



SOUTHERN VOICE



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Fostering collaboration among young think tankers in the Global South

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Key messages



The perspectives of youths in Global South think tanks must be actively included in international development discourse amidst the rising calls for increased youth involvement in global policy processes.



A Southern Voice network survey of young think tankers (YTTs) revealed that most of them had never worked with young researchers from other regions in the Global South.



The YTTs see partnerships with peers in the Global South as drivers to finding solutions to common problems; enhancing research quality; increasing impact and visibility; as well as supporting their professional development.



YTTs acknowledged significant limitations to effective collaboration with their peers. These included their institutions' mandates, capacity, resources, and practices.



International development agencies and Southern think tanks must proactively create opportunities for collaboration among young Southern researchers. These may include events, digital platforms, and calls for proposals.

The levels and quality of youth participation in global policy discussions and practice has recently received increased attention from stakeholders. In the Our Common Agenda (OCA) report, the United Nations Secretary-General includes recommendations for meaningful, diverse, and effective youth engagement both within and outside the United Nations (United Nations, 2021).

As we approach the midpoint of the timeline to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is more important than ever to prioritise the contributions of the Global South's fast-growing youth population in shaping its future. Young researchers and policy advocates within think tanks in the Global South, in particular, need to be more actively included. Think tanks occupy an important space in the Global South, bringing evidence-based interventions and advocacy to relevant global spaces. While collaboration in research and policy work is generally agreed to have numerous benefits, not enough attention has been given to improving it within the Global South.

Southern Voice distributed a detailed survey among young think tankers (YTTs) within our network of 66 think tanks in the Global South, in a bid to understand first-hand the current state of collaboration among them. We defined YTTs as researchers/advocates aged 35 and under who work within think tanks. The essence of this inquiry was to provide an initial analysis of substantive collaborative issues affecting young researchers in the Global South. It would also serve as the foundation for the recommendation of practical ideas that stakeholders could consider to strengthen collaboration among young Southern researchers, considering future generations' needs and interests when making decisions and forming policies.

This brief highlights the importance of facilitating knowledge sharing and collaboration among young think tankers in the Global South. We share the results of the Southern Voice young think tankers survey and offer suggestions to various stakeholders based on the findings.

 **Research collaboration in the Global South**

International research collaboration has intensified as a result of the severity of today's global policy challenges, such as the fights against terrorism, conflict, pollution, biodiversity loss, infectious diseases, and climate change. No one nation can successfully address these issues alone. As recognised by the expanding research on intersecting crises, they often connect across various facets of society and development sectors (Moore et al., 2021). Knowledge sharing is therefore crucial to

understand practical experiences, inform policy implementation, and promote economic growth (Wanjiku, 2019).

Policy research is increasingly being co-authored across sectors, disciplines, and national borders, often through various collaborative arrangements (both formal and informal) amongst individuals, organisations, and countries. The research collaborations of policy research actors in the Global South are discussed almost invariably within the context of North-South Cooperation (NSC) (e.g., Melon et al., 2009; Binka, 2005; Jentsch & Pilley, 2003; Velho, 2002; Costello & Zumla, 2000; Gaillard, 1994). This is not surprising given that the more affluent countries (the Global North) have been driving—or at least significantly influencing—the research agendas of poorer countries (the Global South) for many decades.

Historically, some factors have hampered the proliferation of collaboration among Southern researchers, such as limited research facilities, poor research knowledge and experience, intellectual property rights integrity, and international research visibility (Albanna et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2013; Hossain & Lasker, 2010; Sawyerr, 2004). Due to these limitations, Southern think tanks will often focus their available collaboration opportunities on senior researchers, who are usually older and more experienced. Our inquiries did not find generally accepted procedures for how Southern think tanks prepare their younger researchers for international collaboration within the Global South.

Collaboration among researchers and think tanks in the Global South is essential for strengthening and facilitating dialogues among diverse groups, developing new policy ideas, and producing narratives that promote development (Ordóñez-Llanos, 2021). Researchers and policy advocates can foster equitable partnerships to address common challenges and promote their national and regional interests by cooperating within the Global South. It is crucial that young people's perspectives in research and policy within the South are strengthened and integrated into global discourse given the rising calls for youth involvement in international development.

Increasing youth involvement

Recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of young people in the Global South, with as much as 70% of sub-Saharan Africans now under the age of 30 (United Nations, n.d.). Therefore, it is imperative that the South is actively included as global, regional, and multilateral agencies incorporate youth engagement and involvement in their agendas. Recent developments at the multilateral level reflect a political interest in enhancing this involvement. The United Nations

Youth Envoy (n.d), for instance, works to increase youth involvement in the intergovernmental space while acting as a global advocate for addressing the needs and rights of young people. One of the 12 commitments outlined in the OCA report hinges on ensuring that young people participate in global developmental discourse and on building solidarity with younger generations. The OCA youth commitment also includes ensuring youth involvement in the Summit of the Future (2024) and in particular its Future Generations track, which aim at shaping the future through the lens of youth (United Nations, 2021).

There is a gap to be filled by young think tankers as the global policy space trends towards increasing the impact of youth in decisions that shape the world's future. Think tanks are unique in combining research and policy advocacy, and it is important that youth in those spaces are actively contributing to the development of the Global South. Young people have the ability to shape the future through meaningful involvement in knowledge sharing, which is necessary to influence and build better policies for societal development. Collaboration among young think tankers in the Global South could strengthen their position and bring more attention to the issues affecting their regions and local communities. Young researchers' cross-disciplinary interactions could also better equip them to tackle the challenging issues that occur across the Global South.

■ Learning from Southern Voice's young think tankers

To get accurate information on the state of research collaboration among young think tankers in the Global South, we needed to obtain insights directly from them. Therefore, Southern Voice created a five-part survey for the young think tankers within our network to ascertain the state and condition of collaboration among young researchers in the Global South.

The survey was internally disseminated among more than 200 young researchers within our 66-member think tanks across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. 90% of the 116 respondents were aged 35 years and under, and almost all (98%) have been working in think tanks for 1 to 10 years. The respondents have also mostly been doing research for less than 10 years, with only 6% having more than 10 years of experience. Their research and policy specialisations varied, but the most prevalent were governance and public policy, social development, and the economy. The survey was designed to gather their personal and professional

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insights and experiences with collaboration with other young think tankers. We wanted to know how collaboration has manifested itself in their careers, as well as what part institutional collaboration and support for individual collaboration played in their experiences. The survey consisted of five sections: personal information, personal research experience, institutional research experience, identified barriers (to collaboration), and the conclusion (proposed solutions and expected benefits). We analysed the responses to the open-ended questions in the final section to look for patterns and interesting insights about their suggestions and experiences.

Based on the survey's results, we explore the current state of research collaboration among young think tankers and their predictions for its future, particularly in the Global South.

■ State of Southern young think tankers' collaborations

How YTTs work

While existing literature helps us understand some key dynamics of collaboration between Southern researchers and institutions, little is known about the extent to which young think tankers collaborate with their peers in other institutions, countries, and regions.

When asked about institutional collaborations, 90% of the YTTs stated that their institutions always, often, or sometimes worked with other research institutions in the Global South. This figure dropped to 77%, when they were asked about their think tanks' collaborations with institutions in the Global North. Collaborations were much more prevalent at the institutional level in both instances than among young think tankers themselves. This implies that the young think tankers are often not directly involved even when their institutions engage in these collaborations.

We also wanted to learn about the YTTs' individual experiences with collaboration across regions. 90% of our respondents indicated that they have done research on issues outside of their country, showing the YTTs' interest in tackling issues outside of their national contexts. Responses also showed that collaboration was common among YTTs within the same country, as 78% said they often/always did this.

However, 50% of the respondents had only occasionally or never collaborated with young think tankers from other countries within their continents. This figure rose to 77% when asked about collaborating with young researchers from other continents in the Global South. In comparison, most of the young researchers surveyed also rarely

collaborated with their Northern counterparts. 76% had occasionally or never worked with YTTs from the Global North, while only about 11% said that they always or often did.

This shows that the rate of cross-regional collaborations among young think tankers within the South is similar to that of collaboration with the North. Although there is more collaboration within the continents/regions of the YTTs, there is still much to be done to boost collaboration between regions.

Is there untapped potential?

We also aimed to identify areas where YTTs might see the benefits of greater peer collaboration through the survey. 99% of the respondents thought it was important to collaborate with young researchers in the Global South. The presence of many common challenges across the Global South justified for many, more knowledge exchange with Southern peers. Additionally, a lack of common ground emerged as an obstacle to more collaboration with their Northern counterparts.

When asked about any challenges, the survey respondents cited limited knowledge of potential collaborators and limited suitable platforms for collaboration. However, a recurring trend was around a visible North-South disconnect. For example, some argue that there are no 'common issues' or 'incompatible' research agendas. Others were wary of Northern researchers' limited 'understanding of' and 'adaptability to' Southern contexts. One respondent also noted a difference in work styles, seeing research work in the Global North as more 'fast-paced.'

It is also important to note that 15% of respondents cited 'Intellectual Property' concerns as an obstacle to South-South research collaborations with their Northern counterparts. Even though this concern was mentioned by a small number of respondents, it could point to an underlying trust issue, which is easily understood in the context of the complicated, unequal power dynamics pervading much of the global development ecosystem.

Expected benefits of South-South collaborations for YTTs

Addressing common challenges

According to the YTTs, collaborations within the Global South would be beneficial due to common challenges and interests. It is generally well understood that diversity of perspectives should be seen not purely as an end, but as a means for better understanding. As some of the

researchers pointed out—a key reason in their preference for South-South over North-South collaborations—countries across the Global South face several common issues.

They saw a chance for collective thinking around shared issues in cross-border collaborations with other young researchers. According to one respondent, "it would be possible to address similar problems, challenges, and realities; as a result, provide innovative and collaborative solutions to such issues."

Another respondent stated, "a lot of the problems countries face have global or at least regional dimensions; food security, energy security, debt vulnerabilities, health system preparedness and financing, climate vulnerabilities are some examples. Thinking collectively can provide solutions to these problems." Some of these challenges require regional or global policy change. In one instance, the expected outcomes were thus described as "global solutions," "innovative solutions to global problems," as well as "holistic development in the area of research for the region."

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Recognising the connections between the hyperlocal to local issues that they primarily address, and regional and global dynamics, they also found that collaborations with other young Southern researchers working in similar areas could help them develop the capacity to integrate local insights into larger scale debates. One expected a "better understanding of the common challenges of the region", while another an "improve[d] perspective at the global level".

Improved visibility for their work

The surveyed YTTs generally expected a welcome increase in exposure as a result of two factors: an increase in authorship and a joint, thus expanded, audience.

Increasing research collaborations among young think tankers means a leading role in more publications for them. This could result in "more journal papers and research ideas published," as one researcher suggested, allowing for more citations and invitations to speak at events, for example.

One respondent suggested that "studies/other research products benefit from co-promotion/co-dissemination," while many cited increased 'visibility' and 'exposure' as an expected natural benefit of collaboration.

This audience would also be expanded by the fact that they could explore global issues together, connecting them to an audience of regional or other international stakeholders.

Professional development

Diversity of perspectives has the potential to enhance any particular output's quality as well as sharpen the researcher's perspective. According to the YTTs' responses, they expect to integrate "new methods," be exposed to "different methodologies and skill sets," and acquire "new knowledge and skills." They also expect their perspectives on local issues to become more nuanced and refined. As one respondent stated, "sharing knowledge and experiences from other countries can enrich research by having different points of view, from different professionals and cultures with a different vision from one's own." As a result, another expected an "improvement in the quality of research and in research output, as well as an expansion of research ideas in general."

Beyond research development, the YTTs also expected the potential for the development of several skills required in a think tank environment. These include the ability to lead research projects, from the initial stages of framing questions and writing proposals to managing timelines and budgets and reporting to funders. As one respondent anticipated, such development "fosters confidence and gives rise to [...] continuing applying for grants."

Barriers to YTT collaboration in the Global South

To access the benefits of collaborations within the Global South, we needed to first understand what the current barriers to progress are. We asked our young think tankers, who identified these issues within their institutions.

Institutional attitudes towards partnerships at the level of 'junior' researchers are a key limitation to collaboration between young Southern think tankers. Depending on their experience level, many young researchers may be driven to supporting rather than leading roles, especially in international collaborations. As one respondent explained, partnership agreements may generally be made between more established, senior researchers within the organisations. There seems to be a lack of desire to encourage horizontal collaboration at the YTT level, with another respondent suggesting that this type of cultural change would have to be proactively driven. It will not just 'happen'.

However, several YTTs cited institutional norms and policies as limiting opportunities for international collaborations. The mandates of their

organisations are often to influence national-level policy due to funding and capacity limitations, as well as a choice to prioritise issues most directly affecting citizens of their country. It is also the area where they are most likely to have a direct impact. More than 50% of YTTs surveyed identified a lack of international visibility for their research as a main hindrance to potential cross-border collaborations in the South. Southern think tanks' agendas may also be influenced by changing national political contexts, which means that while they may concentrate on similar issues over time, the moment at which they deal with these issues may not coincide. Finally, some of the YTTs cited language barriers as another factor hampering collaboration outside of the country.

Overall, YTTs agreed that limited research facilities, limited international visibility for research, and poor research knowledge and experience were obstacles to more collaborations with YTTs in other Global South countries.

Towards better partnerships: What can be done?

Finally, the survey sought to find out what the young think tanks required to be able to access these partnerships. While recommendations were varied, a significant proportion of survey responses indicated that horizontal collaborations between young researchers were not a well-established aspect of the operations in their think tanks. They were also not incentivised by funders in the structure of calls for research. As a result, many of the ideas converged on the creation of an enabling environment for research collaborations between young think tankers in the Global South, whether within or outside one's region. This environment would require the following actions:

Changing institutional practices

While most of the YTTs surveyed rarely collaborated with YTTs in other countries or regions, the institutions to which they belong appeared to be working with international research partners. But as one respondent pointed out, "research project design is often oriented towards very concise collaboration through main researchers at specific points in time." Very little space is oriented towards "horizontal team to team collaboration." What appeared to be missing within these Southern think tanks was an institutional structure and organisation that would support "better integration of young researchers".

YTTs suggested a need for "the opportunity to work in collaborative projects done by the Global South," "greater involvement of young researchers in the different research projects carried out with associated think tanks," and "opportunities for young researchers

to participate in research events to present findings from conducted research." Finally, as opportunities for mentorship seem to be missing, improvements may include explicitly mandating the training of young researchers; allocating time to support these researchers in developing their proposal writing skills, so that they are not always reliant on projects that senior researchers may submit to the organisation's leadership.

Investing in the mentoring of junior researchers can be expected to yield long-term organisational benefits by fostering new relationships and engaging in additional projects, run with more independence by the junior researchers themselves. Think tanks in the Global South must also facilitate the integration of young researchers in collaborative projects with one another and with other young think tankers in Southern think tanks in addition to providing mentoring opportunities. They could have joint programmes with other Southern think tanks where their young researchers can collaborate based on similar disciplines or projects and some internal funding could be set aside for this purpose.

Providing resources to fund collaborations

The survey respondents noted funding constraints as a key restriction to new collaborations, particularly between Southern YTTs (indeed, only 3 respondents highlighted this barrier as a key obstacle to forming more partnerships with their Northern counterparts). According to one respondent, the lack of resources forces

researchers to "focus on fewer issues that are more critical to everyday life in [their] individual societies, instead of devoting more time to working with others on more overarching and cross-cutting issues." Because of this, specific accommodations will need to be made, within pertinent calls for research, towards actualizing more YTT partnerships. Finally, YTTs cited the high costs of doing research, which they suggested could be reduced by aiding Southern think tanks in their access to resources, including data and software.



There is a gap to be filled by young think tankers as the global policy space trends towards increasing the impact of youth in decisions that shape the world's future.



Acknowledging the transformative potential of youth engagement which has recently gained prominence at the Global level, some funding may be explicitly allocated to knowledge exchanges between young researchers within calls for proposals. They could include categories for joint projects both within and across fields, allowing different countries to combine their expertise and conduct multi- and interdisciplinary research. This might encourage the required institutional changes in Southern think tanks and help address the wider power disparities in the global research landscape.

Allocating funding towards young think tankers' collaborations will also aid in the creation of diverse forms of knowledge that span various regions across the South. Funding should be allotted for non-traditionally academic research projects, as the addition of policy and outreach work is what makes many think tanks in the Global South.

Facilitating knowledge exchange platforms

Many respondents recommended "providing opportunities" for young researchers to collaborate where possible. This included "incentivising collaborative, young-researcher-led projects" and creating more space for international collaboration between institutions. "We should have an increase in the number of the projects we work to have a regional and continental approach to them," one respondent suggested. These opportunities could integrate relevant training, such as "open calls for inter-institutional research projects with a mentoring element to support young researchers to create connections and earn experience," as one YTT proposed. This would support the researchers' continued learning through the experience as well as the quality of the end product.

The YTTs showed a desire to learn from their peers, nuance their own views, gain insight into common regional challenges, and of course, network among themselves. They believed that this would necessitate the development of appropriate spaces for peer presentations of research, professional development, and knowledge sharing. These solutions may include "a network and a digital platform," "the generation of alliances," "generating networking spaces," "training workshops," "consortiums," "conferences," and "seminars."

Young think tankers from different countries should be able to network and share knowledge in inter-institutional spaces created by existing institutions, organisations, or networks (at the regional and international levels, within the Global South). These platforms may include online fora or activities like workshops, training, and networking events. At the global level, multilateral efforts to integrate young changemakers should explicitly include fostering further connections between young knowledge actors from the Global South. Instead of restricting their inclusion to youth-themed initiatives, this could involve intentionally creating spaces for young Southern think tankers in events and conferences. Creating these spaces for their input and involvement will not only encourage collaboration among them but will also support their participation in global collaboration.

From our survey, YTTs in the Global South agree that it is necessary to improve and increase collaboration among them. However, the details of what these collaborations entail in different contexts remain undetermined and would need to be investigated. Different considerations, such as gender dynamics, equal contributions, and other logistical factors, would need to be taken into account to ensure the effectiveness of the collaborations. This will be needed to prevent unequal partnerships that are likely to result from unequal power dynamics among Global South countries (Boshoff, 2010). Further study could examine what made previous similar collaborations successful, as well as what social, cultural, and administrative needs must be addressed to get the best out of these partnerships.

Young think tankers from the Global South can be a significant asset to international youth advocacy. The steps outlined in this brief will contribute to their empowerment as legitimate actors of global change, allowing them to support the development of the Global South through their work.

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Founded in 2013, Southern Voice is a network of think tanks from Africa, Asia and Latin America & the Caribbean. It contributes to the global dialogue on the UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). Southern Voice's ultimate aim is to address the existing 'knowledge asymmetry' and 'participation deficit' in the development dialogue. It does this by producing, promoting, and disseminating evidence-based policy analysis by researchers from Global South countries.



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