

Reflecting from within: Confronting Institutional practices that undermine Ethical Research Partnerships



MAKERERE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Collaboration and ethics

- Global collaborations fuel discovery, funding, and visibility - but they also surface tensions around fairness and accountability



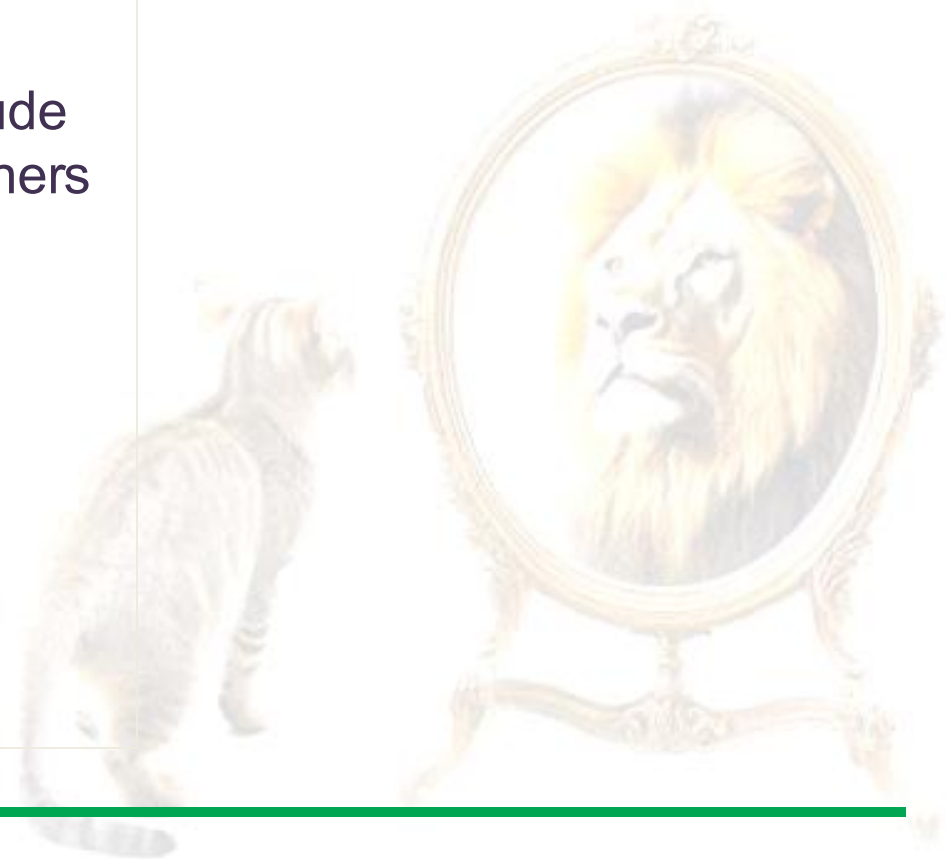
Positioning

For 13 years, I have supported grant applications and compliance at Makerere University.

This role has let me see how our internal systems shape fairness and ethics in research partnerships.

INTERNAL PRACTICES CAN COMPROMISE ETHICAL PARTNERSHIPS:

- Tokenistic involvement
- Weak governance and infrastructure
- Dependence on donor priorities
- Optics-driven collaborations
- Hierarchies that silence or exclude researchers esp Junior researchers



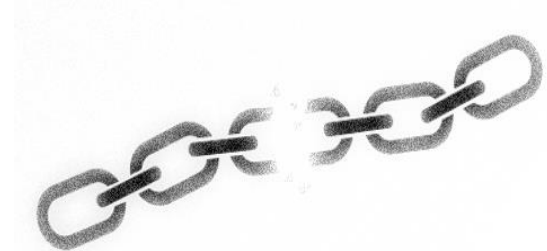


Tokenistic involvement:

(Representation without meaningful inclusion or influence)

What does tokenism look like in practice?

- Accepting symbolic roles - Joining projects for visibility without negotiating meaningful participation or data control.
- Weak internal accountability - Entering collaborations without internal review or clear institutional oversight.
- Gatekeeping by senior researchers - Limiting authorship or opportunities for junior colleagues, mirroring external inequities.
- Outsourcing governance - Depending on Northern templates for data, ethics or contracting due to weak local systems.
- Compliance culture - Avoiding difficult conversations for fear of losing funding or partner approval.





Silent compliance

- When feedback is dismissed or penalized, researchers stop speaking up - suggestions to adjust unrealistic timelines or budgets are sometimes viewed as obstruction.
- This breeds silent compliance and normalizes unethical norms.






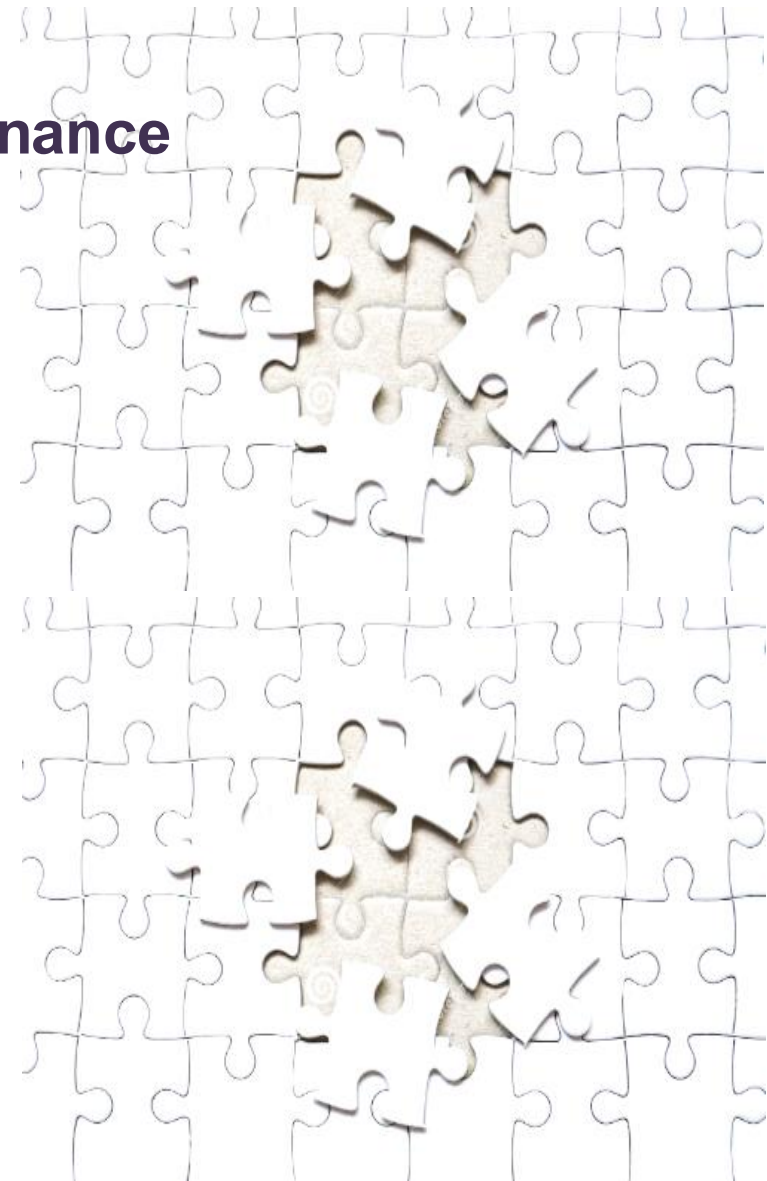
Gaps in systems and governance

- Gaps in infrastructure and unclear policies weaken institutional ethics.

research data is hosted on servers overseas because local infrastructure cannot yet support secure storage and management. Once stored abroad, access becomes limited and local partners often lose control over how the data is used or shared, reducing its value for local analysis and policy use.

- Without governance frameworks, ethics rely on goodwill, leading to inconsistency and vulnerability.

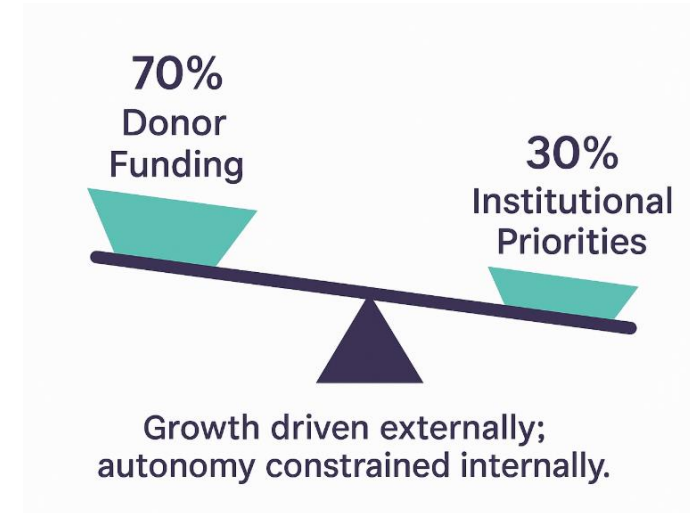
 Absence of partnership agreements, data management policies, weak IP and authorship policies, staff welfare and mentorship programs – Ras, ECRs left unprotected and undervalued) – (Moral distress among frontline staff)
All create a vacuum where inequity thrives.





Dependency and donor agendas

- A huge portion of our research funding comes from external donors. (70%+)
- This support drives growth but constrains autonomy.
- When institutional survival hinges on donor agendas, local priorities and researcher welfare risk being sidelined.





Taking deliberate steps to reform the ecosystem:



Developing
partnership
policies under
DRIP



Diversifying
funding via
RIF and seed
grants



Investing in
infrastructure and
data governance



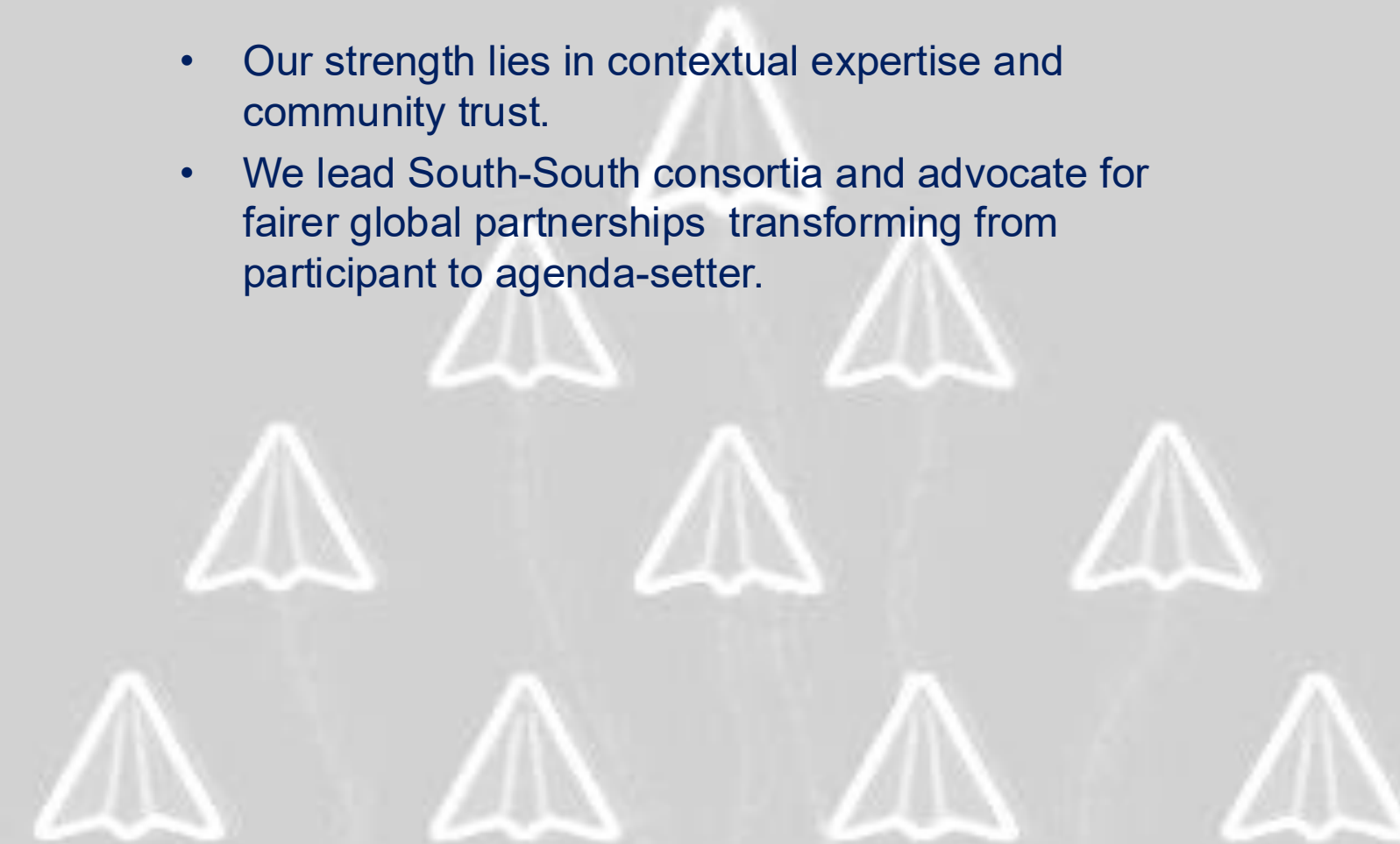
Embedding
accountability
and transparency
in research culture





Strengthening the 'Southern Voice'

- Our strength lies in contextual expertise and community trust.
- We lead South-South consortia and advocate for fairer global partnerships transforming from participant to agenda-setter.





Lessons and Reflections

- Ethical partnerships start within.
- If institutions fail to address internal inequities, no external policy can fix them.
- As the proverb reminds us: 'If there is no enemy within, the enemy outside can do us no harm.' - *African proverb*



Closing



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Got questions or feedback? Reach out to us anytime:

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