

## Reflection and recommendations on tandem research in the Global North - in a team of Global South and Global North postgraduates

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### Abstract

In the discourse of knowledge production, international research collaborations have been widely recognised as a key factor for impactful research. This has also been affirmed for such collaborations in the form of tandem research, which entails cooperation in tandem between peer scholars from different disciplines, regions, or cultures. As collaboration between participants from the Global North and the Global South, tandem research has been taking place in the context of development cooperation at the Centre for Rural Development (SLE) of Humboldt University Berlin, particularly in its Overseas Projects started in 1972. Since then, these Overseas Projects have all taken place in the Global South until 2021, when an Overseas Project was carried out in the Global North. This followed a paradigm shift in development cooperation that led to the recognition of the Global North as a possible site for development cooperation activities with intended impact in the Global South. The Overseas Project in the Global North was jointly carried out by an interdisciplinary team of ten German and African postgraduates, deploying among others tandem research as a method. This paper provides background insights into this mode of collaboration, describes the processes involved, discusses the experience realised, and makes recommendations for future tandem research at SLE and in the Global North.



### Background

#### Literature insight

International research collaborations across disciplines, organisations, geographies, and cultures are crucial in contemporary science. A key benefit they provide is the introduction of multiple perspectives by taking advantage of the diverse knowledge and methodological expertise of the collaborators (Dusdal & Powell, 2021). They also facilitate comparative research across the geographical regions of the researchers, produce more influential and more often-cited research and generate more visibility for participating researchers (ibid; Katsouyanni 2008). Specifically, within the context of tandem research by teams consisting of local and guest researchers, international collaboration leverages both the local researcher perspective, which provides easier field access and local contextual knowledge, and the guest researcher perspective, which is said to be more aware of less appreciated aspects and less bound by internal cultural constraints (Schlehe & Hidayah,

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.

The views and opinions expressed in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the SLE.

2014). Therefore, it transcends the views of a single perspective, making the local and guest researcher perspectives complement each other. However, international collaborations or tandem research endeavours come with challenges such as contrasting cultural and organizational expectations or communication styles, which at the same time might be a chance for knowledge creation. Nevertheless, the benefits have proven thus far to outweigh the challenges, which can be addressed by appropriate measures, such as entrenching inclusiveness and identifying potential pitfalls (Gewin, 2018). This applies even more if learning is to take place explicitly for development cooperation.

### **International collaboration at the SLE**

Since 1972, the Centre for Rural Development (SLE) of Humboldt University Berlin has engaged in numerous types of international research collaborations within its Overseas Projects (Berg, 2018, p1). The Overseas Projects are a central component of the SLE's postgraduate programme, in which the postgraduates with the support of an expert team leader carry out action-oriented research within the framework of development cooperation typically in the Global South. At least 150 Overseas Projects in over 60 countries all from the Global South have since taken place (ibid). A salient form of the international collaborations in the Overseas Projects is tandem research involving the SLE postgraduates and peer researchers with contextual professional and cultural knowledge. The SLE postgraduates are predominantly from the Global North (Germany) – since the program takes place in Berlin with the aim to provide young, qualified professionals for German development cooperation – and the peer researchers from the Global South.

Recently, there has been a paradigm change in development cooperation. This entails the recognition that development cooperation activities can also be carried out not only in the Global South but also in the Global North, with an intended impact in the Global South. Consequently, in 2021, an Overseas Project with a geographical focus of action in the Global North was carried out for the first time. The rationale was effectively two-fold: first, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes a universal need for development, not only in the Global South but also in the Global North. Secondly and more importantly, since some activities in the Global North have had, and continue to have, serious negative developmental effects for the Global South, it is imperative to act in the Global North to reduce the adverse effects, or even

initiate new positive effects, for the Global South. A typical example of this can be observed in the climate change discourse, in which the Global North has been responsible for 92% of excessive CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the adverse climate effects of which will be predominantly experienced in the Global South (Hickel, 2020). Furthermore, the Global North has historically developed economically at the expense of resources in the Global South, thereby deepening inequality between the two global regions. Against this background, the Overseas Project in the Global North took place and included a methodological approach of tandem research.

### **The Global North Overseas Project**

Commissioned in 2021 by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the OP of interest (the Global North Overseas Project) was a pilot project entailing a qualitative investigation into the role of agroecology for rural development in the Global North, and its long-distance effect in the Global South. Specifically, it analysed agroecology as a holistic and integrated approach for the sustainable transformation of agricultural and food systems. The research examined the role of agroecology for rural development in four rural regions in Germany and Austria, while considering the long-distance beneficial impacts for sustainable development in the Global South. Beside the central topics of agroecology and rural development, the research also considered the science of telecoupling, which studies the socioeconomic and environmental interactions between distant human and natural systems (Hull & Liu, 2018).

Methodologically, it deployed primarily an integrated landscape approach and an adapted version of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) TAPE tool (based on the FAO 10 elements of agroecology). Semi-structured interviews with key informants and relevant actors in the case study region were conducted. Participatory research approaches, especially actor mapping, were applied. As per the tandem research approach, ten junior researchers consisting of SLE postgraduates and African guest researchers carried out the research work. As for results, the research established the paths of agroecological transformation in the case study regions, identified the enabling factors for the transformation, and ascertained the connections between the case study regions and the Global South. Finally, it recommended low-threshold agroecological initiatives to be implemented in the Global North for local rural development outcomes, and long-distance beneficial impact in the Global South.

## Aim of the tandem research method

The tandem research approach was regarded as a crucial methodological component of the Global North Overseas Project, particularly by the institutional project partners the SLE and the BMZ. Essentially, the tandem research aimed to facilitate joint learning and knowledge exchange between Global North and the Global South participants – within the framework of field research (data collection), data analysis and report drafting.

By drawing on the expertise of the Global South participants on the research topics in the Global South context and their interest for the Global North context, the tandem research method aimed to infuse these with the corresponding expertise and interest of their Global North colleagues and thereby create a truly global research agenda. This has the potential to provide enhanced learning exchange and rich research finding that would not be possible if the research was carried out through one perspective. Moreover, since the research topics had implications for both global regions, it was simply appropriate that the research be conducted by a team with expertise from both global regions. Specifically, the Global South participants in the team were required to provide insights on the potential impacts of certain agroecological approaches in the case study regions for the Global South, and thereby confer validity and legitimacy on these aspects of the research findings. Furthermore, their engagement was required to complement the competence level in the team needed to execute the qualitative data collection and analysis. Importantly, the tandem research method aimed to establish a research collaboration on equal terms between the Global North and Global South participants.

## Description of the method

The collaboration within the framework of tandem research in the Global North Overseas Project took place from August to October 2021, and primarily entailed field research/data collection, data analysis and report writing. However, in the time preceding, but also following this period, there were relevant activities that took place, that are important to the collaboration. These are described in this section, particularly the selection, arrival/onboarding, debriefing/departure, and the final presentation.

### Pre-collaboration phase

The selection process of the SLE postgraduates and that of the Global South guest researchers took dif-

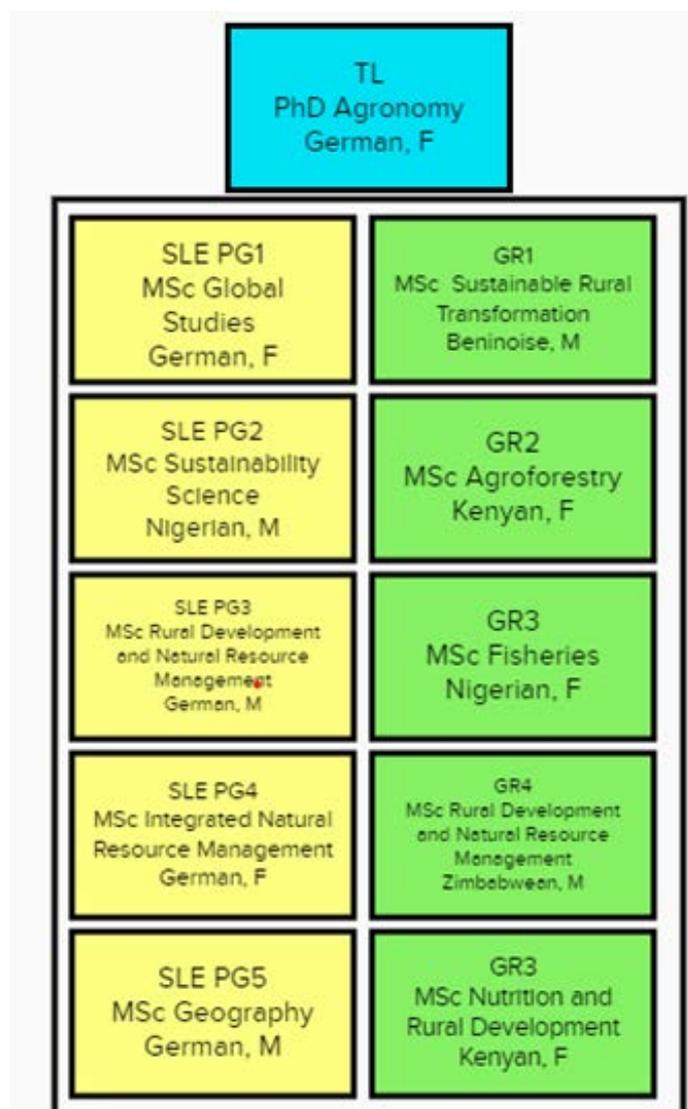


Figure 1: The team, showing the disciplines, nationality and gender of the members. (PG = postgraduate, GR = guest researcher, F = female, M = male, TL = team leader)

ferent paths. The SLE postgraduates were selected to be part of the team in April 2021 by the SLE through an internal process that distributed the participants in the SLE postgraduate programme into four Overseas Projects based on their academic and professional experience, as well as interests. In the Global North Overseas Project, the SLE postgraduates consisted of four German participants and one Nigerian participant, who had German cultural, professional, and academic knowledge. The SLE also took into consideration the disciplines and gender to create a gender-balanced interdisciplinary group. On the other hand, the selection of the Global South guest researchers was carried out by the team leader (a German expert with extensive experience in several African countries) and the SLE postgraduates. A comprehensive call for applications was disseminated through relevant networks and social media in June 2021. Due to covid travel restrictions, applications from African countries were requested. A total of 43 applications were received, and 15 applicants were shortlisted. Finally, 5 successful applicants were

selected in July 2021 based on their field research experience, personal and professional engagement in rural development, interest to learn more about agroecology, and willingness to explore more about the ways the Global South and the Global North can learn from and with each other. Interdisciplinarity and gender diversity, as well as their travel possibilities with regards to the covid pandemic were also considered. The composition of the whole team is indicated in Figure 1.

### **Collaboration phase**

The arrival of the Global South guest researchers to Germany was handled by the team leader, with support from the SLE postgraduates, in matters including visa assistance, flight, accommodation, logistics, and travel information. Following the arrival in Berlin, the guest researchers were onboarded and introduced to the relevant aspects of project. On a personal level, they got to know the team leader, their SLE postgraduate colleagues, as well as each other. On an organisational level, they were introduced to the SLE, informed about the BMZ and its partnership in the project, as well as familiarized and integrated to the virtual collaboration tools (Google Drive for project files, Mendeley for sharing literature, Slack and WhatsApp group for communication). On the content level, they were introduced to the project design (the framework topics, research objectives and questions), as well as key literature. Afterwards, field research preparation was conducted by the whole team, particularly development of questionnaires and organisation of stakeholder interviews. For the field research regions, sub-teams of five members were also formed based on interest, with each sub-team consisting of 2 or 3 SLE postgraduates and 3 or 2 guest researchers. A half-day workshop also took place in which the team agreed on its way of working, shared values, and collective stress management method.

For the field research phase of five weeks in the four case study regions, the two sub-teams simultaneously carried out data collection exercises in two case study regions in the first half of the phase. Subsequently, the sub-teams underwent shuffling regarding composition as previously agreed and conducted further data collection exercises for the remaining two case study regions in the second half. For the stakeholder interviews over this phase, the guest researchers were provided translation services by translators or the SLE postgraduates. Additionally, the sub-teams were supported by the team leader, who travelled to them in the four case study regions. Digital meetings between the sub-teams occasional-

ly took place, where sub-teams reported progress to each other, and discussed further methodological, content-related, and administrative issues.

Following the field research phase, the whole team came together for three weeks in a retreat, where they conducted data analysis and started the report writing. Over the period of the retreat, further sub-teams were also created in plenary team meetings for various task. The results of work done by the sub-teams were reported back to the plenary meetings, and further team discussions and decisions occurred. On the last day of the retreat, a reflection session on the tandem research took place. First, the sub-teams of the SLE postgraduates and the guest researchers had separate sessions, where they collected successes and challenges from their perspectives. Second, a plenary team meeting followed where the sub-teams gave reports from their separate sessions. Third, collective team recommendations for future tandem research were drawn based on a discussion of the reports of the sub-teams. The following sections in this paper partly utilise the results of this reflection session. Afterward, there was a one-week data collection phase in Brussels conducted by a sub-team consisting of two SLE postgraduates, two guest researchers and the team leader. The purpose of this data collection was to further contextualise their research findings on the European scale, through stakeholder interviews. Thereafter, the tandem research effectively came to an end, and the guest researchers departed Germany. The SLE postgraduates developed the report further. Nonetheless, there was a final digital collaboration phase for the preparation and execution of the project presentation. Here, two guest researchers coordinated with the SLE postgraduates.

### **Reflection on the tandem research: lessons learned**

In the two phases that defined the tandem research, there were several advantages realised from the perspectives of the whole team, the SLE postgraduates, the guest researchers, and the individual team members. Similarly, challenges also manifested from the stated perspectives. The selection process through the SLE was commended, as it allowed young guest researchers without pre-established networks to participate, as opposed to a hypothetical selection process through a research partner institution. However, there were mixed feelings regarding the dynamics of the selection. Some team members remarked that the process allowed the SLE postgraduates to gain

relevant key professional skills, while others indicated that the involvement of the SLE postgraduates in the selection process of the guest researchers created an artificial hierarchical relationship between the two sub-teams. This is significant, given that the tandem research in the project was intended by the SLE and BMZ, as well as desired by the whole team, to take place on equal footing between the two sub-teams.

Furthermore, the SLE postgraduates commenced the project two months prior to the participation of the guest researchers. In this time, the former carried out the research design, gained key thematic understanding of the research topics, and began to conduct key-informant interviews. This established “tandem inequality” to the disadvantage of the guest researchers, strengthened the perceived hierarchy, allowed the guest researchers less time to deeply familiarise themselves with the research topics and the methods, and partly inhibited their capacities in contributing to the project. Nonetheless, following their onboarding, the guest researchers were able to comment and make proposals on the research design, and thereby enrich it further. Furthermore, the administrative success of facilitating the arrival of the guest researchers despite the pandemic was noted. This is attributable to a support pairing arrangement between one SLE postgraduate and one guest researcher in a process led by the team leader.

During the field research, a key observation with important implication for data collection was that the interviewees in the case study regions provided reflective qualitative data, that demonstrated their interest in the expertise and background of the guest researchers and allowed them to make connections to the Global South. On several occasions, the interviewees inquired the African perspectives of the guest researchers on topics of the interviews and research, leading to engaging exchanges, and thereby creating a more conducive environment for data collection. This is consistent with observations made in another Global North-South tandem research by German and Indonesian junior researchers (Schlehe and Hidayah, 2014). Moreover, the SLE postgraduates positively noted that they were continuously compelled to contextualise their field observations and the interviews, as they exchanged on certain nuanced behaviours or statements with the guest researchers. Similarly, the guest researchers remarked that the exchanges with the interviewees and the SLE postgraduates significantly enriched their expertise.

Regarding the translation during the field research

and the general question of language during the entire collaboration, there were varied reactions. The guest researchers indicated that the translation services by an SLE postgraduate – or when available – a hired translator were helpful to varying degrees. However, there was a slight preference for translation by an SLE postgraduate as he or she knew the research matter and more familiar with it than the hired translator, even when they were briefed. Nonetheless, there were significant limitations to translation, and language generally. For instance, it was impractical for the guest researchers to carry out interviews with the majority German-speaking interviewees via translation, with regards to content and time available – especially when a SLE postgraduate was available. Hence, the guest researchers’ direct field research experience was primarily limited to English-speaking interviewees. Although these were fewer than the German-speaking interviewees, they were however significant in number to provide good direct field research experience for the guest researchers. On language generally, many of the literature and external materials relevant to the research were available only in German, and therefore more suited for use to the SLE postgraduates than the guest researchers, who then focused on materials available in English. Similarly, due to their knowledge of the local context and language, the SLE postgraduates took additional responsibility for the organisational matters, such as arranging interviews, hiring translators, finding accommodation, and organising transportation for the team. Combined with their head-start prior to the involvement of the guest researchers, this deepened the tandem-inequality in the team.

With respect to the data analysis and report writing during the retreat, there were differing viewpoints on whether the size of the team was adequate. Some opined that a team of ten was large and led to long discussions and made coordination and reaching agreements tedious, while some believed the team’s size was sufficient, especially as it allowed for multiple formation of productive sub-teams in different constellations. Nonetheless, there was the general agreement that effective coordination and communication between sub-teams and efficient plenary discussions and decision making was necessary for the success of the team and could be improved upon in future tandem research, particularly with teams of similar size. In general, the members recognised that the diversity in the team broadened the perspectives of the individual team members. Therefore, this collectively lent the team a full appreciation of the multiple perspectives on the observations made

– with regards to discipline, gender, global region. Instructively, all team members indicated interest in a future tandem collaboration, and this is affirmed in further surveys affiliated to the SLE (Dollman, 2022).

## Recommendations

Going by the lessons learned in the SLE's pilot of tandem research in the Global North, there are modifications that should be made to future tandem research to improve its productivity and experience. Table 1 shows a proposed timeline of stages and activities based on recommendations, which are outlined in the following.

1. Equal participation: This will address tandem inequality between the SLE postgraduates and guest researchers and can be done in two ways. First, both sub-teams should start and end their participation in the research project at the same time – starting with the project planning and ending with submission of the report. This will allow them equal and sufficient time to familiarize themselves with the topics of their research, and to get to know each other. Importantly, it will confer equal ownership to guest researchers, and the SLE postgraduates. In this regard it is also recommended that the SLE organise introductory workshops for the guest researchers – following selection, to acquaint them with SLE's methods and culture. Second, the SLE can attract more qualified Global South participants in its postgraduate programme by internationalising it and fully changing its language of instruction to English. This will provide the SLE a ready pool of equally trained Global North and Global South postgraduates for tandem research. It will also eliminate the need for administrative costs and efforts, such as flights and hotels for guest researchers.

2. Early selection: For the guest researchers, this becomes necessary for participation on equal terms with SLE postgraduates. The selection of the guest researchers should occur in the same period as the selection of the SLE postgraduates. This should be carried out by the SLE, possibly in collaboration with the team leader. Specifically, this will eliminate the need for participation of SLE postgraduates in the selection of the guest researchers, avoid the perceived hierarchy between the two sub-teams, and thereby enhance tandem equality.

3. Language support: This is pivotal for the guest researcher to enable a truly profound engagement with the German cultural context, the German research partners/interviewees, as well as research materi-

als in German. The SLE should provide the guest researchers sufficient time and resources to gain at least basic knowledge of the German language and culture, in order to prepare them adequately for research in the German context. Regarding translation services, this can be enhanced by providing the SLE postgraduates, who are already acquainted with the research matter, with training in translation prior to the field research. This provides the benefit that technical interactions can be easily translated, however confers additional responsibility onto the SLE postgraduates. Alternatively, professional translators could be hired, preferably by the SLE, and more strongly familiarised with the technical content of the research. As for the research materials, it is recommended that documents, literature, and other materials should be made available in English. Where a translation to German is not practical, tasks can be shared between the SLE postgraduates and guest researchers based on language proficiency with the available materials.

4. Efficient communication: Especially in teams considered as large and diverse, it is imperative to have seamless, regular, and efficient communication in the whole team, as well as between and within sub-teams. A way to do this could be to establish and maintain weekly feedback sessions between the sub-teams in different regions during field research, as well as regular reflection sessions within those sub-teams.

5. Timely preparation: For field research in the Global North, especially in tourist seasons and destinations, it is recommended that organisational preparation for tandem research begins very early, particularly the arrival of the guest researchers and the field research stay. Specifically, these entail visa assistance for the guest researchers, and securing accommodation in the case study regions. Delaying these processes could lead to significant complications in team processes and in the conduct of field research.

## Conclusion

There exists considerable scope for enhancement of tandem research at the SLE, especially for Overseas Project conducted in the Global North. This has been apparently acknowledged by the SLE, which has indicated that it will rename Overseas Projects as Joint International Projects in the future to reflect the tandem equality that shall be enacted, among other recommendations. The implementation of these recommendations will require considerable

resources – both financial and otherwise – that are being sourced for. However, they have the potential to maximise the benefits that international research collaborations offer for the participants and the technical research outcomes. Put simply, the Joint International Projects promise a real global learning and equal collaboration experience for the participants, and a truly global research agenda with rigorous scientific outcomes.

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