



Rethinking research practices from the Global South

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Abstract. Contemporary debates are increasingly focused on dealing with crises that span many systems and sectors. These crises have transformed the process of doing research itself, impacting research funding, the type of research being done, and the subjects of our research. They have led to re-thinking and re-evaluating the value and aims of research. As social scientists, it is nearly impossible to isolate our work from the impacts of these. As researchers at knowledge-based institutions, these crises have increasingly shaped the nature of our work. Through this intervention, I argue for a need to invest in developing systems and processes, particularly for institutions based in the Global South, that build resilience within such institutions to be able to deal with crises as they emerge. I offer suggestions and approaches from my own context in India on how, as researchers based in the Global South, we can begin to think about long-term, systemic approaches to responding to these challenges.

1 Introduction

Contemporary debates are increasingly focused on dealing with crises that span many systems and sectors. These crises have been also growing in frequency and intensity, with ripple effects across scale and space: the COVID-19 pandemic, global environmental change, extreme events, economic downturns, and widespread conflict, to name but a few. They have changed and continue to change the lived realities of our world. As social scientists, it is nearly impossible to isolate our work from the impacts of these. As researchers at knowledge-based institutions, these crises have increasingly shaped the nature of our work. These crises have transformed the process of doing research itself, impacting research funding, the type of research being done, and the subjects of our research. They have led to re-thinking and re-evaluating of the value and aims of research. There is also a shift emerging towards greater projectization of research and knowledge production as well as the shrinking of space that earlier existed to develop research that would enable the creation of medium- to long-term research agendas, partnerships, and institution building across geographical and disciplinary boundaries (Tucker, 2023).

There are, however, more specific challenges emerging within higher-education systems across the world. These

range from tackling the growing cost of education, cuts in research funding, sustaining the autonomy of institutional spaces to enable the creation and dissemination of knowledge within narrowing political envelopes globally, decolonizing curricula, and improving representation and diversity in student and faculty communities across the world (see, for example, Ravi et al., 2019; Badat, 2010; de Sousa Santos, 2018; Mintz, 2021). Research practices are typically embedded within these institutional contexts. These emerging challenges across the larger institutional landscape are, therefore, also making the process of doing research and the broader research ecosystem increasingly precarious. To add to this, the ability to do research, the kind of research that is funded, and the types of expected outcomes of this research are being shaped more and more by political forces and actors – both domestically and globally (Mawdsley, 2012; Bloch and Sørensen, 2014; Aagaard et al., 2021; Noxolo, 2017).

This influence in turn has implications for the kind of research that gets done, how and where it gets done, and by whom. Given the current geography of funding flows, this move to influence and align research funding with national and international political imperatives also tends to reinforce and re-articulate existing structural inequalities between northern and southern institutions and researchers (Sami, 2023). This is not a new argument. The reorienta-

tion of research structures to become more inward looking and more narrowly focused is a deeply problematic shift at the current political moment. For instance, over the last decade of the Conservative-led government, funding and aid in the UK has re-centred its research and aid agenda to align more with economic growth approaches that “appeal to the UK’s comparative advantage in management consultancies and the financial sector” (Mawdsley, 2015:344) However, to equip ourselves and future generations of researchers to deal with the polycrisis we face, it is critically important that we work towards fostering a more democratic, diverse, and intersectoral research culture.

There are many ways in which one can approach the question of dealing with these multiple crises in the context of research and higher education, several of which are already being explored: for instance, through proposing methodological innovations (Hong et al., 2023), reimagining the role of research partners in the process (Lall et al., 2023; Allen et al., 2020), or a focus on the means by which knowledge is produced and circulates (Wesely and Allen, 2019; Allen et al., 2017), including curriculum reform, to mention but a few. While these are all critical, I argue that there is a larger systemic issue in play, particularly in the context of southern research institutions – one of the overall research ecosystems within which these institutions are embedded and operate. There is a need to invest in developing systems and processes that build resilience within such institutions to be able to deal with crises as they emerge. I focus on how, as researchers based in the Global South, we can begin to think about long-term, systemic approaches to responding to some of these. Based at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), an urban studies research institution in Bengaluru, India, in writing this intervention, I draw on my experience as a faculty member and researcher at IIHS, on my role in institution building as the anchor of the IIHS Research Programme, and on the collective experience of my colleagues.

I emphasize the need to look carefully at processes and structures that are placing increasing restrictions on the ability to do research around four key aspects: (a) building a shared research agenda, (b) the research funding process, (c) co-producing research, and (d) the dissemination of research. I suggest that it is critical to begin building research infrastructures within and across institutions to try and navigate these challenges, particularly from the perspective of institutions and researchers based in the south. Many of the specific crises that researchers face have their roots in deeper systemic issues that emerge from a deeply skewed terrain of knowledge production and dissemination. It is critical not only to think of fixes for particular aspects of the research process, but to also begin putting in place incremental steps through investment in and development of research infrastructures that will enable the development of a robust research ecosystem within and across southern institutions and contexts.

I begin here by making the case for investing in and building research infrastructures. I then outline four key aspects on which to focus. By research infrastructures I mean setting up systems that support the process of doing research (Flanders, 2021). These may differ across institutions, providing different components that enable institutions to become more responsive and resilient to crises. Examples include building research programmes within universities; setting up research management offices; providing assistance with research communications; facilitating access to various platforms to share research and collaborate (such as conferences and workshops); mentoring (especially for early career researchers); and building capacities to identify, apply for, and manage research grants. Many of these are possible to do in the absence of a large amount of financial resources but do require long-term institutional commitment and investment in processes.

Components of these may already exist in different institutions and in different forms, but it is important to invest in building these where they do not and to eventually move towards the development of a research ecosystem that will be able to weather shocks and be able to bounce back with more agility than is currently possible. The building of robust research ecosystems also allows for the ability within institutions to undertake strategic planning around the building of research agendas and to develop and provide for a longer-term, diverse research portfolio that can not only facilitate ongoing research, but also provide direction on possible trajectories and to some extent enable protection from shocks such as funding and/or capacity constraints as well as possible political exigencies. However, from our experience at IIHS, it is equally important to invest in building a set of trained professionals who can lead and manage these processes.

2 Building research infrastructures

Research ecosystems across the Global South are not uniformly mature (Sami, 2023) – they differ in their ability to support research as well as their capacity to absorb shocks such as those generated by crises like the 2021 UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) research funding cuts or the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Indian universities, for example, are severely constrained by a lack of resources and institutional structures, particularly in the social sciences and humanities (Revi and Sami, 2013). Social science and humanities research in the Indian context tends to depend heavily on partnerships and research funding from abroad, largely the

¹Launched in April 2018, UK Research and Innovation is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) in the United Kingdom. It includes the seven Research Councils, Research England, and Innovate UK. For more, see <https://www.ukri.org/> (last access: 27 June 2024).

United Kingdom, the EU, and North America, although this geography is beginning to shift. The ability to sustain a long-term research programme therefore largely depends on the ability of institutions and individuals to be able to build lasting partnerships and access research funding from outside the country (Flanders, 2021). While research grants and funding are a critical component here, the building of a research ecosystem also demands the existence of sustained institutional practices. Not all universities or research institutions or the individuals associated with them have the capacity to build such connections or sustain them. This is not the case in India alone but exists to varying degrees across southern institutions (for example, see Duque, 2023; Watson and Odenaal, 2013). Building the infrastructures that support research practice therefore needs to be space- and context-specific.

At the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), where I work, we have aimed to develop infrastructures for urban research both internally for staff at IIHS and for the broader urban research community in India and across the Global South. In doing so, we hope to contribute to building a larger research ecosystem that is robust and resilient. IIHS is a relatively young institution, founded in 2009. As a result, we did not have significant financial resources that we could draw on. The funding that we did have access to was opportunistic, built largely through personal networks. However, we did recognize early on that for an institution that aspired to grow into a university and produce interdisciplinary knowledge in, for, and from the Global South, we needed to invest in building an infrastructure that would enable our growth. We began by incrementally building a team that could focus on different aspects of the research process.

We began by focusing on small shifts and functions that would start building a research culture within the institution, for example, the setting up of internal “Chatbox” presentations that would allow researchers at IIHS to present works in progress, exchange ideas, and receive feedback in a safe space; doing regular sessions on how to write and frame grant applications; and setting up an internal review process for academic publications before they were sent out for peer review. Much of this investment came through time and space from the faculty and leadership within IIHS with minimal financial investment. However, the contribution that these kinds of processes made was significant in enabling a very young faculty and researcher community to build research culture institutionally: for many of them, IIHS was their first exposure to urban research. The Chatbox, for example, has now gradually expanded to a space that researchers from outside the institution have begun to seek out as well to test works in progress and present early research in a safe space that offers collegial interactions and constructive feedback.

The IIHS Research Programme now undertakes a wide range of functions, from providing support on research grant management, developing research communications, and helping with building and maintaining partner networks. As IIHS and the IIHS Research Programme grew, we con-

tinued to incrementally add different elements that enhanced our abilities to do research. For instance, realizing the need for context-specific research ethics frameworks that were suitable to our work, we built a custom-designed research ethics process as well as teaching and learning materials to enable ethical research. We created opportunities within the institution through a range of activities to build the capacity of the faculty, especially for early career researchers, to develop independent research agendas, for example by offering an internal competitive grant that provides seed funding for experimental research. In addition, we also set up platforms that would help with building a larger research community through public talks, annual conferences, and doctoral workshops to create safe spaces to share work in progress, get constructive feedback, and identify potential collaborators.²

In addition to processes and systems of the kind I have described above, the IIHS Research Programme has also emerged as a critical archive of institutional memory, not only for ourselves but also for many of our partners. This has enabled us to learn from our experiences and build mechanisms that can be applied across the different kinds of work we do to deal with a range of problems as they emerge. This has also created opportunities for synergies across our research work and helped us to identify chances for innovation. Drawing on our collective learning, I outline here four key aspects of the research process that highlight some of the critical challenges as well as opportunities.

2.1 Building a shared research process

The framing of the research process or project to be undertaken itself is critical to be able to build equitable partnerships which are then the foundation of ethical and equitable research. By “equitable” I mean a research process where all participants and stakeholders are treated fairly and are able to benefit from the outcomes of the work and also the process itself. The ability to build long-standing partnerships across disciplinary and geographical boundaries that are rooted in mutual respect and trust is critical to be able to continue to do work, even when unforeseen circumstances emerge: for instance, our ability at IIHS to continue to do research through the pandemic as well as funding cuts was in large part due to long-standing relationships that are built on mutual trust and respect with our partners. The relationship that we have with our partners domestically and globally has emerged over time and through doing work together on a range of issues. One example is the process through

²More information on the various public-facing research events at IIHS is available via the following links for our public talk series (<https://iihs.co.in/iihs-events/publics/>, last access: 27 June 2024), our annual research conference (<https://iihs.co.in/research/conferences/#urban-arc>, last access: 27 June 2024), and the doctoral workshop (<https://iihs.co.in/research/phd-workshop-2024/>, last access: 27 June 2024).

which the IIHS Curriculum was developed: our interdisciplinary curriculum emerged out of a 2-year-long process that involved consultations and meetings with academics, practitioners, and researchers across the world to build a shared understanding of what an interdisciplinary urban curriculum should be. Many of these individuals and institutions have continued to work with us on a range of research, teaching, and practice projects. I would like to reiterate here the importance of the time commitment that those who were involved with this process made that went beyond the demands of any specific project and has resulted in long-standing partnerships that can now be activated at short notice. Our approach to building partnerships continues to be one that prioritizes building long-term relationships across multiple types of activities, not just research proposals and fundraising.

The process of doing research needs to be constructed equitably across two levels: first, partnerships we build with other researchers (especially in the case of north–south partnerships) and second, with the communities in which we work – for example, within the government, the private sector, or marginalized and precarious populations. In the context of partnerships built with other researchers, we need to insist on building shared frameworks within which research takes place because this also determines how it is used, by whom, and to what ends. An example of this is the current requirement from funders to make data from research projects available on shared repositories for broader use. Examples include UKRI's open-data policy (UKRI, 2021), their open-access policy (UKRI, 2021), and the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC)'s open-data statement (IDRC, 2018). In the absence of a shared framework that shapes research, this open data sharing can become exploitative, resulting in data-mining practices, for instance, that leave researchers who come from less powerful contexts at a disadvantage. Addressing the second aspect, it is important to build a frame that allows for expanded participation from not only a range of researchers but also from respondents and communities that are the focus of the research in the process itself. For example, in the context of work that colleagues at IIHS have undertaken with labour unions, a survey instrument was designed collectively with the unions to also simultaneously collect data that would enable them to make demands more effectively. While not expensive financially, this does need an investment in time and a willingness to listen to all stakeholders in the process, valourizing all types of knowledge. This then leads to the building of a shared interest and investment in the process and contributes to building mutual trust, and the eventual outcomes benefit all participants in the process.

Building an ethical and equitable research process becomes even more important in times of crises – it builds flexibility in partnerships and enables support not only within the research community, but also with respondents and other participants in the research process.

2.2 The research funding process

There is much that has been written on the challenges around accessing research funding (see, for example, Aagaard et al., 2021; Bloch and Sørensen, 2014; Mawdsley et al., 2014; Sami, 2023). Along with challenges around publishing and accessing knowledge, the ability to access research funding is perhaps one of the biggest obstacles for researchers based in southern institutions (Duque, 2023; Keith and Parnell, 2023; Tucker, 2023), but it is also perhaps the most difficult to solve for. The emphases on grants, funding calls, and the proposals themselves tend to emerge largely from a northern- or western-centric frame and draw on ideas that have evolved in and for those contexts. The outcomes of research grants also largely derive from the imaginations of universities and research institutions situated in the Global North. These tend to focus on conventional academic outputs in the form of peer-reviewed publications. In the instances that policy impact is included, it is often interpreted very narrowly and in specific pre-determined frames. For instance, knowledge institutions in the south are more often hybrid institutions that undertake teaching and research (which are imagined as the domains of universities in the Global North). But most southern knowledge institutions also take on other work, such as offering policy support, undertaking a range of implementation and practice-oriented projects, and reimagining what counts as teaching and learning. In the context of an institution like IIHS and others like it, all of these are critical to build a robust research ecosystem, since they constantly and continually feed into each other. To illustrate, the PEAK Urban project³ enabled us to build a contextualized approach to research and policy in the Indian urban context. Much of the work that was done under PEAK has enabled transformative policy solutions over a long period of time for a range of state governments in India, including shaping COVID response strategies, offering teaching that draws on current research as well as urban policy as it takes shape, and equipping our learners to respond to problems in real time. Research funding frames often do not allow for this kind of flexibility with the emphasis largely on academic outputs.

Additionally, except in a few cases, the overall approach is also often predetermined in terms of theory, method, and output. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, these are also increasingly informed and led by political decision-making processes rather than emerging from the kinds of research that are needed, building on earlier and ongoing work and partnerships. There is less and less room for open-ended research with grant timelines become shorter and more projected. There is also an increasing imperative for these out-

³PEAK Urban was a multi-year, multi-country research project funded by UK Research and Innovation as part of the UK government's Global Challenges Research Fund that aimed to aid decision-making on sustainable urban futures. For more on PEAK Urban, please see: <https://www.peak-urban.org/> (last access: 27 June 2024).

comes to be “market-oriented” – this is unfortunate because it reduces the space for innovation and thinking that emerges from more open-ended research (Tucker, 2023). We need to develop frames that are broader and not only drawn from northern-/western-centric imaginations of research. It is critical to open up the research funding process to include more broad-based participation in creating the frame itself: some of this must come through pushing back against participation in research projects where the frame and/or approach is not collectively produced. This is not easy to do for multiple reasons: there is a real risk of loss of funding if partners and/or funders do not agree with this approach. There are also legitimate concerns about the time it takes to arrive at shared understandings and collectively produced research frames, which may not fit in current funding time frames. It is encouraging however to see many funders moving towards a two-step approach to proposal development, where they offer a planning or a development grant to selected consortia or groups to enable them to use the funding support and time to work towards a collectively designed proposal. It remains to be seen how this will actually play out. It also comes from being able to have frank and open conversations with partners and funders about equity in building a shared research agenda.

There is also an imperative for institutions and funders situated in the Global South to start building funding infrastructures that invest in south–south partnerships and on more open-ended research. Some of this does take place bilaterally – for example, through mobility grants that are offered by governments for research scholar exchanges. However, in most cases, it is a north–south exchange, and rarely do such grants include the social sciences or the humanities. These are all large asks and may seem daunting, but it is through changing these that we can begin to open up knowledge production networks and level the playing field.

2.3 Co-producing research

The notion of co-produced research is closely related to the ability to build a shared research process and frame. However, it needs to expand participation not only to all research partners but to include the subjects of the research as well. It is also the implementation of a shared research agenda: developing an agenda together is not enough – it needs to actively involve all stakeholders through the process of framing, doing, and disseminating research. Truly co-produced research needs to find ways of sharing research outcomes and benefits across all stakeholders. It is critically important to find ways to work with respondent communities, for example, to produce outputs that are meaningful and useful and to identify interventions that communities in which research is being conducted might need. In order to do this, there is a need to reimagine the kinds of outputs and outcomes that research needs to produce. In our work, we have found a range of ways in which both the process and outcomes of

the projects are of value to a wide range of participants: for instance, through a long-term project on urban planning pedagogy and its relationship to urban equity, we were able to include a component on life-long learning as part of our research focus which included not just classroom-based learning but also communities of urban activists. As part of this, we worked with colleagues from these communities to continue to develop a series of workshops that were taught collectively. These not only informed our research on urban pedagogy but also led to crucial capacity-building for activist communities across India. Such initiatives are possible only with the existence of a larger umbrella framework such as that which the IIHS Research Programme provides for us within the institution. These initiatives are sustained by their institutionalization within the IIHS Research Programme and enjoy a longer lifespan than single research projects would be able to sustain.

2.4 Dissemination of research

My fourth and last point is on the dissemination of research and the platforms through which this takes place. While this has been a long-standing concern for researchers, accessing academic writing and publishing is becoming increasingly difficult for researchers who lack the resources to pay for journal access. This effectively shuts them out of the process since academic outputs are critical to be able to participate competitively in accessing research funding. In addition, funders and donors are now beginning to mandate making outputs as well as the raw data from research projects open access. This move is deeply problematic and raises questions about extractive research and the ethics of this process. This process of data access and the ability to draw on it is also not always equal – it is rare for southern researchers to have access to similar data on/from the north and even less to be able to draw on it to produce comparative research. This adds yet another layer of complexity to building viable research ecosystems outside the northern and western university frame.

Publishing through open-access journals is yet another obstacle for researchers that do not have access to resources to pay for these – article processing charges or APCs vary widely; for example, the range for Wiley is between USD 1000 to 5000, while SAGE Publishing charges USD 3000. In the absence of institutional resources to support these charges, researchers face obstacles not only in disseminating their work but also in accessing further research funding. In addition to the financial cost, there are also other considerations: for example, how we can share authorship equitably across research partners and the subjects of the research, as well as the relevance of publishing in journals and platforms that circulate in very specific academic and knowledge geographies that tend to exclude others. There are also long-standing questions about language and the dominance of English in journal publishing. Changing these is critical

for equitable participation in research networks. There are several ways in which this is already beginning to happen: for example, reimagining the kinds of outputs that are valorized through research grants, journals that are more inclusive in their publishing and review practices, creating platforms and spaces that enable more open sharing and that also provide language and editorial support, and growing options to build capacity to write.

My intention here has been to encourage us as researchers to not look only at specific aspects or challenges of the research process that are exacerbated through crisis situations. Rather I encourage us to take a larger systemic view and begin to put processes and mechanisms in place that enable the creation of robust research ecosystems irrespective of their geographical location. These are time-intensive processes and particularly for resource-constrained institutions may seem a luxury. But I would also encourage us to not view these through the lens of research funding or resource constraints alone. There is much that can be done in the absence of funding, but it does require commitment in terms of time and patience: these are not investments with quick turnarounds but will pay off in the long run. I also want to call on researchers who are more experienced and better established, whether in the north or south, to actively push towards a broader and more inclusive research culture, which is critical to enable us to work through the range of challenges and crises that we face now and those that are yet to come. However, as I hope I have been able to show from the IIHS experience, it is possible to incrementally build towards these both within institutions and by investing in building communities of research across institutions.

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