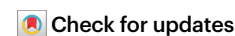


# African researchers must be full participants in behavioural science research

Winnie Mughogho, Jennifer Adhiambo & Patrick S. Forscher



Behavioural science involves understanding humans. However, it fails if it develops a limited understanding of humanity – 17% of whom who live in Africa. Africa’s voice must therefore be included in behavioural science research. Collaborations with African researchers should be grounded in respect.

Public policy has been experiencing a behavioural renaissance. Policy makers in august bodies such as the World Bank and the United Nations are beginning to recognize that one must understand human behaviour and the context that shapes it to understand how people will react to a policy intervention. Yet not all contexts are represented in the research that forms the backbone of behaviourally informed policy. For example, an audit of the top 20 international development journals found that between 1990 and 2019, 73% of the papers were published by researchers in the Global North and fewer than 16% by researchers in the Global South<sup>1</sup>. The situation for Africa is especially imbalanced. For instance, in psychology (one of the disciplines that forms the backbone of behavioural science), one audit found that less than 1% of both lead researchers and research samples in some of its top journals are African<sup>2</sup>.

In areas of behavioural science that do have a stronger history of research in Africa, ‘research in Africa’ has meant taking African people simply as objects of study. Yet developing a robust behavioural science that works for Africa requires making room for African researchers – not merely studying African participants. Behavioural scientists research the things that spark their interest. Because some aspects of life are different inside and outside Africa, African behavioural scientists may choose to study, understand and develop theories around topics that non-African individuals would not. These could include topics such as the use of mobile money, land use conflicts and the motivational power of shame. The result will be a stronger and richer behavioural science.

Including African researchers as full partners would not only bring benefits, but would also mitigate the substantial risks caused by the vast gulf in assumptions between researchers and funders – most of whom are not African – and everyday Africans. Consider the World Bank, an organization whose mandate is to eliminate poverty, including in Africa. A survey by the World Bank found that 42% of its staff believed that Nairobi residents living in poverty would agree that “vaccines are risky because they can cause sterilization”. In reality, only 11% of a sample of Nairobi residents living in poverty agreed<sup>3</sup>. Had the World Bank acted on the beliefs of its staff, they would have wasted resources on interventions to solve a problem that was not there. The risk of this sort of error in judgment can



be mitigated by including context experts among the teams that conduct research.

## The obstacles faced by African researchers

Despite the importance of including African researchers in behavioural science research, substantial barriers work to obstruct their inclusion.

The first of these is limited local research skills and capacity. A career in research is a fairly new pursuit for Africans, and behavioural science as a field is even newer. African education is examination-oriented. Learners therefore focus on getting their qualifications more than they do fostering creativity and building critical skills, which are necessary for conducting research<sup>4</sup>. Higher educational institutions do not invest much in research and in their students, partly because their limited funds are channelled towards infrastructure and operational costs. Even African countries as a whole spend very little on research. In 2018, spending on research and development in sub-Saharan Africa stood at 0.4% of gross domestic product, falling short of the 1% target of the African Union<sup>5</sup>. This leaves many young Africans ill-equipped to pursue a career in research.

The second obstacle is the heavy cost of research. A study in Nigeria found that research professionals, and especially academics, had to use their own salaries to conduct, publish and disseminate their research at conferences<sup>6</sup>. Resources are required at every stage of this process, whether it is at the design phase or during literature reviews (where paywalls obstruct access to scientific papers). Publishing in open-access journals to increase the accessibility of their work also proves costly. A study of 40 top ecology journals found that open-access article processing charges were on average US \$3,150, which is prohibitively expensive when considering that (for

instance) average monthly salaries for a lecturer can be as low as \$531 in Madagascar and \$365 in Ethiopia<sup>7</sup>.

The third obstacle is power imbalances with foreign partners. To overcome the challenge of limited financial resources, African researchers have collaborated with colleagues from high-income countries who bring both resources and expertise. This has provided a platform for local researchers to take part in the research process and learn from their foreign counterparts. Because the resources originate from the West, the research agenda also tends to be shaped there. At times, this agenda does not line up with the priorities of the local context or investigators. A sample of professors at Uganda's Makerere University described that almost all of their university research is donor-funded, therefore making it difficult to pursue interests outside of donor priorities<sup>8</sup>. One professor stated that they are forced to research topics of global interest such as environmental protection, the sustainable development goals and gender equality, which are of importance but do not always align with the expertise of the researcher<sup>8</sup>.

The power imbalances can also result in research that is unethical. For example, in one study conducted with Indigenous San groups living in poverty in Namibia, DNA samples were extracted without any approval of the community<sup>9</sup>. Results from this study were published, sharing details that were private to the community and referring to the people using terms such as 'Bushmen' (meaning 'uncivilized people'), which the community leaders considered pejorative and inappropriate. The ethical review boards that reviewed the study did not consult published research guidelines that should be followed when conducting research with Indigenous populations. The researchers also refused to share consent videos that were taken of the rural sample with San leadership<sup>9</sup>. Effectively, ethical oversight was 'dumped' on a group of people with little familiarity with the research process and their individual rights.

These obstacles make it difficult for African researchers to participate as full and equal partners whose expertise is respected by the global research community.

## What we need moving forward

Firstly, we need to build local research skills and capacity. Before researchers can share their knowledge, they should possess the skills to generate it. Beyond practical training that includes design, data collection and analysis, they require mentorship. Seasoned research professionals can spend their time running younger researchers through the research process, highlighting what is required and how to produce high-impact and high-quality research. These are voices that can be trained to communicate their learnings in a way that is culturally appropriate, relevant to local populations and understood by a wider audience.

Our workplace – the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, a behavioural science nonprofit organization headquartered in Nairobi – provides an example of how to embody these priorities. Busara hires students and graduates from local universities, such as Kenyatta University, and frequently partners with local organizations to execute its work. In one example earlier this year, Busara invited masters' students from these universities to take part in a joint project to forecast the generalizability of behavioural science claims to East Africa.

Secondly, African researchers need funding. The heavy cost of research should not be what keeps researchers from participating in research. Multilateral donors can increase their funding for

African research and increase the number of open calls, so that African researchers can pursue their own independent interests. Open-access journals can provide publication waivers for low- and lower-middle-income groups, while taking care that the administrative burden of obtaining the waiver is contained. Such initiatives can aid in supporting the accessibility and visibility of research by African researchers.

Thirdly, local researchers should be treated as full partners in the research process. Collaborations between the Global North and South should benefit both parties without exploitation. Data in Africa should not be mined in the way that its raw materials have been – the locals providing the land, and the benefits accruing to those with the mining capacity (the high-income country). Whether academic or nonacademic research, local experts should be part of the design process to provide a sense of local ownership and to improve relevance. Locals are best placed to lead research design and identify the 'gaps' that need to be addressed. Collaborative partnership in research is an indication that cultures and values are being respected in the study. Bilateral and multilateral donors can also put in requirements for the presence of at least one local subject-matter expert on the team involved in their design and evaluation of the policies.

If African researchers can at least be equipped in this manner, they will have the resources and motivation to contribute towards research conversations even in the behavioural sciences.

## A sunny future for behavioural science in Africa




Despite the challenges, the future is a hopeful one for behavioural science in Africa. Research is expanding rapidly in Africa, and between 2012 and 2016 the region was reported to have the strongest growing scientific production in the world at 38.6%. The number of authors equally grew, at an astounding rate of 43% over the same period – 10% higher than the next-fastest-growing author population in the world (Asia)<sup>10</sup>. There are also rays of hope that Africans will be included as full partners in research; the Ministry of Health in Rwanda now requires local authorship on all studies published using local data<sup>11</sup>, for example.

Young African researchers have great potential as active participants in global research and opportunities for learning are emerging. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media sites presented opportunities for upcoming researchers in low-income countries to experience learning in well-established institutions in the West through online remote-learning setups. An example is the 'Remote Student Exchange' that was initiated by Busara Center's founder, Johannes Haushofer. This programme allowed Africans from low- and middle-income countries to participate in free online university classes hosted at high-resource universities. Such initiatives offered advanced learning opportunities for prospective African researchers. Other initiatives have been set up to support Africa's growth in research, such as the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) network's 'EGAP Learning Days'. This workshop equips principal investigators in the Global South with research skills such as design, statistical analysis and research presentation.

There is an African quote that reads 'Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter'. In research, that may look like misinterpreted results from Africa producing accolades in the West. Africa needs to learn to write and needs to learn to speak. Research thrives off a diversity of voices sharing their varied perspectives and experience, and learning from one another. Building the research capacity of researchers in Africa will mean that collaborations between

# Comment

the Global North and South, and even South and South, will produce a more holistic picture of the human experience.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.