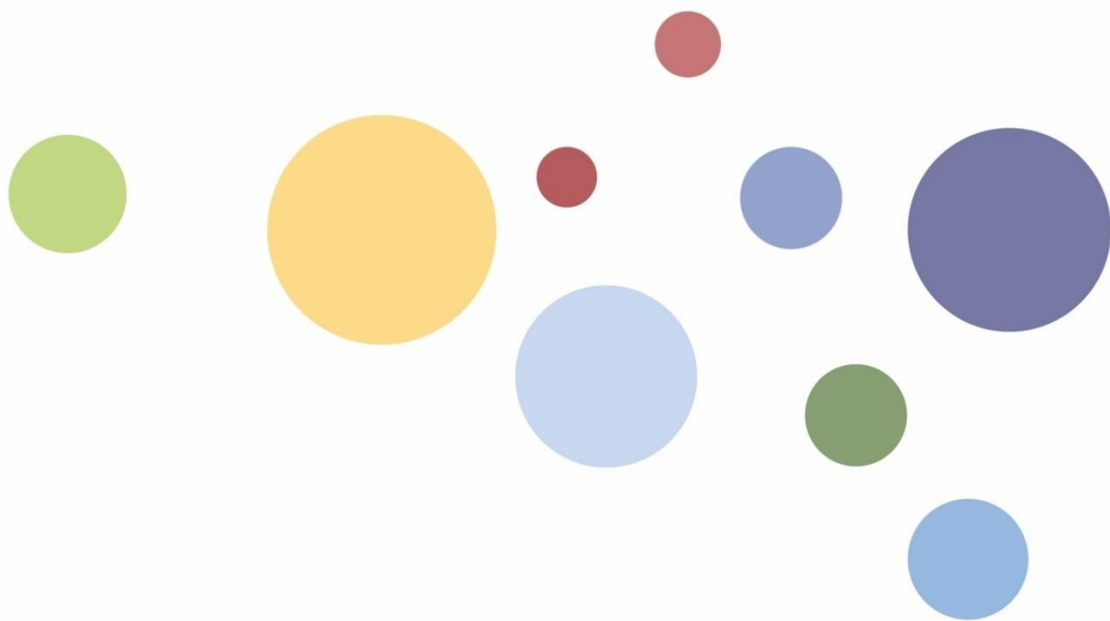


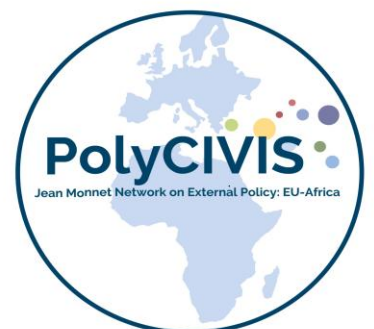
Equitable Partnerships as Governance Infrastructure in an Era of Polycrisis

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The Polycrisis & Policy Brief Series is coordinated by the *Policy Work Package* which is part of [the PolyCIVIS Network](#). The PolyCIVIS Policy brief series aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for policymakers, at various levels and to foster dialogue among stakeholders on effective policy responses.



Executive Summary

This brief draws on the perspective of an African academic who has spent over two decades building, managing, and navigating international research partnerships, including collaborations funded by the European Union, the Government of India, Carnegie Mellon University, CODESRIA, and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). That experience points to something the polycrisis literature has not confronted: crisis-response governance is shaped by deep asymmetries in how partnerships are structured, funded, and controlled.

Broadly, the brief argues that equitable partnerships are fundamentally governance infrastructure, not relational add-ons or ethical afterthoughts. It builds on arguments developed at the Second Conference on Equitable Partnerships in Pretoria in February 2026, where the author proposed that equitable partnerships are a systems-design challenge, not a relationship problem.ⁱ The brief proposes three design imperatives for funders, universities, and multilateral actors: agenda equity, governance symmetry, and long-term institutional benefit. These imperatives are directed at the European Union, the African Union, regional economic communities, research funders, and civil society organisations.

Key messages

- ❖ **Equitable research partnerships are governance infrastructure**, not ethical add-ons. Without structural equity in agenda-setting, decision rights, and long-term benefit, crisis responses remain fragile and exclusionary.
- ❖ **Three design imperatives can incorporate equity into partnerships**: (i) mandate LMIC leadership in agenda-setting; (ii) ensure shared governance and direct funding flows; (iii) require explicit long-term institutional capacity building.
- ❖ **Reform is feasible but inherently political**. Pilot schemes, co-developed risk frameworks, and binding conditionalities in instruments like the AU-EU Innovation Agenda can lower barriers to equitable design.

(1) Introduction

The polycrisis, as theorised by Tooze (2022) and elaborated by Lawrence et al. (2024), describes crises in climate, health, geopolitics, economics, and technology that interact through causal feedback loops rather than merely co-existing. International organisations, including the European Union and the African Union, have recognised the need for integrated responses.¹ But a prior question tends to go unasked: *Who gets to define what counts as a crisis, what counts as evidence, and what counts as a solution?* The governance of these responses is not neutral. It is shaped by the same power asymmetries that structure the partnerships through which knowledge is produced and mobilised.

The author's own trajectory as a scholar illustrates the problem. In 2009, a study of how students and academics at the University of the Witwatersrand experienced internationalisation found that the concept itself had been defined elsewhere.² The curriculum frameworks, mobility patterns, and partnership priorities were set by institutions in the Global North. African universities participated, but they did not set the terms. That early finding shaped the next fifteen years of the author's research. It raised the question of not only who participates in international partnerships but who holds power, who defines the agenda, and who benefits in the long term.³

The implications are practical. When research partnerships on climate adaptation, food security, or pandemic preparedness marginalise institutions closest to affected communities, the resulting policy recommendations are less likely to be contextually sound or locally implementable. In polycrisis conditions, where crises cross

borders, sectors, and timescales simultaneously, governance architectures that exclude significant sources of expertise become active liabilities.

This brief addresses two questions. First, *how do inequitable partnership structures function as governance vulnerabilities in an era of polycrisis?* Second, *what design principles can guide funders, universities, and multilateral actors in building partnership architectures that strengthen systemic resilience?* The analysis draws on evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence, and emerging reform initiatives in research funding and multilateral cooperation.

(2) Background and Analysis

2.1. Partnership Asymmetries as Structural Vulnerabilities

International research partnerships between Global North and Global South institutions have expanded significantly over the past three decades, driven by shared commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals, global health security, and climate adaptation. Yet the architecture of these partnerships has not kept pace with the rhetoric of equality. High-income country (HIC) institutions retain disproportionate control over agenda-setting, funding flows, authorship, and decision-making. Low- and middle-income country (LMIC) partners are positioned as implementors or data providers rather than co-leaders.⁴

These asymmetries are embedded in institutional architecture. Legal frameworks channel resources through HIC intermediaries. Review criteria privilege certain methodological traditions. Reporting

¹ African Union Commission & European Commission, 2023

² Ojo & Booth, 2009

³ Cross et al., 2011; Maringe & Ojo, 2017

⁴ Abimbola et al., 2021; Cakouros et al., 2024

requirements impose disproportionate burdens on LMIC partners. Authorship norms reward those who design studies over those who implement them. The author has experienced this directly. In the EU Horizon 2020 programme, in which the author was involved in a project on global value chains from 2018 to 2022, the administrative and reporting architecture required Southern partners to route decisions through Northern lead institutions, even for expenditures within our own institutional contexts. The effect was a dependency structure that contradicted the stated language of equal partnership. As Fonn et al. (2018) documented, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for over 13% of the world's population but produces less than 1% of global research output. In 2008, the entire continent published 27,000 papers, the same number as the Netherlands alone. This is not simply a capacity gap. It reflects how the global system allocates resources, sets agendas, and distributes benefit.

These observations are not idiosyncratic. They align with a substantial peer-reviewed evidence base documenting how power asymmetries in agenda-setting, funding, and authorship structure North-South partnerships across both global health and higher education.⁵

Under polycrisis conditions, these vulnerabilities become acute. The institutions with the least governance power are often those closest to affected populations and most essential to effective response. If they lack the authority to redirect resources, adapt research priorities, or make timely decisions, the entire governance architecture becomes brittle. The problem is not a lack of good intentions. It is a design failure. As the author asserted in Pretoria, equity failures persist not from lack of intent but from missing

institutional agency, governance symmetry, and long-term capacity logic.⁶

Epistemic injustice is central to this dynamic. Fricker (2007) distinguished between testimonial injustice, where marginalised actors are not regarded as credible, and hermeneutical injustice, where they are excluded from shaping the frameworks that define problems. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) described a "cognitive empire" in which African scholars are valued for contextual data but excluded from theorisation and conceptual leadership. The author's work on decolonial approaches to postgraduate supervision shows these patterns reproduce within institutions, not only between them.⁷ When LMIC researchers participate in pre-set research agendas but cannot influence the questions asked, the knowledge base narrows. The resulting frameworks draw on a narrow range of institutional experience, and recommendations fail to reflect diverse implementation realities.⁸

2.2. COVID-19 and AI as Stress Tests

The COVID-19 pandemic was a stress test for international partnership governance. When borders closed and funding was redirected, the structural fragility of goodwill-based partnerships became visible. The author studied this disruption directly. In a meta-methods study of South African university students conducted with Onwuegbuzie during 2020, a key finding was that the rapid shift to online learning did not affect all students equally. Those at under-resourced institutions, disproportionately in the Global South, bore the heaviest burden: disrupted research activities, lost graduate students, and institutional resources redirected to emergency response.⁹ A subsequent Stellenbosch University study found demographic and spatial factors shaped students' ability to learn online in ways digital continuity measures could not address.¹⁰

⁵ Plamondon et al., 2021; Voller *et al.*, 2022

⁶ Ojo, 2026b

⁷ Mupawose & Ojo, 2023

⁸ Kolpa et al., 2025

⁹ Ojo & Onwuegbuzie, 2020

¹⁰ Onwuegbuzie et al., 2020

Universities in the Global South were expected to adapt to platforms, standards, and timelines set elsewhere. Vaccine nationalism further illustrated how partnerships lacking embedded governance equity reverted to hierarchical logics under pressure. The pandemic revealed that participation without power is not partnership. It is compliance under structural dependence.¹¹

The rapid expansion of AI-enabled systems presents a parallel challenge. AI governance frameworks are being developed predominantly in high-income countries, encoding assumptions that may not reflect the priorities or knowledge systems of Global South communities.¹² In the author's own work on ethical technology integration in teacher education, it is argued that deploying AI in African education without meaningful local input creates a new layer of epistemic dependency, particular ways of knowing.¹³ Who governs AI use in teaching, research, and assessment? Who controls the data, the ethics frameworks, and the accountability mechanisms? These are not technical questions. They are governance questions. And they reproduce the same structural asymmetries that plague research partnerships. Both crises reveal the same lesson: partnerships built on compliance rather than co-governance cannot withstand systemic disruption.

(3) Emerging Models: From Rhetoric to Governance Redesign

Despite these challenges, promising models of governance-centred partnership design are emerging. The GROW Programme is one such model. Co-funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie programme, it brings together six Dutch universities, 22 African academic institutions, and 17 social partners. GROW selected 51 African doctoral researchers to conduct research addressing

Sustainable Development Goals. African scholars were positioned not merely as trainees but as leaders translating new knowledge to their own institutional contexts.¹⁴ The programme's emphasis on science diplomacy recognised research collaboration as a governance relationship requiring sustained commitment from all sides.

It should be noted, however, that even well-designed programmes face implementation challenges. The distance between stated principles and everyday practice remains significant. Governance redesign is not a one-off act but a continuous negotiation, requiring ongoing vigilance against the pull of established hierarchies. The Dutch Research Council's implementation science-oriented funding call on maternal, new-born, and child health provides further evidence of what is possible when funders commit to structural change. By running participatory pre-funding webinars, requiring dedicated LMIC budgets, and ensuring LMIC voices shaped the agenda from inception, the call moved beyond compliance toward genuine co-creation.¹⁵

Governance redesign is not a one-off act but a continuous negotiation, requiring ongoing vigilance against the pull of established hierarchies.

Three lessons emerged: embed epistemic justice in funding call design; ensure fair and flexible budgets; and foster mutual capacity building. The author's involvement as a co-author of a related Lancet Global Health piece confirmed a key observation: the architecture of the funding call itself determines whether equity is possible.

At the continental level, the AU-EU Innovation Agenda (2023) establishes a ten-year framework for research and innovation

¹¹ Ojo, 2024

¹² Ayana et al., 2024

¹³ Ojo, 2026a

¹⁴ Simelane et al., 2025

¹⁵ Kolpa et al., 2025

cooperation. The Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations, launched in 2023 and endorsed by over one hundred major science organisations, sets out

☀ The Graduate Research On Worldwide Challenges (GROW) programme and the AU-EU Innovation Agenda represent promising models of structural redesign of equitable partnerships

Africa-centred principles for addressing power imbalances in knowledge production.¹⁶ These frameworks signal institutional recognition that equitable partnerships require structural redesign. But recognition is not implementation. The challenge remains translating principles into the everyday architecture of funding calls, partnership agreements, and evaluation criteria.

(4) Recommendations

This brief proposes three interconnected design imperatives grounded in a triad framework developed by the author through research and institutional practice: **agenda equity, governance equity, and benefit equity**.¹⁷ The framework emerged from a specific observation. Across partnerships funded by the EU, India's SPARC programme, Carnegie Mellon University, and CODESRIA, the author noticed that equity efforts tended to focus on only one dimension at a time.

A funder might ensure LMIC participation in agenda-setting but retain unilateral control over budget decisions. Or a partnership might

share governance but design no mechanism for long-term institutional benefit to the Southern partner. Equity must be designed across all three dimensions simultaneously. Otherwise, gains in one area are undermined by deficits in another.

The triad is more than a set of principles. It is a theory of change. Agenda equity widens the range of questions a partnership is able to ask. Governance equity allows the institutions closest to a crisis to redirect resources and adapt priorities in real time. Benefit equity builds the durable capacity that lets those institutions respond to the next shock, not only the present one. Applied together, the three aspects shift systemic risk away from concentration in the least powerful nodes of a network and towards distributed resilience. This is how the framework changes risk trajectories rather than merely improving conduct. It also marks the difference between this brief and the charters and guidelines that precede it.

A 2022 scoping review identified twenty-two guidelines for North-South partnerships but found Southern stakeholders under-represented in shaping them, with thin evidence of their use in practice.¹⁸ Instruments such as the Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations articulate principles. The triad is a design and diagnostic tool. It names the three sites where power must be redistributed, and it insists that all three be addressed at once. That is its distinct contribution.

Three design imperatives of equitable international partnerships

1. Equity in Agenda-Setting

Funders and multilateral institutions should mandate meaningful LMIC participation in defining research questions, setting priorities, and shaping terms of reference. This means allocating dedicated resources for participatory pre-funding processes. Proposal assessment panels

¹⁶ Association of African Universities *et al.*, 2023

¹⁷ Ojo, 2026b

¹⁸ Voller *et al.*, 2022

should include equitable LMIC representation. The EU's Horizon Europe programme and the AU's Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy should embed these requirements. Review criteria should explicitly assess whether LMIC partners have substantive influence over research design, not merely whether they appear as consortium members. The central question at the conference in Pretoria was: what would equitable partnerships look like if Global South universities were agenda-setters rather than delivery sites?¹⁹ Funding instruments should be redesigned to answer that question.

2. Symmetry in Governance and Decision Rights

Partnership agreements should include explicit governance provisions ensuring shared decision-making over budget allocation, intellectual property, data ownership, and project direction. Funders should require joint leadership structures and equitable authorship norms as conditions of funding. Flexible budgeting that lets LMIC institutions receive funds directly, rather than through HIC intermediaries on a reimbursement basis, is essential. In the Carnegie Mellon partnership on digital education linking South Africa and Rwanda, negotiating direct budget flows to the African partners was critical to genuine co-leadership rather than administrative dependency. The GROW Programme and the Dutch Research Council's recent funding call provide tested models for these governance provisions.

3. Explicit Attention to Long-Term Institutional Benefit

Partnership design must move beyond individual project outcomes to consider cumulative institutional effects. Funders should require agreements to specify how LMIC institutions will benefit in research infrastructure, human capacity, and sustainable funding beyond the project cycle. Current evaluation frameworks audit inputs and outputs. They do not assess power, decision rights, or legacy.²⁰ This is the gap identified in the author's Pretoria presentation: equity is treated as procedural when it should be structural. Without assessing whether partnerships build lasting institutional capacity, it is impossible to distinguish those that strengthen institutions from those that extract knowledge and move on.

The Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations provides a principled benchmark, and funders should adopt its principles as a framework for monitoring and accountability.

(i) **Allocating roles and sequencing.** These imperatives imply distinct responsibilities. The European Union and the African Union should embed equity requirements in the AU-EU Innovation Agenda and in their respective instruments, Horizon Europe and the Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy. National funders, including the National Research Foundation of South Africa and its continental counterparts, should convert these requirements into proposal criteria and rules for direct disbursement. Universities should translate them into partnership agreements, authorship norms, and budget-flow arrangements. Sequence matters as much as substance. Agenda equity must be settled before a call opens. Governance equity must be fixed in the partnership agreement before work begins. Benefit equity must be assessed at evaluation and beyond the project cycle. Equity introduced late is equity in name only.

(ii) **Political economy and feasibility.** Reform of this kind meets resistance, a point that must be made explicit. Direct funding to LMIC institutions can collide with risk-averse fiduciary rules inside Northern funders and universities. Promotion and reward systems in high-income institutions still privilege lead authorship and grant capture, creating a standing

¹⁹ Ojo, 2026b

²⁰ *Ibid.*

incentive to retain control.²¹ The language of equity has often outpaced the willingness to cede it. Three enabling strategies can lower the barrier. First, pilot direct funding and joint governance at small scale before wider adoption. Second, co-develop risk frameworks with Northern and Southern partners so fiduciary assurance no longer defaults to Northern intermediation. Third, tie conditionalities to the AU-EU Innovation Agenda, making equity provisions a term of funding rather than an aspiration. None of these removes the politics, but they make reform more feasible.

(5) Conclusion

The polycrisis demands governance responses built on institutional equity and epistemic justice. Inequitable partnerships, however well-intentioned, function as structural vulnerabilities. They narrow the knowledge base available to decision-makers. They concentrate risk in institutions with the least decision-making power. They erode the legitimacy of multilateral cooperation at the moment when it is most needed. When Global South institutions are denied meaningful voice in how crises are defined and responses organised, the governance architecture reflects only a partial view. In polycrisis conditions, where crises interact across domains and borders, partial views produce inadequate solutions. The cost of this exclusion is not merely ethical, but strategic.

This brief has argued that equitable partnerships should be designed as governance infrastructure. The three imperatives proposed here are grounded in both the literature and practical experience of partnership design across funding cultures and continents. They draw on the GROW Programme, the Dutch Research Council's epistemically just grantmaking, and the author's own institutional practice spanning collaborations with the EU, India, and North America. These are not hypothetical proposals. They are drawn from programmes already implemented and evaluated. This replicability makes them useful reference points for policymakers seeking practical

entry points for reform. The author's own work, from a 2009 phenomenographic study of how Wits students understood internationalisation to a 2025 Lancet Global Health framework for epistemically just grantmaking, tracks the growing recognition that partnership reform is not optional. It is a precondition for credible governance in a world of compounding crises.

As argued in Pretoria: equity is not generosity. It is architecture. And the multilateral system must help design it.²² Policymakers in the EU, the AU, regional economic communities, and research funding bodies should act on these imperatives as strategic investments in polycrisis governance. The question is no longer whether equitable partnerships matter. It is whether the political will exists to redesign funding calls, partnership agreements, review criteria, and accountability mechanisms. The tools for reform are available. What is required is the commitment to deploy them at scale.

²¹ Flint *et al.*, 2022

²² Ojo, 2026b

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ⁱ See Ojo, 2026b