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CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

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If we want to shape a sustainable future together with relevant stakeholders from politics and civil society, we must first identify and address common problem areas in development. For a long time, this task was left mainly to international donors, in accordance with the policies of the Bretton Woods institutions, the IMF and the World Bank. Their policies implied and prescribed structural adjustments by and in the partner countries of the Global South, often through bilateral cooperation agreements between industrialized countries and so-called developing countries, created under conditions of entangled dependencies.

Today we are talking about the countries of the New South. These countries have intensified and possibly adapted their efforts towards more sustainability. At the same time, they are developing their own, more locally adapted strategies and alternative development models or even alternatives to the perceived Eurocentric development model, often based and focused on economic growth and technological solutions.

ZEF'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Since its foundation, ZEF has been working on development and sustainability issues together with cooperation partners in Africa, Latin America and Asia. This has resulted in a global network at both the project and the doctoral level that is unparalleled at the University of Bonn and internationally. ZEF's international doctoral program (BIGS-DR), established in 1999, is the flagship program of the Institute. With its alumni network, it has created a thriving platform for intensive academic exchange. At the same time, BIGS-DR's ever-expanding course and module development has accompanied the set-up of interdisciplinary graduate schools at ZEF's partner universities worldwide:

The **Ghanaian German Center for Development Studies** (GGCDS) was initiated and run by ZEF in collaboration with the Institute of Statistical Social and Economic Research (ISSER) at the University of Ghana from 2008 to 2018. The international and interdisciplinary PhD program trained dedicated and innovative future leaders from Ghana and other African countries who are committed to the development of their countries. All

48 graduates/alumni of the GGCDS have found employment according to their qualifications, mostly in public universities, but also in the private sector.

In 2017, the **West African Center for Sustainable Rural Transformation** (WAC-SRT) was established as a follow-up program to the DAAD Centers of Excellence in Africa. To date, 54 Masters students and three PhD students have been enrolled. Bringing together partners from Niger and Ghana, the Center promotes synergies to generate knowledge on renewable energy sources and agricultural water management, and to develop applicable technological solutions, locally adapted business models and management approaches. WAC-SRT bridges not only the rural-urban, but also the Anglophone-Francophone divide, thereby contributing to sustainable rural transformation in West Africa in an interdisciplinary and transnational manner.

Since 2017, the bilateral **German-Colombian Doctoral Studies Support Program** (DSSP) on Environmental Peace and Development has been successfully implemented by ZEF and the Institute of Environmental Studies (IDEA) at the National University of Colombia (UNAL). The collaboration was established within the DAAD - SDG Graduate Schools Program and focuses on the nexus of peace, environmental conflict, sustainability, and territorial development. Masters and PhD students from Colombia acquire interdisciplinary research skills and knowledge and learn to adopt critical perspectives on environment, development, inequalities and intersectionality (gender, rural-urban disparities, ethnicities). The program fosters multiple understandings of integrative approaches (e.g., concepts, methods, tools, subjects/objects, etc.) as well as disciplinary knowledge. This enables students to tackle complex research questions. DSSP has supported 18 PhD students and 12 postdoctoral fellows in the first research phase (2018-2020), and 10 PhD students, 20 MSc students, and 13 postdoctoral fellows in the second phase (2021-2025).

The **Capacities on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services** (CABES) project was launched in 2022. It consists of a consortium of seven universities and research institutions in 38 partner countries in Africa and Europe. The main objective is to build a network of platforms for implementing policy decisions for improved management



and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services for local people. The project brings together government officials, researchers, and practitioners, and incorporates indigenous and local knowledge.

The African Climate Center - Future African Savannas (AFAS) is one of eight DAAD-funded Global Centers for Climate and Environment. The project aims to develop evidence-based strategies to conserve and sustainably manage the fragile environments of the West and East African savannas against combined threats. The science-policy-practice interface will be used to co-produce capacity development and research outputs.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

These different qualification and training programs for young researchers have enabled ZEF to (1) expand its teaching concepts and (2) equip researchers with innovative and inclusive research concepts and methodologies from the South. The engagement with civil society actors and multiple (including local) stakeholders has inspired us to think about decolonizing our research methodologies and forms of knowledge production, responding to issues of epistemological violence which were raised in international cooperation. We have also identified pressing research areas and needs that are common to many research regions such as rural and urban transformations, restoration of landscapes affected by mining and extractive activities, and the application of feminist perspectives in development research.

We have been able to strengthen the internationalization of both the University of Bonn and our partner universities. In our South-South-North collaborations,

we communicated in English, Spanish, and French, thus breaking down the partially closed linguistic communities and overcoming academic language barriers. Based on these experiences, we have developed a research agenda that is regularly revised and serves as the basis for future project initiatives. We are careful to include diverse voices in the project planning process, in our research, and in our recommendations - to ensure that the voices of those who will be most affected by any policy intervention are heard.

SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

A real success story, in our view, is that our partner institutions in the South have embarked on their own forms of cooperation. For example, the National University of Colombia (UNAL) and the University of Development Studies (UDS) in Ghana have signed a Memorandum of Understanding, as have several other institutions. In addition, we have organized network meetings, conferences, and traveling summer schools that bring together partner universities from different countries and continents to share experiences and insights. For example, in June 2024, ZEF, IDEA, and UNAL in La Paz (Colombia) organized a traveling school, which was also attended by our Ghanaian partners and students. South-South cooperation is all the more important as countries in the Global South face similar challenges in addressing development issues and implementing appropriate strategies. There seems to be a new impetus for South-South and cross-continental academic cooperation between Latin American, African and Asian countries and higher education institutions: When Colombia's Vice President Francia Marquez visited several African countries (including Ghana) in 2023 to strengthen bilateral relations in areas such as climate change, economics, science, technology, and agricultural development, the Colombian Vice Minister of Higher Education was a member of her delegation.

CHALLENGES

Most of our partner countries are former colonial territories whose histories are partly based on their colonial legacy. As scientists in international cooperation, it is

our responsibility to break through this coloniality of North-South relations and to take the concerns of our cooperation partners seriously. Even the effort to bring South-South partners together for exchange shows that the world is still Eurocentric: Crossing the Atlantic may not be a big deal for Europeans and Americans, but traveling back and forth between West Africa and Latin America poses enormous challenges. Partners face strict visa and travel restrictions, and the journey to their destination can take days. In addition, disparities are often accompanied by a dominance of Western knowledge production. This often puts our Southern partners at a disadvantage in accessing academic resources, getting their articles published in international scientific journals, and facilitating and funding international exchanges. We also found that the intensive exchange in long-term partnerships requires high-transaction costs: Agreeing on a common language is time consuming and therefore often does not fit with academic practice and careers.

PROSPECTS

At a conference organized by DSSP in June 2023, South-South-North partners identified short and medium-term trajectories for collaboration on topics of common interest. These trajectories are intertwined, as constant and continued „low-key“ collaboration often paves the way for larger projects and enhances the credibility of collaborative efforts for potential funding agencies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- We must include diverse voices, conceptualizations, and methodologies from the South in the planning process of our research projects, as well as in our research activities and recommendations (positionality of partners).
- Cooperation in international higher education should create equal conditions for the exchange of knowledge with South-South partners.
- The internationalization of universities can only take place on equal terms if partners from the South are better positioned in academic competition: By better access to research facilities and more opportunities to publish their work in international journals.
- Exchange of low-income countries in bilateral alliances and through multilateral institutions should be strengthened financially (see position paper by UNESCO Commission Germany 2024: <https://bit.ly/unescozefpolbr>) and not be subordinated to geostrategic interests, such as resource extraction or market expansion.
- Promotion of comparative research approaches, that record and consider common experiences with and effects of the consequences of global inequalities, must be strengthened.

IMPRINT

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Over the past 25 years, ZEF researchers have aimed to find science-based solutions to promote sustainable development and planetary health. ZEF's research divisions and groups have conducted inter- and transdisciplinary research in, for, and with emerging economies and on global issues with its collaborating research partners around the world. In this special "ZEF 25 Years" Policy Brief series we focus on some of our core research themes.

