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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Compromise and complicity: partnership and interdependence in a global challenges research collaboration

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This article contributes to debates on international collaborations by examining contradictions between the decolonial turn and the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund which imposed Global North leadership on Global South partners. Through the lenses of compromise and complicity, the article explores how collaborators strive to work together equitably within the constraints of a UK government Official Development Assistance funding scheme. Drawing on focus group discussions with members of a research team, the article traces, first, their engagement with political and institutional constraints and, second, their articulation of collaborative compromise and productive complicity. The article foregrounds the generative potential of complicity as a productive concept that can help partners to navigate the challenges of interdependence and partnership entailed in North–South, South–South, cross-sector and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Key words compromise • complicity • global challenges • development research • collaboration

Key messages

- Strategies of compromise and complicity help secure development research funds and meet funder terms and conditions.
- Compromise is both 'being compromised' and openness to adapt practices to collaborate effectively.
- Complicity is conceptualised as morally ambiguous and a chance to share and develop best practice.

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- Compromise/complicity productively help partners navigate interdependence, participation and alliance.

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Introduction

This article analyses political and institutional constraints, and experiences of interdisciplinary cross-sector collaborations, in development research. It examines contradictions between the decolonial turn and the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) which imposed Global North leadership on Global South partners. We take as our starting point Navarro-Flores's (2009) provocative question: how do actors of the North and of the South build partnerships in environments characterised by unequal power relations? Through the lenses of compromise and complicity, the article explores how collaborators strive to work together equitably within the constraints of a UK government Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding scheme. Drawing on focus group discussions with members of a research team, the article traces, first, their engagement with funder constraints and political and institutional constraints and, second, their articulation of collaborative compromise and productive complicity. The article proposes a shift in emphasis of scholarship away from focusing solely on insurmountable power relations by instead foregrounding the generative potential of compromise and in particular complicity as productive strategies that can help partners navigate the challenges of interdependence entailed in North–South, South–South, cross-sector and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Academics and practitioners have long voiced concerns about challenges in North–South development research collaborations (Bradley, 2007), pointing to the ethical issues associated with structural inequalities and asymmetrical hierarchies underpinned by enduring colonial legacies. Some of this work highlights 'neocolonial' approaches to development research (Jentsch and Pilley, 2003; Drydyk, 2014) dominated by Northern research agendas and a residual assumption of unilinear transfers from 'donors' in the North to 'beneficiaries' in the South (Navarro-Flores, 2006). Despite Global North commitments to prioritise Southern demand-led research and capacity-building agendas (Nair and Menon, 2002; Jentsch, 2004), and a paradigm shift towards a 'partnership' model (Chapuis, 2013), the enduring power dynamic stemming from Northern leadership and the flow of funding from North to South risks reproducing some of the North–South dichotomies they intend to challenge (Standing and Taylor, 2009) and risks precluding Southern ownership of long-term development research objectives (Navarro-Flores, 2009).

More recent scholarship on international development research (Horner, 2020) has critiqued the putative distinction between Global North and Global South that is evident in the classic literature we have cited. Without legitimising this distinction,

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we acknowledge its usefulness in capturing persisting paradigms of power entrenched in colonial histories. We therefore deploy 'Global North' and 'Global South' as a shorthand that enables us to explore the feasibility (or otherwise) of equitable international partnerships in the context of a project team geographically dispersed in the UK and the central Maghreb. Calia et al (2022: 61) remind us of 'the challenge of building equal partnerships in the context of power differences between developed countries that finance research, and LMIC (Low and Middle Income Countries) where the "problems" to be solved are considered to exist'. Hierarchies are complex, intersecting and interpersonal; they 'need to be managed but cannot be managed away' (Lokot and Wake, 2021: 11). Lemmel and Signoret (2016) interrogate how 'partnership' works in practice, and Fransman et al (2021: 328) posit that systemic 'collaboration' is 'better placed to respond to the values of fairness and equity and our complex and uncertain times'. Shuayb and Brun (2021) call for a sustained, reflexive, relational 'friendship approach' rather than 'tick-the-box guidelines'. Alternatively, Nwako et al (2023: 18) argue that the duty of care should be underpinned by the research ecosystem (and not solely by strong interpersonal relationships).

The decolonial turn in the academy has generated further debates around different cultures of research and produced critiques of decontextualised global research. A decolonial approach understands research ethics (Dunford, 2017; Calia et al, 2021) and safeguarding (Daoust and Dyvik, 2022) as always already politicised, particularly insofar as they rely on definitions of vulnerability that are historically and contextually produced. Mormina and Istratii (2021) have noted that UK research capacity development is strongly associated with technical/technological solutions for material disparities, and therefore bound up with colonialism. Instead, they develop a decolonial critique that is sceptical of the power of Western science to empower LMIC researchers and institutions, proposing epistemic diversity to support local processes of knowledge production and work against coloniality by prioritising 'social value' (understood as positive, equitable, sustained impacts on individual, community, and wider societal well-being and resilience). Madsen and Adriansen (2021) also reflect on the challenges of decolonising research dynamics, arguing that privileging the standards of Global North institutions overlooks the challenges for partners of learning to navigate diverse academic contexts. Global North funders impose requirements on research partners in the Global South at every stage of the research process: from due diligence, ethics and safeguarding to intellectual property rights and data management. Fransman et al, (2018) points out that policy and legal frameworks deriving from one context are not always appropriate to other contexts.

Noxolo (2017: 342) argued that GCRF was incompatible with processes of decolonising knowledge inasmuch as 'radical power risks becoming harnessed and domesticated in Western academic spaces'. Rutazibwa (2019: 160) argued that development aid can be 'complicit in reproducing, invisibilizing and legitimizing the ills of poverty, conflict, deprivation, diseases, environmental degradation and exploitation of the colonial project'. Landau (2019: 26) noted the complicitous character of international research partnerships that 'enact and expose the inequalities, structural constraints, and historically conditioned power relations implicit in the production of knowledge'. As Schneiderman asked (in Pettigrew et al, 2004: 24): 'Where do our responsibilities lie, or with whom do we become complicit?'

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Complicity and compromise in development research

The concepts of compromise and complicity – largely framed as straightforwardly problematic in the literature we have cited – provide a useful springboard. We found resonances in compromise and complicity as strategies that helped us to reflect on our positionality vis-à-vis the declared priorities of the funder, the ethics of partnerships and the implications of development research (see also Anderson, 2021, who argues these they are under-analysed strategies that are implicated in processes of humanising studies of refuge and displacement). Our article foregrounds interpersonal experiences of compromise and complicity as lenses to examine the challenges and opportunities of North–South and South–South research collaborations.

Throughout a series of GCRF collaborations entailing two or more of the co-authors – two academics based in the UK and two civil society practitioners based in the Maghreb who have collaborated on various projects since 2016 – we have found ourselves returning to Navarro-Flores's (2009) provocative question: how can we work together equitably within the constraints of controversial UK government/ODA funding schemes? In relation to our work together on a GCRF Network Plus Maghreb Action on Displacement and Rights (MADAR), this question became especially urgent in the context of travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which dramatically delineated how we were able to work together, and the ODA budget cuts in 2021 (Imperiale and Phipps, 2022; Nwako et al, 2023), which threatened the UK institutions' ability to meet pre-existing commitments including ongoing contractual agreements with non-UK partners, thus jeopardising trust and accountability. Nwako et al (2023: 18) argue that the budget cuts demonstrate the inadequacies of current research governance; their study exposes ethical approval processes as unfit for purpose, and sheds light on 'tenuous institutional commitments to equitable South–North partnership' in the UK. We similarly reflected on the opportunities and challenges of interdisciplinary and cross-sector research on global challenges in a context of contradictions between commitments to equitable partnerships and institutionalised Global North leadership.

We asked ourselves to what extent involvement in GCRF implied a degree of compromise and complicity. What compromises and complicities have we made and remade in our attempts to engage ethically? We have negotiated the need for a degree of complicity through multiple and diffuse processes of compromise (see Kothari, 2005: 442; Mosse, 2007: 9): a tension between the GCRF's proclaimed commitment to sustaining equitable research partnerships and aligning with its proliferating technical requirements. We have compromised at times deliberately and at times reluctantly. Having established that the concepts of compromise and complicity resonated for all four co-authors, we then decided to investigate whether these concepts similarly resonated with our wider Network Plus team.

Due to travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and the MADAR team's geographical dispersal across the UK and the central Maghreb, we conducted virtual focus group discussions (FGDs). We prepared a template suitable for use in each partner country: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and the UK. Each of the four FGDs was facilitated by one or two of the co-authors, who opened proceedings by providing our working definitions of the key concepts of compromise and complicity. Each FGD included the facilitator(s) plus two or more participants from the wider MADAR team, which comprises academic researchers and civil society actors. The UK FGD

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took place entirely in English, while the Maghreb FGDs took place either mostly in French or mostly in English, both interspersed with Arabic. We commissioned transcription of the FGDs recordings, after which we hired a professional translator based in the Maghreb to translate the French FGD transcripts into English. Together we manually coded the transcripts to identify prominent themes across the FGDs, which we explore later in relation to funder constraints, political and institutional constraints and cross-sector collaboration. All research undertaken under the aegis of MADAR has been granted ethical clearance via Keele University, and this study did not give rise to additional ethical concerns that could not be addressed by anonymising participants and redacting sensitive information prior to depositing the transcripts with the UK Data Archives (UKDA).

The working definitions we shared in the FGDs included: compromise/*compromis* as making concessions for the sake of coming to agreements; and complicity/*complicité* as involvement with others in questionable activities. In the context of multilingual teams, however, it should be noted that *complicité* can also have positive connotations in French; thus, during our conversations – often across two or more languages – with colleagues in MADAR, understandings of complicity/*complicité* emerged as unstable and nuanced. This article examines how MADAR project partners experienced compromise and complicity in the contexts of development research, political and institutional constraints, and cross-sector collaboration. Drawing on Marcus's (1997: 101) insight that complicity can be both 'ambiguous morally' and also 'generative', we propose a shift in understanding and navigating the challenges inherent in North–South, South–South, interdisciplinary, cross-sector collaborations by foregrounding complicity as not only straightforwardly problematic but also as a productive process that enables interdependence and partnership.

Funder constraints

GCRF was administered jointly by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) as a key component in the delivery of the UK Aid Strategy, 'tackling global challenges in the national interest' (HM Treasury and DfID, 2015). In the context of persistent inequities between Global North and Global South, GCRF explicitly called for 'meaningful and equitable' research partnerships (Grieve and Mitchell, 2020: 514). However, from the start GCRF was beset by structural inequities such as Global North agenda setting – relating to the aforementioned 'UK Aid Strategy' and the UK's 'national interest' – alongside Global North leadership and financial management (Flint et al, 2022: 80; Grieve and Mitchell, 2020: 515). In the post-Brexit era, GCRF became embroiled in official prioritisation of domestic issues over international aid.

In relation to 'tackling global challenges', GCRF aimed to support 'cutting-edge research to address challenges faced by developing countries', to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to 'maximise the impact of research and innovation to improve lives and opportunities in the developing world'.[1] Our GCRF Network Plus (MADAR, 2020–25), sought to address the humanitarian protection of vulnerable, displaced people in the context of conflict in the central Maghreb region of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. The MADAR team brought together researchers based in academic institutions in the central Maghreb and the UK alongside advocacy, humanitarian and cultural civil society organisations (CSOs)

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based in the UK. Notwithstanding MADAR's international and cross-sector team, our work has been shaped by several constraints imposed by the funding scheme. In this section we explore our partners' responses to some of the less negotiable aspects of involvement in a GCRF project.

As large-scale collaborative investments, the GCRF Network Plus application process went through three stages: outline state, development award and full stage. Despite the size and scope of the calls, the turnaround time between call announcement and application deadline was between just three weeks (for the development award) and three and a half months (at full stage). The short timeframe to respond to GCRF calls and develop projects significantly compromises new partnership building. As Fransman et al (2018: 12) points out, 'strong relationships are the backbone of effective partnerships but take time to develop. … [I]t requires significant investment in creating spaces for new partnerships to emerge'. An academic participant in one of our FGDs commented that with GCRF: "the call comes, suddenly, with a very limited time frame and you have to put up this application, and … the people who succeed are the people who've already established relationships with these organisations, so they are relying on these kind of relationships that last". Thus, the short turnaround times that are a recurrent feature of GCRF are an 'impediment to building an equitably engaged multi-stakeholder team' (Grieve and Mitchell, 2020: 522).

UKRI requires UK research organisations who are working with international partners to undertake and evidence a due diligence process aiming to identify and mitigate risks to the delivery of the research project. However, as Fransman et al (2021: 333) point out, 'bureaucratic structures made it very hard for organisations in the global south to meet basic administrative conditions, such as oversight of due diligence processes or inequitable visa allocation'. An academic participant in one FGD pointed out that certain partners are always reduced to being responsive and vulnerable to being buffeted by changing funder landscapes.

Echoing Grieve and Mitchell's (2020: 515) point that some GCRF criteria potentially reproduce 'structural inequities within the South', one CSO participant commented that due diligence processes had effectively "ruled out" individuals and smaller or informal collectives that lack the capacity and/or legal status to be eligible, yet whose work "can in some cases be much more effective than an older or legally constituted association". The due diligence process is also problematic because it is a one-way process whereby the UK funder requires the lead institution in the UK to scrutinise partner institutions, and not the other way around. The irony of this one-way accountability was highlighted in 2021 when the ODA cuts – which threatened the suspension of the funded projects and the curtailment of committed funds to partners in the Global South – were the main risk to the delivery of the research project (see also Nwako et al, 2023: 14).

Due diligence is a one-off process that takes place at the start of the collaboration, unlike several other administrative and financial reporting requirements (including timesheets and receipts), which are ongoing throughout the duration of the project. Collaboration Agreements between partners require input from institutional legal teams, multiple signatories, and periodic variations as a result of relatively minor changes during the project. Participants in all FGDs were critical of the administrative burdens imposed by the funder. In one FGD, an academic participant pleaded that it should be a priority to "get rid of many of the administrative processes that make it

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worse. And we are really wasting so much time on many unnecessary procedures". In another FGD, a CSO participant felt that the administrative burdens sometimes obscured the "real" work: "sometimes it's all the procedures that we have to … go through, for example, budgets, outlines, etc., and sometimes it takes me so long. You actually forget the real job you were hired for or offered on day one". On the other hand, however, many of these complex processes were ostensibly conceived with the objective of protecting institutions and/or employees.

GCRF applications had to be led by a principal investigator (PI) based in a UK research institution with a track record and distinctive research capacity alongside a team of co-investigators (Co-Is) based either in the UK or in equivalent research institutions internationally, plus CSO Project Partners. As Grieve and Mitchell (2020: 515) point out, the 'GCRF shares commonalities with many other south–north research partnerships over the past two decades'. The requirement for a UK-based PI compounds 'the dominance of the Global North with respect to agenda setting' (Flint et al, 2022: 81). During one FGD, a CSO participant suggested that a more diffuse model of "real collegial leadership between the university and civil society" could be both more efficient and more respectful of CSO capacity: grants are "still managed by the university, with the weight of the administration of the university. That relation doesn't mean that civil society doesn't know how to manage".

Strategies of compromise and complicity shaped our initial reflections on working collaboratively on development research within the GCRF framework in the sense that a degree of compromise and complicity were necessary to secure funding and comply with funder requirements. In several ways this framing resonated with our FGD participants. An academic participant in the UK described the growth of their own awareness of the "potential complicities on an intellectual level" in relation to negotiating with increasingly authoritarian political regimes and with what they described as a "crudely colonial" funding regime (compare Noxolo, 2017; Rutazibwa, 2019: 160). Reflecting on the inequity of the uneven employment statuses across the team, another academic participant in the UK suggested that we were all "knowingly or unknowingly complicit in a system" in which relatively securely employed partners rely on and benefit from the labour of often precariously employed and inadequately remunerated partners in the Global South (compare Standing and Taylor, 2009; Zingerli, 2010; Landau, 2019: 26; Hor, 2021: 369).

While echoing our critical premise, however, our participants also overturned our expectation that they would predominantly view compromise and complicity negatively (compare Kothari, 2005: 442; Mosse, 2007). One academic partner in the UK noted that: "compromising with funders is what … everyone does. The funding … has these weird criteria, you have to kind of make your project fit into it… it's about how you present yourself and, to some extent … is quite a playful thing to do. It's not all negative". This quotation illuminates a feature shared also by other participants who similarly proposed a broad range of nuanced applications – positive as well as negative – of the concepts of compromise and complicity (resonating with Marcus, 1997: 101). The next section outlines the political and institutional contexts in which MADAR operates. The subsequent two sections analyse our FGD material on our participants' experiences of political and institutional constraints and on their articulation of collaborative compromise and productive complicity, respectively.

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Political and institutional contexts

MADAR Network Plus partners – academics and civil society practitioners in the Maghreb and the UK alike – work to deliver project activities in political contexts where displacement and protection are, in the words of one partner, "sensitive themes". Academics, researchers and practitioners are concerned about governments around the world imposing increasingly stringent restrictions on civil society – including limiting CSO access to foreign funding and freedoms of association, assembly and expression – since 9/11, and particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring (Rutzen, 2015; Kreienkamp, 2017; Cooper, 2018). In the previous section we addressed funder constraints; in this section, we bring the Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and the UK contexts into conversation with one another to highlight challenges relating, first, to more or less politically restrictive national contexts (whether in the Maghreb or in the UK) and, second, to more or less internationally collaborative partner institutions (whether academic or CSO).

The transformation of Algeria's research landscape since independence has had mixed results (Vega Gutiérrez, 2016): the sector is characterised by scarce human and material resource alongside high institutional running costs (Lamara, 2006); underappreciation of the value of creativity, stability of teams, and the dissemination of results (Khelfaoui, 2001); and the constraints of political authoritarianism (Khelfaoui, 2003). Freedom of association was established in 1988, but the capacity of civil society to mediate between the state and its citizens is diminished by the state's imposition of legal, financial and political obstacles (Dris-Aït Hamadouche, 2017) including the requirement to secure official approval for international cooperation or receipt of foreign funding. Since the 2010s, a new form of independent civil society has sought to oppose authoritarianism and promote democracy (Bozzo, 2011). In 2019, sparked by President Bouteflika's intention to run for a fifth term, the 'massive, peaceful and determined mobilisation' (Belguidoum, 2020) of the *Hirak* movement eventually forced his resignation. However, the new regime has been repressive (HRW, 2022). Indeed, due to a fear that their involvement in a network focusing on migration might jeopardise their ability to continue work in the country, our CSO partner in Algeria decided to withdraw from MADAR.

Morocco's research output was limited during the colonial period and subsequent decades (Kleiche-Dray et al, 2007). Since the turn of the century, however, the Moroccan government has systematically increased research funding, supported international research collaborations and sought to enhance academic publications (Kleiche-Dray et al, 2007; El Adraoui, 2016). Civil society constitutes a dynamic and committed sector (Marchetti, 2016). The number of Moroccan associations increased tenfold in less than a decade during the 2010s; their contribution is notable on social, cultural and environmental issues, mainly at local level. However, CSOs remain fragile at organisational, institutional and financial levels and operate within an increasingly deteriorating legal environment (CSOSI, 2019). A case in point here is MADAR's CSO partner Racines which was dissolved by the Moroccan authorities in 2019 (during our funding application process) and had to find other avenues to continue its work without the risk of its funds being seized and the threat of dissolution.

Since independence, Tunisia has established several research institutes and a Ministry for Higher Education and Scientific Research. A key priority is international research partnership via collaborations (including, for example, EU research funding and

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Erasmus Mundus) with the objective of enhancing research quality and promoting dialogue and understanding (British Council, 2015; Huang et al, 2022). Meanwhile, the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia heralded a new era for CSOs as key players in democratisation and public engagement with politics. New programmes have emerged based on a partnership of EU member states including funding schemes under the EU external action (Ferré, 2018). However, in February 2022 the Tunisian president accused CSOs of serving foreign interests, and announced his intention to block all foreign funding for CSOs, thus threatening to limit freedom of association to an extent not seen since before 2011 (Amnesty International, 2022).

There are shared political, social and economic aspects across the region, and the establishment of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) in 1989 was intended to promote integration – the UMA Treaty even proposed the foundation of interconnected academic, cultural, and research institutes (Article 3)[2] – but divergences and tensions precluded integration (Boudjema, 2010). The 2011 popular uprisings and their democratic aspirations precipitated a wave of renewed optimism over UMA's prospects (Lamrani, 2013), but did not lead to real transformations. As Achcar in CAREP Paris (2021) notes, 'democratisation alone is only part of the solution'; radical changes in economic and development policies are needed. Despite divergent and often adverse social and political contexts (Naciri, 2009), CSOs in the Maghreb have collaborated effectively across borders and across sectors, including in international research.

Our funder, UKRI, is an executive non-departmental public body in which government-funded research is evaluated by peer reviewers rather than by politicians. Academic research in the UK is also funded directly by government departments, and grants from the private sector, industry, charities and EU bodies. Access to EU funding in particular and to international collaboration opportunities in general are diminished by the UK's withdrawal from the EU in 2020; the UK government's decision not to renew GCRF after its initial five-year phase (2016–21) signals a further contraction of the UK's research and development horizons. Meanwhile, the relationship between the state and civil society in the UK has undergone a series of transitions (Savage and Pratt, 2013) culminating in the tightening of accountability and accounting regulations, the formalisation of organisational structures, and the intensification of external oversight (Harris, 2018: 354). Together, these political and institutional contexts in the central Maghreb and in the UK provide the backdrop for our exploration in the next two sections of our FGD material on political and institutional constraints and of collaborative compromise and productive complicity.

Political and institutional constraints

Our FGDs offer rich and nuanced insights into the various countries in which MADAR partners operate. We acknowledge the differences and idiosyncrasies of each country's context and partner organisation, and do not seek to gloss over these. For instance, in the case of institutions such as universities or government-funded research entities in the Maghreb, a distinction between the external political and internal institutional context does not hold as such institutions are de facto extensions of their respective governments. That said, the focus of our analysis rests on the points of convergence. We examine similarities in the experiences of working on international, cross-sector collaborations shared by MADAR partners across the different countries.

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A Tunisian academic participant criticised the centralisation that resulted in the project launch being affected by delays at various interconnected levels by "the central bank and the post offices … the ministry. … In Tunisia, there is a whole debate around decentralisation and giving, let's say, freedom or enough space to the university and so on". A CSO participant in the Tunisia FGD similarly suggested that reducing institutional barriers would ameliorate the "hassle" of international collaboration. An Algerian academic participant pointed out that the discourse from research and higher education institutions promotes "international cooperation, but in reality there is still a gap between the discourse and reality. So even if Algeria has signed a memorandum of cooperation with England, the problem is that there is no real application of these memoranda". With MADAR's focus on such a sensitive topic as migration, one of the Maghreb teams felt it was working "on a razor's edge" and was in the government's "line of sight". There are demanding and often ongoing processes to secure official authorisation: the risk is "if the project is not accepted and it has not been endorsed, this means it is blocked". Similarly, Moroccan CSO participants noted that the Moroccan authorities closely scrutinise their work on sensitive topics such as migration and the treatment of migrants: "we also have to be careful about what we say, how we say it, since it's not really a context or a country that is very free".

These shared experiences of challenges from political environments are pervasive and continue to affect organisations and academic institutions at multiple levels, well beyond interfering with or regulating international collaborations. For instance, the Algerian academic partner in MADAR is a "public institution … governed by decree … we are civil servants" and ultimately decision making rests with the ministry. Such a structure impacts on the setting up and delivery of research projects and activities. Similarly, one of the Maghreb teams pointed out the barriers imposed by local authorities: "since we deal with subjects that are a bit controversial … the daily life of migrants … it's not a subject that pleases, the government does not want to show this reality. So we were forced to film in hiding and not ask for filming authorisations". Concerns about surveillance push organisations who are critical of the authorities to work clandestinely outwith the rules in order to deliver project activities and sustain their transnational collaborations without exposing themselves to the risks of repression.

The capacity of Maghreb teams to engage in international research collaborations was systematically curbed and often actively restricted (which might undermine an argument for decolonising development research funding). The challenges experienced in establishing and sustaining international research partnerships ultimately affect the ability of academic institutions and CSOs to build a track record and develop research capacity to attract (and deliver on) international funds. For instance, a CSO participant noted: "things are not as stable as I would have wished in terms of planning long-term for a big research project … That I would say is one of the challenges". The issue on the scale of the project and lack of capacity and experience in managing that was also voiced by another CSO participant: "I have never managed a project as big as this one … it was a learning curve for all of us. Even the association has worked with many donors on several projects but it is always a continuous learning process … so each time we discover something".

Participants in the UK context also experienced challenges at the level of capacity, albeit of different nature. Referring to their institution, one participant commented

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that "they don't really know what I am doing. The only thing that is the big constraint is the fact that I don't get any time buyout". The mention of buyout here is a key issue: while UK universities gain from the financial benefit of grants awards, they do not adequately enable academics to deliver on the contractual obligations with funders. Another participant said: "the time is a joke … what ends up happening though is everybody feels they're overworked". This issue of capacity and unsustainable workloads in the UK higher education system is coupled with overt criticism from participants of the funding allocation model: a "whole systemic issue" whereby the lead UK institution has significantly more financial gains from external grants. "I think it should be fair … there should be some investor equity out there". In calling out inequity both between and also within North and South, these participants embraced the sense that engagement with GCRF had entailed a degree of complicity. These excerpts appear to frame complicity as a kind of necessary evil. By contrast, in the following section we unpack our participants' more nuanced framings of compromise and complicity as (also) generative.

Collaborative compromise and productive complicity

In this section we explore our participants' rich conceptualisations of compromise and complicity during our FGDs. Moving away from our initial critical premise about the negative connotations of compromise and complicity, and providing additional contributions beyond our initial starting points, the FGDs brought to the fore more nuanced understandings of these concepts and how – as strategies – they shape working relations. To start with, our multilingual participants – conversing across languages – often framed both compromise and complicity in terms of their positive attributes. As one francophone colleague speaking in English noted, "complicity is also endowed with positive meaning, especially in French. … We are definitely developing this kind of complicity with some of our partners".

Several participants reflected that compromise can facilitate smooth working relationships. One academic participant in the UK noted that: "we are slowly, kind of tip-toeing into the compromising stage now … we're working in different institutional cultures, with different rubrics and different kinds of duties or expectations and … we're trying to work out what, how people work". This quotation acknowledges the differences between sectors, disciplines, cultures and country contexts. The use of 'tip-toeing' also points to a desire to collaborate without causing fractures or frictions; in a similar vein, an academic participant from Algeria said: "we always tried not to offend people". Another academic participant in Algeria referred to compromise as a strategy to work effectively across sectors: "we are beginning to understand how civil society … is very important, it must be with us, we must work side by side and unite around the same table". They expressed surprise about the importance of the work of CSOs, and an acceptance to compromise in order to collaborate effectively. This participant's experience of compromise stems from a willingness to shift working practices to establish and nourish partnerships beyond academia. The openness to other modi operandi also extends to working across disciplines and with other professionals. One academic participant in Algeria observed that: "this project has allowed us to open up to other disciplines … So … it allows me a certain openness in relation to my initial discipline … to see things differently and … to create a certain complicity" (translated from French). Complicity – enabled by the project – was

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conceptualised as a positive opportunity for learning from each other, sharing, and developing best practice (for example in relation to research ethics or safeguarding).

Compromise in the working relationships also entailed a change in working practices within – not only outwith – organisations, and participants reflected that this could be understood as a form of complicity. An academic participant in the Maghreb noted that:

> 'we tried to make this complicity with the administration, in the way where we sensitised that it is a project, it is important to do this. It's an opening; it will allow others to work, etc. So it is in this sense that we tried to create a certain complicity, I would say fraternal' (translated from French)

This quotation overtly summarises the participant's efforts to advocate for the project by highlighting the opportunities it affords to the institution. Such efforts were aimed at gaining the complicity of administrators in facilitating what are often cumbersome bureaucratic processes. This framing is reminiscent of Marcus's (1997: 89) insight that 'complicity is necessary for sustaining the working relationships of fieldwork'. The familial connotations of the word 'fraternal' were echoed by another administrative participant in Tunisia who reflected on the solidarity and of being "held, in a sense" and of not having to face challenges alone. Indeed, one participant in the Maghreb aspired to even greater complicity – here seemingly understood as distinct from collaboration – with the other Maghreb partners in the future: "I would have liked even more complicity between the partners. … I hope that we take advantage of this space which is MADAR to strengthen this interregional cooperation which is the Maghreb" (translated from French).

Our participants also expressed more nuanced experiences of compromise and complicity beyond a positive/negative dichotomy. Their reflections go beyond romanticised stereotypes of togetherness, working side by side and being united around the same table. Several participants overtly acknowledged the challenges of collaboration and reflected on what one academic participant described as "the limits of compromise". As a CSO colleague in Morocco eloquently put it:

> 'sometimes I know that you have to make an extra effort to work with people … it looks easy like that but it's not at all because sometimes you just … realise that we don't have the same state of mind and suddenly no matter the quality of the work they do and even the quality of the work we do, we cannot actually collaborate'

This quotation expresses a tension between the commitment to work collaboratively – despite its challenges – and a realisation that fundamental differences in values and interpersonal ethics might not always be reconcilable. Here, the possibility of continuing to collaborate is limited by a desire to avoid being or becoming 'compromised'. This concern about becoming compromised was echoed by a participant in Tunisia who elaborated hypothetically on compromise as "any obstacle … that would oblige me to jeopardise, for example, the relationship or to do something that I am not really convinced with".

One Network Plus eligibility criterion was to incorporate cross-sector work by including project partners from outwith academia. During one FGD, a CSO

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participant remarked that the challenge (and the "adventure") of cross-sector collaboration was to overcome respective shortcomings: CSOs lack the credibility that comes from in-depth and long-term research, while universities lack efficiency and effective dissemination. In the context of action research bringing together academics and CSOs, this participant elaborated that:

> 'the compromise is precisely to find the convergence of interests … inject a little efficiency for academics and … research density for civil society … The complicity, still in this "academy/civil society" relationship, also means that the two are willing to have a little from each other for that to be credible and for that to be effective'

This sense of give and take resonates with Stoltz's (2020: i) account of compromising as a 'temporal and dynamic' process entailing 'some sense of loss' alongside 'a sense of novelty' that can pave the way to 'a cooperative atmosphere and relationship'.

Stoltz's (2020) reference to novelty resonates with our participants' characterisations of collaborative work in the project. Indeed, they perceived and experienced complicity positively as a basis for becoming 'accomplices'. The French *complice* was used by participants in its positive sense and was reappropriated in their narratives as a collective endeavour towards a shared goal. The sense of being accomplices in a worthy cause was echoed by an academic participant in Algeria: "we were accomplices with a lot of people in the context of MADAR's activities". In the same vein, reflecting on complicity, a CSO participant from Morocco observed: "So, for me, it's a rather positive concept, the fact of having accomplices because it means that you have a lot of allies who adhere to the cause and who will participate in one way or another with you." The complicity of collaboration in MADAR was experienced as positive interdependence, participation and alliance. Thus our team members and participants reappropriated our original premise on compromise and complicity (with reference to development aid and its colonial legacies).

Compromise and complicity: navigating constraints to enable collaboration

The ODA budget cuts constituted a serious constraint that posed existential challenges to our collaboration and ultimately the work. Referring to this hiatus, one CSO participant from Morocco noted:

> 'We had no choice … we have been informed that there is a cut. … [i]t was a bit democratic, but if, as you are told, you choose between A and B but … there won't be B, so you only have A. … It is the fact of not having a choice which removes both compromise and complicity. It is an obligation' (translated from French)

The acquiescence that emerges from this quotation is a subtle reminder of the various levels at which unequal power relations are evident: first, the power of the funder over the grant awardees and, second, the power of the UK project lead over the other UK and overseas project partners.

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First, the funder showed its capacity to wield absolute power over grant awardees by unilaterally cutting budgets even after awarding grants and the signing of legally binding Collaboration Agreements. Acquiescence to the cuts was the only alternative to the threat of cancellation, and was only possible due to our prior effort to establish open and durable collaborations. Or, to look at it another way, the prior effort that had gone into establishing open and durable collaborations was precisely what enabled project teams to decide to accept the cuts and continue to collaborate (rather than to concede that the existential challenge necessitated the termination of the project).

Second, the comment that the decision making about the cuts was 'a bit democratic' highlights that project partners might not have felt sufficiently consulted during decision making about where and how to implement the budget cuts. The funder required the UK project lead to reprofile the overall budget several times at short notice, with the effect that decision making did not necessarily meet aspirations of transparency and inclusion, and the impacts of the budget cuts were not necessarily seen to be applied and felt equitably across all teams (across the UK and in the Maghreb alike). In the end the project partners had to trust that the UK project lead would take decisions in the best interests of the sustainability of the Network Plus, even though our overall capacity to commission projects and deliver on all our aims and objectives would necessarily be severely curtailed. Thus compromise and complicity can be used more productively to nuance the inherent implications of such power relations, namely North–South in the relationship between UK project lead and Maghreb project partners, but also North–North in the relationship between funder and grant awardees and in the relationship between the UK project lead and the other UK project partners.

Conclusion

This article was conceived around our initial question of how we could build equitable partnerships in the context of the unequal power relations inherent to a controversial UK government development research funding scheme. In learning from this process, we propose a way forward. First, we acknowledge our LMIC partners' call for more capacity building and their aspirations for more space devoted to South–South collaborations (even within international partnerships in which the central relationship is putatively that between project partners in the Global North and in the Global South respectively). Second, we argue that it is imperative to account for systemic disparities by paying due attention to differential capacities when establishing North–South collaborations, which could entail recalibrating international funding schemes aiming to support and enhance research in LMIC countries.

Drawing on Anderson (2021), we identified compromise and complicity as concepts that helped us to make sense of our involvement with the funding scheme, the ethics of international cross-sector partnerships, and the implications of development research. In our examination of the extent to which the concepts of compromise and complicity also resonated with our project partners, we were compelled to depart from our initial critical premise about the negative connotations of compromise and complicity. Our participants experienced compromise and complicity in more nuanced ways than we had anticipated. While in some ways they echoed our critical premise, they also overturned our initial expectation that – in accordance with the dominant framing in the existing literature – they would largely view compromise and complicity negatively. In response to our original premise – with

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reference to development aid and its colonial legacies – participants experienced complicity as positive interdependence, participation and alliance. Thus, resonating with Marcus's (1997: 101) insight that complicity can be both 'ambiguous morally' and also 'generative', our intervention is to foreground complicity/*complicité* as a productive strategy to define varying degrees of interdependence and partnership and to navigate the challenges entailed in North–South, South–South, cross-sector and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Notes

[1] https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/our-main-funds-and-areas-of-support/browse-our-areas-of-investment-and-support/global-challenges-research-fund/.

[2] https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume 1546/volume-1546-I-26844-English.pdf.

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Data availability statement

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis. The authors have taken measures to ensure the security, integrity and accuracy of data sets generated by the research project, including accuracy of transcripts of focus groups conducted with research participants. Transcripts of focus groups conducted throughout the research project are retained by the principal investigator and can be made available on request by contacting the corresponding author (m.palladino@keele.ac.uk).

Experimentation on humans and animals statement

All research undertaken under the aegis of the MADAR Network Plus has been granted ethical clearance by Keele University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (reference number HU-20076). As stipulated by Keele University Research Ethics Policy, the Research Ethics Committee 'takes into account relevant discipline-specific codes of practice' including 'the Declaration of Helsinki published by the World Medical Association (2013)'. We secured informed consent from research participants.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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