings, involving 30 participants, and in Sierra Leone one workshop was organized with 15 facilitating

researchers. Due to the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the planned workshop setup had to be abandoned in India and was instead replaced with individual interviews and a few focus groups (in total 25) conducted by Toppo.

The background material in this article – describing the general (i.e. before/beyond COVID) situation of facilitating researchers – is based on the transcripts of the discussions in the workshops as well as the individual interviews conducted. The accounts of the situation and experiences during the pandemic is based on continued discussions and consultations with workshop participants by Oscar Abedi Dunia and James Vincent. As noted above, in the case of Jharhkand, most of the interviews were conducted during the pandemic, thus naturally including experiences of research during the pandemic, despite the wider focus of the project.

The group of research facilitators from Jharkhand interviewed for the project comprises a diverse set of people, aged 18 to 75, spread across gender, class, and ethnic categories. Yet, in contrast to the DRC and Sierra Leone, a majority were women and also engaged in issues related to women's rights. Common to many of the Congolese and Sierra Leonean workshop participants is that, while some are affiliated to universities, many engage in research tasks on a temporary basis, depending on research opportunities. As such, most combine academic research tasks with, often a wide range of, other work and some are engaged to also conduct studies for various international organizations. Moreover, in these two settings a majority of the facilitating researchers were men. One reason for this was the project focus on conflict settings and the predominance of men in such field-work sites, often considered too dangerous for women.[2] Some of the workshop participants in the DR Congo (and authors in the forthcoming book) have also written excellent texts for the Silent Voices blog, of which many are referenced in this article.[3]

While attending to facilitating researcher experiences was the main purpose of the project, it also included individual informal interviews (in total 10) with contracting researchers based in Europe (6) and the US (4) with experience from research in various conflict settings. The project was also informed by informal discussions (in total 5, involving more than 50 contracting researchers) that took place in academic forums/workshops mainly in Europe (either organized by or outside the project) where Eriksson Baaz, Parashar, and Utas – who themselves have long experience of fieldwork in the three settings – presented the project and asked for participants' analysis of the state of the art, including their views on the suggested routes forward (see ending discussion in this article). Hence, the aim of the informal interviews and discussions was not triangulation in the sense of 'checking the accounts of the facilitating researchers'. Rather, these served to get a further – yet preliminary – understanding of the various more structural and institutional factors, which contribute to the state of the art (see Abedi Dunia et al., 2023).

Importantly, and despite the seeming decolonial nature of the project, it should be emphasised that it reflected the very processes, structures, and relations that it sought to challenge. It was largely designed by the three Global North-based researchers (Eriksson Baaz, Parashar, and Utas) and funded by research funds only available to them as Sweden-based scholars. In short, it reflected the unequal funding structure for research in which most research funding tends to be available only for researchers in the Global North, in itself creating problematic and systemic power inequalities.[4] Moreover, Eriksson Baaz, Parashar, and Utas underscore that they/we do not claim to be different/better than most other contracting researchers. We/they have, for instance, in previous work also failed to openly discuss and negotiate budgets, arrange insurance, or offer possibilities for co-authorship.

The article does not refer to names of specific locations and leaves out details that may make it possible to identify particular researchers or research projects. This is crucial not only from the perspective of research ethics but also reflects the belief that the problem of unequal, and at times exploitative research relations mainly has its roots in structural causes and inequalities, even if individual qualities of researchers also certainly play a role (see Abedi Dunia et al., 2023).

Facilitating and contracting researchers?

Facilitating researchers is a concept that emerged during the workshops and joint discussions afterward. What meaning do we attach to that concept and why was it preferred to the otherwise commonly used terms to describe this group of researchers, such as 'brokers', 'assistants', 'fixers' or 'local researchers' (Dean and Stevano 2016; Eriksson Baaz & Utas, 2019; Gupta, 2014; Jenkins, 2015; Malony and Hammett 2007; Parashar, 2019; Sangarasivam, 2001; Themner, 2022; Turner, 2013)? The terms 'broker', and to a greater extent 'fixer', more often used amongst journalists (Borpujari, 2019; Murrell, 2015; Palmer, 2019; Palmer 2018; Plaut & Klein, 2019), carry pejorative meanings which also downplay the research conducted by many facilitating researchers. As pointed out in the workshops, the term 'local assistants' also tends to downplay the often crucial and varied roles that many facilitating researchers perform to merely 'assistance'.

The term 'researchers' allows us to avoid the downplaying of the research contribution that facilitating researchers make; through the concept of 'facilitating' we seek to maintain some of the crucial connotations about 'in between-ness' and 'facilitation' attached to the broader notion of 'broker'. These connotations of 'in between-ness', as well as the fact that few facilitating researchers enjoy the benefits of working under clear contracts, is also the main reason why we opted for 'facilitating', rather than the more clinical term 'contracted'. In short, we define a 'facilitating researcher' as a key agent performing research tasks, occupying a position in-between contracting researchers and the researched, regulating the access and flow of knowledge between them. While this label could be placed on many researchers engaged by contracting researchers anywhere, this article focuses on facilitating researchers' experiences as living in or close to the data-collection /research sites. The work and experiences of such facilitating researchers are deeply attached to being based in the research settings where we/they work and are contracted to work. This positionality provides the opportunities to act as facilitating researchers due to networks, familiarity with the contexts, and cultural and language skills. At the same time and as will be demonstrated, it also constitutes a major source of additional work as well as insecurities, also often after data collection is completed.

Facilitating researchers constitute a highly varied group both in terms of educational backgrounds, socio-geographical backgrounds, present and past employment and occupations (see Eriksson Baaz & Utas, 2019) and engagement in research on a more temporary or regular basis. While some are attached to universities, many do not hold PhDs as the possibilities and resources to complete a PhD in many settings are exceedingly limited. Moreover, many who engage in facilitating research are not formally connected to a university but are self-employed, with substantial research experience through their engagement with academic researchers as well as international and national organizations. Hence, facilitating researchers as defined here constitute an essential and large group in many countries in the Global South. Yet, it is a group that is often neglected as the general debate on inequalities in North-South knowledge production tends to focus on more established scholars in the Global South who hold permanent positions, a PhD degree or more (Collyer, 2018).

By contracting researchers, we simply refer to researchers with access to research funding who contract other researchers, often based in the data-collection/research setting, to conduct research tasks. The focus of this article is on contracting researchers based in the Global North, who often, but not always are, white. Yet, while race certainly matters for understanding the power inequalities and dynamics at play, so does class, gender, and other aspects of power and privilege. As is demonstrated elsewhere, it is crucial to remember that inequalities and unethical research practices in knowledge production go far beyond North/South divides. Exploitative research behavior is also going on within national contexts and enacted among more privileged researchers in and of the 'Global South' (see Abedi Dunia et al., 2023).

We will now briefly account for the various forms of long-standing uncertainties facing facilitating researchers, setting the stage for the subsequent discussion of the decolonizing potential of the pandemic experience.

Facilitating researchers managing various forms of uncertainties[5]

In addition to the[5] uncertainties associated with working in volatile areas, most facilitating researchers also have insecure livelihoods (cf. Abedi Dunia et al., 2023; Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018; Eriksson Baaz & Utas, 2019; Mwambari & Owor, 2019). In contrast to contracting researchers, most do not have a stable income that can cover daily expenses. Thus, uncertainties faced by facilitating researchers in the three settings are not simply about the threats of violence connected to living and working in volatile areas and the traumas this can create (Thamani Mwaka, 2019), but about mundane matters such as paying rent, school fees, and medical bills, and putting food on the table.

As we account for in this paper, uncertain livelihoods increase the exposure to risks connected to research tasks. Given insecure incomes, facilitating researchers often feel obliged to submit to the requirements and conditions of the contracting researcher, knowing that there is a great competition between facilitating researchers. They/we often also do so, hoping that assignments may open doors for employment or educational opportunities (Bøås, 2020; Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018; E. Cirhuza, 2019, 2020; Nshobole, 2020; Eriksson Baaz & Utas, 2019; Mwambari & Owor, 2019). A widespread sentiment articulated during the workshops was that contracting researchers sometimes seem to take advantage of their/our precariousness and the inability to refuse what is offered. As one researcher stated, 'when I go into the field, I often think what if I will die now. What will happen and who will take care of my family? Are the risks I am taking now really worth it?' (Abedi Dunia et al., 2023, 2023).

In addition to taking most of the risks connected to research, facilitating researchers are also the ones taking the responsibility for ensuring security for research teams, including for contracting researchers. While rarely accounted for in research texts, some more reflective accounts acknowledge that it is almost always the facilitating researchers who take responsibility for ensuring safety in the field (D. Hoffman 2014; Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Nordstrom, 1997). Such authors thereby highlight the problem with ethics and research guidance which tends to highlight researcher (read: contracting researcher) responsibility (see Eriksson Baaz & Utas, 2019).

The crucial preparatory work to ensure access to the field is also generally in the hands of facilitating researchers. This is one aspect of the work conducted which is often not recognised in contracts or remuneration. To ensure safe access, facilitating researchers have to communicate with contacts in the location chosen for research to assess: Is this study really feasible in the location planned? Which authorities do we have to arrange meetings with, given the particular topic of the research and the locality? Who can I ask to assist in introducing us and vouch for us in case I/we do not already have contacts with these people? How will we be seen bringing in strangers (i.e. contracting researchers) into the setting? Is there a risk that we may be suspected to be or bring in spies (É. Cirhuza & Kadetwa Kayanga, 2020)? How much funds may we need to facilitate access? Have the contracting researchers accounted for these expenses (Mapatano, 2019)? It is important to note that having the capacity to answer such questions and ensure safe access clearly is not an inherent capacity stemming from simply living in the location. It is something that requires a lot of efforts by keeping in continuous touch with key actors and communities before and after a particular research project.

Facilitating researchers in the workshops accounted for how they often feel pressed to cut down on preparations, even if it may cause problems. Moreover, according to them, especially contracting researchers with limited previous experience of the setting do not always appear to understand the importance of preparatory visits and meetings and consider them a waste of time. Facilitating researchers also often need to explain and guide contracting researchers in terms of appropriate behavior during such meetings, especially those new to the setting. As concluded in the workshops, this is at times a delicate task as some contracting researchers do not take advice easily.

Moreover, providing safe access also involves costs: without having something to offer to key officials or gate-keepers as a token of compensation and gratitude, safe access is often difficult – not

the least with the presence of white contracting researchers (Mapatano, 2019; É. Cirhuza & Kadetwa Kayanga, 2020). This can sometimes be difficult to explain for inexperienced contracting researchers and some are unwilling to pay anything, seeing such practices as 'corruption' or unethical research practices. While more experienced contracting researchers most often calculate for such costs, this is sometimes not sufficient. In such situations, facilitating researchers often end up spending from their own pockets. Many accounted for how they/we sometimes do not tell contracting researchers about this additional expense as they/we fear the contracting researcher may doubt their honesty or ability to negotiate.

Yet, costs attached to ensuring safe access are not the only costs facilitating researchers often have to cover from their/our own pockets. Other recurring costs are connected to travel, health, and different forms of injuries. One of the key differences and inequalities in the research relations in focus here is that foreign contracting researchers are covered by insurance. By contrast, facilitating researchers, who often do a large part of the fieldwork, are most often not insured. If anything happens to them/us, there is thus, no mechanism in place to cover medical costs or compensate the family for loss of income. According to testimonies in the workshops and interviews, contracting researchers sometimes offer to pay for hospital care if illness or injury occurs during fieldwork. Yet, that is not always the case. For instance, during the workshops, a facilitating researcher recounted how he was traveling to the field-work site on a bus that had an accident and as a consequence received an injury at the chest that required medical treatment. He contacted the contracting researcher in Europe to ask him to cover the medical costs, as the accident occurred during the work he was contracted to do (although, without a written contact). Yet, he only received half of the amount of the costs and in addition lost additional income, as he was unable to work for some time. Similar experiences are unfortunately common (see Abedi Dunia et al., 2023).

Apart from costs attached to illness and injuries, a good number of other situations also generate additional costs that are covered by facilitating researchers from our/their own pocket. This is especially the case when it comes to communication and transport. Costs can also get added up when facilitating researchers try to resolve threatening situations during field trips. Sometimes such situations are caused by contracting researchers, either through inappropriate behavior, such as asking sensitive questions in an inappropriate manner or not seeking access through appropriate channels. During the workshops, one facilitating researcher narrated a serious incident with a contracting researcher who, despite advice, had failed to seek approval from the appropriate authorities. The situation resulted in the incarceration of one facilitating researcher. While he was released after a few days he continued to receive threats from the actors involved and eventually paid a sum to 'resolve the matter' – expenses that were never reimbursed.

As highlighted in this example, facilitating researchers are the ones who handle risks in the aftermath of data-collection. While contracting researchers' experience of insecurity in relation to various stakeholders in the research setting tends to be limited to the time they spend 'in the field', facilitating researchers are often left to handle such issues a long time after data collection is completed (see also Grimm et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2015; Mapatano, 2019; Middleton & Pradhan, 2014; Thamani Mwaka, 2019). Many have paid a high price and have been subjected to threats, arrests, and physical violence, some that produced lasting physical and psychological scars (Thamani Mwaka, 2019).

In short, the project clearly reveals that current working conditions and remuneration are often unfair and unacceptable (see also Bisimwa Baganda, 2019; E. Cirhuza, 2019), particularly given the extensive tasks often conducted by facilitating researchers. Moreover, many work without written contacts stipulating remuneration, tasks, and rights. In cases where contracts are made, many tasks such as preparing the field, arranging for authorization and summarizing data remain invisible/non-remunerated. Facilitating researchers also often assume a lot of responsibility in terms of preparing research tools (interview guides etc.) and interpretation and translation of the collected data. Since contracting researchers often do not master local languages, facilitating researchers translate and adapt interview or questionnaire questions, as well as responses – thus, making

a preliminary analysis. Importantly, irrespective of this work, or the wishes or ambitions of facilitating researchers, we/they rarely make it further than the acknowledgement section, sometimes not even that. This is of course nothing unique to the settings in focus here (DRC, Sierra Leone, and Jharkhand/India) but is part of a more generalised pattern, visible in other contexts (Middleton and Bøås, 2020; Cons, 2014; Mwambari & Owor, 2019; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2019).

'Traditions' play a crucial role when it comes to both the amount of remuneration and the forms it takes (e.g. advance or after completion remuneration, whether researchers get remunerated only for number of days in the field/amount of data collected or also for preparation and summarising of data). When asking contracting researchers about how amounts and modes of remuneration are decided, the reply was often that 'you often simply offer and do like you are advised by researchers with more experience of the context'.

In what way then may the COVID-19 pandemic offer an opportunity to move towards more equal and ethical research relations and practices?

The decolonial potential of the COVID-19 pandemic on research

Let us first acknowledge that remote (or distance) research practices, whereby researchers in the Global North contract others to conduct research for them is common to many fields since a long time, before the pandemic. It is particularly common within the field of conflict research in recent years. In the last decade, research institutions in Europe, Australia, and the U.S.A have become more concerned about the security of their staff – an aspect of what is often referred to as the increasing securitisation of academic research (Grimm et al., 2020; Peter & Strazzari, 2017; Bloor et al., 2010). The increasing regulations and restrictions posed on fieldwork means that certain locations are simply inaccessible for researchers based in the US, Australia, and Europe. Consequently, researchers restricted by such regulations (or in general not willing to take the risks involved themselves) have come to outsource more data collection to researchers living in the locations, often referred to as remote research (cf. Myrttinen & Mastonshoeva, 2019). Yet, and as concluded above, such practices are seldom recognised in research texts. During this project we have even come across cases where contracting researchers, according to the facilitating researchers, never set their foot in the country. There were no accounts of this in the research texts where the facilitating researchers were excluded and the contracting researchers appeared as single or co-authors with other Northern-based researchers. Instead, through vague or passive formulations, the reader gets the impression that data collection was a collaborative effort, led by the contracting researcher(s)/author(s).

Yet, while remote or distance research practices have been a well-known reality in research in insecure, as well as other, settings for some time, the Covidpandemic had clear implications also for such research. It forced many contracting researchers who normally are present in the field, collecting data together with facilitating researchers to stay home – thus, making all research into remote research.

The implications for facilitating researchers clearly varied from setting to setting, depending on the extent to which the pandemic hit the countries, the regulations and restrictions imposed and to what extent such restrictions were enforced. For instance, India – while mostly successful in managing to control the impact of the pandemic in 2020 – witnessed the total collapse of its health system and medical infrastructure in 2021, leading to a significantly high mortality rate. The severity of lockdowns, economic costs, social isolation, massive internal migration, the collapse of the medical system and the disproportionate loss of lives pushed most of the nation into a collective trauma. The severe lockdowns in India not only had implications for outside contracting researchers who could not travel but also for facilitating researchers. The archives were closed, government offices were not open for public visits, and libraries were shut. Even the fieldwork was limited, as outsiders/non locals were banned from entering the villages and people were scared to meet new faces, for there was always a chance of spreading the disease. Hence, in India much field-based

research came to a halt altogether and contracting researchers' possibilities to hire facilitating researchers to do their work was severely limited. Yet, at different periods and places fieldwork was still happening in Jharkhand and to the extent that it did, the experience was quite similar to that in the DRC and Sierra Leone.

The DRC and Sierra Leone, like many other countries in Africa, were less severely afflicted by the pandemic. Moreover, regulations were more limited, and also not enforced in the same manner. Hence, this made it possible for contracting researchers to continue with their research projects by hiring facilitating researchers. While many research projects and plans came to a temporary halt in the beginning of the pandemic, in turn severely affecting livelihood and research opportunities, they slowly resumed even when the contracting researcher had to remain at home. The experiences especially from Sierra Leone and the DR Congo highlight how the pandemic created a context which in various ways put the spotlight on the contribution of facilitating researchers and appeared to increase their/our room of maneuver.

Firstly, the pandemic has further highlighted the crucial role and competence of facilitating researchers. There are of course various and legitimate reasons behind contracting researchers' choice to be present and collect the data together with facilitating researchers, such as a wish to be part of the research process, get a better understanding of the context and enable better communication with facilitating colleagues (which is clearly more difficult online). Moreover, facilitating researchers at times appreciate the physical presence of experienced and skilled contracting researchers, seeing it an as opportunity of learn new skills. Yet, there is also a widespread belief among contracting researcher circles that you need to be present yourself since facilitating researchers either lack the competence or cannot be trusted more generally (Eriksson Baaz & Utas, 2019). Hence, there is a fear that the data will be compromised in quality or that facilitating researchers will simply invent the data.

Clearly, research fraud through fabrication of data is certainly sometimes committed by facilitating researchers. Yet, such practices are not unique to facilitating researchers. As is clearly documented in a range of studies, research fraud though data fabrication is also committed by researchers in Europe and the US (Craig et al., 2020; Harvey, 2020). Moreover, as demonstrated in this article, many contracting researchers are also involved in research fraud by taking credit for research conducted by others. Hence, one-sided suspicions of fraud directed towards facilitating researchers are quite unwarranted and unfair. Rather than simply reflecting objective risks, such suspicions must be understood in the light of long-standing racialized images of unreliable 'Others', only interested in the money (Eriksson Baaz & Utas, 2019; Eriksson Baaz, 2005; Mudinga, 2020).

One cannot brush away the worry that facilitating researchers lack the adequate methodological skills in a similar manner. Levels of formal university training in methodological skills and procedures are often much lower among facilitating researchers. Yet, many have assembled years of experience by being involved in research and have also participated in various training courses. Moreover, and as highlighted above, they/we possess the unique knowledge of how to transform abstract methodological tools into something that can generate valuable knowledge in the given context. This is something that contracting researchers – unless they have long experience and language skills relevant to the area – rarely possess (see also Mudinga, 2020).

Undoubtedly, whether adequate methodological skills are present varies between settings and researchers. Yet experience articulated from the DR Congo and Sierra Leone suggests that the increasing reliance upon them/us and lack of micro management has made them/us to, as it was put in Sierra Leone, 'more professional'. As concluded by one researcher, it made us 'give our best in terms of reporting and gathering information, to ensure that we are not the cause of bad research and reporting'. Similar experiences were expressed in the DRC and Jharkhand.

Secondly, facilitating researchers in Sierra Leone and the DRC also articulated that they experience that contracting researchers have become more careful in how they treat them/us. A researcher from Sierra Leone explained: 'From my own perspective, it has made contracting

researchers more conscious and cautious about the way they treat us'. This also, at least in part, appears sometimes reflected in remunerations, as reflected in the following:

> The new practice we have seen is that the contracting researchers are more open to us because it is more important that the facilitating researchers are satisfied with their remunerations to ensure that we can provide tangible, and reliable data which can be trusted and utilized.

Yet, facilitating researchers in Jharkhand did not articulate the same positive experiences. As one concluded:

> They are smart and polite in their dealings with us. They know our importance and so they are good to us. However, in terms of remuneration they pay exactly what is promised in the beginning, nothing extra even for incidentals or when the project scope has expanded to include additional responsibilities.

Hence, the impact on the willingness to provide, or negotiate better, remuneration should not be overstated. However, some contracting researchers also accounted for how the pandemic released funds otherwise to be used for (often quite costly) traveling costs of contracting researchers and how such funds instead now were diverted to remuneration of facilitating researchers and fieldwork budgets.

In short, the pandemic appears to have provided more agency and room of maneuver to facilitating researchers, who accepted more responsibility and exercised influence over field-work and data-collection (see also Mwambari et al., 2021). Yet, and as Mwambari et al. (2021, p. 1) note 'neither proximity not distance are in themselves liberating vectors'. However, like them, we believe that the rupture the pandemic brought in terms of distance and remote research has a decolonial potential by making the invisible and hidden work of facilitating researchers more visible.

So, what then do we have to change, and who should be responsible for bringing such change?

Towards more ethical field research and 'remote research' practices[6]

We propose[6] a strong collaborative approach where facilitating researchers are included throughout the research project cycles: from the outlining stage to the development of research questions, to the design of methodologies and researcher approaches, to analysis, all the way through the write-up and publication (see also Similar to Bisimwa Baganda, 2019; Mudinga, 2020; Vogel & Musamba, 2022).

While such an inclusion of course can be achieved in different ways, it is difficult to imagine how it will be possible without changes in the current unequal funding structures. The systematic silencing, exclusion, and even exploitation of facilitating researchers must, in part, be understood as a reflection of the inequalities in the global economy of knowledge when it comes Nshobole, 2020 to research funding. The current funding structures reproduce structural inequalities that systematically favor institutions and research agendas in the Global North (Erondu et al., 2021). Unless this is challenged, it is difficult to imagine fundamental changes in research relations.

Yet, this is clearly a longer term and more difficult proposal given its close connection to international politics and the furthering of national interests and agendas though research. However, what can be done already at this point is to involve facilitating researchers into funding proposals and – similar to the way contracting researchers often do when working with colleagues based in the Global North – make it into *joint projects* in which the researchers involved together formulate research questions, design methodologies – and not the least – put together budget lines.

Secondly, it has to be recognised that the contribution that many facilitating researchers make not only merits co-authorship but also makes non-authorship both fraudulent and unethical – a 'brain theft' (Bisimwa Baganda, 2019; see also Mukungilwa, 2019). While there is no consensus about what merits co-authorship in the humanities and social sciences, a common application of the Vancouver protocol[7] to this area (see Macfarlane et al., 2017) separates responsibilities meriting co-authorship into the following: 1) Being responsible for the conception and design of a project; 2)

Being responsible for the analysis and/or interpretation of data; 3) Drafting the paper or revising it critically for intellectual content (ibid). Our research demonstrated that many facilitating researchers often play a crucial role in the first two phases. Yet, they are not offered the opportunity to become authors, and without being offered this possibility they are de facto excluded from contributing to the final writing process. How can you participate in something that you are not offered to be part of?

Importantly, facilitating researchers must not be denied co-authorship based on the theory-data hierarchy that recognises theory building from Global North researchers as most crucial part of the paper, while empirical data collection is considered less significant part of the intellectual labour (Mudinga, 2020; Parashar, 2021). Moreover, based on the insights from the research project, we strongly advise against the tendency to refuse co-authorship, out of security concerns of the facilitating researchers. All of the facilitating researchers who participated in the workshops clearly felt that they are fully capable to assess such risks themselves.

Finally and importantly, there is need for a better and more transparent remuneration policy through clear contracts wherein the compensation is open for negotiation, rather than presented as a fixed fee, conveyed informally among and by contracting researchers. As mentioned above, currently many facilitating researchers fear that any attempt to renegotiate terms of compensation can result in the termination of the work opportunity itself. Relatedly, the current situation where facilitating researchers work without insurance and often have to cover unexpected costs in the field (caused by accidents, illnesses, theft, and managing intimidation and threats etc) through the meager remuneration is untenable. We need to arrange for access to insurance through formal institutions, as is standard for contracting researchers. Yet, until this is possible, funds must cover unexpected costs crucial to the health, well-being, and safety of facilitating researchers within overall project budgets.

Agents responsible for change?

The findings from the project clearly showed that change requires much more than appealing to the consciousness of individual researchers. As mentioned above, many contracting researchers explained that they simply follow traditional arrangements (i.e. we just do and pay as others have done before us). Many also mentioned incentive structures within academia, for instance related to authorship, visibility, merits, and promotions. Further knowledge about the role that institutional structures and norms within academia (and related institutions) play in the silencing and poor working conditions of facilitating researchers is needed, and will be further explored in a forthcoming project. Yet, inaction cannot be legitimised through the need to first provide better knowledge about the obstacles at play.

Clearly, funding agencies and ethics board and committees assessing research projects must play a vital role. In addition to the need to change current unequal funding structures highlighted above, funders of research as well as ethics review boards need to ask questions about the role and situation of facilitating researchers before approving projects. They have to start asking questions such as: what are the roles of categories of people often named 'local researchers' and 'local assistants'? Are they included/named at all in the application? Is it reasonable to think that the project will be able to be conducted without such input (if it is not recognised)? If named/mentioned at all, have they been invited to read and provide inputs to the proposal, including budgets? Does remuneration appear to be fair? Are they covered by insurance? How will authorship be arranged? These and many other questions need to be posed. In order for this to be effective, there will be a need of testifying documents from the concerned facilitating researchers.

Academic publishers, in particular academic journals have a great responsibility and role to play in effectuating change. Here questions of authorship and who did what in the process are of course at the center. Vague and passive formulations (e.g. 'I', 'we', 'with a team of assistants'), must be probed into. If a paper is single authored, or authored by only researchers based in the Global

North, and it is vaguely suggested that the author(s) did most/all the work, is this really realistic? If it was a team, who were part of this team? What work did they do? Who were involved in adjusting methodological tools to the context? Who were involved in collecting the data? Who were involved in summarising data and initial analysis? Were those who contributed to developing methodological tools and collecting data invited to be part of the writing process? If not, does that appear fair?

In an effort to promote integrity, equity, and fairness in research collaboration, the global medical journal *The Lancet* recently decided to reject papers with data from Africa that fail to acknowledge African collaborators. [8] We believe this is a very good initiative. Yet, it also has to be recognized that subjects vary, disciplines differ in terms of how research is organized and contracting researchers diverge in terms of 'independence' in fieldwork. Thus, a certain openness for the possibility of 'lone researchers' should ideally be maintained. Moreover, a potential problem with the policy adopted by *The Lancet* could be that the contribution of facilitating researchers risk still be downplayed, as authorship may be interpreted simply as a reflection of an enforced policy.

While change requires much more than appealing to the willingness or consciousness of individual researchers, we can also do much more as individual researchers. We need to critically reflect upon our own research practices and resist the luring temptation to take undue credit for the work conducted by others in order to promote our own careers. In addition to making our own research practice more ethical, we can also put pressure on fellow colleagues through constructive critique and engagement. In particular, those of us who act as reviewers of journal articles and research applications have a special responsibility. As part of the review process, we must demand clarity about the research process and role of facilitating researchers, asking similar questions as those suggested above.

We emphasise the responsibility especially of senior scholars. More junior, and in particular PhD students, clearly have more limited resources and also limited possibility in terms of co-authorship, due to the general rules of co-authorships in PhD projects. When it comes to the authorship issue we would instead encourage PhD scholars, when applicable, to better and duly acknowledge the crucial role of facilitating researchers in other parts of the thesis (methodology sections etc.).

Finally, facilitating researchers clearly also have an important role to play. One such possible route is the formation of union-like organizations. One of the obstacles identified in the project is the high competition between and the lack of organization among facilitating researchers. This, in turn, makes it possible for contracting researchers to haggle by referring to other facilitating researchers willing to do the work for less remuneration. While not an easy task, creating union-type organizations could be a useful way to negotiate better pay, demand co-authorship and assurances of security measures, and in general assert greater authority other research processes.

Conclusion

This article has emphasised the Euro/North-centrism in much methodological discussions on what we may learn from the COVID-19 pandemic within a wider dynamic, discussions which often centre on uncertainty and involuntary immobility. Such discussions tend to forget that for many researchers, uncertainty, and involuntary immobility have always constituted defining aspects of everyday work conditions. Centering experiences of facilitating researchers in Sierra Leone, DRC and Jharkhand, India who are contracted by more privileged researchers based in the Global North, we have sought to move beyond the Euro/North centric focus. As we have demonstrated in the article, such research relations are often marked by rampant inequalities in visibility/authorship, remuneration, working conditions, including not the least access to basic security.

Yet, we have argued that the pandemic offers an excellent opportunity to re-think and re-do and create more equal and ethical research practices (see also Bisoka, 2020; Mwambari et al., 2021; Myrttinen & Mastonshoeva, 2019). By immobilising contracting researchers in the Global North it has highlighted the crucial role and competence of facilitating researchers. It has demonstrated that high-quality research is possible without contracting researchers traveling to, and overseeing, others collecting the

data. Moreover, many facilitating researchers in the settings experienced a slight shift in bargaining power, reflected in increasing possibilities to negotiate conditions, as contracting researchers became more dependent upon us/them.

There is need for a long due fundamental change. As has been argued for a long time, we need to move beyond century old exploitative research traditions (Sanjek, 1993) in which researchers in the Global North conduct research on issues in the Global South, without acknowledging the indispensable contributions of facilitating researchers. A change in research practices is also warranted as decreasing and more just international air travel patterns are crucial to mitigate the massive and truly global challenges of climate change. This does not that mean that we propose a full stop to fieldwork for researchers in the Global North. Clearly, there is much to gain from the exchanges in collaborative fieldwork, not just for the involved parties, but also as such exchanges can often enhance the quality and depth of knowledge we produce. Yet, questions of equality and justice must also be addressed in our efforts as researchers to adapt research and traveling patterns in face of the escalating climate crises (Higham & Font, 2020; Nevins et al., 2022). Responsible research must entail less traveling for researchers based in the Global North, not only for fieldwork, but also to the academic conferences where results are presented and discussed. This is a further arena from which facilitating researchers are excluded and where transformation is needed.

We have in this article argued for a strong collaborative approach where facilitating researchers are included throughout research project cycles. Without discarding the responsibilities of individual researchers, we have also emphasised the need for institutional change, as much of the current exploitative research practices appear encouraged – or at least facilitated – by norms, conventions, incentives, and regulations at universities, funding and ethics bodies, as well as by publishers.

Notes

1. The work was supported by the Swedish Research Council, under grant number 2017–05575.
2. While Sierra Leone is classified as post-conflict since a long time now, one reason for selecting Sierra Leone in the original project was to provide a historical perspective of various trajectories of facilitating researchers. Hence, most participating researchers in Sierra Leone started their careers during and in the years after, the civil/rebel war in Sierra Leone (1991–2001), when facilitating research was still mainly conducted by men.
3. This blog is organized by Ghent University, Belgium and be accessed in totality here: https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-blog/.
4. For more details see Abedi Dunia et al. (2023.
5. The account below draws upon Chapter 3 authored by Oscar Abedi Dunia, Eric Batumike-Banyanga, Stanislas Bisimwa, John Ferekani Lulindi, Bienvenu Mukungilwa, Francine Mudunga, Lievin Mukingi and Darwin Rukanyaga Assumani, with comments by James Vincent and Anju Oseema Maria Toppo and Chapter 5 authored by Oscar Abedi Dunia, Elisée Cirhuza, Pascal Imili, Evariste Mahamba, Jérémie Mapatano, Le Bon Mulimbi and Wolf Sinzahera and comments by James Vincent and in the book edited by Abedi Dunia, Vincent and Toppo (forthcoming Abedi Dunia et al., 2023).
6. The below is a summarized version of recommendations presented in chapter 8, authored by Oscar Abedi Dunia, Maria Eriksson Baaz, Anju Oseema Maria Toppo, Swati Parashar, Mats Utas, James B.M. Vincent in the book 2023).
7. According to the so-called Vancouver protocol, the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, authorship requires: 1) Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; 2) Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; 3) Final approval of the version to be published, and Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.
8. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220603115640789&fbclid=IwAR0ytWNQRe7IgmENjhPDmAyi18i6ntzgrAfyi72VmPN9ked5YqPes5x8Jss.

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