Towards post-colonial capacity-building methodologies – some remarks on the experiences of health researchers from Mozambique and Angola

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There is currently a growing academic and institutional interest in issues of capacity building and research partnerships. It is widely recognized that North/South partnerships are fundamental to attaining innovation, leading to improvements in virtually every social field, including science, technology and health. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 17 is specifically focused on research partnerships, which attests to the relevance of this topic. Although there are already some guidelines and compliance tools in place related to capacity building and research partnerships - including the recently developed Research Fairness Initiative - there is very few scholarly work on the experiences of academics who undergo these processes, and the methodological and practical aspects of capacity building are often overlooked.

The aim of this paper is to explore capacity building in practice, addressing the expectations, imaginaries and experiences of health researchers from Mozambique and Angola during their stay in Lisbon, Portugal, between March and April 2018. The empirical data presented in this article stems from a research protocol developed within the Erasmus+ funded project “University Development and Innovation – Africa (UDI-A)”, a consortium established between European and African institutions to promote the mobility and empowerment of African academics, the development of North/South research partnerships and the strengthening of African institutions.

Our research draws on a wide range of qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups with African participants, as well and participant observation at relevant project meetings. Ethical clearance was obtained from IHMT’s Ethics Council and interview transcripts were fully anonymized. The data allowed us to delve into the experiences of African academics working in the health field, their perceptions of capacity building and aspirations during their stay in Portugal in 2018. The empirical section is organized according to four main themes: expectations and motivations; the virtues of capacity building; capacity building and research partnerships in conflict; contested asymmetries.

By addressing some of concerns, perceptions and achievements of African academics, this paper reflects on the performativity of capacity building methodologies, exploring a wide range of issues that emerge within the framework of North/South partnerships, inquiring whether it would be possible to decolonize capacity-building methodologies. In the conclusion we argue that capacity building devices should be reconfigured according to three main axes: the suspension of epistemological authority; the development of symmetric methodologies; capacity building as experimentation. We also address some of the potential impacts of our work, suggesting that methodological options matter, as they may ultimately determine the fate of capacity building exercises.

Keywords: Capacity Building; research partnerships; methodologies; post-colonialism.