

MSU Policy on Best Practices for Equitable Partnerships in International Collaboration

MSU-ISP Guideline

Preamble

This document provides the official statement, adopted for all international collaborative activities for Michigan State University, MSU, to both guide and hold her actions accountable. The MSU Office of Global Innovations in Development, Engagement and Scholarship (Global IDEAS) has partnered with the Alliance for Africa Partnership, African Studies Center, the Tanzania Partnership Project, and the Asian Hub, to jointly lead the development of this framework on *equitable partnership* in global development, research, and outreach.

Target audience: This resource document is meant to guide MSU faculty, academic, research, extension staff, and students who engage with international development and research partners in a variety of ways. Specifically, it provides the needed guidance in the process of coordinating development, teaching, and research activities connecting relevant government departments, regulatory agencies, national and international government, and non-governmental organizations as they relate with collaborative partners. Some important questions to be mindful of include: What is the value of international collaboration? How do you cultivate and maintain noble collaborative principles and values (e.g., trust, accountability, responsibility, humility, courage, objectivity)? How have previous collaborations fared – any mistakes and lessons to be learned? How best can we re-evaluate and or restructure the power imbalance within and between organizational, governmental, national, and regional contexts? In what ways do donor demands conflict with efforts to integrate equity into international collaboration? How sensitive are research administrators and financial officers to the realities on the ground with partners?

Overview

As a global leader in international research, education, and capacity-strengthening programs, MSU is committed to promoting collaborations and advancing solutions to global challenges with epistemic justice at its core.

Michigan State University aims to identify and address the challenges and barriers to equitable partnerships related to international research and development programs by promoting collaborative and inclusive work that elevates underrepresented voices and groups, while committed to the highest ethical and academic standards, transparent decision making and accountable governance. As a community, MSU commits to live these values which have formed part of her legacy of international excellence. MSU has a long history of international partnerships going back 60 years to the groundbreaking relationship between her and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, UNN. MSU has long participated in international research collaborations and is committed to opportunities that facilitate research that is conducted equitably, in true partnership with collaborators and for the benefit of all stakeholders. The lasting impact of partnership is also evident across MSU. For instance, the experience and expertise that MSU faculty have gained over the decades became the foundation for MSU's world renowned African Studies Center, ASC, and later, the Alliance for Africa Partnership, AAP.

MSU recognizes that equity is achieved through collaboration based on partnership and shared leadership. In addition to promoting collaborative relationships, MSU recognizes that equitable and inclusive research processes, strengthened research capacity, and a focus on international priorities will advance the discovery and development of effective, appropriate, and sustainable interventions. In essence, MSU strives to desist from perpetuating “helicopter research or parachute development projects” which are hallmarks of colonization practices and power imbalance. Overbearing power, inconsiderateness or ignorance, all lead to unequal partnerships with objectives that may be irrelevant to collaborators who are forced to accept already formulated ideologies and cultural values alien to them. Voices from other countries need to be heard throughout the entire process, from the planning stages to implementation, all the way to the dissemination of the project results. As an example, the AAP was the product of a co-creation of thoughts between MSU and select African leaders.ⁱ

An equitable partnership is:

- A mutually beneficial relationship with a shared vision for producing transformative change at local and/or global levels.
- Based on virtues such as trust, mutual respect, transparency, empathy, humility to acknowledge mistakes, courage in the face of challenges, and honesty, respect and responsibility for and between partners.
- Envisioned from the beginning to be sustainable beyond an initial interactive cycle, with a view toward long-term collaboration, mutual benefit, and mutual capacity strengthening.
- Founded on clarity of purpose such as the resolve to serve the interest of society.
- Based on the engagement of partners from the onset, in which objectives, activities, resource mobilization, and resource allocation plans are developed jointly.
- Built on a foundation of solid partnership principles and values which recognize power relations and mismatches within institutions, between institutions, in relation individuals in terms of career pressures, goals and the work environment, and work culture differences between the North and the South.
- One that has accountability and maintains a structured work plan and metrics, and personnel and resources that are appropriate, globally focused, and culturally sensitive.
- A voice and agent for all that links academia, society, and industry in pursuit of a fair and just society.
- One in which all partners can bring to the table any concerns without fear of retaliation or being discounted.

MSU encourages the following set of values, best practices, and principles for building sustainable and equitable partnerships:

1. *Inclusiveness*. Creation of diverse, interdisciplinary teams that aim for a quality mix of individual and institutional profiles – be they universities, non-governmental organizations,

national or transnational councils. This includes talent, and expertise to enhance innovation, and mutual learning and knowledge exchange. Michigan State University encourages meaningful efforts that bring together people from different disciplinary, geographical, and cultural backgrounds. The best collaborations are those that establish long-term relationships with people that extend beyond the life of a single project and implement policies, structures and processes that support and promote diversity and inclusivity. All knowledge systems are complementary; hence, research agendas and projects should lead to win-win outcomes.

- How to operationalize this:
 - Review proposal partners (institutions) - Is there a balance of geographical location and of size? Must the “same players” always chosen as partners or are there opportunities to increase the diversity of organizations that we work with?
 - Review team composition – Is our team diverse with regard to gender, equality, and social inclusion (GESI)? How do we ensure that our partners also promote the same diversity in their team?

2. *Clarity and openness.* Clear, transparent exchange of ideas, and explicit definition of all terms and agreements in collaborative projects with team members. This includes making calls for proposals accessible and supporting new partnership development; providing funder requirement details (e.g., budget criteria); working with partners to assign roles; and providing monitoring and post-award support of partnerships as needed. To develop meaningful collaborations, partners on all sides need to mutually and actively engage with each other.

- How to operationalize this:
 - Share drafts early and often.
 - Develop forums of communication that work for all partners – this may mean using WhatsApp, email, or Google Drive over MS Teams
 - Include fiscal officers in project planning meetings so that all budgets can be developed with the same understanding of partner scope.

- *Build on existing knowledge or infrastructure.* Identifying and showing openness to other cultures earlier on often results in more efficient science, time, and resource management, and facilitates the efficacy of communication and bridging groups of people from differing cultural backgrounds.

- How to operationalize this:
 - Think about a process that potentially Global IDEAS or other partners can do to have on hand a paragraph and keywords that describe partners existing knowledge, expertise, and interests so that if an opportunity arises with a short timeline, it is still possible to include all partner input.
 - Could we organize a Community of Practice event around a potential funding opportunity and invite all interested parties to brainstorm and as an output each organization would complete a template (this could be done in Google Forms to develop a partner database like the MSU database of faculty/staff) - these events could be done as partnerships with some of the other Centers on campus that have regional focus.

- Is there a way to “flip the script” and have partners from the Global South bring their ideas to MSU?
- *Collaborations should be mutually beneficial.* Guidelines should be co-developed and adjusted as needed to facilitate ethical practices. To ensure equity in benefit-sharing, joint outcomes should be fairly shared based on needs. For example, local collaborators in academia should receive co-authorship like their Global North partners, while those who prioritize other benefits should receive meaningful benefits for themselves or their communities.
 - How to operationalize this:
 - Taking a holistic approach by designing policies and procedures that incentivize equity in partnerships rather than maintaining or reproducing inequity. Inclusion builds equity, so all stakeholders must be included in decision-making processes, including research agendas, budget allocations, leadership roles, outputs, and impact measurements.
- *Enhancing each other’s capacity development.* All parties to a collaboration should recognize the need to acquire, improve and retain the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary for productive collaborations. Both funders and collaborating institutions must take steps to enable the development of research-support systems, for instance, installing computing infrastructure, mentorship programs, open-access publishing, and the training and salaries of project and financial managers. All stakeholders shall be encouraged to recognize the value of funding research, both to address locally relevant priorities and to reduce the burden on other partners.
 - How to operationalize this:
 - Strong partnerships build self-reliance. All must realize and push for more support and control of development and scientific research by requiring governments, foundations, etc., to leverage and encourage co-funding of nationally identified high-priority areas. Examples include AAP’s current engagement with the Elumelu Foundation in Nigeria, and the Science Granting Councils Initiative which aims to strengthen the management of research grant funding in 17 countries throughout Africa.
- *Listen, respond to partners’ concerns and needs.* A simple change in mindset could be all that matters – the Darwinian sense of superiority is replaced with a sense of camaraderie – a re-orientation that shows that colonial-style development or research practices are plain wrong. Assess the level of consultation and engagement during the different stages of collaborative partnerships and provide institutional support to achieve the goals of global collaborative partnerships. Associated with this is being professional, ethical, and fair-minded about publications and authorship. Establishing clearly defined authorship guidelines for a manuscript is key.
 - How to operationalize this:
 - In the case of scientific research, partners should return the results of scholarly activities to the communities and the country in which research was conducted, including preliminary reports, papers, dissertations, and all forms of publication. The communities studied or engaged in the research

should receive at least a summary of the research and its findings in a form and language they can understand. Eventually and to the extent feasible, researchers also should return copies of primary data sets and relevant notes to a responsible archive or depository in the country of research so that the data and materials can be made available to indigenous researchers.

- *Respect as a two-way street.* Acknowledge and respect cultural differences and sensitivities by recognizing both written and unwritten rules. This includes being respectful and showing culturally appropriate behaviors, engagement, and respect for the local people (unwritten rules) and abiding by the local laws (written rules). Also, it involves behaviors that enhance goal attainment by minimizing negative adjustment outcomes and maximizing positive ones. Respecting, protecting, and prioritizing the collaborators' integrity entails openness, and care toward the local community and the local culture and history.
 - How to operationalize this:
 - Collaborators can assist with navigating sites that are areas of worship or conflict. In turn, this can lead to making use of local infrastructure, where available, to house research samples, data, and results on-site, especially for time-sensitive projects or when samples are obtained from protected species or sites.
 - Include plans to respect and protect the cultural heritage of the people at the local site, particularly considering the growing illegal international trafficking in art, archaeological artifacts, and other cultural materials. Collaborators have an obligation to inform themselves of the provisions, relevant to their research and other activities of The Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of an Armed Conflict, etc.
- *Humility to letting others lead.* Institute a policy requiring all stakeholders with the right to equally take leadership of projects or research efforts. This is grounding partnerships in reciprocity and shared vision or distributive leadership which aims to develop a community of practice capable of sustaining knowledge creation and enhancing skills. Also, it helps to set research agendas from the outset and avoid investing in projects that may not be relevant.
 - How to operationalize this:
 - This involves working across sectors, contexts, and disciplines with a commitment to shared responsibility to improve research design that will result in more meaningful definitions of impact. A commitment to building partnerships on all sides builds partner trust and is more responsive to the needs of partner communities.
 - Supporting the autonomy and capacity of all sides for example, in terms of digital and human resources, is bound to reduce reliance on specific funding periods and build resilience.
- *Aspire to expand access.* Foster open and honest communication, including making collaborative findings available in the local media as well as in open-access publications.

Also, aspire to communicate in languages other than English as much as possible or as needed.

- How to operationalize this:
 - Make use of outreach platforms such as print and electronic media (including social media e.g., WhatsApp and Twitter)
 - Utilize the MSU Language [Translation Center](#) to make text available in various languages.

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ⁱ Sources for this compilation include models and statements adapted from MSU Strategic Plan, and from documents by MSU Alliance for Africa Partnership, Asian Hub, African Studies Center, and external sources such as the ESSENCE and UKCDR, African Studies Association Ethical Guidelines, the NIH's *Promoting Equity in Global Health Research* guide, and the Cape Town Statement on Equity, Fairness, and Diversity in Research (2022 7th World Conference on Research Integrity, Cape Town, South Africa).