

Practical Turn From Decoloniality to Decolonization: Bridging Scholarship and Practice

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Abstract

North-South research collaborations continue to be shaped by unequal structures of power, knowledge, and being that reproduce colonial patterns despite growing commitments to decolonization. While decolonial scholarship has provided critical theoretical insights into these asymmetries, practical approaches for operationalizing decoloniality within everyday research collaboration remain limited. This study contributes to bridging this gap by presenting the participatory co-creation and scientific grounding of two practical decolonial tools for research collaboration: (1) the Institutional get-to-know tool, which addresses structural and institutional asymmetries related to agenda-setting, resource allocation, accountability, and working conditions; and (2) the Self-awareness guide, which supports reflexivity on positionality, epistemic assumptions, interpersonal dynamics, and recognition within collaborative practice. Drawing on concepts of coloniality and decoloniality, the study employed a participatory qualitative design combining walking brainstorming and storytelling to generate collective reflections from participants engaged in North-South collaborations. Through inductive content analysis, the findings revealed how institutional arrangements and relational dynamics jointly reproduce or challenge coloniality in research practice. This study advances a conceptual-methodological contribution by linking decolonial theory with participatory methodological innovation and practical reflexive instruments. We argue that these tools may support more equitable, reflexive, transparent, and epistemically plural forms of collaboration while contributing to broader efforts to dismantle coloniality within research, scientific practice, and knowledge production.

Keywords

North-South research collaboration, positionality, reflexivity, coloniality, epistemic justice, transformative practice

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1. Introduction

Scholarship on coloniality and decoloniality has emerged as a critical response to the persistent legacies of colonial domination that continue to shape knowledge production, governance, and social relations across the globe (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2000). Coloniality, as theorized by Quijano (2000), refers to the enduring patterns of power established through colonialism that extend beyond formal decolonization and continue to structure epistemologies, economies, and subjectivities. Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues that coloniality extends beyond formal independence,

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manifesting in contemporary governance, development models, and social hierarchies. Scholarship on coloniality and decoloniality has therefore generated widespread calls to confront the enduring legacies of colonialism that continue to shape global structures of power, inequality, and dependency. Decoloniality, in turn, is framed as a collective project that calls for dismantling these structures of domination and advancing alternative visions of society that affirm plurality, justice, and dignity (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This call has resonated across diverse domains - ranging from education and governance to ecology and health, signalling the urgency of rethinking inherited institutions, practices, and relations to build futures liberated from colonial patterns of power.

Within the broader call for decoloniality, a central concern has been the persistence of the coloniality of knowledge, which highlights how Eurocentric epistemologies have been privileged as universal while other knowledge systems are marginalized or rendered invisible (Lander, 2000; Quijano, 2000). Mignolo (2011) argued for epistemic disobedience, urging a break from the hegemony of Western science and philosophy to create space for plural and locally grounded ways of knowing. Santos (2015) similarly advances the notion of epistemologies of the Global South, emphasizing the need to recover, validate, and co-create knowledge traditions that have been historically silenced by colonial and capitalist modernity. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) and Walsh (2013) further underscore that decoloniality in the sphere of knowledge is not only about critique but also about praxis: developing pedagogies, research methodologies, and collaborative frameworks that embody relationality, reciprocity, and justice. This scholarship thus calls for transforming knowledge production and dissemination practices, challenging extractive and hierarchical models of research, and reconfiguring research and innovation systems to centre historically marginalized epistemologies and foster more equitable and just forms of knowledge production across epistemic traditions.

In North-South research collaborations, asymmetries persist despite guidelines aimed at fostering equitable collaboration, hindering true inclusivity and power sharing (Bradley, 2008). Challenges include unequal access to resources, structural power imbalances, and diverse conceptions of knowledge acquisition (Rakotonarivo & Andriamihaja, 2023). Many of these challenges are directly related to coloniality and reproduce long-standing colonial patterns (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Efforts to decolonize research collaboration between the Global North and Global South have been ongoing, with initiatives in development studies, participatory action research, and global health seeking to reshape partnerships by emphasizing co-creation, capacity strengthening, and local ownership (Abimbola, 2019; Crane, 2010). In recent decades, transdisciplinary and participatory approaches have further sought to challenge extractive practices by fostering reciprocity and mutual accountability (Lang et al., 2012). However, while decolonial theory is conceptually rich, practical and structured tools for translating decolonial commitments into everyday collaborative practice remain limited and unevenly implemented.

To address these challenges and contribute to ongoing efforts to translate decolonial theory into research practice, we present participatory co-created tools designed to operationalize decoloniality in research collaboration. By providing practical, reflexive, and co-created tools for decolonization practices in North-South research collaboration, we contribute to efforts aimed at bridging decolonial scholarship and collaborative practice through a conceptual-methodological approach.

2. Conceptual Framework: From Decoloniality to Decolonization

Coloniality operates through intertwined domains of power, knowledge, and being, which continue to structure contemporary societies long after formal colonialism has ended. The coloniality of power produces global asymmetries by dividing the world into a Euro-American “zone of being” and a “zone of non-being”, sustained by invisible “abyssal lines” that legitimize domination and exclusion (Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022). The coloniality of knowledge reinforces these hierarchies through epistemicides, privileging Eurocentric epistemologies while marginalizing and delegitimizing indigenous and endogenous ways of knowing (Santos, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). The coloniality of being manifests in ontological hierarchies, where the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” mutated into “I conquer, therefore I am”, producing categories of colonizer and colonized, human and sub-human, and legitimizing objectification and commodification (Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2012). These dynamics extend into science and research, where colonial legacies continue to shape whose knowledge counts, whose voices are centred, and whose humanity is recognized, thereby embedding inequalities into the very structures of knowledge production (Santos, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). Together, these dimensions show how coloniality structures, epistemology, and ontology in mutually reinforcing ways.

Decoloniality seeks to dismantle the enduring structures of coloniality by challenging the power relations, epistemologies, and ontologies that sustain racial, gendered, and geopolitical hierarchies in knowledge production and social life (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022). It goes beyond critics by affirming epistemic plurality and exposing violence while enabling knowledge production rooted in marginalized contexts. This project is simultaneously political and epistemic: it calls for “epistemic breaks” and the unthinking of inherited disciplinary assumptions (Wallerstein, 1991), the recovery and valorisation of endogenous and indigenous knowledges (Arowosegbe, 2016), and the questioning of neoliberal paradigms in knowledge governance (Chiumbu, 2015). For Biney (2011), decoloniality also expands knowledge

boundaries to include political, environmental, gendered, and ontological justice, including the decolonization of the psych. In this sense, decoloniality is both a political and epistemic transformative project that shifts the geography and biography of knowledge, and advances the ecologies of knowledge for more just and plural futures (Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022; Santos, 2015). Overall, decoloniality combines critique and generative possibility by both exposing and reconfiguring knowledge systems.

Operationalizing decoloniality for decolonization means moving from critique to transformation by reconfiguring the organisation of knowledge, power, and being in practice. It requires dismantling the colonial matrix of power and creating spaces for epistemic plurality and justice (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022), fostering “epistemic breaks” that unsettle Eurocentric assumptions and enable ecologies of knowledge (Santos, 2015), and “unthinking” the inherited categories and methodologies of nineteenth-century social science that constrain our understanding of the world (Wallerstein, 1991). For Global South scholars, this includes affirming the right to produce knowledge on their own terms and grounding scholarship in local contexts (Arowosegbe, 2016; Smith et al., 2012). Decoloniality thus requires both epistemic and institutional transformation, including the recognition of suppressed knowledges and alternative modes of existence. In this sense, decolonization is not a metaphor, a buzzword, or a one-off event but an ongoing practice of undoing colonial legacies (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Decoloniality provides the normative critique, while decolonization refers to its practical enactment in situated contexts.

Research collaboration in the North-South form often reproduces coloniality by perpetuating extractivism, epistemic injustice, tokenism, and asymmetrical capacities, positioning Southern researchers as dependent “Others” and Northern researchers as gatekeepers (Asiamah et al., 2021; Chasi, 2019; Kulesa & Brantuo, 2021). These practices mirror historical colonial patterns of exploitation and marginalization (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022), where knowledge from the Global South is invisibilized or appropriated while Euro-American epistemologies remain central. Decolonizing research collaboration thus involves reconfiguring relationships toward equity, responsibility, and mutuality (Chasi, 2019; Itchuaqiyag & Matheson, 2021), recognizing interdependence of knowledges (Cammarata, 2021), and addressing Northern dominance in agenda-setting and knowledge validation (Stockholm Environment Institute et al., 2021; Trisos et al., 2021). Accordingly, it is not a one-off shift but a continuous, collective process (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Itchuaqiyag & Matheson, 2021) that both challenges colonial legacies and enables more just, inclusive, and contextually relevant knowledge production and dissemination. This shifts collaboration from hierarchical knowledge extraction toward relational co-production.

To move from critical thinking to practice, the decolonization of research collaboration requires attention to concrete aspects that can guide a practical turn toward equitable collaboration. These include the ways of collaboration, where models must shift from hierarchical, dependency-driven arrangements to peer-based, respectful, and co-creative modes of engagement (Asiamah et al., 2021; Chasi, 2019); enablers of collaboration, such as early communication, trust-building, and safe spaces for decolonial dialogue, which lay the groundwork for equity (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Itchuaqiyag & Matheson, 2021); and principles of collaboration, including shared ownership, openness to change, and genuine participation, which directly challenge colonial patterns of knowledge production (Cammarata, 2021; Kulesa & Brantuo, 2021). Decolonization also depends on working conditions, ranging from administrative capacity and linguistic inclusivity to fair salaries and recognition of diverse productivity measures (Chasi, 2019; Trisos et al., 2021), and on responsibility in collaboration, including equitable roles in data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Itchuaqiyag & Matheson, 2021). Beyond immediate project dynamics, career and skill development as well as field and network development are central to breaking dependency cycles by enabling Southern researchers to access funding, mentoring, and research leadership opportunities (Chasi, 2019; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022). Finally, satisfaction with collaboration must be considered, as meaningful engagement and intellectual stimulation are vital for sustaining long-term partnerships (Asiamah et al., 2021). Together, these aspects translate decolonial commitments into operational dimensions of research collaboration.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participatory Approach

This study is a participatory qualitative co-design study aimed at developing practical decolonial tools for North-South research collaborations within a consultancy-supported process. It adopted a participatory approach with the explicit goal of addressing the coloniality of knowledge, power, and being in North-South research collaborations. Participatory design was chosen as both a methodological and decolonial practice. It emphasizes user-centeredness, collaboration, co-creation, iterative improvement, and inclusivity, while adapting to technological opportunities such as online platforms that enable participation across geographies and time zones. In line with Santos (2015), who defines epistemologies of the South as “the production and validation of knowledges anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy”, we

understand the “South” not only as a geographical location but also as a set of structural disadvantages and struggles experienced by researchers under colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal systems. Conversely, the “North” represents the privileges that facilitate ease of access, visibility, and influence in academic spaces.

Participatory approaches (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Reason & Torbert, 2001) are critical for decolonization because they democratize the research process by valuing diverse perspectives, resisting extractivist practices, and fostering reflexivity. They allow participants from different origins, backgrounds, and positionalities to collectively generate solutions. In this study, we applied an approach called *Walking brainstorming* to ensure that every voice could be heard, regardless of communication style, personality, or seniority. This method encouraged creativity, minimized the dominance of a few voices, and created an inclusive, anonymous, and introvert-friendly environment. In doing so, participatory design directly confronts the inequitable dynamics of traditional collaborations, where Northern researchers often dominate agenda-setting, decision-making, and recognition.

3.2. Storytelling

Storytelling was a central dimension of the walking brainstorming exercise, as participants were explicitly encouraged to share their experiences through personal narratives rather than abstract statements. This method enabled contributors to situate their reflections in lived realities, foregrounding emotions, struggles, and aspirations that often remain invisible in conventional data collection techniques. Storytelling, as emphasized by Chilisa (2012), Kovach et al. (2013) and Kovach (2021), is a decolonial method that validates experiential knowledge and challenges the dominance of Eurocentric research conventions. Within the Mural platform, each “sticky note” became a miniature story - sometimes recounting moments of exclusion, other times narrating practices of reciprocity and trust - that collectively revealed the dynamics of coloniality and possibilities for more equitable collaboration. By creating space for storytelling, the process honoured diverse epistemologies, particularly those rooted in oral traditions and relational worldviews, thereby aligning with the broader goal of operationalizing epistemic justice within North-South research collaborations.

3.3. Data Collection

The virtual *Walking brainstorming* exercise (Andersen & Balbontín, 2021; Henningsen & Henningsen, 2023; Michinov & Jeanson, 2023) was carried out over a two-week period, from 25 September to 8 October 2023, on the online collaboration platform Mural. Participants joined anonymously as invited visitors to ensure privacy and reduce the pressure to conform to hierarchical or institutional expectations. Each participant received a personal invitation and had the opportunity to invite interested colleagues through the organizers, thereby broadening the inclusion while maintaining security.

Two hundred and seventy one (271) individuals were invited to share their experiences and reflections on eight discussion topics. The topics were derived from recurring themes identified in the literature on North-South collaborations, including agenda-setting, authorship, participation, mentorship, resource allocation, reflexivity, power asymmetries, and recognition of diverse knowledge systems. The participants contributed by engaging with the platform and adding 116 sticky notes, each containing a story, reflection, or an idea. Contributions were signed with a name or nickname accompanied by a self-identified positionality for example “Ravi_South” to allow the analysis of positional differences without compromising anonymity. Because participation was anonymous, it was not possible to determine the exact number of individual contributors, as some participants may have submitted multiple sticky notes. Sticky notes were aligned with topics to preserve clarity, and contributions that did not fit existing topics were added in a designated “Others” section. To encourage input diversity, participants were advised to engage not only with heavily populated areas but also with less addressed topics.

This method allowed participants to contribute asynchronously, thus accommodating different time zones and work schedules. Importantly, it gave equal weight to all voices, decentring Northern dominance, and ensuring that participants who might otherwise feel marginalized in synchronous or in-person discussions could contribute meaningfully. Nevertheless, the invited participants were given the opportunity to sign up to appear in the acknowledgements of the outputs of the project and to receive updates about the tools and the project report. From the participants who signed up, nine considered themselves as northern researchers and six as southern researchers; three identified as PhD students and 12 as senior researchers including project and team leader.

3.4. Data Analysis

Inductive content analysis was employed to make sense of the rich qualitative material generated through the *Walking Brainstorming* process. Inductive content analysis is an iterative process that allows for close reading and open coding of the qualitative data to identify patterns and build a rich, nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Gioia et al., 2013; Kyngäs,

2020; Mayring, 2015). The unit of analysis in this study was the contribution itself through sticky notes rather than the individual participant. While anonymity reduced hierarchical pressures and encouraged candid reflection, it also limited the ability to contextualize individual contributions according to participants' backgrounds, institutional affiliations, or levels of experience.

The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, all the co-authors read all contributions in full to develop an overall sense of the materials. All sticky notes were included in the analysis regardless of whether contributors later opted to identify themselves to receive project updates. Second, the first author conducted open coding of all contributions and the second co-author conducted coding of a number of contributions, with labels assigned to meaningful segments of text that captured the key ideas, challenges, or practices. Third, the first author grouped the codes into categories based on similarity and relational patterns. The categories were validated by all co-authors. From these categories, we derived higher-level statements summarizing the recurring issues, needs, and opportunities for decolonizing collaboration. Minor iterative disagreements arose during coding and were resolved through discussion, primarily serving to refine open coding rather than producing substantive divergence in interpretation. To enhance analytical trustworthiness, particular attention was paid to ensuring that categories remained grounded in participant contributions while supporting the development of practically useful tools.

The resulting statements were subsequently organized into two main strands: (1) institutional-level issues, which informed the development of the *Institutional get-to-know* tool, and (2) individual-level reflections, which informed the *Self-awareness guide*. The analytical process moved iteratively from participant stories and reflections to open codes, then to subcategories and broader categories that reflected recurring structural and interpersonal patterns within North-South collaborations. Categories associated with institutional arrangements, resource allocation, decision-making structures, and accountability converged into the Institutional get-to-know tool. In contrast, categories related to positionality, reflexivity, trust, mentorship, interpersonal dynamics, and epistemic recognition informed the Self-awareness guide.

For example, codes related to agenda-setting, budgeting, authorship, and institutional responsibilities were grouped into institutional-level categories that informed the Institutional get-to-know tool, whereas codes related to positionality, trust, mentorship, and interpersonal dynamics informed the Self-awareness guide. Importantly, the emergence of these two tools was inductive rather than predefined, as the clustering of codes consistently revealed two analytically distinct yet interrelated dimensions of collaboration: structural-institutional conditions and relational-interpersonal dynamics. The two tools therefore emerged as the most appropriate synthesis for translating these dimensions into practical interventions. Together, these tools were designed to surface, redistribute, and transform power in North-South research collaborations.

3.5. Guiding Principles

Three principles guided the data collection and analysis processes. *Inclusivity* was fostered through anonymous contributions, asynchronous participation, and encouragement of diverse inputs. *Reflexivity* was promoted by asking the participants to explicitly reflect on their positionality, expectations, and experiences. *Accountability* was built into the design by creating outputs (the two tools) that could serve as practical interventions to address inequities rather than remaining an abstract critique.

3.6. Positionality of Authors

First, O. Ravaka Andriamihaja was born and raised in Moramanga, centre-eastern Madagascar. Growing up in this historically and politically significant context for Malagasy struggles for independence shaped her early awareness of resistance, (in)justice, and the enduring effects of colonial and neocolonial power relations on development and governance. She began her university education in Madagascar at the Ecole Supérieure des Sciences Agronomiques University of Antananarivo, from which she obtained an engineering diploma in Forestry from the University of Antananarivo. She began her professional journey in Madagascar working as a research assistant for Swiss PhD students. She later pursued a PhD in Geography and Sustainable Development at the University of Bern in Switzerland, after which she continued as a senior researcher and postdoctoral researcher at the same institution. This transnational academic trajectory has positioned her at the intersection of different institutional cultures, epistemologies, and power structures, allowing her to experience both the opportunities and tensions embedded in North-South research collaborations. This perspective of North-South research collaboration, their background, and experiences inform her commitment to bridging decolonial theory and practice by recognizing the plurality of knowledge systems and the need to create institutional, epistemological, and ontological spaces where marginalized voices and experiences can meaningfully shape research processes.

Second, as an academic researcher based in Ghana, Ama Asantewah Ahene-Codjoe approaches this study from a Global South perspective that is directly implicated in North-South research collaborations. Her participation in several North-South collaborations has provided firsthand insight into the structural asymmetries that shape agenda setting, funding, and

knowledge production, positioning them not as a detached observer but as someone embedded within the systems this study examines.

While her perspective is grounded in Global South experiences, she recognizes that her academic training, largely influenced by dominant Northern paradigms, may shape how she interprets collaboration and “best practices”. This creates a dual positionality, as both a critic of power imbalances and a participant in knowledge systems that may reproduce them.

She is also conscious of potential power dynamics in data collection and interpretation, including how participants may respond to her institutional affiliation or perceived expectations. To address this, the study adopts a reflexive and participatory approach that incorporates diverse perspectives and critically examines them to produce contextually grounded insights for more equitable North-South research collaborations; while reflecting on the researchers’ role within these processes.

Third, as a trained anthropologist and scholar from the Global South, and based in Kenya, Mariah Ngutu acknowledges that her field has a significant history as a tool of colonization. As such, she is committed to improving practice of decolonizing research, guided by postmodernist feminist perspectives and by people with lived experiences different from her own. In this study, she ensures that the principle of reciprocity informs the subsequent abstraction process of her anthropological reflections. She approached this study from a Global South perspective, which is directly implicated in North-South research collaborations.

She is also conscious of the potential power dynamics in data collection and interpretation, including how participants may respond to her institutional affiliation or perceived expectations. As such her reflections are not an opportunity merely to display the breadth of her semiotic repertoire or the scope of her interpretive virtuosity, rather she reveals the depth of her ethical sensibility and the genuineness of her political and cultural commitments in decolonizing research. In this way, her research product could serve as a “resource of hope” for the improvement of her research subjects’ lives (devoid of any condescending missionary intent), and not merely to fulfil, the exigencies of making a living in an academic institution.

3.7. Limitations

The consultancy setting shaped the process in several ways, raising considerations of representation, context, and transferability. However, it did not interfere with the authors’ academic freedom to conceptualize the central arguments presented in this study. Furthermore, although the participant group was diverse, it cannot be claimed to represent all perspectives in North-South collaborations, and some structural voices may have been underrepresented.

The online and anonymous format, while fostering openness, limited the ability to probe deeper into contributions through dialogue or follow-up questions. The anonymous design of the walking brainstorming exercise facilitated openness and reduced the influence of institutional hierarchies. However, it also constrained opportunities for participant validation and deeper contextual interpretation of individual contributions. As the contributors could not be contacted after data collection, contributor-checking or iterative feedback sessions on the resulting categories and tools were not possible to conduct. Consequently, the analytical interpretations presented here should be understood as co-authors’ syntheses of participant reflections situated within decolonial theory and the existing body of knowledge rather than as findings that were formally validated by participants themselves. Despite these limitations, the participatory design process generated robust, practice-oriented insights that directly informed the development of tools for decolonizing collaboration.

4. Findings: Tools for Decolonization of Research Collaboration

The analysis of the participatory exercise discussions revealed recurring thematic clusters identified across participant contributions during the coding and categorization process: (1) institutional dynamics and frameworks, and (2) individual positionalities and self-awareness. These two domains were subsequently developed into separate practical tools, the *Institutional get-to-know tool* and the *Self-awareness guide*, to address the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being in North-South research collaboration. In this section, we present the results leading to the development of the *Institutional get-to-know tool*, which surfaces and redistributes power, and the *Self-awareness guide*, which nurtures epistemic justice and ontological recognition. Table 1 illustrates the analytical progression from participant contributions to codes, categories, and the resulting tools, making explicit how the practical instruments emerged from the participatory analysis.

4.1. Institutional Get-To-Know Tool: Addressing Coloniality of Power in Research Collaboration

The *Institutional get-to-know tool* (Appendix A) highlights how structural arrangements, agreements, and resource allocations shape equity in research collaboration. The analysis organized these reflections under the main category “Institutional dynamics and frameworks”, which captured how institutional arrangements, governance structures, and resource distribution reproduce or challenge inequities in North-South collaborations. Within this category, one important

Table 1. Analytical Progression From Participant Contributions to Categories and Resulting Tools

Example codes from sticky notes	Subcategories	Main categories	Resulting tool
Exclusion from proposal writing; unclear agenda-setting; unequal budget control	Decision-making asymmetries	Institutional dynamics and frameworks	Institutional get-to-know
Unequal salaries; infrastructure disparities; administrative burden	Resource and institutional inequalities		
Lack of safe discussion spaces; communication tensions	Collaborative accountability and transparency	Individual positionalities and self-awareness	Self-awareness guide
Reflexivity about privilege; discomfort in collaboration	Positionality and reflexivity		
Different understandings of quality and progress	Epistemic pluralism		
Mentorship; trust-building; interpersonal exchange	Interpersonal relationships and mutual recognition		

subcategory concerned “Decision-making asymmetries”, particularly around proposal development, agenda-setting, and participation in institutional governance. The exclusion of Southern collaborators at critical early stages, such as proposal writing, reproduces the patterns of the coloniality of power. Late or absent involvement diminishes both inclusivity and output quality. A recurrent theme was the timing and modalities of engagement between Northern and Southern partners. When these were undefined or left to ad hoc arrangements, inequities were reinforced, resulting in asymmetrical involvement and questionable scientific outcomes. One participant identifying as southern stated, **“There seems to be a lack of consistency in established rules and practices. For instance, there have been cases where a sub-team was led to believe in a particular approach or guideline, only to encounter discrepancies later on”** (Santy_South). This observation reflects how colonial legacies persist in contemporary collaborations, with Northern institutions often serving as agenda setters, as a southern participant shared **“In the beginning as a PhD student in a North to South research project, the participation in the project was limited to the studentship. The university as a south collaborator was not involved in the original proposal writing.”** (Ari_South).

Financial and administrative structures were also identified as sites of power consolidation. These contributions were grouped under the subcategory “Resource and institutional inequalities”, which reflected recurring concerns about unequal access to funding, infrastructure, and administrative support across North-South partnerships. Current systems, designed to fit Northern institutional logics, often disadvantage collaborators from the South. For example, budget management, student supervision, and access to infrastructure frequently fall to Southern partners without corresponding resources or decision-making power. Participants pointed out that such practices perpetuate extractivism and dependency. These recurring accounts were coded under institutional asymmetries and resource dependency, which later informed the accountability and transparency dimensions of the Institutional get-to-know tool. An anonymous participant wrote **“Having budget available on both sides of the collaboration that are managed individually and are sufficient to implement the tasks planned in the project is a precondition for equitable collaboration... communication was very unidirectional from North to South with often delayed and minimal reactions.”** (X_X), and a southern participant added, **“We designed a project and were not clear on the budgets and clarity on what items can be covered from the onset... This was not clearly discussed and most students expected to travel abroad.”** (Nya_South).

In contrast, the participants envisioned alternative arrangements that embodied decolonial principles. These include co-defining research agendas and principles of collaboration, formalizing collaboration agreements that clarify roles and responsibilities, and creating structural support for reciprocity and shared ownership. Practical measures suggested include equitable and independent budget management, equal valuation of evidence generation and network development, and regular exchanges to prevent “collaborative fatigue”. A southern participant shared **“I had an experience with negotiated research agendas, but the results were somewhat unsatisfactory... Although we mentioned and discussed this, it seemed that our explanations were not fully embraced.”** (Santy_South).

Equally important was the call for institutionalized safe spaces, both time-bound and professionally facilitated, where collaborators could openly discuss conflicts, strengths, and weaknesses. These reflections formed the subcategory “Collaborative accountability and transparency”, emphasizing the need for mechanisms that support open communication, mutual accountability, and equitable dialogue. These spaces, by enabling marginalized voices to be heard, directly challenge silencing mechanisms and colonial hierarchies of authority. A northern anonymous participant mentioned **“Dissatisfaction**

regarding the scarce engagement of one of the south partners to the project. In every project meeting they only talk about their intention, but progress is very weak. Difficult to deal with that.” (X_North).

Finally, participants highlighted the need to move beyond projectification by planning collaboration in a long-term, sustainable manner. This includes recognising the importance of collective rather than solely individual achievements (e.g. when to use “team” vs. “individual researcher” for acknowledgements) and supporting collaborators’ capacity to balance their professional and personal lives within the partnership. A southern participant shared, **“In our project, all project members enrolled in a Swiss institution were able to take time off when they visited southern countries. They could enjoy the best of the countries they visited. But researchers from the South could not do that when they came to Switzerland because their income did not allow it. It is always a hurried business trip.”** (Galax, South).

Taken together, these insights constitute the *Institutional get-to-know* tool, a decolonial mechanism for surfacing asymmetries and redistributing power within collaborative structures at the institutional level. By explicitly engaging with issues of agenda-setting, resource allocation, and institutional responsibilities, this tool seeks to dismantle North-imposed priorities, foster accountability, and create conditions for equitable, long-term partnerships. A southern participant wrote, **“Challenging dominant agendas was rarely considered an option; instead, we seemed to embrace them as the norm and best practice, assuming that the North always knew better.”** (Santy_South).

4.2. Self-Awareness Guide: Addressing Coloniality of Knowledge and Being in Collaboration

Alongside institutional arrangements, participants stressed the importance of individual reflexivity and interpersonal dynamics in decolonizing North-South research collaboration. These reflections were grouped under the main category “Individual positionalities and self-awareness”, which captured how participants understood reflexivity, relationships, and epistemic assumptions as central dimensions of equitable collaboration. These reflections informed the development of the *self-awareness guide* (Appendix B), which supports researchers in recognizing their positionalities, expectations, and relationships within collaborative settings. Whereas the *Institutional get-to-know* tool addresses structures and resources, the *self-awareness guide* nurtures epistemic justice and ontological recognition by foregrounding how everyday practices and attitudes can reproduce or dismantle colonial hierarchies. A southern participant shared **“A critical skill I have developed centres around effective collaboration, both in general and particularly in North-South dynamics... Some of our initial collaborators chose to depart from the collaboration due to a lack of clarity regarding processes, misunderstandings, and communication challenges.”** (Santy_South).

The first cluster of insights focused on adaptability, preparedness, and decision-making clarity. These contributions informed the subcategory “Positionality and reflexivity”, which emphasized the importance of critically engaging with one’s own assumptions, responsibilities, and privileges throughout the collaboration process. Participants emphasized that the ability to navigate diverse working conditions, clarify responsibilities, and share expectations early on is essential for fostering equitable collaboration. This includes awareness of the project agenda, timing of involvement, and distribution of responsibilities such as proposal development, budgeting, or data collection across partners. A southern participant mentioned, **“I always doubt about decisions I have to make for the project... There seems to be a lack of consistency in established rules and practices... Northern counterparts should also be open and willing to share their challenges.”** (Santy_South).

Discussions on psychological safety, trust, and interpersonal exchange were equally important. These contributions were grouped under the subcategory “Interpersonal relationships and mutual recognition”, highlighting the importance of trust building, mentorship, and recognition of collaborators as full subjects with aspirations and dignity. These reflections were further consolidated under relational reflexivity and mutual recognition, which became central components of the Self-awareness guide. Many participants noted that informal interactions, mentorship, and mutual support are often undervalued, yet they are critical to building relationships of dignity and respect across hierarchies of geography, seniority, gender, and ethnicity. By recognizing contributions, validating diverse perspectives on “quality” and “progress”, and ensuring that all voices are heard in meetings, collaborators can move toward genuine inclusion rather than token participation. A northern anonymous participant mentioned, **“There have been some excellent examples in our project where participants from the North and South really got to know each other and then the collaboration was fairly balanced and pleasant - some friendships developed. In other cases, there have been frustrations because of a failure to connect on a personal level...”** (Anonymous_North).

The *Self-awareness guide* also emphasizes the recognition of collaborators as full subjects with aspirations, rather than as instruments of project delivery. Participants underlined the importance of career and skills development opportunities, mentorship, and access to networking, both within and beyond academia, as part of equitable collaboration. This recognition directly challenges the colonial practice of exploiting Southern researchers, primarily as fieldworkers or data collectors, without supporting their professional growth. A northern anonymous participant shared **“I personally benefited a lot**

through good publications, experience working with our colleagues in the South, co-supervising students, etc. Many of the students got better jobs as a result of being involved in our project.” (Anonymous_North), and another anonymous participant stated, “Networks are everything. Once you have built them, there is a strong incentive for North collaborators to further invest in that collaboration.” (X_X).

Another theme concerned awareness of the conditions and roles of colleagues. Understanding collaborators’ working contexts, achievements, and constraints fosters solidarity and prevents misunderstandings rooted in unequal positionalities. These reflections contributed to the subcategory “Epistemic pluralism”, which captured tensions around different understandings of quality, progress, and valid knowledge within collaborative research. A southern participant wrote: **“Working conditions have been a challenge though the project collaborators try to make things work. Often times in the South there are not adequate resources to successfully implement, like office space, computers, printing facilities, access to peer reviewed literature...”** (Ari_South). Similarly, developing sensitivity toward how knowledge hierarchies operate, and how they influence judgments about quality standards or valid contributions, was seen as essential for creating an environment of epistemic pluralism. A southern participant shared, **“At times, there was a palpable sense of disillusionment among some Northern partners when they realized that the data wouldn’t lead to publications of the required standard... Unfortunately, this sentiment is sometimes not openly shared.”** (Santy_South).

Finally, the participants highlighted that reflexivity is not a one-off exercise but a continual practice throughout the project cycle. This includes responsibility for project activities, clarity of roles, recognition of others’ efforts, and openness to discomfort when confronting one’s own privileged position. As one anonymous participant mentioned: **“Embracing discomfort - this has been evident in an ongoing collaboration where North-South collaborators have had to address potential conflicts as the project was being implemented... Some of the discussions were uncomfortable but eventually very useful.”** (X_X), highlighting the transformative potential of a sustained self-awareness.

Together, these insights constitute the *self-awareness guide* - a decolonial tool that supports researchers in cultivating reflexivity, mutual recognition, and epistemic justice. By addressing positionalities, expectations, and interpersonal relationships, the guide fosters collaboration in which all researchers are recognized not only as knowledge producers but also as individuals with aspirations, dignity, and agency. Northern participants shared, **“I try to find out what the career aspirations of my colleagues in the South are. Not everyone wants to be a researcher per se, so it’s important to understand their personal goals and how their work on the study can foster their professional development.”** (Anonymous_North) and **“I have developed many skills through North-South research collaboration, especially in terms of how to share knowledge, project management, and collaborative work. Most of this was really just through practice and being in the flow, some also through targeted trainings organised by the project.”** (DO_North).

The tools were intentionally designed as practical reflective instruments, rather than evaluative checklists. For example, the Institutional get-to-know tool includes prompts such as: “Who was involved in defining the research agenda?”, “How are financial resources distributed and managed across institutions?”, and “What mechanisms exist for addressing conflicts or asymmetries?” The Self-awareness guide includes reflective prompts such as: “Do I feel comfortable voicing concerns within the collaboration?”, “How does my positionality shape my assumptions about quality and expertise?”, and “Am I recognizing collaborators as full knowledge producers rather than primarily as implementers or data collectors?”

For example, a research team could use the Institutional get-to-know tool during the proposal development phase to clarify expectations regarding budgeting, authorship, decision-making, and responsibilities among collaborating institutions. During project implementation, team members can use the Self-awareness guide individually or collectively to reflect on interpersonal dynamics, communication practices, experiences of inclusion or exclusion, and assumptions regarding expertise and quality. Thus, the two tools function iteratively across the project cycle to support more equitable, reflexive, and transparent collaboration practices (Table 2).

5. Discussion

5.1. Bridging Theory and Practice: Operationalizing Decolonial Principles

A key contribution of this study lies in examining how abstract decolonial theory may be translated into concrete collaborative practices through the Institutional get-to-know tool and Self-awareness guide. Rather than functioning as mere checklists, these tools are intended as reflective and practical instruments that may support efforts to address the dimensions of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being within research collaboration (Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022; Quijano, 2000). They provide both institutional and individual entry points for critically engaging with the inequities, silences, and asymmetries that continue to shape North-South research collaborations.

The *Institutional get-to-know* tool targets the structural level of collaboration by rendering the power dynamics embedded in agreements, resource allocation, and administrative practices visible and open for negotiation. This corresponds to efforts

Table 2. Overview of the Two Decolonization Tools for North-South Research Collaboration

Tool	Main focus	Main components	Example prompts/items	Intended use
Institutional get-to-know tool	Structural and institutional dimensions of collaboration	Agenda-setting, budgeting, decision-making, authorship, working conditions, accountability, communication structures	“Who participated in proposal development?”; “How are resources distributed and managed?”; “Are responsibilities and authorship expectations clearly defined?”	To identify and address structural asymmetries and institutional power relations within collaborations
Self-awareness guide	Individual reflexivity and interpersonal dynamics	Positionality, expectations, trust, mentorship, recognition, communication, epistemic assumptions	“Do I feel safe expressing disagreement?”; “How do my positionality and privileges shape collaboration?”; “Whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate?”	To foster reflexivity, mutual recognition, epistemic justice, and relational accountability

to dismantle the coloniality of power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000; Wynter, 2003), as it directly engages with the hidden asymmetries that shape the initiation and governance of such collaborations. Examples include unequal entry points, such as the exclusion of Southern partners from proposal writing or the lack of clarity on the timing of involvement, which reproduce patterns of epistemic extractivism and dependency (Asiamah et al., 2021; Chasi, 2019). Financial asymmetries, such as centralized administration designed to fit Northern procedures, or the lack of equitable and independent budget management, mirror broader global structures of unequal economic governance (Santos, 2015). Similarly, issues of unequal recognition and decision-making, such as Southern researchers supervising students without access to budgets or infrastructure, highlight how institutional dynamics reproduce the division between the “Zone of Being” and the “Zone of Non-Being” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Wynter, 2003). By surfacing issues related to collaboration agreements, shared responsibility, and transparent budgeting, the Institutional get-to-know tool may help collaborators critically reflect on and negotiate these asymmetries in practice.

The *Self-awareness guide* complements this by targeting the relational and epistemic dimensions of collaboration. Its focus on positionality, epistemology, and recognition addresses both the coloniality of knowledge and being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). Epistemically, the contributions highlight the persistence of Eurocentric hierarchies that define what counts as “progress” or “quality” in research, sidelining local epistemologies and perspectives (Kulesa & Brantuo, 2021; Santos, 2015). Practices such as excluding Southern researchers from proposal development or budgeting decisions or restricting their role to data collection exemplify epistemic injustice (Tuck & Yang, 2012). On the ontological side, concerns around respect, recognition, and psychological safety reveal how researchers from the Global South continue to experience tokenism, objectification, and the denial of dignity within collaborations (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). The guide seeks to encourage mutual trust, recognition of diverse contributions, and acknowledgement of researchers as full subjects with aspirations, not merely as instruments for data gathering.

Taken together, the *Institutional get-to-know tool* and *Self-awareness guide* demonstrate that decolonizing collaboration cannot be reduced to either structural reform or individual reflexivity alone. Structural redistribution of power must be accompanied by epistemic justice and ontological recognition if decoloniality is to be realized in practice (Itchuaqiyag & Matheson, 2021; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Thus, these tools illustrate one possible pathway through which abstract decolonial principles may be translated into tangible collaborative practices, supporting more reflexive and equitable North-South research collaboration. Furthermore, studies advancing decolonization should centre frameworks developed directly by Global South scholars, and extend decolonized research collaboration beyond project-based, North-initiated research contexts.

5.2. Enablers and Barriers

The findings highlight how the enablers and barriers of equitable collaboration are deeply embedded in working conditions, guiding principles, and shared responsibilities. Enablers such as transparent collaboration agreements, mutual respect, and trust-building resonate with calls in the literature for early and continuous dialogue as the foundation for equitable North-South partnerships (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Trisos et al., 2021). Conversely, barriers such as unequal access to resources,

lack of clarity in roles, and unbalanced responsibilities, such as Southern researchers supervising students without adequate budgetary or infrastructural support, reflect the persistence of colonial patterns of dependency and marginalization (Chasi, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). By encouraging reflection on these structural and relational issues, the tools may contribute to creating more favourable conditions for epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Santos, 2015) and collective responsibility (Itchuaqiyaq & Matheson, 2021); however, they also reveal how fragile equity remains when institutional structures reinforce asymmetry.

5.3. Transferability

Although developed in a specific consultancy context, the *Institutional get-to-know tool* and *Self-awareness guide* were designed with principles of adaptability and reflexivity, which makes them transferable to other collaborative settings. Similar to Santos (2015)'s call for an "ecology of knowledges", their flexibility allows for contextual tailoring without losing sight of the core decolonial principles of redistribution, recognition, and reciprocity. Previous studies have emphasized that tools for equity must avoid one-size-fits-all prescriptions and instead accommodate different positionalities, institutional cultures, and epistemic traditions (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012). By focusing on processes rather than fixed outcomes, such as facilitating safe spaces for dialogue or promoting reflexivity on positionality, these tools provide a flexible framework that may be adapted across diverse geographies, disciplines, and institutional arrangements, thus broadening their relevance beyond the initial project.

5.4. Contributions of the Study

This study contributes to ongoing debates on decolonizing research collaboration at theoretical, methodological, and practical levels. Theoretically, this study advances scholarship on coloniality and decoloniality by demonstrating how the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being manifests in the everyday realities of North-South research collaboration. By linking participants' experiences to these interconnected dimensions of coloniality, the study illustrates how structural arrangements and interpersonal dynamics jointly shape collaboration. In doing so, it contributes to bridging abstract decolonial concepts with the practical realities of collaborative research.

Methodologically, this study contributes by combining walking brainstorming, storytelling, and participatory co-design as a process for generating collective reflection and co-creating decolonial tools. The participatory design enabled contributors to share their experiences anonymously and asynchronously, creating opportunities for diverse perspectives to inform both the analysis and the resulting tools. Therefore, this study demonstrates how participatory approaches can serve not only as methods of data collection but also as mechanisms for reflexive knowledge production and collaborative tool development.

Practically, the study contributes two complementary instruments for supporting more equitable research collaboration: the *Institutional get-to-know tool* and the *Self-awareness guide*. Together, these tools provide structured opportunities for collaborators to identify, discuss, and address the structural and relational dimensions of inequity. Rather than prescribing universal solutions, they function as adaptable reflective instruments that may support more transparent, accountable and reflexive collaboration across diverse research contexts.

5.5. Comparison With Other Frameworks

Compared to existing frameworks, such as ethics protocols or capacity-building tools, the proposed decolonial tools offer both continuity and novelty. Ethical guidelines for global research collaborations often emphasize consent, data protection, and fairness, but rarely interrogate the underlying coloniality of power and knowledge that shape research agendas (Resnik, 2018; Smith, 2015). Similarly, capacity-building initiatives have historically positioned Southern partners as training recipients rather than co-producers of knowledge, thereby perpetuating hierarchical dynamics (Kingori and Gerrets, 2019). In contrast, the *Institutional get-to-know* and *Self-awareness guide* go beyond procedural compliance or technical training by embedding decolonial principles into the fabric of collaboration. They align with recent calls for frameworks that promote co-production, shared ownership, and mutual accountability (Asiamah et al., 2021; Stockholm Environment Institute et al., 2021), but extend this agenda by explicitly linking collaborative practices to the dismantling of coloniality.

5.6. Challenges

Although the tools presented here provide concrete entry points for operationalizing decoloniality, they cannot dismantle the broader structural inequalities underpinning North-South research collaborations. Persistent issues, such as inequitable

funding flows, Northern dominance in agenda-setting, and the global concentration of high-impact journals in the North (Santos, 2015; Trisos et al., 2021), remain largely outside the scope of these tools. Moreover, institutional inertia, entrenched academic reward systems, and geopolitical asymmetries continue to limit the extent to which equity can be achieved in practice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Therefore, tools must be understood as part of a wider ecosystem of decolonial practices, policies, and structural reforms. Without parallel transformations in funding architectures, publishing systems, and institutional accountability mechanisms, project-level efforts risk remaining partial or symbolic (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The challenge, then, is not only to apply such tools but also to embed their principles into the broader governance of global research in the future. Accordingly, the tools presented here should be understood as supportive mechanisms for reflexive and equitable practice within collaborations, rather than as standalone solutions to systemic academic inequalities.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to ongoing efforts to translate decolonial commitments into structured and reflective practices for North-South research collaboration. Through the co-creation of the *Institutional get-to-know tool* and *Self-awareness guide*, this study explored how the theoretical principles of coloniality and decoloniality may be translated into practical tools for interrogating power relations, epistemic hierarchies, and ontological assumptions embedded in research collaboration. These tools are intended to support both institutional and individual reflexivity, fostering equitable structures, transparent processes, and mutual recognition among partners. By integrating conceptual analysis with participatory methodological innovation, this study contributes to ongoing conversations on how research collaborations might become more reflexive, equitable, and epistemically plural. It does not claim to be a comprehensive solution. It underscores the potential of decolonial approaches to inform more just, inclusive, and epistemically plural research practices, while recognizing that broader structural transformation requires changes extending beyond individual projects and collaborative tools.

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Author Contributions

O. Ravaka Andriamihaja led the conception, design, and implementation of the study; coordinated story collection and analysis; and drafted and finalized the manuscript. Ama Asantewah Ahene-Codjoe and Mariah Ngutu contributed to the literature review that informed the synthesis of concrete aspects of North-South research collaboration. Co-authors also contributed to the data analysis and provided critical revisions and validation of successive drafts of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the paper.

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Citation Practice Statement

We consider citation practices to be a political and ethical component of decolonizing science, academia, and research collaboration. Because citation contributes to shaping whose knowledge becomes visible and legitimate, we believe that efforts to diversify and critically reflect upon citation practices should be made explicit and open to scrutiny.

In preparing this manuscript, we deliberately examined the composition of our reference list. We manually assessed the countries of origin and institutional affiliations of first authors as imperfect proxies for the geopolitical location of knowledge production. Our assessment indicates that approximately half of the cited first authors originate from the Global South, while most are affiliated with institutions located in the Global North. These observations are intended to make visible both the diversity of scholarly trajectories represented in our references and the continuing concentration of academic resources and publishing infrastructures within Northern institutions.

We acknowledge that categories such as Global North and Global South are historically situated, relational, and imperfect. They do not fully capture researchers' positionalities, institutional trajectories, identities, or contributions to knowledge production. Moreover, our reference list reflects the scholarship relevant to the questions addressed in this manuscript rather than the entirety of the literature on these topics.

We therefore do not view citation practices as a quantitative exercise or as a substitute for substantive engagement with diverse scholarship. Rather, we use these assessments as a reflexive and accountable tool to interrogate potential biases in whose work we read and cite and to identify opportunities to broaden the range of voices, experiences, and knowledge traditions represented in our research. While imperfect, we consider making citation practices visible preferable to leaving them unexamined as part of an ongoing decolonial research practice.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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