

Peer tandem research approach

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Abstract

The (digital) peer tandem research approach was elaborated during the Overseas Project Benin 2020 by the Centre for Rural Development against the background of travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. By involving scholars from the study region in the co-creation of knowledge, the participatory approach follows the idea of global partnership cooperation at eye level and seeks to increase the research quality by including region-specific expertise. Divided into tandem partners and mirror teams with an overarching plenum, the nested organisation and communication structure is essential for effective, inclusive cooperation, but also time-consuming and labour-intensive. Due to the limited influence of the mirror team of the Global South on the research design, however, the objective of a truly collaborative partnership on an equal footing can only be partially achieved. In order to cushion underlying structural North-South power imbalances, future peer tandem research projects must build on institutional partnerships and include both mirror teams during all stages of the research process.



Abbreviations

OP: Overseas Project

MT: Mirror team

PTR: Peer Tandem Research

SLE: Centre for Rural Development

Aim of the peer tandem research approach: making a virtue of necessity

In view of the special circumstances, such as contact and travel restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the SLE research team of the OP Benin 2020 designed and implemented the Peer tandem research (PTR) approach. The objective of this method is to increase the quality of research through the institutional inclusion of region-specific expertise in the project by working in close partnership with scientists from the study region. By conceptualising scientific cooperation of scientists and students from the Global North and the South within the framework of a specific project, it aims at coming closer to the claim of global partnership cooperation. The

SLE method briefs are created from the practical experiences of our alumni in their interdisciplinary research projects. Lessons learned and good practices are compiled. In each brief, we present the method that is explained clearly, step by step, and with the help of practical examples. With its method briefs, the SLE aims to support researchers and practitioners who are active in solution-oriented and transformative international development work by providing insights into hands-on methods in a structured manner, so that the wheel does not always have to be reinvented.

The Centre for Rural Development (SLE) is affiliated with the Albrecht Daniel Thaer-Institute for Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences in the Faculty of Life Sciences at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Its work concentrates on four branches: international cooperation for sustainable development as a post-master degree course, training courses for international leaders and experts in the field of international cooperation, research on sustainability issues, and advisory services for universities and organisations.

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constant exchange of content and expertise on planning, implementation and analysis, taking into account perspectives from the South, as well as the conduction of quantitative and qualitative interviews of Beninese scientists in their linguistically and culturally familiar environment create inherent, considerable benefits for the quality of the research results. It is emphasised that the learning successes of the researchers in terms of intercultural competences and capacity building are more than just a positive side effect, but also part of the goal of the approach. Although it is oriented towards well-established participatory research styles (see info box), fundamental distinctions contrast the particular design of the PTR approach with regard to the research mandate, development of the project design and cooperation with research partners. These distinctions root in the original project idea and design date being planned before implemented restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which prevented the SLE research team from carrying out field research in Benin. Developing the PTR approach was thus a remote adaptation of the project design born out of necessity of travel restrictions in order to realise the original research assignment, namely the market analysis of the Beninese poultry meat sector.

Background: diversity of participatory research strategies

Inclusive, transdisciplinary partnerships gain a strong momentum in international development agendas, and so does the interest in participatory research strategies in international cooperation. Given the vast diversity of approaches, participatory research refers not much to a concrete, cohesive research method. It rather highlights a research paradigm that advocates the importance of involving research partners in all steps of solution-oriented research (Bergold 2012). Against this background, the inclusion of research partners is conceptualised in numerous ways, particularly within qualitative research. Community-based participatory research is a widespread method emphasizing the influence, participation and control of non-academic researchers in the process of knowledge co-creation and social change (Isreal et. al, 1998; Viswanathan et. al, 2004). This very idea of researching with people rather than for or about people can also be found in Participatory Action Research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). The practice-oriented collective inquiry approach combines participation with action and research in order to address investigation units significant to the researchers. In the same vein, an SLE Overseas Project (OP) in 2020 applied a co-research concept

in the context of the Covid-19 lockdown and food insecurity in South Africa's marginalized communities (cf. SLE Method brief co-research).

Description of the method: stages of cooperation

In applying the PTR approach, the team structure was considerably changed and expanded (see figure 1). Five young researchers in Cotonou complemented the core team of five SLE participants and a team leader in Berlin. Additionally, two Beninese consultants (one in Berlin, one in Cotonou) accompanied the process. The resulting group size of 13 mostly digitally collaborating participants makes structured coordination, communication and organisation key elements for efficient, effective and solution-oriented research (see chapter data collection and data analysis: It's all about organisation and communication). With the ultimate goal of collecting a rich data set and obtaining meaningful results for the final report through data analysis, the actual execution of the research is embedded in several stages of cooperation. They include on-boarding, implementation, writing phase and off-boarding and can be adapted depending on the project design.

First, the on-boarding process makes use of human resources management tools for the systematic introduction and social integration of new colleagues. This process is divided into three levels. On a personal level, the peer tandem researchers get to know each other and build a personal relation in informal meetings. At this point, it is essential to clarify and document personal expectations and needs. In addition, the joint drafting of a team contract increases commitment and the sense of community. The organisational level does not merely regulate the technical-spatial equipment (office, internet connection, tablets, etc.), but also brings the teams together in terms of project design (mission statement, target group, goal, methods), tasks, roles, organisational structure and working culture (e.g. communication and decision-making rules). The content level provides space for familiarisation with literature and content exchange between the tandem partners. During on-boarding, the power imbalance between the receiving team, which has already drafted the research framework, and the newly integrated team, which naturally tends to adapt rather than actively participate, becomes apparent. Accordingly, it is imperative that the receiving MT is open to criticism and change, while the on-boarding MT has shaping opportunities. This includes giving feedback on essential issues such as the overall goals of the re-

Criteria	Description
Practical experience in the field of research (content, methods)	Practical experience in the research field and with the applied methods as well as an academically suitable background are prerequisites for the successful implementation of the project.
Subject orientation of the Master's degree (content, methods) University degree: Master	The level of the academic degree should be balanced to avoid dominance of higher educated team members.
Multidisciplinarity	Helps to understand economic, social and political processes as an individual and in a team. Relevant for the solution-oriented approach of complex contexts.
Relevant languages: French, English, Fon	English will facilitate cooperation with SLE participants to some extent. French and Fon are relevant for conducting interviews in the markets.
Age	The age structure should be balanced to avoid potential dominance of older team members.
Gender Balance	The gender ratio should be balanced to promote gender equity and avoid male dominance within the group.
Motivation letter: written expression, content and form	The quality of the cover letter shows whether the applicants have engaged with the content of the study and they have adequate written expression in order to contribute during the writing phase.

Table 1: Criteria for staffing the peer research positions. Source: Own illustration.

search assignment or the research questions that have been developed beforehand.

The second work stage initiates the practical implementation and includes all steps of data collection and analysis. Region-specific expertise is a significant advantage in both the elaboration of the questionnaires and in the execution of quantitative and qualitative interviews. KoBo Toolbox is a useful tool for quantitative data collection in the context of digital collaboration, as it allows researchers to work jointly on the questionnaires and run them offline. When analysing data, it is particularly relevant to ensure that both MTs have access to software such as MAXQDA or SPSS. During this stage, digital knowledge management is of great importance due to high organisation effort and data volume. Cloud based data storage has proven to be suitable, as it does not require much training to use. Yet, data privacy should be checked for compatibility with the project. OP Benin used Google Drive as a file storage and synchronisation service, thematically divided into folders on the overall process (interview data, work plan, etc.) and self-organised subfolders by each tandem partner team (see figure 1) with questions on the respective research question.

The PTR approach aims to include all involved team members to jointly publish results. The clarification of responsibilities and roles during the on-boarding process facilitates the joint realisation of the writing phase, which requires a great deal of organisational effort. The entire team should agree upon the structure of the study and adapt it accordingly when necessary. Details and practical tips on writing in teams

can be found in the SLE's Action- and Decision-oriented Research Handbook (Fiege 2019).

The off-boarding provides the space for a joint reflection process and is an integral part of the PTR approach. It included feedback loops among all organisational sub-units as well as an anonymous evaluation sheets to address the expectations and needs formulated at the outset as well as to record the lessons learned.

Selection of tandem partners and composition of the team(s)

The selection of peer tandem researchers is time-consuming, requires reliable contacts in the partner region and must take into account both, the individual strengths and limitations of the individual scientists, and the harmonious, interdisciplinary composition of the overall team. In the case of the OP Benin 2020, job advertisements were disseminated through relevant graduate networks in the study region. In a three-week selection process, the core team evaluated 542 Beninese applications for five peer tandem positions and 10 applications for the two consultant positions. Based on seven weighted criteria (see table 1), three to five applicants were shortlisted for each position by the SLE team, the team leader and the consultant in Benin.

Weekday	Participants	Channel	Purpose
Mondays	MT 1	Analog / video-conference	Team check-in
	MT 2	Analog / video-conference	Team check-in
	Plenum (all)	Zoom	Overall progress
	Tandem teams	Zoom	Research question
Wednesdays	Team leader 1on1	Zoom	Feedback
Fridays	Tandem teams	Zoom	Research question
	MT 1	Analog / video-conference	Team check-out
	MT 2	Analog / video-conference	Team check-out
	Team leader / MT 1	Analog / video-conference	Update, planning
	Team leader / MT 2	Analog / video-conference	Update, planning

Table 2: PTR communication channels OP Benin 2020. Source: Own illustration.

Data collection and data analysis: It's all about organisation and communication

For efficient digital research collaboration and to overcome the challenges of jointly coordinating data collection and analysis, the organisation and communication structure is crucial (see table 2; figure 1). The PTR approach was organised in four sub-units; each of them had clearly defined tasks and institutionalised and scheduled communication channels. The core sub-units consisted of five German-Beninese tandem partner teams, each of which jointly worked on one research question (alternatively: defined task). Each core unit exchanged experiences on the organisation and progress of their research question twice a week. Informal, often daily communication via WhatsApp, develops organically, fosters personal rapport and facilitates task completion. Especially during the implementation phase, independently and spontaneously organised meetings were the norm. Based in Berlin and Cotonou, the next larger sub-units in the organisational structure were the two mirror teams, each consisting of five researchers and a consultant. The role and tasks of the advisors can differ substantially. In the case of the OP Benin 2020, the consultant in Cotonou took the role of a research assistant with coordination tasks, while the consultant in Berlin closely accompanied the work process as an expert in terms of content and methodology. For internal communication within the respective MTs, personal exchange has proven helpful in realising non-digital meetings due to the enormous need for coordination and fine-tuning.

While content-related tasks were defined according to the project goals (e.g. conducting and analysing qualitative interviews), coordinative tasks were diverse. In addition to the formally scheduled team meetings, the MTs organised independent meetings several times a week to meet enormous organ-

isational challenges. These include discussing the progresses and possible challenges of the tandem teams, internal personal feedback, content-related and emotional support, assisting coordination of the team leader, overview of the overall progress of the project and exchange with advisors or communication with partners. The largest unit was the plenary, whose communication channel of the very same name embraced the entire team and met weekly to steer and discuss the overall progress. Each tandem sub-unit alternately facilitated the weekly meeting. Rotating responsibilities not only increased ownership, but also improved the digital moderation skills of the tandem researchers. Further functional meetings took place between the team leader and the consultants. Besides, institutionalised feedback between the team leader and each team member proved to make adjustments and to resolve conflicts.

Lessons learned – How to foster potentials and counteract limitations

Like any research method, the PTR approach has both strengths and shortcomings. Based on the experience in Benin, future teams should be aware of the hallmarks of this approach in order to foster potentials and counteract limitations.

PTR actively includes perspectives from the Global South in international research cooperation and thus also in knowledge production. By integrating participatory research strategies in a more rigorous way and by taking the expression “international cooperation” more literally, a particular strength of the approach is the intense intercultural exchange and capacity building for both MTs. The experience of the OP in Benin shows that all team members improved their language skills (English and French) and practiced intercultural competence, honing empathy and sensitivity and emotional competence in working with researchers from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, in terms of capacity building,

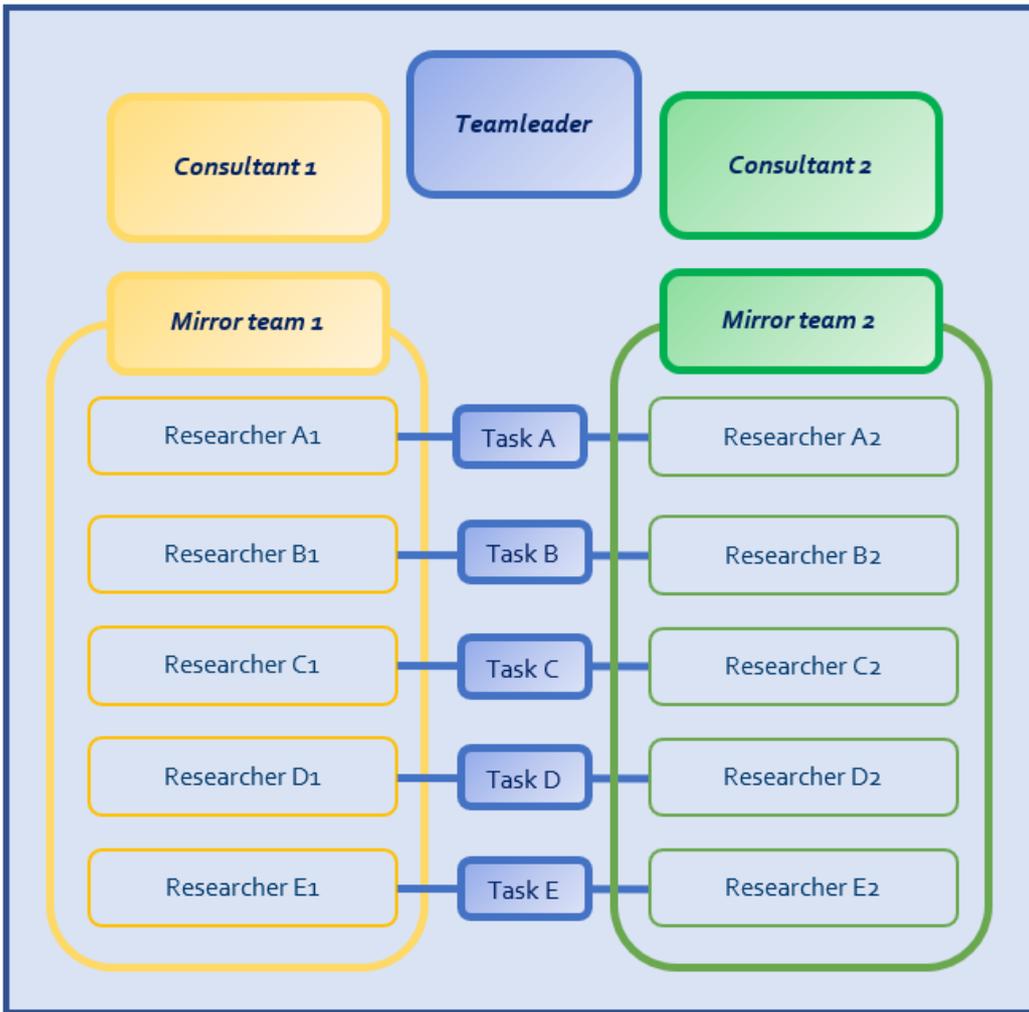


Figure 1: Organigram PRT approach. Source: Own illustration.

the MT in Berlin learned much about rural development in Benin and about working with quantitative data from their colleagues in Cotonou, while the Beninese MT was able to acquire trade policy knowledge and skills in qualitative research from their SLE colleagues. After all, the working process represents a tremendous learning effect for everyone involved in terms of digital research, project management, and moderation of meetings. Besides personal development, applying the PTR approach potentially increases the quality of data collection and analysis. This is firstly due to the region-specific expertise of the researchers, which has a major positive impact on the design of the questionnaire, the conduct of the interviews and the interpretation of the results. Secondly, thanks to a number of contacts among the Beninese researchers, the project gained access to relevant yet marginalised in discourse stakeholders through the use of regional networks and was thus able to draw on otherwise unheard voices - in this case interviews with smallholder farmers. Thirdly, the organisational structure made it possible to work on a complex and labour-intensive issue. This allowed numerous interviews to be conducted on the ground while other team members were already writing parts of the final report and designing quali-

tative questionnaires.

However, there are also limitations of the PTR approach that future research teams should consider and address. The most critical important lesson learned from Benin is that structural power relations limit truly collaborative research partnership on an equal footing, as outlined in the following. First, the research mandate and the project funding are still set in a context predominantly shaped by actors from the North. Second, at the time of the expansion of the team, the elaboration of the project design was already well advanced (e.g. context of utilisation, content definition, and methods), which limited the contribution of the Beninese tandem

team to the research design. The decision on how to research about whom or what and with what purpose was already fixed at this point, which resulted in the claim of cooperation at eye level moving away from Northern-dominated research practices only being partially fulfilled. Additionally, this aspect lead to unbalanced distributions in the sharing of tasks, e.g. the MT of the North coordinating and steering, while the tandem partners of the South took over executive activities and showed in part limited ownership and commitment during the writing phase . These undesired circumstances could not be avoided in 2020 due to the pandemic-related adjustments, because the PTR approach was integrated into an existing design. An effective way to counteract this is to involve both MTs at the earliest possible stage of the project and at best “get on board” and draft the research design together. One way to do so might be to embed the research project in an institutionalised collaboration between universities of the South and the North. Both the mandate and the composition of the entire team is then based on university cooperation from the very beginning of the project. Thus, it eventually becomes a truly North-South co-production, which is actively shaped

by both MTs. Besides, the selection of the second mirror team by professors from a partner university in the study region could foster ownership and commitment during the writing phase, which partly took place after the working contract had finished.

A further important take away is that, given the team size and the digital character of the approach, the organisational effort was enormously time and labour intensive. Organisational activities, feedback and reflection loops were frequently necessary at different levels, which is why tandem partners sometimes struggled to keep up with content-related tasks. Also, the supervision of all team members was accordingly challenging despite the involvement of consultants. To address this extra organisational effort, cooperation partners and research teams should consider institutionalising recreational activities and adjusting both the scope of the project and the strained budget due to the additional time expense and costs incurred.

Finally, a written and jointly elaborated agreement between the MTs is helpful to fully exploit the potentials and to mitigate shortcomings, which unfortunately did not materialise in the case of the Benin OP. Part of such a contract should be the fair distribution of tasks during all phases of the collaboration on an equal footing.

The evaluation shows that all research members (40% without reservations, 60% with modifications) of the OP Benin 2020 would recommend the PTR approach to others and gave it an average score of 8.2 out of 10 points. The lessons learnt can be considered by researchers to further fine-tune the methodology and to adapt it to the context of the study.

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