



Building Equitable International Research Partnerships

Practical Training for Researchers in
Thailand, Cambodia and Laos



Presenter Biography

Alex Phillips

Alex Phillips is the Research Development Manager at the University of Derby and co-founder of the African Research Network at Derby, a platform that strengthens partnerships, research capacity, and impact across the African continent. He leads strategic initiatives to enhance research bidding, develop academic capability, and grow the University's external funding portfolio, with particular strengths in biomedical sciences, STEM, and interdisciplinary research.

Before joining Derby, Alex worked at the University of Nottingham, where he managed major international research projects across Africa and led several UK-based educational randomised controlled trials, supporting evidence-informed practice and innovation in schools and learning environments. Before moving into academia, he worked in both the UK Parliament and the European Parliament, contributing to policy, research, and international development agendas.



Session Goals

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

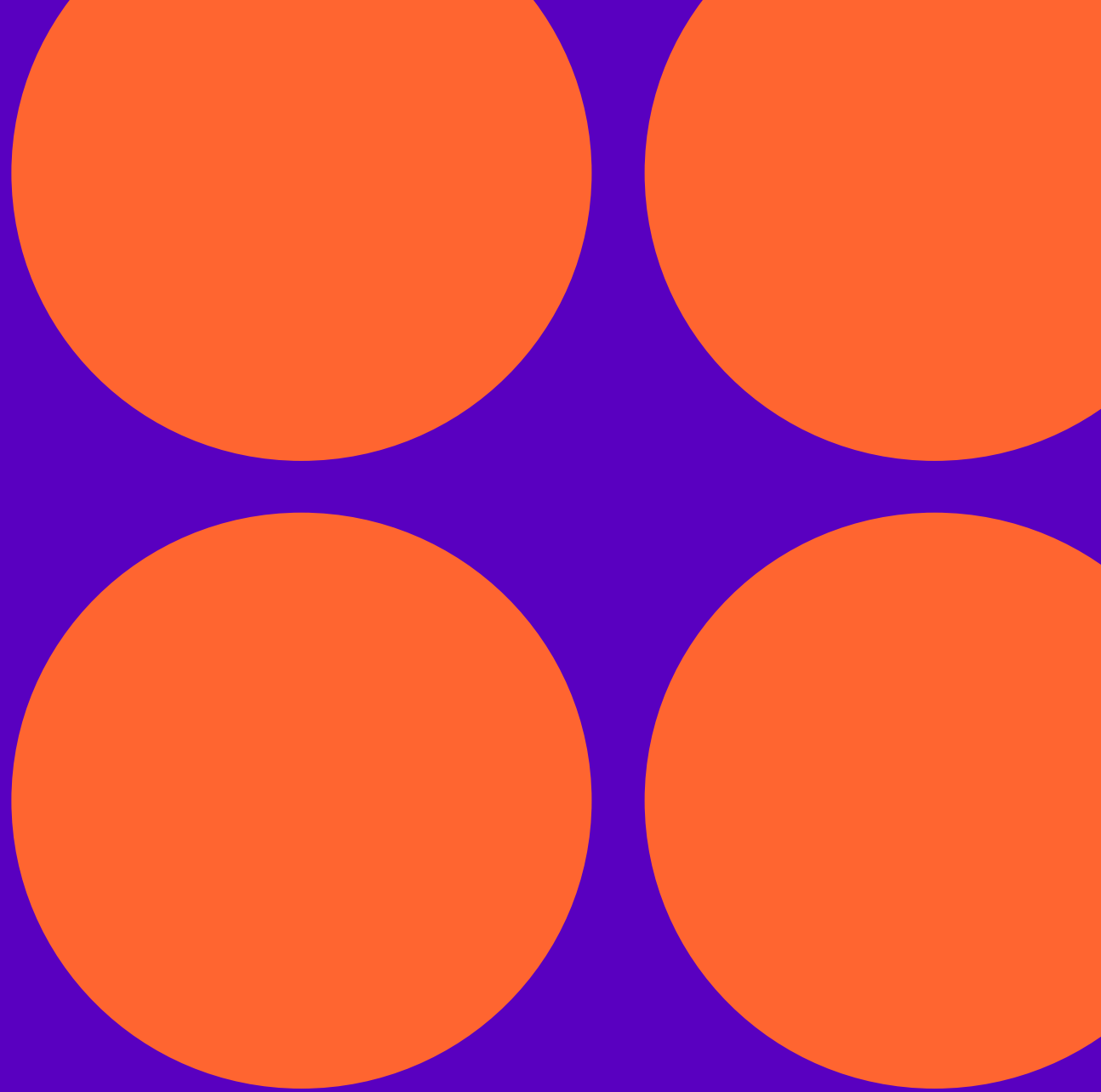
- Understand why equity does not mean equal
- Identify characteristics of equitable partnerships
- Recognise common inequities in ASEAN–Global North collaborations
- Apply co-creation and shared governance principles
- Evaluate budgets for fairness and transparency
- Analyse an imbalanced partnership scenario
- Produce a 3-point action plan for governance, roles, and budget
- Build confidence to advocate for equity in collaborations

Your Role as Participants

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- ⌘ Engage actively: Participate in discussions, group work, and Slido questions.
- ⌘ Reflect honestly: Share your real experiences of international partnerships, good and bad, to help the whole group learn.
- ⌘ Bring your national context: Use examples from Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia to ground the discussion in regional realities.
- ⌘ Think critically about equity: Consider where partnerships have been fair or unfair, and how equity differs from equality.
- ⌘ Collaborate with others: Work in mixed groups, listen to diverse viewpoints, and build shared solutions.
- ⌘ Challenge assumptions respectfully: Question models or practices that may reinforce inequality, even unintentionally.
- ⌘ Co-create solutions: Contribute to developing practical, realistic action plans for more equitable partnerships.
- ⌘ Apply learning to your own practice: Identify concrete actions you can take to strengthen fairness and shared leadership in future collaborations.

Equitable Research Partnerships





“What one word
describes an equitable
research partnership?”



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Equity $\neq$ Equality

Equity ≠ Equality

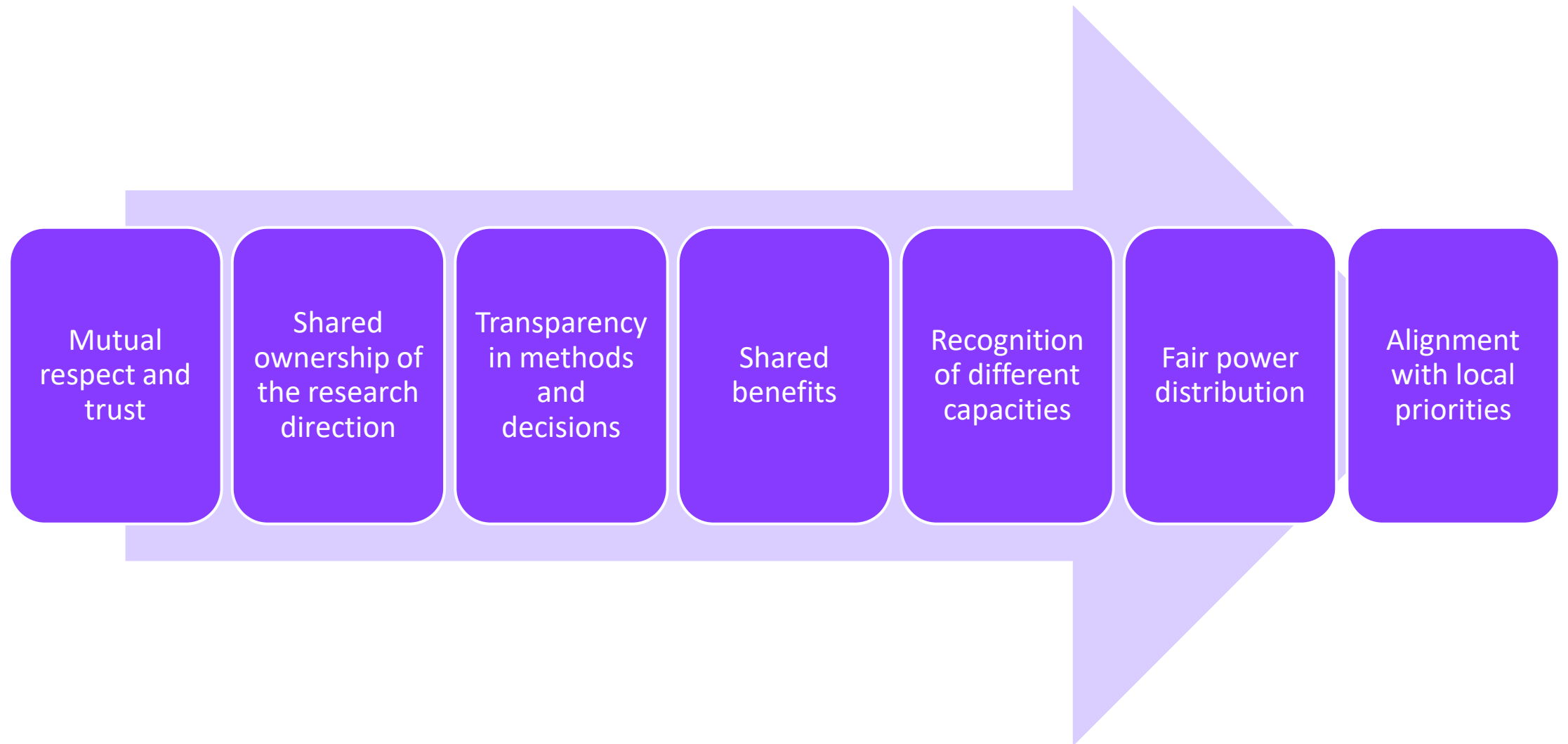
⌘ **Equality** = everyone receives the same

⌘ **Equity** = everyone receives what they need to contribute fully

Examples:

- One partner may need more fieldwork funding
- Another partner may need translation support
- UK partners may need compliance reporting support
- One partner may lead community engagement
- Funders may restrict what is available to international partners

Principles of Equitable Partnerships



What Makes Partnerships Inequitable?

- ❖ Northern-led agenda setting
- ❖ Late involvement of partners
- ❖ Unequal budget distribution
- ❖ Token authorship
- ❖ Imposed methodologies
- ❖ Administrative burdens placed on local institutions





“What barriers to equity
have *you* faced in
research partnerships?”



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Scientists conduct helicopter research when they collect data from developing countries and marginalized communities with little to no involvement from local researchers and community members. Helicopter research also occurs when researchers take data out of the country, they collected it from without either providing benefit to or sharing the results with the community.

Dana Al-Hindi, *How a South African community's request for its genetic data raises questions about ethical and equitable research, The Conversation*. Available at: https://theconversation.com/how-a-south-african-communitys-request-for-its-genetic-data-raises-questions-about-ethical-and-equitable-research-166940?utm_medium=email (Accessed: 28 February 2026).

Common Barriers to Equity for Thai, Lao, and Cambodian Researchers

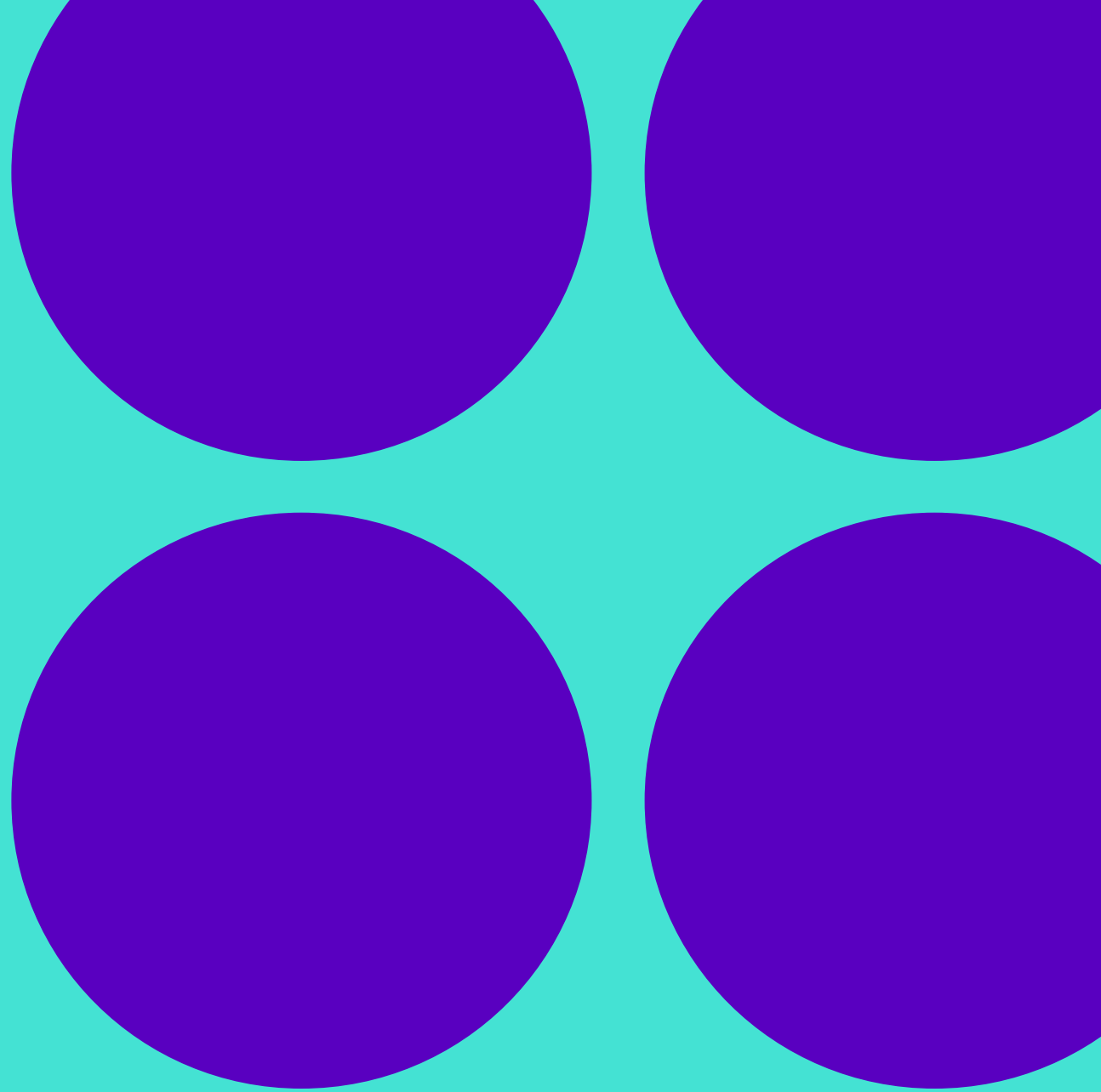
- ❖ Limited access to admin/finance staff
- ❖ Slower institutional procurement
- ❖ Local/national ethics reviews
- ❖ Language constraints
- ❖ Hierarchical decision-making norms
- ❖ Donor-driven timelines



Why Equitable Partnerships Matter to Funders

- ⌘ **To ensure fair and non-extractive research:** Funders expect partnerships that distribute power, leadership, and decision-making fairly, avoiding extractive models where one institution dominates.
- ⌘ **To produce research that is relevant and impactful:** Equitable partnerships lead to context-appropriate methods, meaningful local engagement, and stronger outcomes for communities and policymakers.
- ⌘ **To strengthen trust and longterm collaboration:** Research built on mutual benefit, respect, and clear communication creates durable partnerships and more sustainable impact.
- ⌘ **To support capacity and knowledge exchange on all sides:** Funders increasingly highlight shared learning, local capacity strengthening, and reciprocal expertise as essential, not optional.
- ⌘ **Because equity improves quality and credibility:** Diverse leadership, co-creation, and fair budgeting generate more rigorous proposals and better implementation, directly aligning with funder assessment criteria.
- ⌘ **Equity is now a standard expectation:** Major funders explicitly incorporate equity principles into their guidance, evaluation criteria, and contracting conditions.

Research Funders and Equitable Partnerships



What United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) Expect



**UK Research
and Innovation**

- ❖ Expects equitable partnerships in all international research.
- ❖ Requires projects to be locally relevant, culturally appropriate, and co-created.
- ❖ Emphasises fair power-sharing, ethics in context, and capacity strengthening.
- ❖ Looks for transparency around roles, budgets, and governance.

What The British Academy Expect



- ❖ Strongly committed to mutual benefit, fairness, and shared leadership.
- ❖ Funds and supports researchers working through equitable international collaborations.
- ❖ Emphasises reciprocity, shared ownership of research, and collaborative agenda-setting.
- ❖ Encourages Global South leadership and balanced budget distribution.

What The British Council Expect



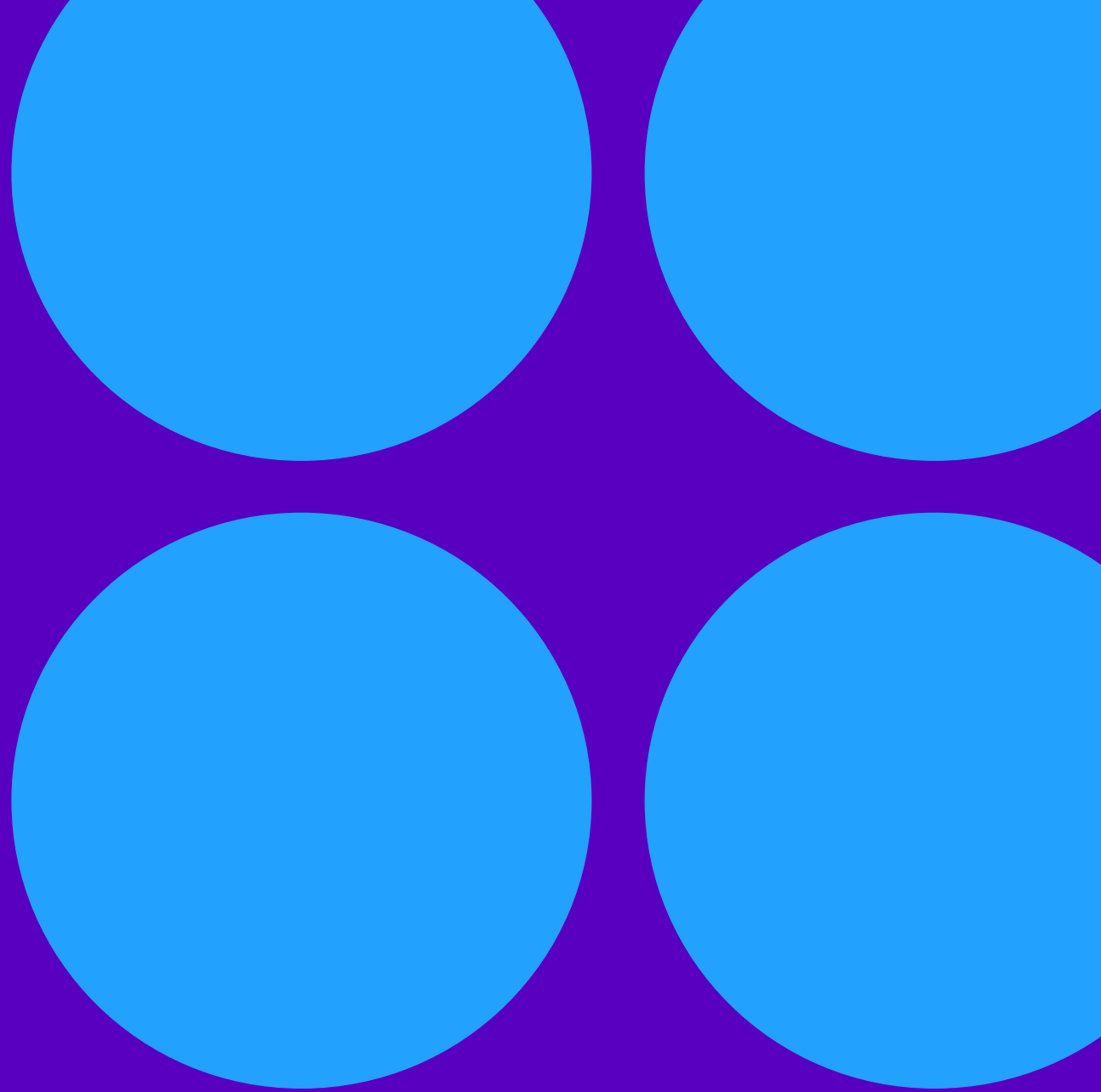
- ❖ Promotes trust-based, culturally grounded research partnerships.
- ❖ Encourages co-creation, respect for local knowledge, and inclusive methods.
- ❖ Highlights the need to address power imbalances in knowledge production.
- ❖ Expects equity to be embedded in design, delivery, and dissemination.

What Horizon Europe Looks For

HORIZON EUROPE

- ❖ Horizon Europe emphasises collaborative design, co-creation, and shared decision-making.
- ❖ Partnerships must demonstrate benefits for partner countries, not just EU institutions.
- ❖ Projects are expected to be grounded in local priorities, not externally imposed agendas.
- ❖ Inclusion & Fairness
- ❖ Horizon Europe supports diverse participation and inclusive, equitable

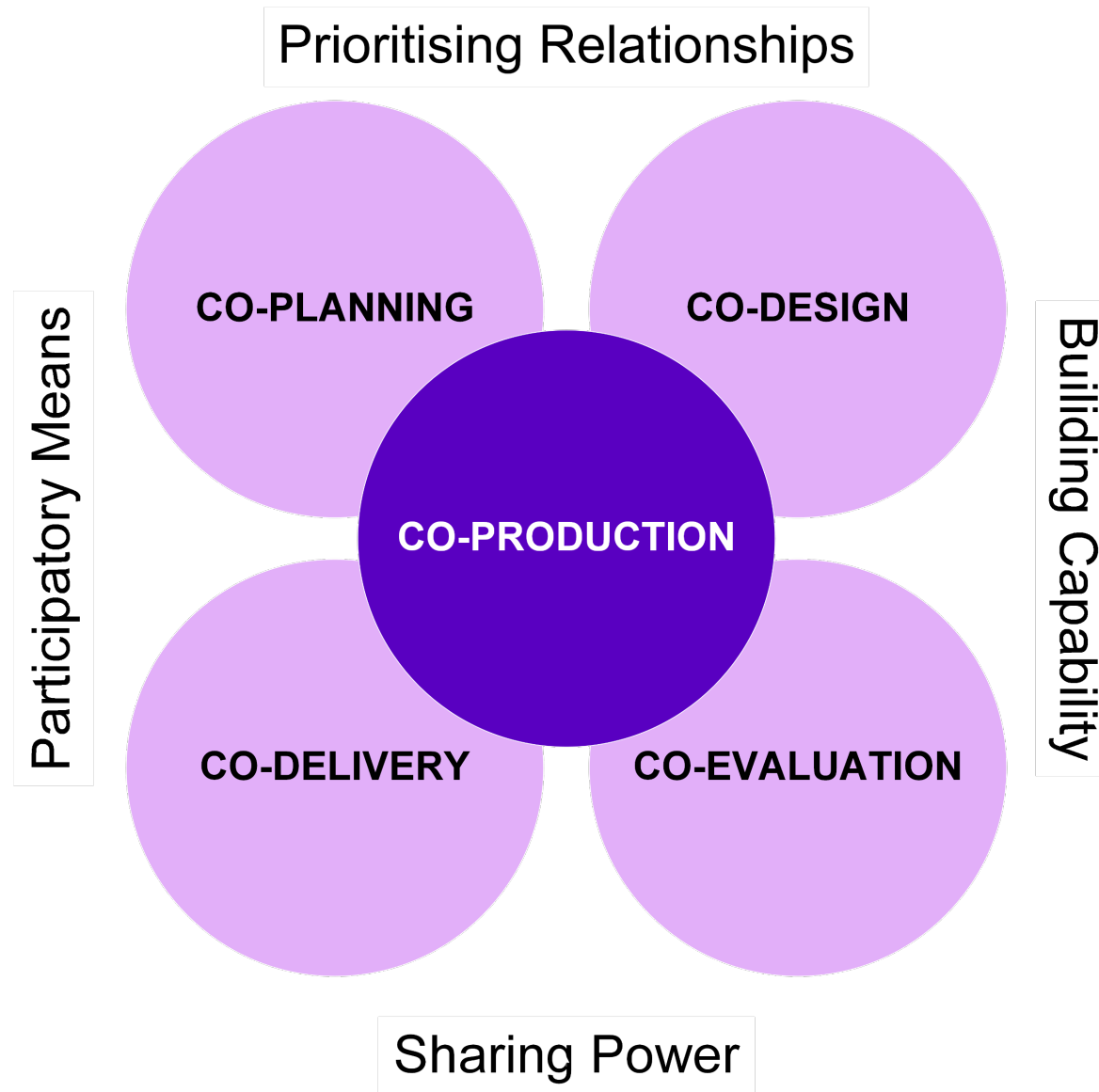
Co-creation





- **Not:** *“We drafted the proposal, please comment.”*
- **But:** *“Let’s design this project together from the start.”*

Principles of Co-Production





“First, in terms of ethics, individuals most affected by particular phenomena should have a say in shaping the direction of associated research. Second, in terms of impact, when research reflects the needs and interests of end-users, the results are more likely to be used. Third, in terms of efficiency, considerable resources are wasted when applied research fails to contribute to practice or policy due to irrelevance or triviality of the topic”

(Evans et al., 2021, p.2; see also Chalmers et al., 2009, 2014)



MAKERERE UNIVERSITY
Kampala, Uganda



Dr Anthony Mugeere

Senior Lecturer at the Department of
Sociology & Anthropology
Makerere University, Uganda

Co-Creation: Grounding Research in Real Needs

Research must be grounded in the needs of the population, communities, and national priorities.

True co-creation means:

- ⌘ Joint definition of the problem based on local population needs
- ⌘ Aligning research questions with national and regional priorities
 - Thailand: human capital, inequality, climate resilience, sustainable agriculture
 - ASEAN: climate resilience, digital transformation, inclusive growth, health system strengthening
- ⌘ Ensuring methods and tools reflect local economic, environmental, and cultural contexts
- ⌘ Engaging policymakers early so research is policy-relevant
- ⌘ Ensuring communities and local institutions shape the agenda

Co-designing Proposals with International Partners

- ❖ Start from locally-defined needs and priorities.
- ❖ Engage partners at the earliest stage. Not after drafting.
- ❖ Co-write methodology, budget, and impact plans.
- ❖ Ensure balanced responsibilities, leadership, and authorship.
- ❖ Share administrative burdens fairly.
- ❖ Build time for consultation/local review

Ensuring Meaningful Impact

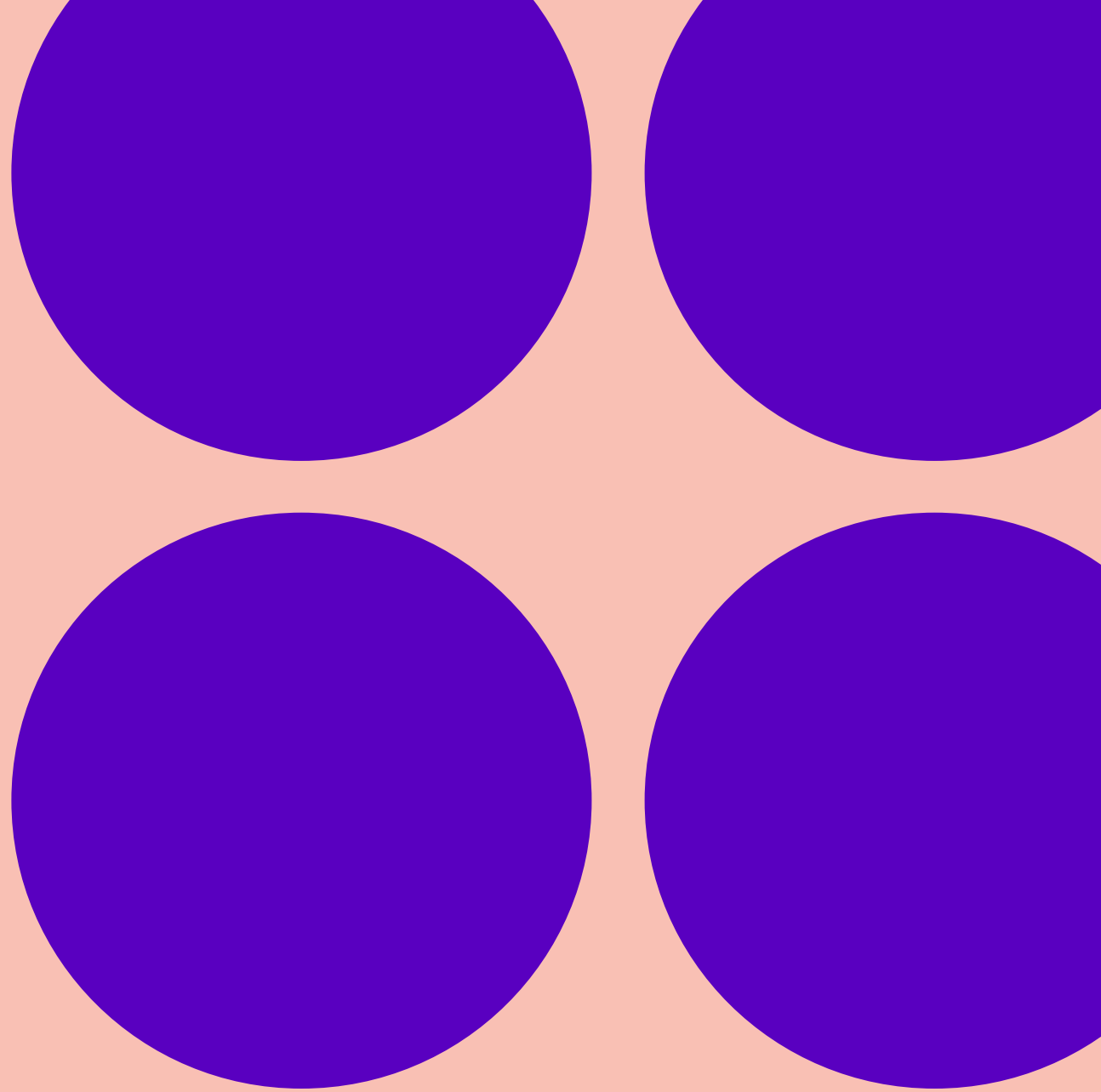
Impact in Global South projects should include:

- ⌘ Improvements for communities and practitioners.
- ⌘ Influencing policy or practice.
- ⌘ Strengthening partner institutions.
- ⌘ Enhancing local research skills and infrastructure.
- ⌘ Ensuring findings are accessible in-country.
- ⌘ Long-term sustainability beyond the funding period.

Monitoring & Evaluation

- ⌘ Track capacity building outcomes.
- ⌘ Measure policy/practice influence.
- ⌘ Assess sustainability beyond funding.

Fair Budgeting



Fair Budgeting & Resource Allocation



- ❖ Realistic fieldwork costs
- ❖ Administrative and translation support
- ❖ Community engagement funding
- ❖ Fair institutional overheads
- ❖ Direct funding flows
- ❖ Contingency for currency fluctuations

Signs of Budget Inequity

Budget share does not match responsibilities

The institution doing most of the fieldwork, coordination, or community engagement receives the *smallest* budget share.

Underfunded local implementation costs

Essential local expenses, rural travel, community meetings, translation, permits, village entry, and ethics fees are not budgeted realistically.

No funding for local ethics, approvals, or administration

Multi-step approvals in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia require time and resources that are often unbudgeted.

Administrative burden pushed onto local institutions

Local partners handle procurement, reporting, logistics and compliance, but the budget for admin support sits with the external partner.

Financial control centralised in one (usually Northern) institution

Local institutions have little or no authority to manage their share of the funds, even when they conduct most activities.

Signs of Budget Inequity

Unrealistic assumptions about local costs

Budgets underestimate actual expenses for transport, accommodation, materials, community engagement or government interface.

No funding for translation or multilingual communication

Proposals ignore the need to work in Thai, Lao, Khmer or local languages for ethics, consent, and community interaction.

Little or no overhead for Thai, Lao or Cambodian institutions

Overheads are allocated unevenly, limiting local institutions' ability to support staff, administration, facilities, and long-term capacity.

Technical tasks funded abroad, while fieldwork is underfunded locally

Analytical work, training or equipment budgets are concentrated with a foreign partner while local teams lack basic operational funds.

Work packages designed abroad but implemented locally

The local partner is expected to “make it work” without adequate resources.

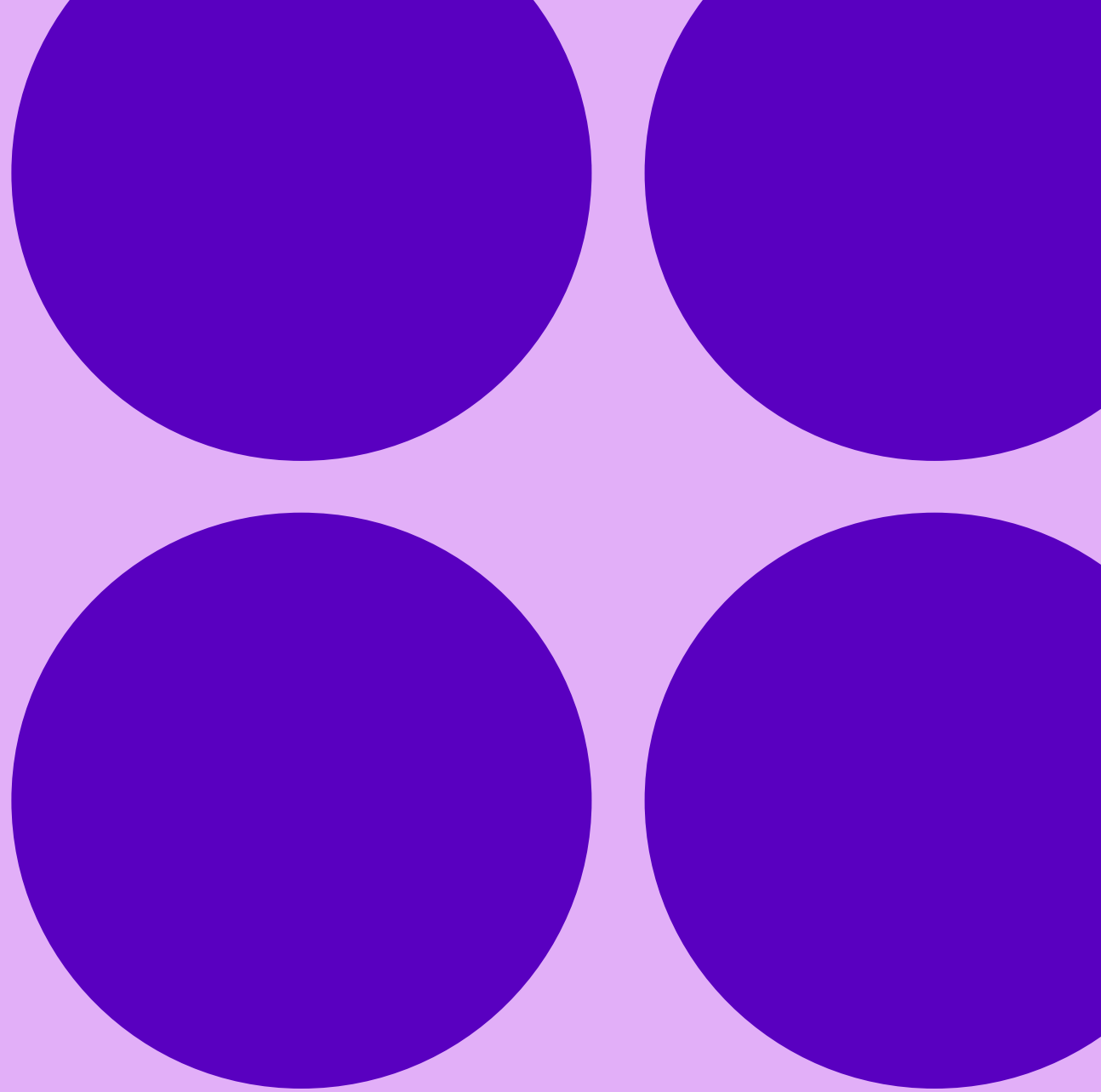


MAKERERE UNIVERSITY
Kampala, Uganda

Dr Anthony Mugeere

Senior Lecturer at the Department of
Sociology & Anthropology
Makerere University, Uganda

Power Dynamics and Ways of Working



Power Dynamics in Global South–North Partnerships

Challenges to acknowledge and address:

- ⌘ Funding often flows through Global North institutions.
- ⌘ Administrative requirements can burden local partners.
- ⌘ Imbalances in leadership, authorship, and recognition.
- ⌘ Northern timelines vs. local operational realities.
- ⌘ Infrastructure gaps (connectivity, equipment) can affect delivery.
- ⌘ Imported methodologies that ignore local knowledge/emergent priorities.

The goal: Collaboration, not extraction; partnership, not assistance.

Ensuring Equitable Partnership Working

Practical approaches:

- ⌘ Joint governance committees and decision-making.
- ⌘ Transparent budget drafting with fair resource distribution.
- ⌘ Clear agreements on data management, authorship, and leadership.
- ⌘ Shared risk management and contingency planning.
- ⌘ Allocate time and funding for in-country engagement.
- ⌘ Build reciprocal capacity (training goes both ways).

Shared Governance



- ❖ Joint Steering Committees
- ❖ Rotating chairs
- ❖ Distributed work package leadership
- ❖ Clear, transparent decisions
- ❖ Accessible minutes and documentation

Communication Structures & Agreements

Effective communication includes:

- ⌘ Predictable meeting schedules
- ⌘ Alternating time zones
- ⌘ Shared digital workspaces

Agreements should cover:

- ⌘ Roles & responsibilities
- ⌘ Data ownership
- ⌘ Authorship rules
- ⌘ Conflict resolution
- ⌘ Budget authority

How to Initiate & Sustain Collaborative Relationships

- ❖ Create a database for potential partners based on your areas of interest
- ❖ Always monitor the websites and other sources of information for any forthcoming calls for proposals
- ❖ Clearly pitch your research agenda/ideas
- ❖ Keep your networks 'alive' (check on your 'people' occasionally drop an email, WhatsApp) etc..



Case Study: An Equitable Partnership

Background:

❖ A UK–Ghana team is working together to improve how Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is taught in Ghanaian universities. The project aims to understand current practice and co-develop a practical framework to strengthen ESD across the tertiary sector.

❖ Partners

- University of Derby (UK)
- University of Education, Winneba (Ghana)
- University of Cape Coast (Ghana)

Why This Partnership Is Equitable

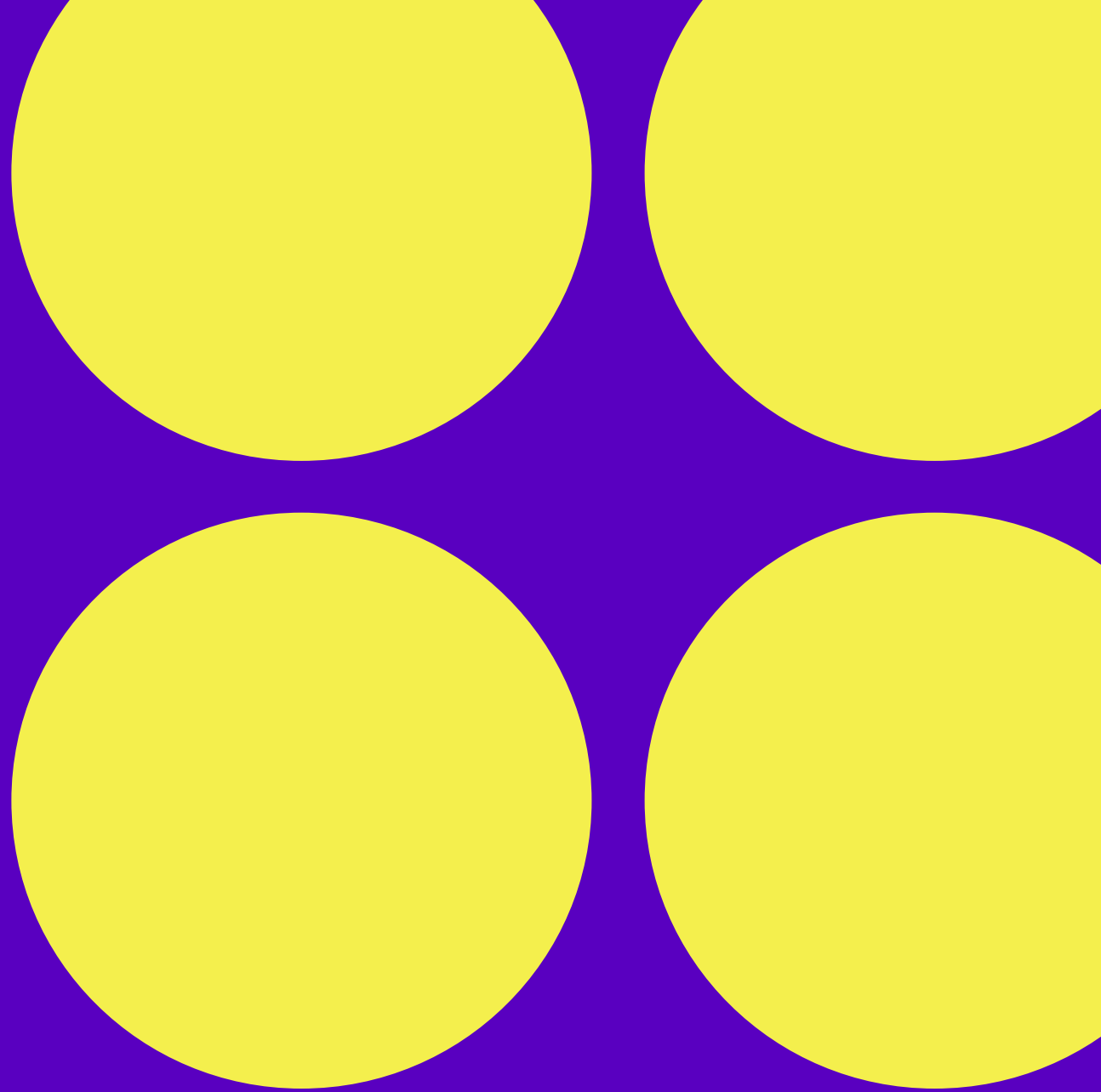
- ❖ **Co-designed:** Research questions, methods, and workshops are developed jointly.
- ❖ **Local leadership:** Ghanaian partners lead fieldwork, engagement, and national workshops.
- ❖ **Fair resourcing:** Budget supports local research assistants, travel, and in-country activities.
- ❖ **Mutual learning:** Both teams gain skills, insight, and shared experience.
- ❖ **Local impact:** The framework will support national education priorities and long-term sector change.

The Three-Pillar Framework for Equitable International Research

People	Purpose	Process
• Trust-building from the outset – early conversations, clarity of expectations • Shared leadership – Local partners leading where expertise is strongest • Clearly defined roles & responsibilities – avoids duplication and imbalance • Transparent communication practices – meeting schedules, document sharing, decision-making • Respect for institutional contexts – timelines, teaching loads, admin processes • Capacity strengthening as mutual – recognising expertise on both sides	• A problem defined from the local context • Local priority alignment – national strategies, community needs, policy gaps • Clear articulation of local partner motivations • Evidence of co-creation – joint scoping, joint drafting, shared problem framing • Impact that is locally embedded – beneficiaries, communities, practitioners • Ethical and cultural considerations integrated from the start	• Funder alignment – how the project meets call specifications and funder expectations • Co-designed methodology – not imported; appropriate to context and resources • Equitable budget distribution – resourcing partners properly, avoiding tokenism • Governance structures – steering groups, WP leads, reporting lines • Risk management – political, institutional, financial, cybersecurity, data flows • Sustainability – plans for long-term collaboration beyond the funding

Equity, Reciprocity, and Shared Benefit

Equitable Partnerships Scenario



The Mekong–UK Research Collaboration

A UK university is preparing a proposal on community-based environmental sustainability in Southeast Asia. They invite partners from Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, but:

The proposal

- 90% written already
- Research questions, methods, and impact plan set without local input
- Local partners asked to “add details later”

Roles and leadership

- All work packages led by the UK
- Local partners listed only as “coordinators”
- UK team pre-selects authors, all UK-based

Budget

- UK institution keeps ~**78%** for “management and analysis”
- Mekong partners share ~**22%**, despite doing fieldwork
- No funding for ethics approvals, translation, local travel, or community meetings

Governance and decision

- UK holds all financial control
- Meetings scheduled only in UK time zones
- Drafts circulated late, limiting meaningful input

Methods

- Tools designed for a European context
- No budget or time for translation, piloting, or cultural adaptation

Cambodian partner

- Added only to meet funder eligibility
- No defined role
- Minimal budget
- Tokenistic inclusion

What Would You Do to Fix this Partnership?

Using the scenario, discuss in groups: How would **YOU** fix this partnership?

Focus on:

1. Governance

- What decision-making structures need to change?
- How can leadership be shared?

2. Roles & Leadership

- Who should lead which work packages?
- How can local expertise shape the project design?

3. Budget & Resources

- What needs to be re-allocated?
- What must be funded (ethics, translation, travel)?

Your 3-Point Action Plan

In your group, produce a **3-point action plan** to fix the partnership:

1. Governance Action

(e.g., Rotating chairs)

2. Roles & Leadership Action

(e.g., shared authorship plan)

3. Budget Action

(e.g., local travel budget)

Link to Equitable Partnerships Scenario Task

⌘ Full details of the task can be found at:

⌘ <https://tinyurl.com/BCModule2Task>



Key Messages

- ⌘ Equity ≠ Equality: equity means fair, contextual, needs-driven
- ⌘ Co-creation must begin early
- ⌘ Governance = power. So, design it equitably
- ⌘ Budgets should reflect real workloads
- ⌘ Power dynamics can be reshaped
- ⌘ Impact is strongest when partnerships are equitable
- ⌘ <https://tinyurl.com/BCModule2HO>





*“What is one thing you
will do differently next
time you collaborate?”*

Thank You

