

## Higher Education Partnerships between the Global North and Global South: Mutuality, Rather than Aid

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### ABSTRACT

Higher education partnerships between the Global North and the Global South are recognized as means of developing research and education capacity, especially in the institutions of the Global South. Due to the realities of individual agreements, however, not all partnerships work effectively. This article examines a Norwegian and Ethiopian university partnership named “The South Ethiopia Network of Universities in Public Health (SENUPH)” as a case study to identify key elements in the development of effective, mutually beneficial partnerships from policy and institutional perspectives. The first part of this article outlines the different concepts of aid-focused partnerships and mutuality-focused partnerships. The second part reviews the evolution of the Norwegian Funding Programmes for Higher Education Partnerships. The third part describes the mission and key characteristics of SENUPH. The final part analyzes the policy implications for the development of functional, mutuality-focused higher education partnerships, as learned from the SENUPH case study. The Norwegian case provides three implications for how to make such mutual partnerships functional: 1) the importance of fostering the authorship of the partnership among key actors; 2) the significance of multiple phases and periodic evaluation to assess the progress of the partnerships; and 3) the promotion of knowledge and skill development among recipients so they can promote growth and cause a spillover effect that has a positive regional impact.

*Keywords:* case study, higher education partnership, mutuality, policy development

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Concept of Higher Education Partnerships

In today's knowledge-based society, knowledge creation has become an important aspect of national governments' strategies for enhancing international competitiveness. National governments not only compete to create knowledge, they also cooperate, and one form that this cooperation takes is a higher education partnership in research and education (Hanada & Horie, 2021). Higher education partnerships around the world can be classified into two main types. The first is the aid-based partnership. This type of partnership often involves institutions of higher education in Global North countries supporting institutions

of higher education in Global South countries, and the basic framework emphasizes the relationship between the supporter and the recipient. Additionally, this kind of support can be provided as a part of overseas development aid. The second type of partnership is the mutuality-based partnership, where parties are expected to cooperate as equal partners rather than in a supporter-recipient relationship. This type of partnership can exist between countries that have similar - or different - degrees of economic and educational development.

The concept of the partnership is not limited to higher education; it can be found in many sectors. One major international example is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Consisting of 17 goals and 169 targets, the SDGs are a “call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.” (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Of these, SDG 17, entitled “Partnerships for the Goals,” aims to “enhance North-South and South-South cooperation by supporting national plans to achieve all the targets.” In terms of education, SDG 4 aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” and proposals have been issued to improve various all levels of education, from pre-school education to higher education. In addition, SDG 5 declares that “ending all discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, it’s crucial for a sustainable future.” Naturally, gender equality is an important issue for educational institutions, so a wide range of initiatives - from educational systems to support for school attendance - are required for greater equity. Here, partnerships are expected to play a role in achieving those goals where countries commit to make improvements on their own.

However, not every partnership functions effectively. For example, even if the partnership is based on the idea of the mutual benefits between the supporter and the recipient, in reality, the burden on one party or the other may be heavier, making the partnership difficult to sustain. Alternatively, even if departments that are party to the partnership agreement cooperate with each other, the partnership may be reduced to a mere facade if university-level cooperation cannot be secured. Furthermore, the partnership may not function as expected if cultural differences between the respective parties are overlooked (Lanford, 2020). In short, the success or failure of a partnership depends significantly on government-led policy development and university-led program development. Therefore, an examination of policy development and program development to ensure sustainable partnerships can be considered an essential research topic.

With these issues in mind, this paper focuses on the South Ethiopia Network of Universities in Public Health (SENUPH), a higher education partnership between the University of Bergen in Norway and four universities in Ethiopia - namely, Hawassa University, Dilla University, Wolaita Sodo University, and Arba Minch University. This paper takes up the case of SENUPH for the following two reasons. First, SENUPH aims to promote the independence of education and research activities at institutions of higher education in Southern Ethiopia, and mutuality is secured among the parties involved. Second, the benefits of the partnership are not shared among the parties; rather, the aim is to ensure sustainable contributions beyond the end of the partnership because the program is designed to share research outcomes with the region of Southern Ethiopia.

This study is based on the findings obtained from an on-site investigation conducted by the author at the University of Bergen in 2018, interviews conducted with faculty and program coordinators involved in SENUPH as part of an online follow-up interview conducted in 2020 and a review of the relevant literature. First, the author contacted a SENUPH program officer in June 2018. The program coordinator introduced the author to a professor responsible for managing SENUPH at the Centre for International

Health in the School of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Bergen. The author visited the University of Bergen in August 2018 and interviewed the professor and program coordinator about the mission, objectives, and goals with partner universities in the establishment of the SENUPH project schemes. Although the author planned to visit the University of Bergen in 2020 for a follow-up interview, the plan was canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Alternatively, the author continued online communication with the program coordinator in 2019 as a follow-up investigation. Before and after the interview, the author read a series of policy papers, program descriptions, and related papers to deepen their understanding of the SENUPH project.

From a university program development perspective, Hanada (2019) focused on the following three elements required for overcoming differences in academic culture to ensure the proper functioning of SENUPH: 1) educational philosophy, 2) the relationship between students and faculty, and 3) the researcher training systems. By contrast, from the perspective of developing policies to support partnerships, this study focuses on the policies enacted by the Norwegian government. Specifically, the author explores the policy development process for ensuring effective partnerships by conducting a multi-layered analysis of both the content of policies enacted by the Norwegian government and the situation surrounding the recipients of assistance under SENUPH.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Norwegian Funding Programmes for Higher Education Partnership**

SENUPH is backed by the Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development (NORHED), which was launched by the Norwegian government in 2013 (Norad, 2020). Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the Norwegian government has implemented development support programs for Global South countries through the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), which is under the direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Looking at the content of the support programs for higher education that have been implemented over the last 30 years, there is an evident shift from aid-based to partnership-based programs.

The first example of this is the Norwegian Programme for Development, Research and Education (NUFU) that was implemented from 1991 to 2011. NUFU, which was jointly administered by Norad and SIU (SIU has been reorganized as the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education), was a subsidy program that supported the promotion of joint research between Norwegian universities and universities in the Global South, as well as educational and research activities in graduate programs, university management, and the training of technical staff at universities in the Global South (SIU, 2015a). More specifically, the program operated under the following six goals:

contribute to the development of institutions in the South; produce knowledge in areas deemed relevant to goals and objectives at institutional and national level; educate new researchers; develop Master's and Ph.D. programs in the South; promote gender equity in research and academic cooperation; to establish sustainable environments for research and research-based teaching; and to contribute to the enhancement of quality and relevance in research (SIU, 2015a, p. 14).

NUFU began in 1991, and programs were implemented for periods of approximately five years across four stages: 1991-1995, 1996-2000, 2002-2006, and 2007-2012. In the last subsidy period from 2007 to 2012, approximately 400 million Norwegian Krone (NOK) was allocated to 69 projects in 19 countries in Asia and Africa. Together, these projects produced 194 Ph.D. students (46% of whom were female), 294

master's students (37% of whom were female), and 2,030 scientific publications, including 790 peer-reviewed articles. Furthermore, 63 new programs were established in partner universities where 336 staff training sessions were held (SIU, 2013, p. 5).

The next example is Norad's Programme for Master Studies (NOMA). NOMA, which focused on capacity building for master's programs in Global South countries, was implemented from 2006 to 2014. The indicators of success are the number of master's programs established at institutions in the Global South, including master's programs of direct relevance for the work force; the number of candidates educated through the NOMA master's programs; and the number of candidates educated through NOMA and employed by institutions in the South (SIU, 2015a, p.13). In terms of major outcomes, 2,031 NOMA-sponsored students (41.5% were female) have been enrolled during the whole program period, and 81% of them were awarded their master's degrees by higher education institutions in the Global South. Also, 91.8% of NOMA master's graduates who responded to the NOMA/NUFU Tracer study report as being in employment, and the majority of them remain in their country or region of origin. Furthermore, at program level, 44 master's programs and courses were established at 28 institutions in 18 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (SIU, 2015b).

SENUPH, which the author researched for this paper, has been funded by the NORHED since 2013. NORHED funded research and educational collaborations between institutions of higher education in the Global South and institutions of higher education in Norway. Between 2013 and 2020, a total of NOK 756 million was allocated to 50 projects involving 13 Norwegian universities and 60 universities in 26 countries (Jávorka, Allinson, Varnai, & Wain, 2018). SENUPH is one of these projects, and it has received NOK 15.5 million (Norad, 2015a). The three main features of NORHED are as follows. First, there are six areas eligible for support: 1) Education and Training; 2) Health, 3) Natural Resource Management, Climate Change and Environment; 4) Democratic and Economic Governance; 5) Humanities, Culture, Media and Communication; 6) Capacity Development in South Sudan. Each project receives subsidies for partnerships with institutions of higher education related to one of these areas. Second, initiatives aimed at improving the gender disparity are mandatory for all six areas. Third, rather than temporary cooperation during the grant period, partners are encouraged to cooperate with a view to the medium-term effects through 2030 and the long-term effects through 2050, and program continuity is emphasized. While programs are developed with an eye on the long term, policy development and program operations are regularly assessed, and evaluation reports have been published in 2014, 2015 and 2018 (Norad, 2015b, 2016, 2018). In 2020, the second phase of NORHED, or NORHED II, was announced for 2021-2026, and SENUPH is expected to continue receiving funding under Phase II to the tune of NOK 19.7 million (Norad, 2020).

Finally, another important aid program administered by the Norwegian government is the Norwegian Partnership Programme for Global Academic Cooperation (NORPART). Launched in 2016, NORPART provides subsidies to support academic cooperation in pedagogy and publication mutual student mobility between universities in Norway and the Global South. (Nordhagen, Jones, Wold, Tostensen & Dahle, 2020). One core feature of this program is that, instead of one-way mobility where students from the Global South come to Norwegian universities to earn their degrees, students at both universities spend time at the other institution, and degrees are granted by the home university (SIU, 2017). Most conventional student mobility between the Global South and the Global North is one-way, but many of the students studying abroad from Global South countries remain in the destination country or another Global North country even after studying abroad. Hence, the program is designed to prevent brain drain

from the Global South, whereby talented individuals with valuable higher education credentials emigrate from their home countries to the Global North. In the first phase of the program from 2017 to 2021, 21 projects were adopted, and they are expected to receive subsidies totaling NOK 97 million (SIU, 2017).

### **Mission of the SENUPH**

The collected data through field survey and literature review reveal how significant this partnership has been for developing the capacity of higher education in Africa. For example, the African Development Bank Group (2008) points out that the proportion of science and technology engineers in Africa is 35 per million, which is extremely small compared to 4,103 per million in the United States, 2,457 per million in the European Union, and 168 per million in Brazil. Furthermore, the number of papers authored by researchers in Africa's 54 countries between 1999 and 2008 was only about 27,600, which is almost the same as the Netherlands alone. The situation has not improved much since then. Citing a policy paper published by UNESCO, for example, Norad (2020) points out that the researcher population per million people is about 3,500 in OECD countries, compared to just 66 in the least developed countries. Similarly, it was reported that while OECD countries accounted for more than 70% of the world's scientific publications, the least developed countries only accounted for 0.6%, with Sub-Saharan Africa accounting for no more than 1.4%. Since the beginning of this century, the World Bank Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) has pointed out that strengthening higher education will be a crucial factor for the economic development of Global South countries in the 21st century, and the African Union (2006) specifically cites the quality of research and education as an area that requires improvement. As the above data shows, an effective strategy might tackle the challenge through the promotion of partnerships with countries where research and education infrastructure is well developed. Under these contexts, partnerships with universities in the Global North are being sought out as a means to help overcome this issue.

The issues facing Southern Ethiopia and the mission of SENUPH are outlined as follows. According to projections published by the United Nations, the current world population of about 7.6 billion is expected to increase to about 9.8 billion in 2050 and to about 11.2 billion in 2100 (United Nations, 2017b). In addition, approximately 50% of the world's population growth from 2017 to 2050 is projected to come from nine countries: Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, Uganda, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and the United States. Meanwhile, Ethiopia is already experiencing rapid population growth, with a massive uptick from 66.5 million in 2000 to 99.87 million in 2015 (United Nations, 2017a). With such rapid population growth expected going forward, the improvement of public health, with an eye on improving the quality of life, has become an urgent issue in Ethiopia (CMHS, 2015).

The population of Southern Ethiopia is about 16 million and includes nearly 50 ethnic groups (CMHS, 2015). In the region, preterm birth, neonatal death, and pediatric malnutrition are serious problems even though the overall fertility rate is high (CMHS, 2015). To remedy this situation, one of the main efforts of SENUPH is to deploy highly skilled specialists who are working to improve public health. Although the societal demand for training specialists in Ethiopian institutions of higher education is increasing, myriad issues act as obstacles, such as the need to improve the education and research infrastructure and the need to produce educators and researchers who can oversee human development. This makes it difficult for the region to develop professional specialists on its own (CMHS, 2015).

In response to this, the University of Bergen and Hawassa University established a joint Ph.D. program under the SENUPH framework at the latter institution. Efforts were undertaken to improve the quality of master's programs in public health at all four universities involved in the partnership with an eye

on developing highly-skilled public health professionals who can undertake the improvement of local public health. The four main goals of the partnership are to increase the number of female students in master's and doctoral programs, promote domestic cooperation in education and research by forming an inter-university network in Southern Ethiopia, and share research outcomes with public institutions. To achieve these four goals by the end of the grant period in 2018, SENUPH was effectively designed by each of the five university members of SENUPH. First, a new doctoral program will be established at Hawassa University, which already has a master's program in public health, as a nexus for education and research; the University of Bergen will, in turn, engage in direct cooperation to improve the education and research capabilities of Hawassa University. Next, master's programs in reproductive health, human nutrition, and medical entomology and vector control will be established respectively at Dilla University, Wolaita Sodo University, and Arba Minch University. By developing a system that allows students who have completed one of these master's programs to proceed to the doctoral program at Hawassa University, the project will form a network to independently develop highly-skilled human resources in the field of public health for Southern Ethiopia. To select the specialized fields for the master's programs at these three universities, the program directors identified the three aforementioned master's programs in the field of public health with the aim of providing education and research tailored to the local situation. In addition, the research achievements of SENUPH will be shared with the regional health bureaus in Southern Ethiopia with an eye on possible applications on the front lines of public health.

## DISCUSSION

### **Key Characteristics of the SENUPH**

Based on the findings of field survey and Hanada (2019), this paper examines the characteristics of SENUPH based on the six indicators proposed by NORHED (partnership model, holistic approach, education and research, employability, digitalization, and inclusion and gender equality).

Looking at the *partnership model*, *holistic approach*, and *gender equality*, NORHED strongly recommends the development of North-South-South partnership models. As for the holistic approach, rather than focusing on just one indicator, programs are expected to pursue improvements based on the fact that different components are interrelated and interdependent. SENUPH is a model designed to contribute to the development of education and research in Southern Ethiopia by sharing the benefits of the partnership not only among the universities involved, but also with education and research activities throughout the region. Specifically, Hawassa University, which is receiving assistance from the University of Bergen through the joint Ph.D. program, is collaborating with the three other universities to share research outcomes with the local community and work towards gender equality (As of August 2018, 11 male students and nine female students are enrolled in the joint doctoral program). In addition, a holistic approach has been adopted to realize a framework for the universities in Southern Ethiopia to independently undertake the development of highly-skilled professionals to improve regional public health. In this sense, this partnership can be considered an example of the North-South-South model whereby Hawassa University, with its joint Ph.D. program with the University of Bergen, acts as a central hub for the region and collaborates with the other three Ethiopian universities. Therefore, the University of Bergen is in a position to support the future independence of education and research at Hawassa University, and it has explicitly stated that the authorship of the joint Ph.D. program lies solely with Hawassa University.

*Education and research* is expected to be updated by effectively utilizing the partners universities' existing education and research capital instead of creating everything from scratch. In this respect, as well,

no new project-based faculty is hired especially for the joint Ph.D. program, and six Hawassa University faculty members and four University of Bergen faculty members are also handling some coursework. These four University of Bergen faculty members are also teaching classes at Hawassa University. In this way, the essence of both universities has been incorporated into the subjects, doctoral dissertation guidance, and researcher training, and existing capital is being effectively utilized. In addition, Hawassa University students are required to study at the University of Bergen as part of their coursework and doctoral dissertation preparation, but the period of study at the University of Bergen is limited to a maximum of three months to prevent brain drain. The internet is fully utilized for all other classes and research activities, so, in this way, *digitalization* is being promoted.

The third point is the development of a researcher development system to ensure *employability*. In the College of Medicine and Health Sciences at Hawassa University, the focus is on students conducting research under the supervision of the faculty in the graduate school. Meanwhile, the Center for International Health in the School of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Bergen expects its students to pursue independent research while receiving supervision from the faculty in the graduate school. From these differences, it can be inferred that there are not many opportunities for enrolled students to carry out independent research at Hawassa University, compared to the University of Bergen. Therefore, some graduates end up becoming university faculty or assuming other professional positions without having had sufficient opportunities for practical training in research, including conducting surveys and presenting findings. On the other hand, between three and five percent of graduates of doctoral programs in medical fields at the University of Bergen secure full-time teaching and/or research jobs, and most of the graduates who want to become researchers are expected to further hone their skills as postdoctoral fellows. Hence, there are major differences in the policies employed by these two universities for the training of young researchers.

One point that was raised in the interviews conducted for this paper is that, in general, researchers looking for solutions to regional issues in the field of public health must gain more experience in teaching and research after completing their doctoral programs, so the establishment of a system for training young researchers is an urgent issue. However, another point that should be explored is whether the introduction of a Norwegian post-doctoral system could end up being a major disadvantage for Ethiopian students in terms of employment after completing their doctoral programs. With this in mind, subjects have been established that aim to incorporate a young researcher training framework into the joint Ph.D. program and provide students with practical research experience, while also respecting the young researcher training policies of both universities. Considering the issue of employability in Ethiopia, a Norwegian-style researcher training system has been adopted that strikes a balance between both universities' systems for the development of young researchers.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The following three points can be raised as implications for making partnerships functional, in terms of both Norway's policy development and SENUPH's program development. First, during policy development, it is important to guide policies that foster the authorship of partnership among key actors (i.e., universities). In terms of Norwegian policy development, the earlier programs (NUFU and NOMA) were practically aid-based programs for universities in the Global South, but the more recent programs (NORHED and NORPART) appear to be mutuality-based partnerships. With SENUPH, the University of Bergen is in a position to support the future independence of education and research at Hawassa University,

and it has explicitly stated that the authorship of the joint Ph.D. program lies solely with Hawassa University. As discussed previously, it is extremely important to cultivate authorship on both sides of a partnership without creating a dependency between a supporter and a recipient. To achieve this shared authorship, first and foremost, there must be a clear benefit for both universities, so it is necessary to create a mechanism enables the sharing of those benefits with the local community rather than just with the parties involved. This must be included in the program requirements to enhance the social significance of the partnership. For example, a partnership can contribute to the international community by striving to achieve some of the SDGs. Recognizing that contributions are being made both domestically and internationally is beneficial to the universities that are parties to the partnership. A policy framework that encourages this cycle is desirable.

Second, subsidized programs must have multiple phases and a mid-term evaluation. In the case of NORHED, which funds SENUUPH, the subsidized program encompasses multiple phases. In particular, NORHED requires a project design to outline the medium-term effects through 2030 and the long-term effects through 2050. Concurrently, it has introduced an evaluation system that regularly evaluates policy development and program operations. Depending on the type of partnership, funding for a single project may conclude with a single phase. Since project outcomes must be shared widely at home in a short period of time as part of social accountability, evaluations tend to emphasize numerical targets whose results are easy to see; qualitative aspects, however, may be more difficult to assess. In addition, the university may be overwhelmed by the need to set numerical goals, so qualitative improvements might be neglected. When running a project, issues can arise that make it impossible to implement a partnership as it was initially envisioned. While the program is in session, new situations like these can be addressed through trial and error and deliberation, so it is preferable to balance the qualitative and quantitative evaluations of the solutions and establish a mechanism that enables flexible policy operation so that adopted projects can be replaced if piecemeal efforts do not generate results.

Third, the primary target of the subsidized program should be “soft” elements like human development, educational program development, and joint research, as opposed to “hard” elements like infrastructure development. Although NORHED includes support for small-scale infrastructure development, it is clear from the four programs implemented after NUFU that Norwegian subsidy programs have basically focused on “soft” support. On the other hand, some other countries focus on “hard” support by operating subsidy programs targeting the establishment of universities in the Global South or the construction of libraries or other school buildings; this focus on “hard” support tends to solidify the positions of the supporter and the recipient. Additionally, the Norwegian government pays close attention to the prevention of corruption, so, from this perspective, one could say it is rational to focus on “soft” support that leaves behind few physical objects.

In conclusion, after showing that there are two types of higher education partnerships, (aid-based and mutuality-based), the author of this paper examined the case of SENUUPH at the policy level to highlight how mutuality-based partnerships effectively create benefits for both parties. Mutuality-based partnerships emphasize the mutual benefits of the supporter and the recipient, and the specific structure and contents of the partnership tend to be designed by the universities of the two sides. On the other hand, in the aid-based partnerships, the basic schemes, such as areas to be supported, are sometimes designed in advance by the government or governmental agencies. Therefore, the degree of freedom tends to be relatively higher in the mutuality-based partnerships. The Norwegian case provides three implications on how to make such mutual



partnerships functional: 1) the importance of fostering the authorship of the partnership among key actors; 2) the significance of multiple phases and periodic evaluation to assess the progress of the partnerships; and 3) the promotion of knowledge and skill development among recipients so they can promote growth and cause a spillover effect from partnerships in the local region. While identifying the six supporting areas as policy intentions, it would be an example of good practice to secure the authorship of the universities to implement effective mutuality-based partnership.

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