

## THE CONVERSATION

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# International research collaborations: how can we shift the power towards Africa?

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Post-COVID, there's an opportunity to form lateral research partnerships driven by the needs of African communities. GettyImages

*The higher education sector globally has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Academics have been discussing various aspects of the disruptions in a series of webinars organised by the University of Cape Town. One area of particular interest is how the pandemic could affect international research collaborations. The Conversation Africa's Nontobeko Mtshali asked panellists to share their views.*

**Could COVID-19 change the power dynamics between African and foreign institutions when it comes to research collaboration?**

**Salome Maswime:** There have been many successful global research collaborations. But there's a long history of unequal partnerships and research collaborations between African institutions and research institutions from developed countries. African researchers have often described unequal power dynamics. These have been fuelled by what can be described as a top-down approach, a sense of tokenism. There's a sense that research agendas are driven by interests of collaborating centres instead of the needs of the communities involved.

One big change is that, prior to COVID-19, collaborators could travel to conduct research. But implementation is now dependent on the full buy-in of the local institution.

The pandemic has also compelled us to look for African solutions for Africa, and to ensure that we don't miss out on the opportunity to be part of important discoveries like vaccines and drug treatments.

**Rifat Atun:** COVID-19 will likely affect the power relationship between African and foreign institutions. To date this power relationship has been hugely imbalanced. It's been in favour of research institutions from high-income countries at the expense of African researchers and institutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly revealed that research undertaken in African countries – and subsequent policies related to COVID-19 – are critical not just for Africa but for the world. What's also apparent is the importance of local contexts in relation to the behaviour of the epidemic and responses to different policies. This has shown how necessary it is to have locally generated research led by researchers who understand local contexts.

The speed of the epidemic has made it imperative to quickly develop local capacity in Africa to lead and undertake research – and reduce dependence.

One adverse consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is the economic crisis that has followed. This is likely to lead to reduced research funding for health. Another adverse effect is the greater national focus on self-sufficiency. It could risk undermining international collaborations.

**Kevin Marsh:** It could contribute to a change that long predates the pandemic and which has been gathering pace.

Historically, we're all aware of the imbalance in many such relationships. This reflects a structural consequence of colonialism, in terms of where money and scientific expertise and decision making were centred.

This has in fact begun to change markedly over the last few years. There are now many more researchers on the continent beginning to exercise their autonomy and leadership. The centre of gravity is changing in relation to defining African research priorities and funding.

Similarly, there are plenty of international collaborators who recognise and support these changes.

Other factors include the fact that, unlike Ebola, collaboration cannot involve a mass influx of collaborators from “outside”. Another is that there has been real synergy between continental organisations in setting priorities. These include the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organisation Regional Office for Africa and the African Academy of Sciences.

### **How could things change?**

**Salome Maswime:** This could lead to collaborations that are truly lateral with all collaborators involved from the design phase of the project to completion.

Often organisations with funding have the means to set up research sites and to employ research staff, with little buy-in and minimal engagement from the stakeholders in collaborating institutions. With virtual communication, there’s more transparency and more visibility. And no excuse for lack of representation.

The African community has also taken a keen interest in science, collaborations, equity and ethics with COVID-19. This could lead to more community engagement with research. It could also see greater effort at improving science communication. Curiosity about the safety of vaccines and drug trials, the risks in Africa and the credibility of the organisations involved are examples of how science has become a priority on the continent.

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**Rifat Atun:** The change could be positive. It can empower African research institutions and enable the development of local research capacity that can design, implement and evaluate large research studies in Africa and beyond.

The new environment gives Africa the opportunity to lead local research and development using local capacity rather than being a “venue” for research for researchers from high-income countries who all too often take the credit for the studies. Africa must develop research and development capacity and transition to greater self-sufficiency in critical supplies of vaccines, medicines and health products.

### **Does COVID-19 open possibilities that didn’t exist before?**

**Salome Maswime:** With the acceleration of virtual communication there’s been wider engagement locally and more South-South partnerships forming. Previously we’d rely on funding for meetings to engage on research projects. But more scientific groups are being formed virtually to respond to COVID-19 and local challenges.

There are also opportunities to increase research capacity and training through online education. Over the past eight weeks, hundreds of South Africans have attended live webinars run by Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, on postgraduate research methods. This is a great example of an approach to research that inspires and empowers aspiring researchers.

After the pandemic we have an opportunity to form truly lateral partnerships driven by the needs of African communities.

**Rifat Atun:** There's an opportunity to establish regional and continent-wide research networks to undertake research in Africa. There's also the opportunity to be part of international and global studies and lead them.

**Kevin Marsh:** There is a sudden increase in funding – so in that sense the answer is yes. But more positively and importantly, we're seeing that the response from the scientific community on the continent in taking leadership has been strong. So in many ways COVID-19 has revealed this rather than caused it.