

**A Postcolonial Exploration of Finnish
Engagement in North-South Higher Education
Capacity Development Partnerships
Master's Thesis in Education**

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Master's Thesis in Education
Monograph-style
Autumn Term 2023
Faculty of Education and Psychology
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ABSTRACT

Tuba, Orsolya. 2023. A Postcolonial Exploration of Finnish Engagement in North-South Higher Education Capacity Development Partnerships. Master's Thesis in Education. University of Jyväskylä. Faculty of Education and Psychology. 76 pages.

The ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have sparked a multilateral interest in higher education (HE) development cooperation, including political, economic, and global responsibilities. However, there is a lack of critical evaluation of recent capacity development (CD) collaborations with partners from the Global South, particularly in the Finnish context. The study reveals how Finnish HE CD projects are guided by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), as well as the successes and challenges that Finnish counterparts face when implementing these partnerships.

The qualitative research methods used in the study were inspired by postcolonial theory and development studies. Despite the role of SDG4 in shaping Finnish global education development strategies, the main priorities of CD are based on Finnish expertise and are not always based on the needs of Global South partners, according to a thematic analysis of key policy and funding documents. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with eight Finnish HE CD practitioners revealed struggles with funding instruments and project-based approaches, as well as a strong desire to improve partnerships so that they are more equal, ethical, and collaboratively developed. The experiences of Finnish counterparts and the underlying motives for establishing CD partnerships are discussed from a postcolonial perspective on the latent level to unpack the underlying global and national agenda driving North-South HE partnerships led by Finnish HEIs.

Keywords: higher education, capacity development, postcolonialism, Sustainable Development Goal 4, North-South partnerships

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Heidi Layne, whose guidance, and insightful comments were not only invaluable but also instrumental in shaping this thesis. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my colleagues at Innovative Learning Environments, Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER), specifically Kristóf Fenyvesi, Matias Mäki-Kuutti, and Takumi Yada. Your teamwork, understanding, and *full support* during the busiest days made this journey more manageable. To my unofficial mentors, friends: Christopher Brownell, and Edit Püski, I am grateful for your constant encouragement, cheering and belief in me.

A special thanks to the FIER leadership for granting me the opportunity to attend the SANORD conference and to my South African colleagues, Prof. Werner Olivier, and Flora Olivier to accompany me. It was a privilege to engage with participants from North-South academic partnerships, bounce ideas off them, and meet inspiring individuals in the sector. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the participants of my interviews, whose names remain anonymous. Your invaluable contributions significantly enriched the content of this thesis.

I would also like to thank the GINTL MA thesis seminar for allowing me to present my work-in-progress. The feedback and inspiration received during this session were truly beneficial. My sincere thanks to the EDUMA colleagues and the Global and Sustainable Education (GSE) thesis group, as well as my DEICO peers. Your camaraderie provided a much-needed professional and friendly community throughout my studies.

A warm thank you to my family and friends for their encouragement and understanding during this academic journey. Lastly, I acknowledge myself for believing in my capabilities, demonstrating perseverance, and prioritising this endeavour. The journey had its highs and lows, creating a flow of experiences that ultimately shaped this thesis.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CD	Capacity Development
EDUFI	Finnish National Agency for Education
EU	European Union
GN	Global North
GS	Global South
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEI ICI	Higher Education Partnership
HEP	Higher Education Institutions' Institutional Cooperation Instrument
HRBA	Human Rights Based Approach
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
N-S	North-South, meaning Global North-Global-South
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SDG4	Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education for All
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

1 INTRODUCTION

Guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Finland, with its esteemed education system, views SDG 4, "Quality Education," as crucial in addressing the global learning crisis (UN General Assembly, 2015; *Better Together for Better World*, 2017). It is committed to a 'long-term role', fulfilling its 'obligation' to combat global exclusion and inequality, with a specific focus on improving teaching and learning outcomes, particularly in the Global South (Reinikka et al., 2018). Higher education capacity-building partnerships in North-South education development aim to address 'knowledge gaps', enhance inclusivity, and promote quality education in regions with particular difficulties (Adriansen et al., 2016). However, a notable challenge arises from inherent asymmetries, power imbalances, and cultural-contextual disparities (Ojala & Hooli, 2022; Adriansen & Madsen, 2019).

Over the past decade, Finland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has endorsed higher education capacity development initiatives in the Global South, utilising funding instruments such as the Higher Education Institutions' Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI), Higher Education Partnership (HEP) Programme (*HEI ICI Programme Document*, 2019; *HEI Programme Document*, 2023). Aligned with Finland's Development Policy, these efforts, especially focusing on Africa, have been significant (MFA, 2021). Launched in 2020, Finland's Africa Strategy emphasises enhancing economic and political ties, directly impacting increased higher education partnerships (*Finland's Africa Strategy*, 2021; *Africa Action Plan*, 2022). Since 2010, over 140 million euros have supported capacity development through HEI ICI and Erasmus Capacity Building Higher Education (CBHE). From 2024, the HEP Programme will allocate 6 million euros to seven projects, maintaining focus on teacher education, climate change, and intensifying partnerships with African countries (*HEI Programme Document*, 2023). The increased economic interest in Africa is reflected in the upcoming HEP funding call as well as in Finland's Africa Strategy, urging for a

critical investigation of what actually happens in these capacity development projects and how the SDG4 guides these partnerships.

The existing research discussing partnerships and development has already looked at the perspectives of the Global North (Johnson & Wilson 2006, Kapoor 2004, Kontinen 2007). Postcolonialism provides a theoretical framework for studying power, identity, and culture in global North-South higher education collaborations, and its epistemological concerns are relevant to education and HE capacity development discourses (de Sousa Santos, 2019; Dei & Kempf, 2006; Mignolo, 2012). This study adds to the previous research by providing a postcolonial assessment of the latest global and national efforts of north-south capacity development partnerships, specifically by looking at Finland's engagement in global education development, while addressing the undermining global agendas and existing power-relations.

The primary aim is to investigate how SDG4 serves as a guiding framework for North-South capacity development partnerships, specifically examining the experiences encountered by Finnish stakeholders in coordinating such partnerships. This exploration seeks to understand the impact and influence of SDG4 on the design, implementation, and outcomes of capacity development initiatives, shedding light on the challenges and successes faced by Finnish stakeholders in navigating and orchestrating collaborative efforts with partners in the Global South. The concerns surrounding power imbalances and binary frameworks within higher education capacity development processes is of significant concern in this study. The findings could provide useful insights to inform the development and implementation of more effective, ethical, and sustainable capacity development initiatives.

2 FINLAND'S ENGAGEMENT IN GLOBAL EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

This section provides a postcolonial perspective on Finland's engagement and role in global education development, shedding light on the country's historical ties to neighbouring nations, its relationship with the Sámi people, and its place in the Nordic welfare model. It also investigates initiatives from the Global North, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and their incorporation into Finnish policies. Thus, this chapter investigates Finland's role, impact, and interaction in global education development, as well as its surrounding socio-political agenda and specific interest in the African continent.

Finland, while not a colonising power in the Global South, has a complex history of subjugation and governance by Russia and Sweden (Menon et al., 2021). In the context of Western colonisation, Finland occupies an ambivalent position, having experienced foreign occupation while simultaneously constructing a racialized notion of nationhood (Lehtola, 2015). Concurrently, it engaged in practices that marginalised the Sámi people, demonstrating the intricate dynamics of power and privilege. Considering the insights from Sámi studies, Finland offers an intriguing context where discussions regarding its colonial past are notably lacking in critical examination (Lehtola, 2015).

Finland's alignment with the Nordic welfare model serves as a clear illustration of its connection to the global North (Thrupp et al., 2023). In this capacity, Finland actively participated in shaping policies like the SDGs designed to facilitate development in the global South. These SDGs have been seamlessly integrated into Finnish policies, but as we find ourselves in the year 2023, questions arise about their effectiveness and relevance in light of the continuously evolving global landscape (Kontinen et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the perpetuation of a colonial perspective is evident in narratives that endorse Nordic exceptionalism and egalitarianism (Menon et al., 2021). Finland's development policy underscores the Finnish education system as a significant national asset, emphasising its paramount role in carrying a

global responsibility (MFA, 2021). The Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) has articulated, in the HEI Programme Document of 2023, the ambition of Finnish HEIs to bolster their internationalisation efforts, advance education and research, and attain global leadership in their respective fields (*HEI Programme Document*, 2023). Recent Finnish education export initiatives further underscore this phenomenon, capitalising on the favourable global perception of Finnish education, fostered by its consistent success in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) since the early 2000s (Schatz 2016).

Finland's Africa Strategy predominantly emphasises the enhancement of economic and political relations between Finland and African countries, with education holding a less prominent position in this specific development cooperation strategy (*Finland's Africa Strategy*, 2021). Conversely, the Agenda 2063, led by a coalition of African nations, signifies the Global South's aspiration to have a significant role in shaping development agendas (*Agenda 2063*, 2014). In addition, the Africa Action Plan, published by Finnish MoEC, is aligned with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, focusing on the promotion of education, research, skills, culture, understanding, creative industries, social cohesion, and civil society, which explores the engagement of Finnish HEIs in these global initiatives (*Africa Action Plan*, 2022). However, it is vital to recognize that the pursuit of economic and political interests is evident in development cooperation efforts with African countries, necessitating a keen awareness of ethical considerations among researchers and practitioners in the HEI sector.

Over the last decade, the Finnish MFA and MoEC have actively promoted capacity development efforts in higher education through the HEI ICI and its successor, the HEP Programme. Both funding instruments encourage collaboration specifically with countries in Africa and in the Global South, which is consistent with Finland's development cooperation policy, which places a strong emphasis on the Triple Nexus (*Humanitarian-Development-Peace*) approach (Development Policy Committee, 2021). As these initiatives are framed as a means of improving institutional and teaching capacities, with the ultimate goal of providing students with relevant and inclusive higher education

opportunities, the programmes are optimistic about their long-term impact, promising significant improvements in educational equity within partner countries. However, it raises concerns that it may unintentionally resemble a form of neocolonialism hidden within the context of development cooperation and education partnership, particularly given the history of the Global South being colonised by 'modern' knowledge imported from Western cultures. These funding programmes require a more thorough examination in the postcolonial framework, with a focus on epistemology, decolonisation, authentic collaboration, and a re-evaluation of power dynamics (*HEI ICI Programme Document, 2019; HEI Programme Document, 2023*).

The collaborations between HEIs in Finland and in developing countries serve to foster reciprocal internationalisation efforts and facilitate mutual knowledge exchange (*HEI ICI Programme Document, 2019*). However, the power dynamics at play here are far from equal, due to the donor-recipient relationship and to the fact that Finnish expertise and Finnish development policy conveniently dictate the thematic priorities of this programme: (i) solving the learning crises, (ii) addressing climate change, and (iii) fostering innovations (MFA, 2021). This begs the question: who determines the priorities, and in whose interest do they ultimately serve? The imposition of Finnish policy and expertise raises concerns about the preservation of indigenous knowledge and the stifling of local agency. It is critical to consider whether such initiatives perpetuate a Eurocentric worldview while subtly marginalising the voices and perspectives of the Global South.

The above-mentioned concerns and challenges, however, are acknowledged and addressed in UniPID's Ethical guidelines for responsible academic partnerships with the global south (2023), which was compiled with the goal of formulating ethical principles for research and partnership with the Global South. As a result, the guidelines incorporate practical advice on addressing inherent inequalities, promoting inclusivity and diversity, and fostering a shift from 'knowledge transfer' to 'knowledge dialogue' to avoid imposing Western knowledge. Additionally, it functions as a preventive tool to

counteract researcher misbehaviour, prevent opportunism, and resolve potential conflicts that may arise during a partnership (Kelly & Avento, 2023).

2.1 Guiding light: Sustainable Development Goal 4

In the pursuit of advancing the Agenda 2030, an increasingly vital arena of exploration revolves around North-South partnerships and development initiatives within the realm of higher education (Ferguson & Roofe, 2020; Boni et al., 2016; UN General Assembly, 2015). This chapter examines Finland's role in international development and partnerships with higher education institutions for sustainable development, with a specific focus on their relationship with Africa. It explores the problematic implications of these collaborations in the context of achieving long-term 'sustainability'. Untangling the complex discourses and ideological influences that have shaped policy decisions is necessary to understand the struggles that went into developing SDG4 and its targets – not only in terms of what was included and excluded, but also in terms of quality education, its goals, and means of attainment.

The UN's Agenda 2030, which encompasses the SDGs, urges states worldwide to enhance their social, economic, cultural, and environmental practices with the aim of fostering a more equitable and sustainable world. (United Nations, 2015). SDG 4 endeavours to guarantee inclusive and equitable access to education, as well as foster lifelong learning prospects for individuals of all backgrounds. However, it is important to note that all of the aforementioned goals are of a voluntary nature, hence lacking a solid framework of accountability and monitoring (Unterhalter, 2017). Additionally, there is a notable absence of a firm commitment to financial resources for their implementation globally. These factors contribute to developing nations' reliance on more powerful and financially endowed counterparts, reinforcing existing power disparities and potentially perpetuating neocolonialism (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017).

Finland is committed to achieving the SDGs, with a special care for the SDG4, given their historical success story and strong commitment to education

(Reinikka et al., 2018). In the Government Report on Development Policy to the Parliament 2021, Finland has received a call to enhance its backing for education in developing nations. The report designates education as a distinct focal point within its Development Policy, underscoring its significance (MFA, 2021). The voluntary report on SDGs shows that Finland has contributed to achieving the SDG4 targets on a national level, but there has been little mention of the specific results and impact of such partnerships and development cooperation with the Global South (*Voluntary National Review*, 2020). Given that Finland is set to become a global leader in higher education and research by 2025, as stated in the International Strategy for Higher Education and Research, there are high expectations and a lack of follow-up studies to back up Finland's global achievements (*Better Together for Better World*, 2017).

Finland's commitment to strengthening development collaborations with Africa and to Agenda 2030 necessitates a review of Agenda 2063, the African Union's strategic blueprint for the continent's future progress and advancement. The topics and goals discussed for the next 50 years include economic growth, regional integration, and peace and security in Africa. Interestingly, Agenda 2063 is implemented through African institutions, including the African Union and its diverse organisations and agencies, constituting a well-established and closely followed strategy with specific regional initiatives and mechanisms. In contrast, Agenda 2030, with its broad global focus, is executed by individual countries, each adapting the SDGs to their national context as deemed suitable.

The UN's policy commits to a more short-term 15-year plan, with 17 very ambitious goals such as ending poverty globally. In contrast, Agenda 2063 narrows its vision and showcases a long-term dedication to challenges specific to Africa, such as regional integration, economic growth, and peace. Agenda 2063's regional aspirations are in line with the postcolonial agenda of self-determination and regional identity, prioritising African nations' autonomy in areas such as development, infrastructure, industrialization, and food security. The importance of peace and security in Agenda 2063 is notable within a postcolonial

framework, recognizing past national and international conflicts and the necessity of establishing stable nations and regions.

The specified timeframes and developmental focus of these agendas are indicative of neoliberalism, a prevailing and pervasive paradigm that has shaped our collective socioeconomic consciousness, according to scholars (Lebeau & Sall, 2011). This dominance is reflected in the lens through which education policies are framed, with neoliberalism frequently serving as the default viewpoint, which, in contrast to the SDGs' emphasis on equity and equality, promotes competition and privatisation, creating inequalities. When we look at SDG4, we see a clear conflict between the main neoliberal worldview that guides educational policies and a more democratic one, which allows us to think about how the world is connected and dependent on each other in a very different way (Wulff, 2020).

Recognizing interdependence between the Global North and the Global South is a crucial aspect of global partnerships and the SDGs. Inequalities are sustained by structural imbalances, according to Kumar (2019), and the SDGs force a more in-depth examination of these disparities. Aligning HEI strategies with the SDGs allows the sector to tap into its significant potential to drive sustainable development actions. HEIs are tasked with paving the way for more equitable access to education and lifelong learning in order to support education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, and gender equality (King et al., 2011; Franco et al., 2018). However, the neoliberal policy that has driven HE globalisation and internationalisation efforts has resulted in higher tuition fees and the global commodification of education (King et al., 2011).

HEIs contribute to data collection and research, educate future decision-makers, design research projects, facilitate knowledge-creation, and provide new information to all (Boni et al., 2016; Franco et al., 2019). Given the SDGs' flaws, researchers must remain critical and address educational challenges in terms of equity and equality, as well as generate new knowledge with an emphasis on social justice, in order to assist HEIs in creating a sustainable society (Ferguson &

Roofe, 2020; Taysum, 2019). HEIs can contribute to SDG4 by forming ethical and equitable partnerships in which Northern and Southern nations actively collaborate in co-producing knowledge, technologies, and processes that promote sustainability (Leung & Waters, 2013; Kontinen & Nguyahambi, 2020a; Bradley, 2008). Stafford-Smith et al. (2017) highlight the importance of strengthening capacities in Southern countries through collaborative efforts. This approach not only empowers nations with limited resources, but it also fosters a sense of shared responsibility in the achievement of global sustainability goals. Ojala and Hooli (2022) underline the value of sustained participation, dynamic project reform, and comprehensive support mechanisms in the realisation of impactful HEI partnerships.

2.2 Finnish Institutional Landscape

Finland's higher education sector features numerous projects, networks, and stakeholders actively involved in global education development efforts, with the Finnish University Partnership for International Development (UniPID) standing out as a key driver. UniPID serves as a platform where Finnish universities collectively contribute their expertise and resources, fostering collaboration, learning, and teaching on sustainable development themes. Additionally, these universities utilise UniPID's Infobank platform to share details about their ongoing research endeavours, comprising 270 research projects and 74 capacity development cooperation initiatives (UniPID Infobank, n.d.).

Similarly, the Global Innovation Network for Teaching and Learning (GINTL), a university-based, government-funded project that is part of the MoEC's internationalisation programme in Finland, facilitates research and collaboration with Finnish HEI and HEIs from China, India, and Africa. It serves as a knowledge exchange platform, allowing stakeholders to share best practices, conduct research, and develop innovative solutions to educational challenges that Finland and its global partners face. However, the initiative's composition, which includes leading economic superpowers China and India as well as the

entire African continent, raises concerns about economic imbalances, cultural diversity, power dynamics, and neocolonial influences (GINTL, n.d.).

Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that capacity development initiatives in this context primarily take the form of project-based efforts, in line with key funding opportunities such as HEI ICI, HEP, CBHE or GINTL. Another point to consider is Finland's electoral system, which results in the election of a new government every four years (Jääskeläinen, 2023). This raises concerns about the security and financial viability of the aforementioned initiatives, as the prospects for future R&D initiatives similar to the HEP Programme may be uncertain under the current administration (Government R&D Funding Decreases for 2023, 2023). Despite their best intentions, Agenda 2030 and its objectives can be highly vulnerable to changes in government decisions and funding fluctuations. The prevalence of a project-centric approach may worsen the issue of long-term sustainability and continuity in meeting development objectives.

The Finnish Society for Development Research (FSDR) collects, preserves, and disseminates educational and social science data. This data-driven approach informs policy decisions and programme design, ensuring that Finland's global education development initiatives are empirically supported and capable of addressing specific challenges faced by partner countries. The University of Jyväskylä Coalition of Africa Networks (JYU-CAN) consists of three research networks that collaborate with Finnish universities and their African counterparts. These networks include: i. the University of Turku-led Finland-Africa Platform for Innovation (FAPI); ii. the Aalto University-led EDUCASE / Case Platform for Sustainable Development; and iii. the Finnish and Southern African Higher Education Institutions Network for Health and Well-Being (SAFINET).

The Coordination of Multi-Agency Cooperation between Ministries and other actors in education and training was established in 2020 to improve collaboration in the sector (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2020). The August 2018 report, "Stepping Up Finland's Global Role in Education," outlined efforts to

strengthen Finland's international role and increase contributions to addressing the learning crisis in developing countries (Reinikka et al., 2018). Furthermore, the education export sector deserves mention, with its ambitious economic target of reaching 1 billion euros in turnover by 2030 (Kangasniemi, 2021). Despite Finland's historical absence from colonial hegemony, its current engagement in global education development and perceived role implies neocolonial and neoliberal perspectives.

Due to the profit-oriented nature of education export, there is limited interest from education export (EE) companies to engage in collaborations with 'developing' countries. Finland's association with the Global South primarily occurs through humanitarian and development assistance (Development Policy Committee, 2021; Kontinen et al., 2022). Education plays a vital role within the humanitarian-development nexus, serving as a fundamental mechanism for sustainable support, fostering developmental prospects, and advancing gender equality.

African countries are keen to learn what Finland has done to achieve quality learning for all. This is the area where Finland has most to offer, and therefore Finland should further invest in addressing the learning crisis and existing gender gaps in its African partnerships. (FCA's Recommendations to Finland's Africa Strategy, 2020, p. 3)

Finnish civil society organisations, such as Finnish Church Aid (FCA) and World Vision Finland, actively participate in and advocate for development cooperation, implementing vocational skills training programmes for instance in Uganda. However, there is no mention of collaborating with and utilising university partnerships with development cooperation efforts or vice versa in the given regions.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a theoretical framework that aims to connect postcolonial contexts with global development challenges, filling the gap between these two perspectives.

3.1 Postcolonial lenses for North-South Partnerships

Employing postcolonial theory as the analytical lens, I seek a comprehensive understanding of the manifold dimensions inherent in capacity development partnerships of HEIs from the Global North and South. The research engages with influential postcolonial scholars, including (de Sousa Santos, 2019, 2021; Dei & Kempf, 2006; Said, 1978; Samuel & Mariaye, 2014; Shahjahan, 2016; Spivak, 1988, Mignolo, 2012, Johnson & Wilson, 2006, Ojala & Hooli, 2022 as well as those of development studies (Epure, 2015; Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1990; Freire, 2000; Hall, 2012; Li, 2014; Mohanty, 2003; Pieterse, 2010, McEwan, 2019). This effort takes place in a complex environment that includes ambitious global goals, national policy landscapes, and intricate frameworks of financial support. The study seeks to not only unravel the intricate narratives and complexities intertwined within Finland and Global South HE partnerships, but also to function as a proactive mechanism, preventing consent to oppressive hegemonic norms and practices in capacity development partnerships, by employing a postcolonial framework.

Postcolonialism is a critical theory that emerged as a response to the historical phenomenon of colonisation and its subsequent consequences (de Sousa Santos, 2021). It focuses on interpreting the West, examining the impact of colonialism on societies and cultures that were once subjected to imperial rule (Roy, 2016). This theoretical framework places significant focus on the viewpoint of the colonised and aims to comprehend the ways in which their identities, cultures, and historical narratives have been influenced by the overarching power dynamics of colonial rule (Mignolo, 2012). "Orientalism," the fundamental

work by Edward Said (Said, 1978), served as a catalyst for change by methodically tearing down Eurocentric and neoliberal representations of the East. Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak (Spivak, 1988) and Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 2012) further contributed to this discourse by engaging with concepts of subalternity, cultural identity, and hybridity.

Postcolonialism provides a theoretical framework for investigating the complex dynamics of power, identity, and culture in global North-South higher education collaborations (Dei & Kempf, 2006; Mignolo, 2012). The epistemological concerns in the context of postcolonialism and decoloniality are highly relevant to education and HE capacity development discourses (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019; Bradley, 2008; King et al., 2011; Unterhalter, 2019; Wulff, 2020). The epistemological perspective reveals the deep interplay between dominant Northern knowledge paradigms and global forces such as capitalism and colonialism, as well as the symbiotic relationship between emerging Southern epistemologies and the ongoing battles against these dominant systems (de Sousa Santos, 2019). These struggles have systematically challenged dominant cultural assumptions over the past century, fueling the rise of marginalised narratives and altering the geopolitical environment in the process (de Sousa Santos, 2019). As a result, the theoretical framework of this study pays special attention to epistemological challenges in North-South collaborations, especially considering that the research focuses on HE capacity development projects, which are inherently linked with knowledge-creation processes (Adriansen, 2020; de Sousa Santos, 2019; Samuel & Mariaye, 2014).

Development-as-modernisation has been a historically deep-rooted colonial approach taken in global development efforts, which is excessively Eurocentric and sees the 'developed' Western societies and institutions as superior and as sources of development policies of the developing countries (Peet & Hartwick, 199 p. 120). Given the pervasive influence of Eurocentric assumptions, this study incorporates modernization theories solely (Sachs, 2010) to better understand postcolonial critiques of development. Europe's rapid industrialization and colonisation led to the North-South divide, a concept that

represents an imaginary line that separates countries with similar wealthier, influential 'northern' and impoverished, underdeveloped 'southern' attributes (Mahler, 2017). According to McGregor and Hill (2009), 'North-South' has become an essential framework for understanding international economic and political dynamics and recognizing global disparities (McGregor & Hill, 2009).

The decolonisation movement emerged in response to the rise of critical theories in postcolonial studies and development as modernisation (de Sousa Santos, 2021). Decoloniality entails acknowledging that numerous present-day global challenges are rooted in the persistent impact of coloniality, frequently masked by the narrative of modernity (Mignolo, 2012). It entails dissociating from the rhetoric of modernity and revealing colonial logic. This methodology challenges existing knowledge incorporates a range of global perspectives, and aims to reinstate disadvantaged viewpoints (Mignolo, 2012). According to Sharp & Briggs (2006), postcolonial theory has been criticised for being abstract and disconnected from real-life issues like poverty and inequality in development studies. Some view postcolonial theories as lacking practical tools for addressing problems in the Global South. Conversely, development studies are criticised for perpetuating Eurocentric or neocolonial perspectives (Sharp & Briggs, 2006).

3.2 North-South Divide in Global Education Development

Within the realm of global education development (GED) partnerships, the postcolonial theory lens provides a profound perspective, challenging Eurocentric narratives and advocating for a shift towards Southern and indigenous paradigms (de Sousa Santos, 2021). This approach calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of the dynamics underpinning knowledge production, validation, and the recognition of agency and resistance (McEwan, 2019). As noted by Andreotti and Burr (2008) and Edge et al. (2009), the common use of the North-South distinction to distinguish between developed and developing countries in educational collaborations poses challenges because it reinforces a binary framework, which postcolonial critiques seek to disrupt.

According to Mignolo (2012), it's important to recognize that the influence of colonialism persists even after political sovereignty has been regained by formerly colonised regions. By acknowledging that colonialism is an ongoing phenomenon, the anti-colonial prism guides us to scrutinise the power structures that shape GED partnerships. It prompts us to question the ways in which knowledge is formed, validated, and disseminated within these partnerships, and to consider the nuanced experiences and identities that receive acknowledgment (Mignolo, 2012).

Binary thinking in the postcolonial discourse becomes particularly relevant in partnerships between the Global North and South, potentially perpetuating the idea that the North provides solutions while the South is solely the recipient of aid and knowledge. Sachs (2010) argues for moving beyond simplistic rich/poor and developed/developing views while acknowledging the likelihood of the dominance of Western thought. Furthermore, binarism can lead to the prevalence of Western academic traditions and methodologies, sidelining indigenous and local knowledge systems in the South (Sachs, 2010). Mohanty (1988, 2003) underscores the often-overlooked gender binary as a category of analysis in anti-globalization movements, despite the vital role of women's experiences in understanding the impact of global capitalism, especially for poor women of colour in the Global South. Mohanty discusses the absence of a feminist perspective in many postcolonial anti-globalization movements and advocates for a feminist agenda within these movements, emphasising the centrality of women's labour and bodies in these struggles (Mohanty, 1988; Mohanty, 2003).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos introduced the concept of "abyssal thinking" to describe the gaps, hierarchies, and exclusions that exist within dominant forms of knowledge production. The conceptual and epistemological divide that separates Western knowledge systems from other marginalised or subaltern knowledge systems, often rooted in colonial and imperial histories, is referred to as abyssal thinking. Santos' (2007) symbols of colonial and coloniser exchange illustrate discursively constructed hierarchical distinctions between them, where

certain features or characteristics are described as being "on this side" and others as being "on the other side" of the abyss line. As a result, the new abyss can be viewed as a metaphor for how, through hierarchical distinctions of knowledge in the material, an image of someone—someone who tolerates, accepts, or confronts what is presented as the other—is constructed. This viewpoint seeks to bridge the gap and advocate for a more inclusive, dialogic, and pluralistic approach to knowledge production.

Beyond the abyss, an asymmetrical knowledge hierarchy already exists, wherein knowledge generated by institutions in the Global North is inherently granted higher status compared to knowledge produced by institutions in the Global South (Kontinen & Nguyahambi, 2020a). These preconditions have the potential to diminish the value of diverse knowledge systems and marginalised perspectives (Johnson & Wilson, 2006; Shahjahan, 2016; Spivak, 1988). Deepening this issue, partnerships that are solely focused on addressing challenges and conducting research relevant to the "developing" world may perpetuate the myth that the Global North provides solutions while the South is merely the recipient of aid and knowledge (Wilson, 2007). While progress has been made in challenging these norms, changing institutionalised habits remains a complex endeavour, requiring joint reflection, experimentation, and a commitment to reshaping research practices (Kontinen & Nguyahambi, 2020b).

North-South HEI research partnerships have served as the foundation for the funding structure of various development organisations and programmes, resulting in a clear association to the material power held by funding agencies (Zingerli, 2010). There have been numerous systematic and power asymmetries as well as challenges in addressing the goals of academic rigour, policy relevance, and social engagement in research collaboration practices (Kontinen & Nguyahambi, 2020a). Agenda-setting is a common difficulty for development research collaborations, as Bradley (2008) notes during which cultural diversity in the Global South is often overlooked (Bradley, 2008). Despite the fact that modern theories of development no longer exclusively advocate for a unified modernisation, there is still a lack of clarity regarding how culture should be

conceptualised and applied in development processes, the dominance of joint agendas by Northern donors and researchers is constantly criticised, and a greater role for Southern partners in establishing research priorities is demanded (Bradely, 2008). This disparity is significant because research initiatives that are not aligned with the priorities of Southern actors frequently have limited developmental impact (Bradley, 2008).

According to Johnson & Wilson (2006), in the ideal world, partnership can benefit all parties if they play complementary roles based on their differences. Diversity promotes mutuality through dialogue, reciprocity, trust, and the sharing of different values, knowledge, and practices, which fosters cooperation through institutional arrangements that prevent exploitation and promote equitable exchange. This ideal mutuality highlights differentiation's benefits, allowing partners to share and develop (Johnson & Wilson, 2006). However, McEwan (2019) contends that contemporary global inequalities persist through emerging variants of colonialism, including the paradigm of 'development,' which not only involves power dynamics but also encompasses a substantial industry dictating the agents of development, their beneficiaries, objectives, and underlying conditions.

The significance of the Global North and Global South divide in terms of inequalities and injustice emerges and has an impact on the nature of HEI partnerships. The equitable participation of Southern partners in such partnerships is critical for the credibility, relevance, and authenticity of the generated knowledge and shared understandings (Blicharska et al., 2021). According to Zingerli, partnerships may not be a solution to global inequalities, but they provide opportunities for individuals and institutions from diverse contexts to negotiate social relations and power, which can lead to more respectful and equitable implementation (Zingerli, 2010).

3.3 Capacity Development in HE

This chapter explores higher education partnerships, with a focus on the nuanced collaboration of capacity development. Adopting a postcolonial lens, it delves

into the history, intentions, and debated research topics in the realm of higher education and capacity development. Analysing diverse definitions of capacity development from development agencies, policies, and strategies becomes crucial for unravelling the neocolonial agendas embedded in contemporary development cooperation.

According to Baser and Morgan (2008), 'capacity' is the emergent mix of individual skills and collective capabilities that enables a human system to produce value. One could argue, however, that the definition of value can be examined to see what it means in different contexts. Capacity is defined in the setting of institutional capacity development as the various aspects (human, social, and technical) that contribute to an institution's ability to carry out its obligations effectively and sustainably over time (Wignaraja, 2009). These definitions imply not only the potential context- and agenda-dependence of what is considered to be value, but also the neoliberal efforts to function and generate profit. When considering "capacity" in the context of higher education, critical components include research, innovation, and data collection and analysis (*United Nations Academic Impact Capacity-Building*, n.d.). However, unequal transfer of knowledge, often from more powerful people to those with less influence, may be a result of growth in capacity, with the potential to worsen global imbalances (Pritchard et al., 2022).

The terminology of 'capacity building' has been critiqued for its perceived paternalistic undertones, prompting the emergence of the term 'capacity development' or 'capacity strengthening' (Mugisha, 2015). This shift represents the move away from merely building knowledge and skills and towards fostering a comprehensive, individualised developmental process. Thus, in this study the term *capacity development* is applied instead of a more frequent, and problematic term *capacity building*. Alternatively, capacity strengthening can be used, as it conveys the message of existing knowledge and skills in the given arena rather than indicating missing capacities (Mugisha, 2015). The terms 'development' and 'strengthening' are also preferred in the context of GED, given that capacity development can be divided into three major categories:

development research, fellowship programmes, and targeted capacity-development initiatives (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019).

The persistence of colonial ideology in development is evident when we examine the role of education in shaping Africans to resemble Europeans, as Kontinen (2007) highlights. Dei (2014) promotes a paradigm shift in African universities, emphasising the need to prioritise African communities' needs, aspirations, and knowledge systems, and underscores the importance of context-sensitive approaches to capacity development, including the reconsideration of research priorities. Many development aid and cooperation projects include training and capacity development initiatives, with the goal of bringing southern partners closer together with their northern counterparts. As Kontinen (2007), Mignolo (2000) and Alasuutari (2015) have noted, this approach is a direct extension of colonialist ideals within the contemporary development sector. Furthermore, in educational policies and initiatives such as the SDGs, the concepts of poverty and wealth, which are rooted in modernist notions of progress and development, are frequently portrayed as universally applicable (Pieterse, 2010; Boni et al., 2016).

3.3.1 Epistemological and Ethical Concerns

*What constitutes knowledge?
Who is disseminating knowledge?
Whose development?*

Inspired by Spivak (1998), I offer three vital questions that direct the epistemological exploration of global education development practices and policies, utilising a postcolonial framework to scrutinise the effects of neoliberalism and development as modernization (Spivak, 1988). Employing these questions and scholarly works, I critically reflect on capacity development practices in HE partnerships.

Examining capacity development in HEI collaborations between the Global South and North necessitates using an epistemological lens to reveal intricate dynamics in knowledge creation while acknowledging power imbalances and

the coloniality of knowledge (Shams & Hasan, 2020; Adriansen & Madsen, 2019). Participants in capacity development initiatives should critically reflect on their roles and perspectives on coloniality, challenging underlying assumptions, biases, and epistemological foundations (Shahjahan, 2016). Rutazibwa (2019) advocates for a holistic anti-colonial decolonization framework that includes paradigm shifts, rethinking epistemological hierarchies, and a critical examination of normative motivations behind partnerships. Adopting an anti-colonial perspective (Dei & Kempf, 2006) encourages the deconstruction of dominant discourses and knowledge systems, thereby cultivating critical awareness (Rutazibwa, 2019). These principles provide a thorough examination of contextual dynamics and alternatives for reshaping university collaborations beyond colonial influences (Dei & Kempf, 2006).

When looking at *What constitutes knowledge?*, it is necessary to consider the complex relationship between power and the neoliberal agenda behind global educational development and social structures. The use of the concepts of "powerful knowledge" and "knowledge of the powerful," as well as the "universality of knowledge," are significant analytical approaches (Young, 2008; Adriansen and Madsen, 2019). According to Young, the 'knowledge of the powerful' derives from Marx's statement that the governing ideas at the time are the ruling class's ideas, but it does not elaborate on the knowledge itself. On the other hand, "powerful knowledge" is measured in terms of what it can accomplish or the intellectual strength it provides its owners. The precise content of "powerful knowledge" varies greatly depending on the context, as it is influenced by local norms and relevance (Young, 2008).

Who is disseminating knowledge? has a lot to do with issues of power, colonial legacies and the decolonisation of education systems. In "The Wretched of the Earth," Frantz Fanon (1961) explores the utilisation of colonial education as a mechanism for cultural subjugation and manipulation, emphasising the necessity of reassessing the power dynamics surrounding knowledge in the decolonization process (Fanon, 1961). Moreover, the dominance of Western languages can marginalise indigenous languages and hinder the dissemination

of local knowledge, thus language plays a crucial role in knowledge dissemination (Thiong'o, 1986). In the Global South, unequal access to technology and different geographical locations, whether urban or rural, have a direct impact on the dissemination of knowledge and educational opportunities (Roy, 2016).

When contemplating the inquiry of *Whose development?*, previous research in this field sheds light on the enduring influence of colonial legacies, neoliberalism, and power disparities in shaping educational policies and agendas (Dei & Kempf, 2006; Mignolo, 2012; Escobar, 1995; Freire, 2000; McEwan, 2019; Sharp & Briggs, 2006). Capacity development initiatives frequently encounter challenges when they neglect to consider cultural factors, societal structures, and economic systems, as well as when there is a lack of consensus among the direct beneficiaries regarding the desired development outcomes. Smith argues in favour of incorporating indigenous knowledge into the process of educational development as a means to address the marginalisation of indigenous perspectives (Smith, 2012). In order to effectively tackle the intricate challenges associated with global education development, it is imperative to adopt a comprehensive and contextually tailored approach that places emphasis on the appreciation of diverse knowledge systems and the inclusion of local perspectives (Dei & Kempf, 2006).

Examining epistemological discourse has helped to develop a more nuanced understanding of knowledge construction and dissemination in educational development. North-South research collaborations seek to address educational disparities by generating new knowledge, sparking critical inquiries about research decision-making, and defining new knowledge. Scholars argue against imposing Eurocentric, neoliberal, and Western ideologies, highlighting the importance of listening to less privileged counterparts in terms of existing knowledge and capacities (Blicharska et al., 2021; Kumar, 2019; Zingerli, 2010; Trefzer et al., 2014). Neoliberalism has resulted in the commodification of education, eroding public education and reducing equal access and equity (Unterhalter, 2019). Despite being aware of power imbalances and pervasive

inequalities, implementing ethically delivered HEI partnerships remains challenging (Bradey, 2017). As a result, a critical examination of Finnish counterparts' experiences, as well as the political agenda driving global education development in the given context, is required.

3.3.2 Voices of Finnish Counterparts

The statement by the Finn Church Aid (FCA) implies that African countries are interested in Finland's educational achievements. Owing to Finland's success in education, there is an inherent responsibility to take proactive measures in addressing the global learning crisis (*FCA's Recommendations to Finland's Africa Strategy*, 2020). However, it is essential to critically evaluate the feasibility and appropriateness of transferring Finland's educational model to diverse African contexts. The call for Finland to invest in addressing learning crises and gender gaps in its African partnerships must also be scrutinised to ensure that it fosters genuine cooperation, respects local agency, and that the voices of the Finnish counterparts avoid perpetuating neocolonial dynamics in educational development efforts.

In their investigation, Kontinen and Nguyahambi (2020b) delved into the institutional learning of Finnish HEIs in North-South capacity development partnerships, specifically within the Finnish institutional context. Learning I involves enhancing existing practices within established institutional structures, focusing on improving collaboration, communication, and capacity development within existing norms and roles. In contrast, Learning II goes beyond partnership improvement by addressing challenges, recognizing power dynamics, and striving for more equitable collaboration through criticism, discussion, and efforts to change institutional norms. Learning III signifies a radical shift in institutional assumptions, challenging concepts like *development* and the North-South divide and seeking to decolonize higher education institutions and epistemologies. The aim of Learning III is to move away from Eurocentric thinking toward new knowledge production modes informed by local

perspectives, and achieving it is a complex process that often necessitates a fundamental shift in research and academic principles.

(...) We have managed to reform some of the institutionalized practices, but not fundamentally triggered any changes in the institution itself and the principles of knowledge production and funding structures inherent in it. (Kontinen & Nguyahambi, 2020b)

While capacity development projects funded by the HEI ICI have not undergone extensive external evaluation recently, valuable insights from past endeavours have been jointly collected by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI). Additionally, experiences and feedback from partnership programmes funded by selected European countries have been taken into consideration. Overall, the previous HEI-ICI layout has proven functional, as indicated in the HEI ICI Programme Document (2023) and HEP Programme Document (2023). However, certain key design elements of the HEP Programme have been adjusted to underscore mutual ownership.

These modifications include a heightened emphasis on equal and mutually beneficial partnerships, a revised financing model for more balanced collaborations, the promotion of reciprocal mobility for students and teachers, partnerships between both experienced and recently established higher education institutions in the South, and the inclusion of vocational teacher training (TVET) within higher education institutions. The overall lessons learned stress adaptive management and flexibility; a concept acknowledged by the MFA of Finland in the Higher Education Partnership Programme Document (*HEP Programme Document, 2023*).

4 RESEARCH TASK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Behind North-South development cooperation in higher education is a strong multilateral interest encompassing political, economic, and global responsibility, as well as an ambitious global agenda. However, critical evaluation of HE capacity development collaborations with Global South partners is lacking, particularly in the Finnish context. Thus, the Finnish HE landscape is investigated, with a particular emphasis on recent North-South capacity development partnerships coordinated by Finnish HEIs. Furthermore, particular attention is placed on how the Agenda 2030 is reflected in Finnish HE capacity development funding programmes and relevant policies, as well as how closely Finland-led projects align their focus to specific SDG4 targets (*SDG4 Indicator List*, 2023).

The study aims to gain insights into the overall stakeholder experiences and outcomes of HEI capacity development project implementation, particularly from the perspective of Finnish counterparts. Simultaneously, the research employs a postcolonial lens and critical perspective to analyse the underlying national and global agendas, power imbalances, and potential economic interests of Finnish HEI coordinated capacity development partnerships. The final contributions are hoped to provide insights into how these efforts can truly foster impactful and socially just outcomes.

RQ1. How does the SDG4 guide the Finnish higher education capacity development projects in North-South education partnerships?

RQ2. What are the experiences of Finnish counterparts and possible successes and challenges when it comes to collaborating on HEI capacity development projects with partners from the Global South?

5 RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

The study was carried out using a qualitative research method informed by postcolonial discourse. The research methodology was inspired by qualitative methods rooted in postcolonial theory (de Sousa Santos, 2019; Mignolo, 2012; Smith, 2012) and development research (Desai & Potter, 2006) and was conducted within the context of the Finnish HEI sector and North-South university partnerships. This method enabled a thorough examination of the intricate patterns and power dynamics inherent in these collaborations, taking into account the historical and contemporary dimensions through a postcolonial lens.

5.1 Research Context

The context and scope of the research was limited to the Finnish HE sector, within which to those institutions that have shown keen interest in coordinating capacity development projects in partnership with Global South countries during the past decade. Given Finland's increasing interest in building relations with African countries, a special attention to those partnerships was placed (*Finland's Africa Strategy*, 2021). The interviewees were chosen based on their involvement in projects funded under the policies and policy documents examined in this study. The timeframe was introduced to give space to ongoing and already finished capacity development projects.

Prior to selecting the participants for the study, a literature review was conducted on North-South partnerships, specifically focusing on Finnish-African HEI collaborations and education development initiatives. This review aimed to establish a comprehensive understanding of the underlying motives guiding HEI strategies. Simultaneously, an examination of the global education development agenda (SDG4) was imperative to grasp the potential influence and significance of North-South education development collaboration in Finland within the broader context. Thus, the research questions were drafted accordingly to 1, explore the SDG4 and its influence on Finland led North-South HEI capacity

development and 2, gain insights to the experiences of Finnish counterparts' who participate in such partnerships.

5.2 Research Participants

The interviewees were chosen based on the identification of capacity development projects coordinated by Finnish HEIs. Initially, 5 interviewees were identified to participate in an interview; however, applying the snowball-method, more experts expressed an interest in sharing their experiences and reflections on the topic through anonymous interviews. Finally, 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted, offering practitioner insights as primary data for this study. This selection process came with a particular attention to ensuring that both universities (5) and universities of applied sciences (3) were included in the study. Furthermore, the selection aimed at including project cases from both completed (3) and ongoing phases (3), as well as those discussing the broader context of Finnish HEI practices in North-South capacity development partnerships (2).

For this study, all participants were initially contacted via email invitations. These invitations included detailed information about the research project, a consent form, and an invitation to partake in an online interview (see Appendix A, B, C). Participants were informed that the data collected would be anonymised in order to create a secure environment that would foster trust and encourage open sharing.

The participant pool comprised representatives from eight distinct Finnish higher education institutions. Some of the interviewees were known to the researcher from previous conferences and other university-related activities. Notably, all participants had previous involvement in one or more capacity development initiatives, holding positions as advisors, researchers, project managers, or project coordinators within Finnish universities or universities of applied sciences. These roles involved collaborative efforts with higher education institutions in various African countries. Some interviewees had a deep understanding of the topic, and the semi-structured interview questions allowed

for a more profound and detailed exploration of their thoughts, enhancing the research process.

5.3 Data Collection

5.3.1 Key Documents

Key document analysis was a valuable qualitative exploration method for understanding the relationship between the Finnish context, strategy of capacity development initiatives in Finland's higher education sector and the global development goals. Given the abundance of available documents and the study's limitations, the data pool was narrowed to only the most relevant and timely ones to current HEI capacity development and N-S partnerships, guided by the research question and research problem as well. Finland's Africa Strategy, the Official List of SDG4, the Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI) Programme Document, and the Higher Education Partnerships (HEP) Programme Document are among them (*HEP Programme Document, 2023; HEI ICI Programme Document, 2019; Finland's Africa Strategy, 2021; SDG4 Indicator List, 2023*). These documents are interconnected and relevant to determining how the SDG4 guides North-South capacity development efforts in Finland. It is worth noting that the HEP Programme came after the previous HEI ICI funding program, while Finland's Africa Strategy is not limited to higher education, it also includes political and economic efforts.

The Official List of SDG4 is a document prompted by a research question, and it was critical to thematic data analysis of the selected documents.

The Africa Strategy of Finland, which was published in 2021, holds significant influence as a policy document. Analysing this strategy provides valuable insights into Finland's national development cooperation narrative, the underlying agenda it has in Africa, and its perception of the role of education and higher education institutions in attaining sustainable development and fostering stronger political and economic relations with African nations. This document was chosen due to its intriguing nature, as it provides an opportunity to analyse

the potential correlation between these objectives and the encounters encountered by Finnish counterparts in capacity development initiatives.

The selection of the HEI ICI and HEP Programme Documents was based on their significant impact and pivotal role in enhancing the capacity development initiatives of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Finland. The significance of the application processes, preferred themes and objectives, and the evaluation criteria of the awarded capacity development projects cannot be overstated. In addition, it is worth noting that a comprehensive grasp of these pivotal funding instruments was crucial in facilitating the interviews with research participants, all of whom acquired an expertise with the practical implementation of these funding calls and program documents.

5.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview was purposefully selected as the interviewing approach. This decision was based on its ability to adapt to the participant's unique experiences while also allowing the conversation to move toward topics of importance to the participant (Tracy, 2013; Galetta, 2020). In addition, semi-structured interviews enable follow-up questions and probes, which are critical for clarifying responses and delving into specific areas of interest. This method not only captures the breadth of participants' experiences, but also provides a setting for nuanced discussions, allowing for a comprehensive and contextualised understanding of the given capacity development project case.

The interviews were conducted online, with participants scheduling them conveniently using an online scheduling tool. The participants expressed a strong willingness to voluntarily share their experiences and emphasised the topic's timeliness and relevance. The interviews were only recorded in audio format with a recording device. Following that, the researcher transferred the recordings to their personal computer, ensuring that the data names were handled anonymously.

The interview questions were used to organise and categorise the interview data into three main sections, mainly concentrating on a specific case study of

capacity development projects (See Appendix D). The phases included initiation, implementation, and evaluation, with a focus on impact measurement. The core interview questions during the initiation phase focused on understanding the background of the partnership and explored the key aspects of initiation and the primary motivations for participating in the project. To understand national and global agendas, power imbalances, and economic interests, it was important to determine whose needs were prioritised, the set capacity development goals, and whether these goals were determined through an unbiased stakeholder analysis or background study. However, direct inquiry was avoided to prevent biased responses or influencing participants' thoughts. Instead, open-ended and follow-up questions were used to create a supportive and non-judgmental environment, allowing interviewees to freely express their experiences.

The interview's implementation phase questions provide insights into the experiences, challenges, and successes of north-south capacity development projects. The capacity development case project's partners, languages, cultures, and the coordinator's experience level were important factors influencing the perceived experiences. Practical suggestions were gathered regarding how Finnish counterparts could enhance their collaboration with partners from the global south. The evaluation and impact section of the interview allowed participants to reflect on whether the capacity development project achieved its objectives, met quality standards, and ensured sustainability and impact, also with regards to the SGD4. Questions regarding the impact and sustainability of funding were raised. This includes inquiries about the commitment to conduct follow-up research on the outcomes and the participants' comprehension of the impact and sustainable results.

Not all interviews were focused on a single case project. The participants, with their extensive experiences, used multiple capacity development projects to reflect on the interview questions. The framework described above was found to be beneficial for participants to organise their thoughts and reflect on their capacity development experiences.

5.4 Data Analysis

5.4.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic data analysis was used to examine both the key documents and the data gathered through semi-structured interviews, as this method is known to provide a new theoretical or conceptual perspective in response to specific research questions (Lochmiller, 2021). The research employed Braun and Clarke's (2018) 6-step framework, which began with different steps for interview data and document data. For interviews, transcription and anonymisation were required before proceeding, while both types of data underwent iterative coding and analysis processes. This involved identifying and developing themes and sub-themes by returning to the data and refining the coding and development of themes over multiple phases of analysis. The thematic analysis processes were facilitated through the utilisation of the Atlas.ti software, which involved employing the grouping of codes function and using distinct colours to distinguish and identify the inclusion of specific sub-themes within different documents.

The process of thematic analysis was also applied to key documents, which aimed to examine the emerging focal points and themes of capacity development efforts in higher education. The focus was specifically on finding answers to RQ1 and to see how the SDG4 may be guiding Finnish capacity development partnerships. This allowed a deeper understanding of the policies, funding calls and core themes that are emphasised in these documents.

Thematic analysis is especially valuable for investigating shared experiences, thoughts, and meanings (Guest et al., 2012). This benefit is particularly important and relevant in the context of this study, as data on the experiences of Finnish counterparts who worked on capacity development projects in North-South university partnerships were gathered. The combination of the semantic level and an inductive approach to thematic analysis ensures that the impact of various discourses on the meanings and experiences of capacity development projects is investigated (Braun & Clarke, 2018, pp. 1-18).

5.4.2 Document Analysis Process

The 4 documents yielded 83 pages worth of data, which were imported to Atlas.ti for the initial coding and sub-theme categorisation. The document analysis was guided by RQ1 *“How does the SDG4 guide the Finnish higher education capacity development projects in North-South education partnerships?”*, and the selected key documents (see above in Data Collection) were analysed. The focus was specifically on extracting findings to RQ1 and gaining a deeper understanding of the guiding policies, funding calls. The SDG4 Indicator List was examined, and targets and methods of implementation were coded in order to establish direct links between the SDG4 document and key documents in the Finnish context.

A critical postcolonial lens was maintained throughout the coding process, which started with looking at Finland's Africa Strategy. Codes were created with the purpose of reflecting the latent meaning behind the evident narrative. For instance, the following section was coded as ‘Guided by Economic Interest’ as it clearly states that education should be commodified and used as a source of income for Finland:

Measures are taken to better utilise the networks of business operators and higher education institutions in export promotion, including international chambers of commerce cooperating with Finnish partners. (Finland’s Africa Strategy, 2021)

A total of 40 codes were generated from the analysis of the four primary documents. The iterative review of theme development ensured accurate code allocation. These themes offer insights into the drivers behind north-south academic partnerships, serving as a foundation for examining stakeholders' experiences in later interview transcript analysis. This preparation was essential for the upcoming interviews, as the interviewees follow the funding instruments and policies reviewed during the document analysis.

5.4.3 Interview Analysis Process

The interview analysis began with transcribing eight approximately one-hour-long audio materials using Microsoft Outlook's transcribing tool, resulting in 114 pages of plain-text data. Anonymization was a crucial preliminary step to ensure the exclusion of personal data before the thematic analysis. This step was

particularly important due to the potential traceability of participants in the relatively small Finnish-African and North-South partnership landscape. Details such as titles, project names, and university partnership specifics related to the capacity development initiatives were either faded or anonymized. Demographic variables like age, gender, and background information were not collected for this study. Participants were assigned numerical codes (e.g., P1, P2) to protect their identities.

The thematic analysis was guided by the second research question of the study “RQ2. What are the experiences of Finnish counterparts and possible successes and challenges when it comes to collaborating on HEI capacity development projects with partners from the Global South” and sought findings on the experiences shared by participants. During the initial round of coding, attention was specifically directed towards terms such as 'challenges,' 'risks,' 'opportunities,' 'solutions,' and other significant encounters mentioned by participants. Keywords like 'difficult,' 'challenging,' 'efficient,' 'easy,' 'equal,' 'different,' and 'influence' were instrumental in identifying diverse experiences of Finnish counterparts in these capacity development projects. The initial codes were descriptive, contributing to the subsequent formation of themes. For instance, codes such as 'different context, culture is challenging in HEI CD' were created to capture the essence of the experiences.

The second round of coding included codes that clearly did not belong in either the challenges or successes categories, as they could easily be both or none of the two, such as the 'Southern partners feel more equal' code. During this stage, codes were created that provided valuable insights into the experiences of those involved in capacity development projects, highlighting the most highlighted comments and narratives of participants. Some codes were also created when participants specifically shared their critical perspectives and views on SDG4 and the role of supranational organisations and global policies, all of which align well with the postcolonial framework of the research.

Following the completion of the two-round coding, the interview data was reviewed again, and some duplicate codes with very similar meanings were

merged, yielding 96 codes. The development of themes had already begun during the data collection phase, as encouraged by Braun and Clarke (2012). The codes were initially organised into project stage-specific themes, such as Initiation, Project Implementation, and Project Evaluation;'. However, it soon became clear that many of the experiences could not be confined to a single stage, as they occurred across multiple stages or outside of them. Throughout the coding process, these provisional themes that are commonly used when discussing challenges and successes, such as 'Funding' and 'Impact,' were identified. Finally, four sub-themes were assigned to three main themes (see section 6.2), and the transcripts were reviewed again to ensure that the themes matched the data.

5.5 Researcher Positioning

When conducting research on north-south partnerships, the researcher must be aware of their positioning, power imbalances, and social justice issues (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019; Dei, 2014). I am a 26-year-old female of Caucasian ancestry and Hungarian nationality. I moved to Finland to pursue higher education, which I received for free during both my bachelor's and master's degrees. My early adult years were spent in Finland, England, and Hungary, mostly working in higher education (academia), education development, and international project management. As an avid traveller who has visited nearly 40 countries, I have a keen interest in the intersection of education and social systems. My observations have given me insight into the impact of political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors on local communities, particularly their access to quality education.

I have recent prior experience preparing project proposals with partners from both the Global North and the Global South. These processes had an impact on my current research because they forced me to think critically about how funding systems work, how researchers work, and what global responsibility means to practitioners in higher education in Europe. I have worked on a variety of international projects in the fields of higher education and teacher education,

mostly as a representative of a Finnish university, and I have always been struck by the overwhelming image and admiration for the 'perfect' Finnish education system.

I have witnessed systemic oppression, abuse of power, and unethical practices in higher education throughout my career and life. Because of my experiences and worldview, I feel a strong ethical obligation to assist those who are victims of injustice. Having gained some experiences through my travels and work, I recognize that I still lack the perspective of being born in a less privileged country in the Global South. Thus, I consider my research contribution to be ethical and valuable if it focuses on the experiences of my Finnish counterparts and then critically examines the collected data.

Given the aforementioned life experiences and worldview, I have my own assumptions and preconceptions about the potential outcomes of university collaboration, which must be acknowledged. Throughout the research process, I admit to struggling with critical and reflective thinking while also avoiding my potential biases. However, because of my data-driven approach to analysis and by continuously and extensively reflecting my point of view as well as my presumptions throughout the research, I considered the ethical issue of intentional or unconscious researcher bias, as explained by Bryne (2017).

5.6 Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of this thesis were guided by established principles, including those outlined by Tracy (2013), Byrne (2017), which emphasise the importance of ethical planning and execution in research, particularly in terms of confidentiality, potential conflict of interest, and informed consent. The 'incentive dilemma' and established norms in the field of research were also taken into account (Guest et al., 2013). These following ethical principles and practices ensured the protection of participants' rights and the integrity of the research process.

Given that Finland is a small country, with an even smaller professional circle of researchers, practitioners working in the field of North-South HE

capacity development, anonymisation of the data was a must to provide a safe space for sharing experiences and critical reflections. Multiple steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, beginning with the researcher participating in anonymisation training, coding of the collected data, and the possibility for research participants to review the findings before final submission. No video recording of participants was taken, and voice recordings of the interviews were deleted after the transcription process was completed. Any identifying information was removed from the collected data during the pseudonymisation process and participants were designated with code names to prevent recognition.

The research adhered to ethical principles outlined by the Finnish Board for Research Integrity (TENK, 2021), including informed consent, confidentiality, respect for participants, and consideration of cultural and traditional norms. Prior to the interviews, each participant was given a copy of a modified version of the University of Jyväskylä's research notice, privacy notice, and consent form and were asked to approve of the consent forms. At the start of each interview, permission was obtained to record the discussion. Participants were told that their data will be analysed pseudonymously, and that all identifying information will be removed prior to data sharing and publication. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, and participants had the option to withdraw from the data collection process at any time.

Data management practices were in line with recommendations by Guest et al. (2013) and the University of Jyväskylä. Measures included securing recorded interviews with two-level passwords, storing data on secure platforms, and pseudonymization of participant identities and communities to ensure anonymity. Original recordings and documents linking pseudonyms were intended to be destroyed within six months of the project's completion, and all data was stored in a password-protected folder on a computer.

Research participants received the final draft of the thesis document prior to submission. They were asked to have a look at the study, with a specific attention to the Results and Discussion sections, and to give feedback on the

findings to ensure that there were no misunderstandings in data collection, and analysis. Their comments and suggestions were positive regarding the successful anonymisation of the data, and there were only 2 comments regarding rephrasing some of the findings to make sure that there is no generalisation based on results, but rather these experiences of Finnish counterparts are of representative value.

6 RESULTS

The thematic analysis results are based on two different sets of data collected to be able to respond to the first research question (*RQ1. How does the SDG4 guide the Finnish higher education capacity development projects in North-South education partnerships?*) as well as the second research question (*RQ2. What are the experiences of Finnish counterparts and possible successes and challenges when it comes to collaborating on HEI capacity development projects with partners from the Global South?*). First, the results of the document analysis are explored, which include the thematic analysis of four key documents. Second, the semi-structured interviews on participants' experiences in North-South capacity development partnerships are examined by using inductive thematic analysis.

6.1 Document analysis

Table 1 displays the outcomes of the thematic analysis conducted on the primary policy documents pertaining to SDG4 and the funding programmes that are most significant to Finnish higher education capacity development partnerships. The aforementioned sources encompass the HEP Programme document, HEI ICI Programme document, Finland's Africa Strategy, and the Official list of SDG4 indicators of the United Nations (*HEP Programme Document, 2023; HEI ICI Programme Document, 2019; Finland's Africa Strategy, 2021; SDG4 Indicator List, 2023*). These documents demonstrate interdependence and refer to each other within the specified sector. The following section provides an explanation of the five main themes and their coding content (see also Appendix E), which reveal the underlying reasons and motives for establishing capacity development partnerships. Later in the discussion chapter, these results are further discussed from a critical, postcolonial perspective on the latent level to unpack the underlying global and national agenda driving North-South HE capacity development projects.

Table 1*SDG4 indicators and key policy document thematic analysis results*

Theme	Description
<i>SDG4 relevance*</i>	The design and purpose of capacity development partnerships are directly relevant and connected to the SDGs and refer to the achieving of SDG4 targets.
<i>Development Cooperation</i>	HE CD Selection of partner universities in developing and low income countries.
<i>Ethical Guidelines</i>	HE CD partnerships are based on ethical practices, mutual benefits and joint development, joint ownership of projects.
<i>Finnish Expertise</i>	Focus of partnerships are driven by the existing Finnish expertise and sectoral opportunities set by the Finnish development policy.
<i>Economic Interest</i>	Developing institutional and pedagogical capacity to meet the needs of the labour market, increase employability of graduates and to create market opportunities for Finland.

**Research-question driven theme*

6.1.1 SDG4 Relevance

It was important to examine the key documents in terms of their relevance to the SDG4 targets in order to determine how closely the Finnish funding programmes adhere to global education development policy and the relevance of capacity development efforts to SDG4. Furthermore, it was critical to investigate the SDG4 themes and codes in order to derive findings that would allow us to answer Research Question 1 (*RQ1. How does the SDG4 guide the Finnish higher education capacity development projects in North-South education partnerships?*). As a result, the SDG4 and SDG relevant mentions in program documents are examined in this theme to see how they influence the emphasis of capacity development projects. These findings are discussed later in the discussion chapter in terms of the role of SDG4 and how the SDG4 targets are reflected or not in the North-South binary through a postcolonial lens.

The Official list of SDG4 indicators document was used as a foundation to develop research question-driven codes and to support the analysis of funding programme documents to determine where and how the SDG4 targets and indicators are directly or indirectly adopted (SDG4 Indicator List, 2023). All seven SDG4 targets and their three means of implementation were coded, and key program documents were examined to determine how frequently and in what context these targets, indicators, and means of implementation were mentioned. The 'Directly refers to the SDGs' code was created because it was interesting to see how frequently the documents explicitly refer to Agenda 2030.

Targets 4.3 and 4.4, which are more focused on the higher education sector than other SDG4 Targets, were addressed in all three documents. Target 4.3 seeks to ensure women's access to TVET and higher education, while Target 4.4 seeks to develop technical, vocational, and entrepreneurship skills for improved employability, with a focus on improving ICT skills. Target 4.6, which aims to ensure that all youth and adults in society achieve literacy and numeracy, received the least attention across key documents. It is important to note, however, that all of the SDG4 targets are interconnected and reliant on one another, thus, efforts to develop HE capacity are likely to have an indirect impact on meeting the other targets.

Finland's Africa Strategy was more political and economic in nature; it also made an explicit reference to the UN's Agenda 2030 and included some education development-related themes that corresponded well with a few SDG4 targets. The Strategy highlights Finland's role in addressing the global learning crisis, leveraging its expertise, values, and strengths. The establishment of North-South development cooperation partnerships in the education sector is being driven by Finnish expertise in quality education:

Development cooperation between the Finnish education sector and African countries continues and strengthens. Most of the support is channelled to comprehensive development of the education sector at primary and secondary level, including vocational education and training. The capacities of higher education institutions and research institutes are also supported to promote knowledge, innovations, and sustainable development. **Finnish expertise in the development of quality education, including teacher training is used in this cooperation.** (*Finland's Africa Strategy, 2023*)

The HEI ICI Programme document referred to less SDG4 targets than the preceding HEP Programme document. The HEI ICI has quoted Target 4.4 the most frequently, which aims to support the development of technical and vocational skills for employability:

The solving of the learning crisis at a scale requires development efforts within the HEIs and teacher training institutions which combine pedagogical tools (including modern ICT-based tools when relevant) with socially and culturally sensitive practical examples. (*HEI ICI Programme Document, 2023*)

The HEP Programme Document was closely following the SDG4 targets throughout the document including its set objectives, application and selection process. Finland's development policy was introduced in the first chapter as a national steering platform to enhance and ensure the role and actions taken by HEIs to achieve the SDGs, setting the tone for the commitment to Agenda 2030. Targets 4.1 and 4.2, as well as 4.5, 4.7, and 4.c, appeared frequently in the HEP Programme document as a means of implementing the targets to train teachers and aid in the supply of qualified teachers. This reflects in the keywords that appear frequently in the SDG narrative, such as 'equal access,' 'gender equality,' 'inclusive,' and 'inclusion,' are used throughout the program document:

The partnership programme is also linked to digital development, blended learning and enhanced attention to promoting equal access to higher education for a diverse cadre of students, including vulnerable groups such as girls and persons with disabilities. (*HEP Programme Document, 2023*)

6.1.2 Development Cooperation

This theme investigates instances where capacity development efforts resemble development cooperation (DC). DC refers to collaborative efforts between countries or organisations to support less developed regions' socioeconomic progress, sustainable development, and well-being. It is examined how key documents and funding instruments contribute to the formation of development cooperation partnerships.

Finland's Africa Strategy calls for strengthening those focal points of cooperation which are of mutual interest and benefit. It is clear that the strategy has a narrow and political, economic focus, when it comes to selecting the suitable partners from African countries. There is an evident association between

the focus of the capacity development efforts, the existing Finnish expertise and Finland's Development Policy, which is further reflected in an upcoming section (see 6.1.4). Finland's Africa Strategy guides the funding instruments such as HEI ICI and HEP, which shape the focus and direction of higher education capacity development partnerships.

The HEI ICI Programme document explicitly cites Finland's Development Policy as a determining factor in establishing a roster of eligible partner countries. The involvement of the Finnish Embassy is cited as an additional contributing element in the establishment of these partnerships. The funding instruments exhibited clarity and specificity in their determinations regarding the partner countries that were deemed eligible:

The eligible development country partners function in one or several of the following countries: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Namibia, Mozambique, Palestine Territories, Egypt, Nepal, Myanmar or Vietnam. The projects in these countries can be supported directly by the Finnish embassy, excluding Eritrea which has a unique position in Finnish development policy. (*HEI ICI Programme Document, 2023*)

According to HEI ICI, Finnish diplomatic missions play an important role in facilitating and advancing higher education partnerships and development cooperation with institutions in other relevant partner countries. The functions, contributions, and mechanisms through which Finnish embassies support HEI ICI projects and activities, both in terms of policy support and practical assistance, appear to be widespread. When it comes to forming partnerships and defining the main beneficiaries, partners from developing countries were identified as the main beneficiaries in both program documents:

The partner country HEI has the final ownership and responsibility for the capacity development and is the ultimate owner of the project results. The partner HEIs in the developing countries - including their students, teaching, and administrative staff - are the main, direct beneficiaries. (*HEI ICI Programme Document, 2023*)

This showcases a dedication to enhancing educational opportunities and resources in partner nations, aligning with SDG4's principles, which advocate for strengthened partnerships and development cooperation, particularly in countries with the greatest needs. Both the HEP and the HEI ICI program documents stress the significance of defining a geographical focus for Finnish

HEIs to identify suitable partners. The HEP's choice of target countries is grounded in Finnish development policy and aligned with global policies and SDGs:

Eligible partners are higher education institutions from the ODA eligible countries, paying due attention to Finnish partner countries and countries where Finland has other activities in the same sector. The list of the ODA eligible countries is continuously updated. (HEP Programme Document, 2023)

Both program documents advocate for mutually beneficial and collaboratively planned higher education partnerships, outlined as prerequisites for securing funding. Mutual learning acknowledges a two-way exchange of knowledge and experiences between Finnish higher education institutions and their developing-country partners. The HEI ICI program, for example, recommends the formation of a 'Project Board' chaired by a higher education institution in a developing country, while the HEP program assesses projects based on the partners' shared sense of ownership.

6.1.3 Ethical Guidelines

This section delves into the ways key documents advocate for ethical practices in capacity development projects. These codes collectively emphasise the centrality of ethical partnership, recognizing the importance of practices such as equal partnerships, collaborative efforts, joint ownership, and mutual learning within the realm of North-South HE partnerships.

While Finland's Africa Strategy primarily emphasises gender equality rather than partnership equality, the implemented approach does promote mutually beneficial collaborations in higher education. The ethical underpinning of key documents integrates a human rights-based approach (HRBA), ensuring that partnerships align with fundamental human rights principles. The capacity development projects are expected to justify their strategic decisions in addressing HRBA objectives, as outlined in the HEI ICI Programme Document (2023).

Both the HEI ICI and HEP funding programmes strive for equitable partnerships, with a particular emphasis on the joint definition of results and

targets in collaboration with partners. Specifically, the HEP Programme has modified its call and improved its attention to equality in practices of HE partnerships, where the projects are jointly prepared, implemented and evaluated by partners from GN and GS:

In general, the overall layout of the previous HEI-ICI has proved to be functional. However, in order to further emphasise mutual ownership, some focal design issues of the programme have been modified. Key elements of the Higher Education Partnership Programme are as follows:

- Enhanced emphasis for equal, mutually beneficial partnerships
 - Renewed financing model to enable more equal partnerships
- (*HEP Programme Document, 2023*)

Additionally, the importance of collaborative project evaluation, implementation, and preparation is emphasised, underscoring the significance of shared efforts throughout the project lifecycle:

The quality of partnership including:

- The extent to which the project is jointly developed by the partner institutions.
- The level of formalized commitment between partners in a mutually beneficial manner. (*HEP Programme Document, 2023*)

These mutually beneficial partnerships and the concept of joint ownership in project endeavours are also evaluated by funding instruments:

Show evidence of joint preparation and joint definition of the needs and objectives, as well as the signs for the institutional commitment to the project. Describe possible earlier cooperation between the partners if relevant. Describe how local ownership will be nurtured and developed during the project. (*HEI ICI Programme Document, 2023*)

Partnerships are envisioned as being needs-based, tailored to address the specific requirements and aspirations of all parties involved. Respect and the cultivation of strong personal-level relationships within partnerships are encouraged, fostering an atmosphere of trust and cooperation, integral to the ethical framework. In essence, these ethical principles of key documents not only provide a guiding philosophy but also present a practical roadmap for the promotion of harmonious, equal, and ethically grounded partnerships in the context of capacity development cooperation.

6.1.4 Finnish Expertise

Across key documents, there is a consistent reference to Finland's Development Policy that serves as a foundational framework, delineating key themes that reflect the nation's existing expertise. Finland's expertise in education calls for more engagement in addressing global educational crises, as it seems that Finland's Africa Strategy calls for "Finnish expertise in the development of quality education, including teacher training, is used in this cooperation". It reflects Finland's commitment to leveraging its education expertise to tackle the worldwide challenges related to access to quality education, learning disparities, and educational inequalities.

Finland's Africa Strategy calls for increased dialogue with various actors including the African diaspora, which refers to individuals with African backgrounds and roots who have settled in Finland: "Finland engages in a regular dialogue with actors in different sectors operating in Africa and with the African diaspora. Actors are encouraged to increase their cooperation" (Finland's Africa Strategy, 2021). It should be noted, however, that this collaboration is not specifically mentioned in the context of education development, but rather to expand Finnish companies' investment opportunities in new African markets.

Finland's expertise, values and strengths are driving the partnerships, which means that the focus of capacity development projects is intricately tied to the existing Finnish expertise and the sectoral opportunities outlined by the Finnish development policy:

*"Education at all levels is a Finnish strength" "Global responsibility is a key value in Finnish society". These two elements are combined in the way Finland is exercising its strength and experience in its development policy in the field of education.
(HEP Programme Document, 2023)*

This alignment underscores the crucial role of Finland's knowledge and resources in shaping the direction of these partnerships. These guide the content of funding programme documents, thereby narrowing the focus of capacity development projects.

6.1.5 Economic Interest

This section investigates the various financial motivations and priorities of capacity development and global education partnerships as described in key funding and policy documents.

Finland's Africa Strategy places a strong emphasis on education's critical role in fostering economic growth, improving competitiveness, and creating job opportunities, with specific focus on women and youth in African countries. The statement underscores the significant business opportunities that learning and education present, particularly for Finnish businesses. It also draws attention to the potential for innovative industries to create new business opportunities:

Solutions to improve access to quality education can significantly boost economic growth, competitiveness and the employment of women and youth in African countries. Learning and education involve significant business opportunities for Finnish companies. Creative industries can also offer new commercial opportunities. (*Finland's Africa Strategy, 2021*)

The African continent's increased political and economic integration, combined with its rapidly expanding population, drew significant attention, and as a result, Africa has gained strategic, geopolitical, and commercial significance. Consequently, the strategy proposes increasing the number of partnerships and emphasising the pursuit of leveraged opportunities within the context of the European Union and global forums in order to promote Finland's interests: "The aim is to double the trade between Finland and Africa between 2020 and 2030, and efforts are made to significantly increase investments of Finnish companies in Africa and of African companies in Finland during the same period" (*Finland's Africa Strategy, 2021*).

The SDG4 Target 4.4, which is mentioned frequently in all key documents, calls for increased relevance of education with working life, demonstrating an indirect economic interest behind capacity development partnerships. Developing institutional and pedagogical capacity to meet labour-market needs and increasing graduate employability are key priorities of partnerships supported by funding instruments:

The partnership programme supports the partnering higher education institutions to improve their pedagogical practises and institutional capacity to better respond to the

rapidly changing needs of the labour market and to improve the resilience of the education system. (*HEP Programme Document, 2023*)

The establishment of non-academic partnerships aimed at strengthening the connection between HEIs and the labour market is encouraged by funding instruments, whenever possible and relevant:

Where relevant, describe how the project involves non-academic partners (NGOs, companies) and their specific expertise to interact within project in order to provide specific services or to enhance the contacts with the labour market and the surrounding society. (*HEI ICI Programme Document, 2023*)

The vital role of HEIs in acquiring and disseminating climate change information in developing countries, as well as their advocacy for efficient solutions that generate large-scale employment opportunities, is also mentioned (*HEI ICI Programme Document, 2023*). The establishment of joint degree programmes with developing countries serves an economic purpose and directs capacity development partnerships toward education commodification (*HEI ICI Programme Document, 2023*). In conclusion, as outlined in key funding and policy documents, financial motivations and priorities in capacity development and global education partnerships show a complex interplay between economic interests, geopolitical considerations, and sustainable development goals, emphasising Finland's multifaceted engagement in these initiatives.

6.2 Semi-structured interviews

During the process of the thematic analysis, 96 codes were identified from the eight semi-structured interviews with research participants. 3 main themes (Funding & Financing, Project Management, SDG4) and 4 sub-themes (Initiation & Objectives, Partnership, Implementation, Impact & Sustainability) emerged from the codes, which are described in Table 2 below and also further at the latent level in the following sections.

Table 2

Themes and subthemes of the semi-structured interviews and descriptions.

Theme	Description	Subtheme	Description
Funding & Financing	Funding instruments behind CD projects, funders' influence on partnerships.	Initiation & Objectives	Proposal writing, needs analysis, setting up the objectives, creating the results framework and forecasting the main outcomes.
Project Management	Role, responsibility & level of global awareness of Finnish project managers in North-South capacity development projects.	Partnership	Formation of partnerships, practices, different contexts, cultures and experiences.
		Implementation	Practices, experiences specifically relevant at the implementation phase of capacity development projects.
Impact & Sustainability	Measuring impact and sustainability of project results through indicators and other means.	SDG4	Linking project objectives to SDG4, translating expertise to SDG goals and targets.

Table 3 shows numerical data on the themes. These numerical values should only be used to indicate that participants extensively discussed each theme in all capacity development projects in respective interviews.

Table 3

Numerical data to showcase the density of codes and their mentions in themes

Theme	Number of Codes in Given Theme	Mentioned in <i>n</i> of interviews	Total mentions
Funding	11	8/8	70

Initiation & Objectives	17	8/8	71
Project Management	16	8/8	84
Partnership	18	8/8	74
Implementation	17	8/8	96
SDG4	4	7/7	16
Impact & Sustainability	23	8/8	102

6.2.1 Funding and Financing

Participants in the study acknowledge that discussions and considerations related to funding and financing are essential and span the entire lifecycle of a capacity development project, beginning with the initial stages, continuing through proposal development, and concluding with project reporting and evaluation. Interviewees reported openly discussing budget planning, implying that these CD projects coordinated by Finnish HEIs are supported by a culture of financial transparency and communication. Despite the open discussions, a notable tension emerges concerning the requirement for equal partnership in funding arrangements. This tension stems from the need for project coordinators to simultaneously monitor project partners' spending. This disparity highlights the intricate interplay between funding expectations and the realities of financial monitoring within the project:

In some of the discussions, they tend to also have quite idealistic views. The abstract view that let's just have equal partners in that everything will be fine, but you know in reality it's not equal because the funding is coming from us and we need to be accountable for that. (P3)

The challenges associated with funding bureaucracy are also obvious. The bureaucratic elements related to funding were identified as a source of inefficiency, posing major obstacles for Finnish partners involved in these CD initiatives. However, the level of bureaucracy and its negative impact on human and time resources depend on the funding instruments and their specific reporting, documentation requirements. The European Union-funded Capacity

Building Higher Education (CBHE) funding, for example, is said to be quite demanding: *"It's a very, very bureaucratic system, and I feel that it takes up some of the efficiency of the money because I feel like a lot of the effort is wasted when dealing with Brussels"* (P2). Those funded by national sources and aligned with Finland's development policy, on the other hand, are said to be more flexible (P7).

Furthermore, the influence of funders on project dynamics is manifested in several ways. For instance, funders exercise control over the formulation of project indicators, at times leading to the imposition of unrealistic expectations:

These indicators, in a sense, are just things that I feel like you need to report and have some checks and balances on, but they seem to be more of a technical thing that you feel and do in order to comply with the funder's requirements. However, that doesn't give you the whole picture of what else you learn with those fifty teachers or 300 students, or what other things you might learn or the impact that these things have. (P1)

These expectations, in turn, are intricately connected to the process of measuring impact and ensuring quality control in project reporting:

It's impossible to predict, especially when you need to speak the funding agency's language. You have to write it in a certain way, but after 4-5 years of collaboration, you can see what actually happens and what makes sense. As a result, there is a discrepancy. Of course, you must still report against the original objectives. (P5)

Furthermore, participants noted that funding has a significant impact on the project's focus. The possibility of aligning funding calls and institutional priorities stand as one main motivation for project participation for Finnish partners. This means that capacity development projects are structured in a way that aligns well with the goals and priorities of the institutions involved. Participant 2 said that the funding of their own contract can depend on whether external funding is secured:

Our funding model is structured in such a way that much of the money we have for our own salaries and so on comes from outside sources, so we don't get a lot of money from the university as core funding, which is why we always need to apply for funding. There is room for additional outside funding. So we look for funding instruments that are a good fit for that, and then we build from there. This begins with identifying a suitable call, followed by the search for suitable partners, eligible countries, countries with which we have connections, and so on. (P2)

Initiation & Objectives. Capacity development projects are initiated for diverse reasons, driven by the high demand for existing Finnish expertise among

Southern partners. Personal connections and professional networks also play a pivotal role in catalysing project initiation, and Finnish universities are motivated by the desire to bring funding to their institutions. Participant 7 said: "But my contract still runs out in September next year, so I'm now writing crazy different project proposals to try and get more projects for me to manage". However, in certain instances, Southern partners took the lead in initiating projects focused on enhancing their research capacities by establishing clear objectives: "That was for me the remarkable experience of how an African country was able to set the priorities and to be really strongly in the driver seat in the collaborations and how different projects could contribute to the same objectives" (P5).

At the start of capacity development projects, several critical tasks are identified, such as needs analysis, proposal writing, and project goal formulation. This preliminary stage also includes the creation of a results framework and the forecasting of primary project outcomes, both of which are heavily influenced by funding and financing. Participants in the research bring a nuanced understanding of the fundamentals of capacity development, emphasising that how goals are set during the initiation and proposal writing stages has a significant impact on the overall project. Different perspectives on capacity development include knowledge construction, with a side note on how measuring knowledge acquisition is difficult. Some see it as an internal learning process for partner universities and the development of research capacity within HEIs, highlighting the complexities of capacity development.

Needs analysis is a critical component prior to project initiation. This analysis is reported in most cases as a collaborative process: "We wrote our needs analysis based on the information we've got directly from our partner, and then based on the research that we did" (P2). However, in few cases it seems as less of a collaborative approach, suggesting variations in its execution:

If a colleague at my workplace writes a lengthy needs analysis off the top of his head and sends it to the partner with the words, "Hey, is this okay?" Can we apply for funding that I occasionally mention, you know, at least in weekly meetings or discussions or whatever, as it would have been nice to develop that a little bit with the partner as well? (P2)

Some participants advocated for the inclusion of previous projects from the Global South in the needs assessment, indicating a historical and cumulative perspective on capacity development. 5 interviewees additionally highlighted the importance of dialogue-based project preparation, emphasising the necessity of open and transparent communication in understanding and addressing the needs of partners and power imbalances: “The requirement for success is that you are open about the requirements when you negotiate the partnerships. Also, we involve the partners in the proposal-writing process so that they understand what is going on. That, I believe, is critical” (P4).

Participants express the difficulty of accurately forecasting the main outcomes of a given project during its initiation. Initial optimism is palpable when setting project targets and results frameworks. One participant reported that they had not yet seen “*a project where the initial setting of objectives is a good match with what is considered the most important outcome*” (P5). Challenges such as the Southern partners' potential misunderstanding of their responsibilities at the project's outset derive from insufficient project preparation and are associated with the time and perhaps even human resources constraints in the project preparation phase:

At least one of the partners really didn't understand that this is a three-year project, and they need to contribute to all work packages. They somehow believed that because they are in this project you should start with some other countries. This partner was responsible for the situational analysis, and they somehow thought that after that their work was done. Then they were sort of shocked that they needed to do all the other stuff as well. (P4)

Participants reported success in adapting Finnish expertise to the specific needs of Southern partners, demonstrating responsiveness to local needs. The incorporation of local languages and cultures into project design and implementation underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and context in capacity development initiatives' success. Furthermore, it underlines the importance of cultural inclusion, and collaborative needs analysis in the successful initiation and financial planning of these projects. The complex interplay of funding instruments and HE financing is evident, influencing project efficiency, partnership structures, and project alignment with institutional

priorities. These financial dynamics have far-reaching implications for capacity development initiative planning, implementation, and evaluation, emphasising the role of addressing funding-related challenges in these projects.

6.2.2 Project Management

Participants' experiences that relate to the responsibilities, role, and global awareness of project managers, as well as partnerships and project implementation, are included in this section. The concept of **dialogic, equal implementation**, and mutual learning stood out prominently among research participants, as it was emphasised repeatedly and extensively. This reflects a fundamental ethos within these projects where open communication, collaborative decision-making, and knowledge exchange are valued as essential elements for success. According to Participant 5, "It really varies between projects, but projects that are strongly coordinated from the North don't tend to Work and we all understand that we do need people who really know things in and out and who are motivated to keep things going."

This narrative also touched upon the role of Finnish project coordinators, who enjoyed the autonomy to support equal practices during implementation. The influence of funders appeared to lessen during the implementation phase, enabling project managers to foster mutual learning and collaborative approaches:

When the project gets going, it's less about the funder telling us what to do and more about us working together in the consortium to figure out what we want to do, how we want to approach these things, having kickoff meetings, meeting the partners in their own universities, and then meeting some of their associates in that context. And I believe that is the most rewarding aspect of this job because you learn a lot about new contexts, as well as new people and their working cultures. (P2)

Time management emerges as a crucial aspect of project management. Participants acknowledge that these projects demand additional time and effort from all partners involved. Effective time resource management is not just a matter of convenience but is intricately linked to risk management. Moreover, the dialogic, more collaborative way of work in projects requires more time,

which underscores the complexities and time constraints faced in managing such projects:

But then, there's also the factor of things having been done in a certain way. And I have learned this job, also from my superiors, that I already have the experience to kind of do it the easy way. Like, I know that not coming face to face with some of the problems can be easier, and I can just do the work myself. And the way that it has always been done, and that's less work. And then if I actually want to do it the other way, perhaps a better and more equal way, or dialogic way, then it's more work. So there's always this balance to think about, you know, university staff are always really busy, so this equality loses. (P2)

In-person meetings were consistently noted as contributing to the effectiveness and equitability of projects, underlining the value of face-to-face interactions in building trust and understanding. However, it was acknowledged that the implementation phase demanded additional work and time from all partners involved. Finnish coordinators expressed concerns about overwhelming Southern partners with a plethora of commitments, indicating the delicate balance required in maintaining enthusiasm without overburdening partners as: “it's not somehow incorporated into their workload, and this, of course, creates challenges to which they don't have time to commit” (P4).

Financial management, another vital aspect of project management, presents challenges for project managers. This is often attributed to insufficient human resources and the complex reporting systems associated with funding instruments:

So we need to make sure that our partner is intuition, but we kind of make sure that in our budget there is also allocation for the somebody to do the financial management because it's a big part of the project management and unfortunately often it's the academics who want to do that and we are not totally, we are totally unprofessional in financial management and it takes a lot of time and we do a lot of mistakes because we don't know how to do it. (P3)

Limited resources in Finland were identified as a challenge for building and maintaining partnerships:

I think the great challenge in the Finnish landscape is that there is this kind of very, very strong policy motivation to show and be bigger than we are and then the resources are still very, very small compared to other countries. So, there's a lot of like kind of.. Of course, collaboration is good and it's good to collaborate, but every collaboration needs time and resources, so it's kind of challenging. (P3)

Partnership. The establishment of capacity development partnerships took on various forms, with Finnish partners sometimes being approached by Southern counterparts for collaboration. However, in most cases, CD projects were initiated based on personal connections and long-term academic partnerships with strong shared research interests. Given the individual-driven collaborations, personnel changes in HEIs, such as employment transitions, retirements can reshape partnerships:

There are committed professors who've done this for a long time. Some of them could be retired and happily be, you know, reading a book in there or, you know, could take in the garden or something like that. But they still want to do these things. And so others as well they are putting their own time into these things, and also because it's been sort of, there has been new partners coming up, some of them are new or the same institution, but new people or new totally new partners in a way. (P1)

Power imbalances were acknowledged as factors that could influence the dynamics within partnerships, including the issue that the work distribution among partners may be determined by the Northern partner. However, there seems to be a more dialogic approach taken in Finland where listening and collaboration are reported to be increasingly common practice.

So, I understand that I understand having read a lot of, and listen to a lot of people talking, particularly from, let's just say old Europe. Where cultural arrogance is still a big problem. We've been doing this for years. We know what to do. Listen to me. I'm a specialist. (P7)

Historical factors, such as the legacy of apartheid and existing boundaries, were cited as challenges to partnerships, suggesting the lingering influence of historical and geopolitical factors:

I think any project is challenging, but it's especially challenging with an African country. The history of heritage with the apartheid is not easy for Europeans to come there as coordinators. There are already existing sort of boundaries within the nation like I that did some research on the African partner country context. (P4)

The narrative wove a common thread of trust and understanding as the foundation of these partnerships, underscoring the importance of relationship-building. Longevity in partnerships was underscored as a valuable factor in achieving sustained results, highlighting the role of enduring collaboration in effective capacity development. At a personal level, participants emphasised the

significance of individual motivation among employees in the continuity of these partnerships:

The driving force for collaboration is missing because it is the people and the academics who do the content of the project. It is not simply about managing funding. And this is what makes successful projects stand out, where there is genuine academic interest. And that is mutual. And then that generates, you know, research and publications and public joint courses for students and all these. (P5)

A significant narrative element was the recognition that project-based approaches to partnerships may not yield enduring outcomes: "So it's a long process. It's not something that you can achieve in a single project. And I really wish the funding agencies would understand that" (P7). This underscored the need for long-term commitments and continuity in these collaborative efforts.

Implementation. Interviewees acknowledged the challenges posed by the varying contexts, cultures, and levels of experience of partners engaged in capacity development project implementation. The untapped potential of the African researcher diaspora in Finland was recognized as a solution to this challenge. They highlighted the missed opportunity to leverage the expertise within this community, which could greatly contribute to capacity development and North-South partnerships:

We have an extremely highly educated Academic diaspora that we are not able to 'utilise' - terrible word - these people are not often being recruited especially for more permanent positions. Maybe for projects. ^[P]So, this is a challenge because this is where the expertise is. These are the people who know about the contexts. They've done their research. A lot of their research in the African country conflicts all they have done comparative studies between the South and the North they have amazing linguistic capacities and we have not found ways to engage most of them in what we try to do, and if we, if we are serious about doing things or impact, I think this is a serious step /gap. (P5)

The importance of understanding and acknowledging global diversity, differences between local and global contexts, was recognised particularly as a risk factor and the inclusion of different actors was mentioned as a possible solution:

I don't necessarily believe that our most experienced Finnish professors who have only worked with the Western world are in the best position to communicate some of the essence of Finnish education; instead, I believe that PhD alumni who have navigated both systems are in the best position to see: What could be translated? (P5)

Bureaucracy within Southern universities was identified as a substantial challenge, hampering the smooth implementation of projects. Participant 1 said: "I think well Finnish ones are not the most flexible either, but you know better than the African one, with the bureaucracy always takes time". The cultural, societal, and educational differences that surfaced during the implementation phase underscored the significance of contextual sensitivity:

You need to negotiate and introduce the idea to the leadership of the department, to the faculty and even maybe to the university. Because in most of the Southern University, if there is no support coming from the higher-level leadership that's going to ruin the whole thing, because of the hierarchy and power. (P3)

Incompatible institutional cultures and structures were recognized as sources of complexity, and even blamed for failing to meet the promised indicators:

We do talk about successes, and then we have had some even failures in some instances like we failed to meet indicators. So we always talk about things like, maybe what caused that. And in many cases, there are institutional kinds of reasons for that. It's nobody's personal fault that it didn't get it done, but it was more like incompatible institutional cultures or something like that. But I think there is definitely room for reflection. (P2)

Jealousy among Southern partners and stakeholders negatively affected project dynamics:

There is sometimes this kind of jealousy, competition, the idea that there are a few chosen ones involved in this project and there is a lot of money around, so there is a lot of... We have, for example, encountered some sabotage of our project by others from the Southern Universities who believe they should have been involved rather than the others. (P3)

Regarding Finnish teams, two participants reflected on the presence of established senior researchers and how some inequality, and problematic practices are created within these teams, which can potentially impact project dynamics and success:

And I feel that the some of the other members in our team in our department who would work with projects in the Global South, they, of course, they don't disagree with the basic philosophy that I for example, have about the project, but it's rather that their way of established way of doing it is different. And they don't recognize that it has problematic characteristics. (P2)

Recognizing the existing equality in Finnish teams and striving for continuous enhancement demonstrates a strong commitment to equity and

cooperation. Seeking feedback from stakeholders in the Global South is considered essential for improving project effectiveness and relevance. The implementation phase is known for empowering partners in the South and promoting equality in collaborative efforts. Moreover, the implementation of digital solutions to enhance accessibility demonstrates a dedication to broadening the reach and impact of the project. These ongoing efforts are crucial for ensuring the impactful and sustainable capacity development efforts.

6.2.3 Impact and Sustainability

Participants shared their multifaceted understanding of the complexities associated with achieving and measuring impact and ensuring project sustainability. One recurrent code was the realisation that the actual impact of a project often becomes evident only after a few years. As Participant 4 said: "I would say that you plant the seeds for something you want but won't be finished." This also meant that Finnish practitioners recognised that the full scope of a project's influence may require time to manifest fully, underscoring the importance of long-term perspectives in evaluating impact. A relevant and frequently upcoming issue was the importance of conducting follow-up research to assess the outcomes of capacity development initiatives, as: "Usually the actual impacts or effects will definitely come a few years after the project has ended and it would require some follow-up studies" (P1). Follow-up studies are considered valuable for comprehending the long-term effects of projects and are suggested as potential areas for future research.

Challenges arose in designing realistic results frameworks and measuring the development of knowledge, capacities, and project outcomes. Initial optimism surrounding target setting and results frameworks was mentioned, as well as the challenges associated with accurately predicting the main impact and outcomes of a project. The narratives indicated that although the project's intentions were evident initially, accurately predicting the actual outcomes could be difficult due to the dynamic nature of capacity development projects. Project-based approaches to partnerships were seen as insufficient for achieving lasting

results, underlining the need for long-term and sustained collaboration. As Participant 7 noted: “So it's a long process. It's not something that you can achieve in a single project. And I really wish the funding agencies would understand that”.

Implementing the practices developed through the partnership posed a challenge. The narratives highlighted the challenges of effectively transferring knowledge and practices from a project context to real-world application, underscoring the importance of developing effective strategies to bridge this gap. The risk of trainers withholding knowledge to protect their own careers in the past had posed potential barriers to knowledge transfer: “Earlier, there was a tendency for some people who've done some extra, to get an extra certificate or something, they are reluctant to pass on the knowledge” (P1). These lessons learnt are beneficial for those planning to implement training of trainers (ToT) approach to ensure impact and sustainability of their projects.

The COVID-19 pandemic and local challenges, including conflicts, were identified as potential factors that adversely impacted project outcomes. The pandemic has caused disruptions and highlighted the importance of adaptability and resilience in project design for securing positive impact:

Impact is always driven by reality, to be honest. You know you can design a project with a fantastic plan, and you can say it's going to have this, this impact and that impact. And then a pandemic occurs. Civil war breaks out. Then you can't just ignore the impact statements that you made when you were creating your plan. P7

Funder influence on measuring impact through indicators was noted, as was the link between quality control and impact measurement. According to the narratives, the interpretation of indicators left room for subjectivity, reflecting the nuanced nature of determining project success. It was stated that monitoring and indicators are needed but should not be the only tools used to guide projects. Continuous monitoring was deemed necessary in order to effectively track progress; however, the difficulty of defining indicators and desired impact in the context of the project was raised as a point to consider:

I completely agree that we must monitor, we must have action plans in place, and that we must ensure that we are carrying out our responsibilities. I believe that most of the indicators are quite simple if we want them to be simple, and the impact of our kind

of impact level is much more complex. It might be more difficult to say, "OK, what was the impact of this project?" or to look for these kinds of indicators. (P3)

The narratives also highlighted the positive impact of projects in promoting South-South and regional collaboration and learning: "So it isn't just north-south. In some ways, I suppose it's improving the level of regional, south-south collaboration. In addition, when each country had tasks or chose to do specific parts of the materials, we peer reviewed them as well" (P1).

SDG4. Since there was an interest to learn about SDG4's role in capacity development initiatives, research participants shared their reflections regarding this topic. SDG4 targets and indicators were directly or indirectly guiding the impact and sustainability planning of these projects and participants discussed how they have seen projects align with this particular development objective. The narratives represented a wide range of perspectives, difficulties, and possibilities in relation to SDG4. The ongoing endeavour to connect projects to SDG4 was a recurrent theme: "You should always sort of in line and link your projects or initiatives into that SDG 4" (P1).

Participants expressed a commitment and motivation to align their initiatives with the goal's principles and objectives, demonstrating a collective 'Northern institutions' aspiration to contribute to global sustainable development:

It is nice to see, for example, the Times Higher Education ranking for SDGs and see how Northern institutions are measuring certain sustainability indicators. It gives us a common language and I think it helps to see how contextual all the issues are.^[P]_[SEP]A simple example: when we discuss gender and education in the Finnish context, we are super worried about the boys, and we don't have male teachers.^[P]_[SEP]But when I go to African countries, gender is about girls' education. So, I think it gives us a nice framework to talk about things. (P5)

Simultaneously, a note of scepticism emerged regarding the practical meaning and implications of SDGs in real-world application. Participants raised concerns about the practicality of achieving the ambitious targets set out by the SDGs, reflecting a need for a more grounded approach to these global objectives:

When we do the applications for development business, for example, we need to explain this, but for example, the kind of research capacity building can actually maybe contribute to the SDG about institutions and society rather than the SDG4 for example,

or it can be it can be research into innovations and decent work rather than so there's a lot of other kind of related to the content of the research project, for example that what SDG becomes the most relevant one for the for the collaboration. (P3)

Despite some scepticism, participants recognized the significance of SDGs in promoting effective communication and recognized the importance of applying their expertise to contribute meaningfully to these ambitious global goals. SDG4 also plays a role in communication by offering a global platform, context, and shared language. The SDGs provide a framework for promoting the HRBA to education and gender equity. The global sustainability goals are acknowledged for their ability to offer a concise and universally comprehensible framework for defining and assessing project outcomes, promoting transparency, and fostering equitable partnerships:

However, SDG4, specifically in relation to capacity building projects, is of particular significance. We seek two specific elements. We seek an education approach grounded in human rights principles. We seek to examine gender and promote gender equity. Gender equality is a frequently discussed and written topic, although it is technically inaccurate. What do I mean by that? Transparency in our operations and public perception is essential. Effective communication involves clear and unambiguous exchange of information between individuals who are regarded as equals. We are also discussing the concept of administrative transparency. We must ensure transparent financial reporting to mitigate the risk of corruption. (P7)

7 DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to look into how the SDG4 guides North-South capacity development partnerships in Finland, as well as to understand what roles SDG4 targets play and how they drive these partnerships led by Finnish universities. Moreover, another objective of the study was to gain a better understanding of these collaborations from a postcolonial standpoint through analysing the experiences of Finnish stakeholders involved in coordinating these partnerships. In this chapter, reflections on both the outcomes of key document analysis and the insights garnered from interview data are presented and examined in connection to the research questions in Section 7.1 and 7.2. Research Questions are briefly answered in Section 7.3. The discussion employed a postcolonial framework to discern the implicit meanings embedded in Finnish funding instruments and the reflections of research participants.

7.1 SDG4 and Finnish capacity development partnerships

Finland's development policy delineates key expertise areas, influencing funding programme content and shaping the themes of capacity development projects. This alignment underscores the influence of national policy on project thematic focus. The Finland Africa Strategy strongly advocates for Finland's expertise as the foundation for development cooperation across sectors, including higher education. Similarly, the HEP Programme aligns with Finland's values, guiding five priority areas for development cooperation, directly linked to SDG4 and other SDGs, allowing for interpretation and realisation flexibility.

Finland's Africa Strategy's interpretation of '**sustainable development**' may differ from academic understanding due to its strong political and economic focus. Partnership funding documents often equate sustainable development with economic growth. This echoes criticism that 'development' mirrors emerging colonialism, especially as neoliberal policies in higher education contribute to rising tuition fees and the global commodification of education.

Despite SDGs and SDG4 advocating for equal partnerships, the power imbalance persists, with development projects primarily originating from the global north. This critique highlights the intersection of economic policies with educational goals, suggesting that the market-driven approach to higher education may inadvertently perpetuate structures reminiscent of colonial-era power dynamics and exploitation.

Partnerships for capacity development appear to be shaped primarily by **existing Finnish expertise and sectoral opportunities** outlined in Finnish development policy. This predetermined nature means partnerships are influenced on aligning with the needs and solutions identified by Finnish experts, potentially forcing GS partners dependent on GN funding to adjust their priorities to match Finland's expertise. This may force GS partners who require or rely on GN funding to change their main priorities in order to meet the supply of Finnish expertise. This dynamic raises concerns about capacity development projects' long-term effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. The determination of project focus and themes is, in many ways, preordained by the needs and solutions put forth by Finnish experts. Capacity development projects have been typically structured around the specific expertise and capabilities that Finland can offer. In practice, the focus and themes of these projects are frequently dictated by Finnish expertise, leading to engagements with Global South HEIs whose needs align with Finland's expertise, sometimes necessitating priority adaptation by Global South partner institutions.

The perspectives shared by Finnish project coordinators offered valuable insights to the **binary reality of N-S partnerships** and revealed that these collaborations are influenced by a combination of economic factors and current geopolitical forces. Interestingly, the SDG4 is mentioned frequently as a means of effective communication for the capacity development effort, but otherwise a great deal of scepticism appeared when talking about 'impact' and what has been achieved so far in the promised Agenda 2030. Scholars have also raised concerns around the injustices around capacity development projects where the 'knowledge gaps' are filled with the 'help' of Northern actors (Blicharska et al.,

2021; Kumar, 2019; Pritchard et.al, 2022; Zingerli, 2010). Some, but not all the research participants seemed to understand this concern, especially those practitioners and project managers of universities of applied sciences were lacking critical understanding of power imbalances.

SDG4 urges the collaboration of efforts and pooling of resources to assist least developed and developing countries. However, as capacity development initiatives in education align with SDG4 targets, addressing the challenge of **coloniality of knowledge** became complex due to inherent power imbalances (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019; Dei & Kempf, 2006). While the HEI ICI and HEP Programme documents emphasised equal partnerships, there is a lingering concern regarding the epistemological underpinnings of these projects. Additionally, the necessity to explicitly highlight 'achieving mutual benefits' in programme documents raised questions about the potential asymmetry in collaborations, warranting consideration. It is imperative not only to recognize the value of Finnish expertise being imparted in partner countries within the Global South but also to clearly articulate the reciprocal benefits of engaging in such partnerships. The narratives in the programme documents frequently suggested that the projects are built around themes relevant to existing Finnish expertise, which may create barriers to the mutual benefit and joint ownership of these projects.

The observation that the most frequently addressed SDG4 targets in Finland's Africa Strategy and the HEI ICI, HEP Programme were those offering potential **business opportunities for Finnish companies** is a cause for concern. This trend is alarming as it suggested that these new partnerships could evolve into neocolonial endeavours, potentially reinforcing inequalities within the global systems. A closer examination of the capacity development funding programme revealed a problematic narrative steeped in postcolonial undertones. Despite the mention of equal partnership practices in the HEP Programme Document, there remained a limited focus and responsibility in addressing the power imbalance between the global north and south in discussions on development cooperation and the SDG4 targets.

After carefully examining the key documents, such as strategies and funding instruments that steered Finnish capacity development partnerships, a clear pattern became apparent. These collaborations are intricately connected within a broader framework, which is greatly influenced by **power dynamics, economic interests, and the ongoing presence of neocolonialism and the neoliberal agenda**. Acknowledging power imbalances becomes imperative within the framework of SDG4, where the coloniality of knowledge must be recognized and critically evaluated throughout the implementation of research capacity development (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019). It appeared that the focus on labour-market oriented skills development among learners, which was often mentioned as a key objective, failed to consider the specific economic challenges and opportunities faced by local learners.

The lack of attention brought to **indigenous and local knowledge systems** is alarming, as it should have been a crucial part of capacity development efforts, where the existing knowledge and culture is incorporated into the local development efforts. Stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and experts engaged in capacity development initiatives linked to SDG4, should engage in critical reflection on their roles and perspectives regarding coloniality. This involves questioning and addressing underlying assumptions and biases that impact 'expert' status, as well as scrutinising the sources of advice and research, and the epistemological foundations of projects and indicators (Shahjahan, 2016).

Agenda 2030 has influenced higher education partnerships' selection of partner universities in developing countries, with particular focus on two targets within the SDG4 framework that emphasise the importance of focusing on developing nations. As indicated in the HEP Programme Document (2023), the demographic targets of these partnerships are clearly defined, encompassing themes relevant to education development while also prioritising core topics such as climate change and employability. However, there is a notable lack of discussion about the **climate justice perspective**, and incorporating this viewpoint could provide a platform for shared learning and instil a greater sense

of global responsibility among GN counterparts. Furthermore, the HEP Programme Document (2023) calls for the meaningful inclusion of less experienced and/or more fragile HEIs, which has emerged as a difficult process in interviews.

Furthermore, the HEI ICI Programme document acknowledges Finland's embassies as an additional supporting factor in the establishment of these partnerships, emphasising the **political and economic nature of capacity development cooperation** in higher education. Nonetheless, Finland's partner countries are determined by the political and economic ties it maintains, which align with the overarching neoliberal goal of improving international relations with Africa. This strategy aimed to improve business opportunities for Finnish firms (Finland's Africa Strategy, 2021).

The **project-based approach** has several problematic aspects including the previously discussed concerns regarding sustainability and impact. However, it is evident that until education development has economic interests, the project-based approach will be kept as it allows programmes and national policies to be tailored to the constantly changing political and economic landscape. Programme documents can therefore discreetly shift their focus in response to geopolitical shifts after a few years, possibly after parliamentary elections, to support the preferred themes, partner countries, and industries.

It is worth noting that these funding programme documents frequently fail to emphasise the importance of conducting a **stakeholder analysis**, which is a powerful risk assessment and contextualization tool that could help Finnish project coordinators better understand the local circumstances even before the project begins. The stakeholder analysis examines all relevant international, national, and local actors with varying degrees of power and influence over the given capacity development project (for example, main beneficiaries, religious leaders). Differences in population, culture, language, and religion in partner countries are important to be aware of in order to foster strong academic partnerships, as diverse lived experiences and distinct societal issues can heavily

influence research interests. As a result, raising awareness of these challenges and opportunities is critical for forming effective and ethical collaborations.

After all, the **SDGs' voluntary nature and lack of accountability** frameworks may perpetuate power imbalances, despite their global aspiration for a more equitable and sustainable world. It became clear that supranational organisations, such as the UN, have the influence and role to guide national and global development policies. Policies have the power to influence and control the design of funding instruments, which have a direct impact on the focus, partnerships and results of capacity development projects.

As key players in knowledge creation and dissemination, Finland has the potential to act upon systemic imbalances and show an example in ethical partnerships. However, it is imperative for HEIs to critically evaluate the principles of equality, equity, and social justice. This necessitates a departure from neoliberal educational policies towards more democratic approaches that acknowledge the interconnectedness of the global community. Ethical and equitable North-South partnerships driven by shared responsibilities and resources can help achieve SDG 4 and the SDGs.

7.2 Insights of Finnish Counterparts

Drawing from the data gathered through semi-structured interviews, this section analyses the challenges and successes faced by Finnish counterparts in North-South capacity development projects. Some of the underlying causations behind the challenges are somewhat explained in the section above, where I provided an overview of the system and other influential factors to the partnerships. The challenges discussed here were often recurrent and voiced by multiple interviewees, highlighting their significance. It's noteworthy that the identified solutions and successes did not always originate from the same interviewee, showcasing a collaborative exchange of knowledge and best practices across participants, fostering a collective emergence of insights. The most crucial findings are consolidated in Table 4 for a comprehensive overview.

Table 4

Possible Challenges and Successes of HE capacity development projects

Theme (Subtheme)	Challenge	Success / Possible Solutions
Funding & Financing <i>(Initiation & Objectives)</i>	Given that the funding comes from Finnish partners, there is a power imbalance in funding and spending monitoring.	Transparency, open communication are essential, and funders must recognize that there is no equal partnership if funding is only channelled through Northern institutions.
	Funders expect unrealistic indicators and outcomes, projects cannot meet the initial set targets.	Some project managers suggested explaining project outcome changes with reasonable arguments that changed the project's focus and key results.
	The need for funding to support the salaries of Finnish academics influences the formation of partnerships and raises ethical concerns.	The need for the partnership should come from the GS partners and be based on a genuine need that requires attention.
Project Management (PM) <i>(Partnership, Implementation)</i>	Dialogic, equal implementation takes too much time & time challenges are very common in PM.	Organising intensive co-working weeks (in-person or online) to support the research work and build trust, shared understanding and to keep up with deadlines.
	Lack of financial management staff in universities puts more responsibility on researchers.	When writing the proposal, some extra amount for financial experts should be included. Collaborating with UASs, where there is more financial expertise.
	Lack of understanding of the local culture, context and different realities Southern partners have.	Employing master's and PhD students and experts of the African diaspora in Finland who have experiential knowledge of the given context.
Impact and Sustainability <i>(SDG4)</i>	Funders and donors are hard to convince of the project's impact which comes only years after completion.	This is an opportunity to receive continuing funding and avoid a single project-based approach in capacity development.
	Adopting the practices developed during the capacity development projects is a common challenge.	Stakeholder analysis and greater collaboration with influential and powerful local actors could support the adoption of practices and the sustainability of projects.

7.2.1 Funding and Financing

The academic employee funding system in Finland, a focal point within the funding and financing theme, significantly shapes capacity development partnerships' formation, implementation, and impact. The continuous reliance on external funding to sustain the salaries of Finnish academics introduced ethical concerns regarding the initiation of partnerships. Some research participants were fully aware of the power imbalance in project financing, emphasising the necessity for monitoring spending when funding originates from Finnish partners. The narratives highlighted a significant risk: projects may continue to be unduly influenced by researchers from the Global North until genuine needs emerge from partners in the Global South.

When research participants were asked or referred to the benefits of their participation in capacity development, the results frequently revealed that these vary significantly depending on the profile and experience of the partner HEIs. Furthermore, research participants indicated that their involvement in capacity development projects is always focused on a field in which they have expertise. This could also be interpreted as the Finnish partners were not keen on 'mutual learning' because they 'bring their expertise' to the table rather than challenging institutional norms and participating in projects with slightly different profiles, which would result in learning outcomes for the Finnish partners. Nonetheless, this issue is inextricably linked to the academic system's reliance on external funding and the proclivity of research groups to focus on a specific area of expertise when establishing their standing in the field.

Based on participants' insights, recognizing the diverse realities of involved institutions from the start was crucial for tailoring indicators and adapting funding instruments to specific contexts. Anticipating the main outcomes of capacity development proved challenging, emphasising the need for a realistic approach that prioritises quality over quantity. Participants expressed the effectiveness of a 'training of trainers' approach in maximising impact and participation. Misunderstandings often arose from varied interpretations of 'capacity development' and differing perceptions of partnership roles. Allocating

ample time for collaborative preparation helped mitigate these issues, based on the experiences of several research participants.

Participants in the interviews emphasised the importance of acknowledging the African Diaspora in Finland, highlighting the importance of including this community's experiences and perspectives in higher education capacity development partnerships. The academic community's openness and inclusivity in Finland, where not all staff members are required to speak Finnish, should ideally facilitate this integration. However, the absence of such practices may be attributed to a lack of financial resources. The decision to hire master's or PhD students should have been made earlier in the process of developing budget plans and proposals, a step that was overlooked in some cases. As a result, raising awareness about this beneficial approach can help to increase the inclusion of members of the African diaspora in Finland.

7.2.2 Project Management

While not all research participants have recognized the 'pervasive inequalities' underlying North-South partnerships (Bradey, 2017), some have highlighted that achieving a more equal and collaborative approach to project management and communication requires considerable time and effort. This raises concerns about the extent to which all partners can effectively voice their perspectives. The project-based nature of capacity development, with its time constraints and reporting demands, supports timely implementation by urging progress. However, these external pressures have the potential to draw attention away from the collaborative aspects of project implementation.

Listening to participants' stories, I noticed that some had a strong project manager mindset, which, while not necessarily negative, raised concerns about equitable, ethical, and collaborative implementation. The emphasis on achieving predetermined outcomes and meeting numerical targets may make allocating time for continuous feedback and discussions on capacity development and inclusive practices difficult. According to reports, partner members from a specific African country were having difficulty articulating their needs,

prompting the project coordinating team to step in and offer assistance. This intervention could be interpreted as either a charitable act by Northern 'experts' or as an imposition of Western knowledge, potentially preventing Southern partners from fully expressing their needs in accordance with local circumstances and perspectives.

COVID was cited as a significant challenge in carrying out capacity development projects. At the same time, the interview participant(s) mentioned the difficulty of establishing realistic indicators, followed by unforeseeable changes and disruptions such as COVID. As a result, there is a slim chance that COVID was also 'beneficial' in arguing that failing to meet these unrealistic targets was not the project coordinator's fault, but rather the result of an external disruption. In any case, the coronavirus pandemic has had a negative impact on capacity development partnerships, as in-person meetings and travels have been reported to be extremely beneficial to project implementation.

The Finnish counterparts emphasised the perceived advantages of being a part of an international network, stressing the associated benefits. However, inclusion of HEIs with diverse levels of experience and profiles emerged as a critical factor in achieving impact and sustainability. While these consortia were effective, Finnish coordinators described their management as difficult due to complexities arising from differences in partner expectations, expected results, and internal learning goals among participating institutions.

7.2.3 Impact and Sustainability

To start with, it is important to note that most of the capacity development projects that have resulted from the HEI ICI and HEP Programme calls have recently been implemented, and there haven't been many follow-up studies or impact research conducted to see and validate the effectiveness of these initiatives. Participants appeared to be aware of the difficulties associated with measuring impact and reported that it is one of the most difficult aspects of project design because they must be cautious of what the promised results framework will produce. Convincing funders and donors of a project's impact,

particularly when it manifests years after completion, was expressed as a significant challenge. On the other hand, this difficulty was viewed as an opportunity to secure ongoing funding and avoid a project-based approach to capacity development. However, the policy and funding call may shift its focus in some cases, and these partnerships may be unable to continue.

When it came to generating long-term results, the training of trainers method was mentioned several times. However, participants noted that there is a risk associated with this practice because those teachers and educators who received the training may see an opportunity to earn higher wages and leave their positions to further their careers. This is an intriguing challenge that should be considered when developing capacity development projects and training programmes.

The discussion of sustainability and impact included considerations for SDG4. A subset of participants expressed scepticism about the tangible implementation of SDG4 targets, implying that SDG4 is primarily useful for articulating the project's objectives. While some participants were less critical and their narratives were more aligned with the SDG4 goals, their projects were 'impactful' because they contributed to the achievement of the SDG4 targets within the given project. This narrative suggested a strategic alignment with funding institutions' language, portraying the project as a resounding success in contributing to SDG4 targets. However, a critical examination reveals that these broad SDG4 targets may not necessarily address localised challenges, implying that they make only minor contributions to local contexts.

7.3 Concluding Answers to Research Questions

RQ1. How does the SDG4 guide the Finnish higher education capacity development projects in North-South education partnerships?

Key documents and research participants indicated that the SDG4 framework helped shape the priorities of Finland-led North-South education development partnerships. Despite frequent mentions of SDG4 in communication efforts, there is scepticism about the actual impact and

achievement of Agenda 2030 goals. Some participants' narratives were aligned with SDG4, emphasising project impact on SDG4 targets, but a critical examination reveals limited contributions to local contexts. The misalignment between SDG4's emphasis on developing countries, rural areas and Finnish thematic priorities, combined with Finland's selection of partner countries based on political and economic considerations, calls into question genuine reciprocity. The voluntary nature of the SDGs, as well as the influence of supranational organisations, contribute to power imbalances in global education partnerships, posing a challenge to the goal of creating a more equitable and sustainable world.

RQ2. What are the experiences of Finnish counterparts and possible successes and challenges when it comes to collaborating on HEI capacity development projects with partners from the Global South?

Finnish counterparts involved in North-South higher education capacity development projects face a variety of challenges and successes. Although funding and financing appear to generate multilateral challenges, such as power imbalances in funding and spending monitoring as a result of Finnish partners providing funding, transparent communication and recognizing the need for equal partnerships were proposed as solutions and optimal procedures. Two project management challenges that can be overcome through co-working weeks and collaboration with institutions with more financial expertise are time constraints and a lack of financial management staff. Key challenges include measuring developed capacity/knowledge, developing indicators, and creating realistic results frameworks, all of which are influenced by SDG4 and donors, resulting in difficult situations. Collaborative needs analysis, stakeholder analysis, and involving local actors are suggested for practice adoption and project sustainability.

7.4 Limitations and Potentials of the Study

The study revealed some key challenges, risks, solutions, and approaches from HE capacity development practitioners from 7 different Finnish HEIs. However,

due to the study's sample size, which includes the number of research participants (8) and documents analysed (3), final conclusions cannot be drawn. Despite using a content-driven approach to research and analysis, pre-existing biases may have influenced the study's final results. Topics concerning the discussion chapter, in particular, have previously been noted throughout the data collection and analysis phases. However, acknowledging the study's limitations and researcher positioning should aid in reading the results.

Given the study's time frame, the findings may have limited future applicability. Based on the key policy and funding documents examined, as well as the research participants' experiences, the findings are applicable at the time of the study's release. However, given the ongoing efforts to strengthen partnerships with the Global South, the outcomes provide timely snapshots of the current context in terms of Finnish HE capacity development partnerships' challenges and solutions. This may be utilised for a comparative study into the changes and 'previous' insights of these partnerships.

Due to time constraints and other research limitations, not all existing documents were analysed for RQ1 in terms of data collection. At the time of the study, the key documents chosen were thought to be the most influential and applied for HE capacity development in the Finnish context. The Erasmus+ CBHE funding call and the Academy of Finland DEVELOP2 calls, for example, were not reviewed. Furthermore, the research design and thematic analysis used to investigate how the SDG4 guides these partnerships yielded broad results that could be interpreted in the discussion chapter. Fortunately, the participants in the study had previously reflected on the role of SDG4 in their capacity development projects, reducing the possibility of biased interpretations.

Regarding the semi-structured interview participants, it is important to note that the findings of this study were based primarily on the experiences of Finnish counterparts regarding their participation and project management of HE capacity development with GS partners. There were no interviews with stakeholders from the Global South. Given the possibility of biases or misleading information in participant responses, the findings should be interpreted in light

of these perspectives (Goodwin, 2017). Furthermore, the anonymization of data gathered through interviews may limit readers' ability to comprehend the participants' experiences.

7.5 Recommendations for Decision Makers

7.5.1 Policy makers, Funding institutions

True equality in partnerships cannot be achieved if funding flows exclusively through Northern institutions. A potential solution to be explored involves **diversifying funding channels to ensure a more balanced and inclusive distribution of resources**, promoting mutual understanding, and strengthening collaboration between all partners involved. This approach could contribute to a more transparent and equitable funding process, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and joint decision-making among all stakeholders.

There is a **lack of impact evaluation and follow-up research** on the outcomes of north-south capacity development partnerships led by Finnish HEIs. To address this, it is critical to allocate resources and scholarship opportunities to actively support the implementation of follow-up studies and impact research. There is a lot of potential in better collaborating with university students and PhD researchers, as well as including the African diaspora in Finland, to contribute to these studies that will help development efforts. Financial support for impact research becomes critical in ensuring that Finnish HEI initiatives result in measurable and sustainable outcomes. The impact of capacity development partnerships can be increased by facilitating continuous research and dedicated funding, resulting in more informed and effective policies in the long run.

The salary system of Finnish academics, coupled with the imperative to seek external funding for career sustainability, poses a significant risk to ethical North-South partnerships. To foster global education development and promote the establishment of ethical, equal partnerships driven by genuine need, it is imperative **to reduce academics' dependency on external funding in the context of North-South collaborations**. This shift would empower academics to engage

more authentically and sustainably in partnerships, allowing for a focus on genuine needs and priorities, rather than being primarily driven by financial constraints. Such a change is fundamental in cultivating partnerships that are truly equitable, mutually beneficial, and responsive to the authentic educational requirements of all involved parties. The increased dissemination of UniPID's Ethical Guidelines and its inclusion in training programmes of practitioners could be a possible preemptive measure.

Adopting flexible monitoring and evaluation frameworks that allow for adjustments based on the evolving nature of projects can foster adaptability and responsiveness. Finnish project coordinators could be more effectively supported to improve project success without feeling pressured to strictly adhere to initially promised indicators. The most significant outcomes frequently emerge during project implementation as a deeper understanding of local systems is gained, which could be addressed by giving GS partners an equal role in identifying and setting project outcomes during the planning phase. As a result, support mechanisms prioritising adaptability, could allow for changes in project goals as coordinators gain context. This approach not only promotes more realistic and responsive project management, but it also recognizes that the most important outcomes may evolve and differ from the ones initially anticipated, emphasising a results-oriented and context-sensitive approach to project implementation.

7.5.2 Project Managers, Senior Researchers

For academics and researchers in Finnish universities, further exploring **enhanced collaboration with universities of applied sciences (UASs)** can have mutual benefits. UASs exhibit lesser dependence on external funding and possess a more robust infrastructure with administrative personnel and financial experts. Given the prevalence of both universities and UASs in nearly all Finnish towns with higher education institutions, such collaboration presents local opportunities, fostering authenticity, teamwork, and potentially garnering increased attention from local governance and support from non-academic stakeholders, including companies. Dividing responsibilities should not pose a

challenge, as universities excel in research and UASs have expertise in developing work-related skills. These areas are often cited as prerequisites for capacity development collaborations.

Inherent to the funding-reliant nature of academic employment arrangements, a certain level of competition exists within the sector. Nevertheless, **enhanced collaboration among institutions and local academic communities** is expected to yield more successful and sustainable outcomes. Funding institutions can strategically support the targeted development of a specific focus area in a given region by fostering a more strategic mindset of Finnish stakeholders in North-South HEI partnerships. Indeed, this approach could address the project-based nature of capacity development initiatives by ensuring that certain countries and partner universities in the Global South receive sustained attention over an extended period. This longer-term engagement fosters deeper relationships, allows for more comprehensive development, and contributes to enduring positive impacts on capacity building in those regions.

Stakeholder analysis, combined with improved collaboration with influential and powerful local actors, has the potential to facilitate practice adoption and strengthen project sustainability. Collaboration with local governments, businesses, institutions, and NGOs, as well as religious leaders, should help the project gain acceptance, and its practices will be better encouraged for adaptation in the future. Additionally, stakeholder analysis can function as means to foster ethical and sustainable capacity development practices, with reduced risk and improved communication and collaboration strategies.

Despite all of the strategic efforts and cross-sector commitments, I found a lack of evaluation measuring the effectiveness of development projects and the outcomes of international partnerships, as well as the extent to which Finnish (education) expertise has contributed to improvements in education in partner countries. As these collaborations are funded on a project-by-project basis, there is insufficient attention and resources allocated to provide follow-up research

and quality assurance studies. **Leveraging the unique insights of the African diaspora in Finland** is paramount, given their cultural understanding and experiential knowledge. Incorporating the African diaspora into this analysis enhances cultural competence and strengthens the project's ethical basis and long-term influence.

Continued collaboration with established partners across multiple projects can mitigate the risks and limitations inherent in a project-based approach, ensuring a more sustained and impactful engagement. By fostering long-term relationships with proven partners, organisations can build on shared experiences, streamline communication, and capitalise on mutual trust. This approach facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the local context and allows for iterative improvements based on previous project outcomes. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to address evolving needs and challenges collaboratively, fostering a deeper and more meaningful impact over time.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Research Notification

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
AND PSYCHOLOGY

05.12.2022



RESEARCH NOTIFICATION

1. Invitation to participate in the research: 'North-South higher education capacity development programmes: investigating the experiences of Finnish counterparts'

We ask you to participate in the Master's thesis research 'North-South higher education capacity development programmes: investigating the experiences of Finnish counterparts' the purpose, objective and aim of which are described below.

In spite of the growing number of North-South capacity development programmes of Finnish higher education institutions (HEI) and the continuing efforts towards achieving the SDG4 targets, there is a lack of critical assessment on the outcomes and overall stakeholder experiences of the implementation of such projects. The research aims to provide insights into these partnerships and learn about the perspectives and experiences of Finnish counterparts in order to better understand how their collaboration with African partner universities can best make a real impact in a socially just way. Besides reviewing the institutional landscape and existing agendas, policies, strategies behind Finnish-African education development cooperation, anonymous interviews will provide opportunities for project managers, coordinators, researchers and advisors to share their experiences, perspectives and critical reflections on ongoing or previous transnational capacity development projects.

You are invited to the study because you have taken part in one or more capacity development project(s) / worked as an advisor/researcher/project manager/project coordinator in partnership with African HEI.

This research notification describes the study and related participation. The attachment provides information on the processing of your personal data.

The study will involve 5-7 research subjects of different backgrounds and sectors, who have acquired experience and expertise by being involved in North-South partnerships, particularly Finnish-African capacity development programmes.

This is a single study. However, you may be contacted later for a further study if you give your consent for such contact.

2. **Voluntariness**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study, stop participating or cancel your previously given consent, without stating any reason for this and at any time during the study. This will have no negative consequences to you.

If you cancel your consent for the processing of your personal data, the personal data, samples and other information collected about you up to that point cannot be dealt with as part of the study but must be deleted as far as their erasure from the data is possible.

3. Progress of the study

The research is conducted as part of the Development, Education and International Cooperation Master's degree programme at the University of Jyväskylä. The duration of the study is planned to occur from 01.09.2022 until 31.05.2023. A key part of the data collection are the anonymous interviews, where the experiences, perspectives and critical reflections of Finnish stakeholders collaborating with African partners are collected. Interview subjects will be asked to share genuine thoughts regarding challenges and achievements when participating in North-South partnerships. Moreover, as the study also aims to critically analyse the role of the Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education for All (SDG4) in guiding the HEI capacity development projects, the interview subjects will be asked to contribute if they have valuable information to share.

The interviews take place online and are recorded (voice recording only) to support data collection and analysis. The interviews are semi-structured, and each of them lasts approximately 45-60 min. In case further information is needed, the subjects may receive a follow-up interview request or email to provide the necessary data.

4. Possible benefits from the study

The results of the study may benefit current and future Finnish-African HEI capacity development projects; may contribute to better understanding North-South and Finnish-African partnerships landscape, the limitations, opportunities, challenges and successes of these cooperation and may provide recommendations for designing capacity development project with greater impact towards achieving sustainable results.

5. Possible risks, harm, and inconvenience caused by the study as well as preparing for these

The study is not expected to cause any risks, harm or inconvenience.

6. Study-related costs and compensations to the subject as well as research funding

No rewards will be paid for participation in the study.

7. Informing about research results and research outcomes

The main outcome of the study is the master's thesis.

The research results will be provided for the research subjects regarding their own results and the study in general.

8. Contact person for further information

Orsolya TUBA, 0403639622, work: tubors@student.jyu.fi, private: tubaorsolya@gmail.com, MA student, Researcher

Heidi LAYNE, 0445348804, heidi.j.layne@jyu.fi, Senior Lecturer, Supervisor

APPENDIX B Privacy Notice

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

Privacy notice

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
AND PSYCHOLOGY

05.12.2022



You are participating in a scientific research. This privacy notice informs you about the processing of your [and/or your child's] personal data as part of the research. You have a legal right to receive this information in accordance with the European Union and Finnish legislation.

1. Data Controller(s)

The Data Controller is responsible for lawful processing of personal data in this research.

The **Joint Data Controllers** of this research are:

University of Jyväskylä, Seminaarinkatu 15, P.O. Box 35, 40014 University of Jyväskylä (JYU). Business ID 0245894-7. Data Protection Officer: tietosuoja@jyu.fi, +358 40 805 3297.

The researcher (the Data Controller and implementer of the research) [Contact information – tubors@student.jyu.fi].

Supervisor, Heidi Layne, Senior Lecturer, hedid.j.layne@jyu.fi

Team members who process personal data in this research:

Orsolya Tuba, researcher

Heidi Layne, supervisor

2. Other disclosure of personal data during research

Your personal data will be handled confidentially and without disclosing them to any outsiders.

3. Personal data to be processed in [add the name of the study]

This research does not involve processing of personal data of special categories.

4. Protection for personal data

Processing of personal data in this research is based on an appropriate research plan and the study has a designated person in charge. The personal data collected and saved for this research will include only such data that is necessary for the research purpose.

Preventing identification

The data set is anonymised at the compilation stage (all identification data are fully removed so that there will be no return to the identifiable data and no new data can be connected to the data set).

The personal data processed in this research will be protected by means of:

password and registered use

For this study, a separate data protection impact assessment has been made:

No, because the research manager in charge has checked that the impact assessment is not compulsory.

The researchers have completed data protection, information security and data anonymization trainings

Yes

5. Rights of the data subject

Right to access your personal data (GDPR, Article 15)

You have the right to get to know whether and which personal data of yours are processed. If you wish, you can also request a copy of your personal data to be processed.

Right to rectification (GDPR, Article 16)

If there are any inaccuracies or errors in your personal data to be processed, you are entitled to request that these be rectified or supplemented.

Right to erasure (GDPR, Article 17)

You have the right to demand in some cases that your personal data be erased. However, the right of erasure is not applicable if the erasure would prevent or greatly hinder reaching the goal of processing in a scientific research.

Right to restriction of processing (GDPR, Article 18)

You have the right to restrict the processing of your personal data in some cases, like when you challenge the correctness of your personal data.

Deviating from the rights

In some individual cases, it is possible to deviate from the described rights on the grounds stipulated in the GDPR and the Data Protection Act insofar as the rights would prevent or greatly hinder reaching the goals of scientific or historical research or statistical purposes. The need for deviating from the rights is always assessed case-specifically. It is also possible to deviate from the rights if the data subject cannot, or cannot any longer, be identified.

Profiling and automatised decision-making

In this research, your personal data will not be used for any automatic decision-making. In this research, the purpose of the processing of personal data is not to assess your personal qualities, i.e. profiling, but personal data and qualities are considered from the perspective of broader scientific research.

Implementing the data subject rights

The organisations listed in Section 1 act as Joint Data Controllers in this research, so that they are jointly responsible for the lawful processing of personal data. Data subjects can make all requests regarding the use of data subject rights in this research to the following contact person: Orsolya Tuba, tubors@student.jyu.fi.

A data subject can use his or her data subject rights under the GDPR with relation to, and against each Data Controller. In such a case, the recipient will forward the request or demand also to the other Joint Data Controllers.

Reporting an actual or suspected information security breach to JYU

<https://www.jyu.fi/fi/yliopisto/tietosuojailmoitus/ilmoita-tietoturvaloukkauksesta>

You have to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority especially with a locally relevant one in terms of your permanent place of residence or work if you regard that the processing of personal data violates the EU General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679. In Finland, the supervisory authority is the Data Protection Ombudsman.

Updated contact information of the Office of Data Protection Ombudsman:
<https://tietosuoja.fi/etusivu>

APPENDIX C Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PROJECT

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
AND PSYCHOLOGY

05.12.2022



North-South higher education capacity development programmes: investigating the experiences of Finnish counterparts

I understand that participation in the study is voluntary and that I can stop participating at any time, without giving a reason. There will be no negative consequences for me if I withdraw. The data collected about me up to the point of withdrawal may still be used in the study.

I have been adequately informed about the study and the processing of my personal data. I have received the Notification of the study, as well as the Privacy Notice. I have also had the opportunity to ask the researchers further questions.

I consent to voice recordings being taken of me for research purposes, but they have been processed in such a way that I cannot be identified.

Yes

No

I consent to be contacted at a later stage for possible further studies (follow-up or equivalent to this study), options:

- To being asked to participate in further studies:

Yes

No

- To the request for further use of data collected about the research topic:

Yes

No

I understand the information that I have received and agree to participate in this study.

Yes

By *ticking the relevant boxes in the electronic questionnaire*, I accept that

- data will be collected from me as described in the Notification document,
- my data can be used in accordance with the procedures outlined in the privacy notice

I give my consent to the sections specified above by ticking the "yes" boxes.

If I do not wish to participate in a particular section, I have the right to refuse by ticking the "no" box.

However, I still agree to participate in the study otherwise.

Contact
Orsolya Tuba (orsolya.o.tuba@student.jyu.fi)

details:

APPENDIX D Semi-structured interview guide and Interview Questions

Semi-structured interview guide

MENTION/ASK: Do you give consent to the voice recording of this interview for research purposes?

ADMINISTRATIVE QUESTION:

Can you send/have you sent the consent form filled out? I sent you the fillable version, where you can simply tick the boxes by clicking them.

Brief Introduction to my research:

In spite of the great number of recent Finnish-African capacity development programmes coordinated by Finnish HEI and the ambitious funding and strategy behind Finnish-African education development collaborations, there is a lack of critical assessment on the outcomes and overall stakeholder experiences of the implementation of such projects.

The research aims to provide insights into these partnerships and learn about the perspectives and experiences of Finnish counterparts in order to better understand how the collective efforts can best make real impact in a socially just way.

Besides reviewing the institutional landscape and existing agendas, policies, strategies behind Finnish-African education development cooperation, anonymous interviews will provide opportunities for project managers, coordinators, researchers and advisors to share their experiences, perspectives and critical reflections on ongoing or previous transnational capacity development projects.

Mention: The collected data will be anonymised.

The research is guided by the following RQs:

1. RQ1. How does the SDG4 guide the Finnish higher education capacity development projects in North-South education partnerships?
2. RQ2. What are the experiences of Finnish counterparts and possible successes and challenges when it comes to collaborating on HEI capacity development projects with partners from the Global South?

FIRST PHASE: PROJECT INITIATION

1. Can you please introduce yourself, including your most relevant experiences to the research topic, especially related to capacity development with Global South, and African partners?
2. What was the main reason for the partnership / the capacity development project ?
3. How was the objective/aim of the cooperation/project formulated?
 - a. How or Was the SDG4 taken into account when formulating the aims/activities of the development cooperation?
4. Can you tell a little more about what was your role in the project initiation?
5. Would you say that there was enough time to prepare a needs analysis / proposal? Who was responsible for doing the needs analysis?
6. How would you describe your and the Finnish institution's overall role in this given project?
7. How much have you considered the SDGs and SDG4 when designing the project? Why?
8. What is your definition/understanding of capacity building/development in the context of north-south higher education cooperation?
9. Were the indicators designed already at the proposal writing stage?

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Transition: As I mentioned I am also very interested in learning more about the specific experience you had when working on a given project/cooperation.

1. Do you think that the xy project was a success? Yes/No → Why?
2. Overall, what were/are the biggest challenges of the project?
3. Overall, what were/are the biggest successes achieved during the implementation of the project? (if necessary add: Any beneficial lessons learned perhaps?)
4. What about the quality of work of the other project partners?
5. How would you rate the contribution of your / Finnish partner's work towards achieving the planned outcomes when implementing the project?
6. When working in north-south/Finnish-African HE capacity development programmes/cooperation → what was your overall experience?
 - a. On paper, strategies may seem effective, but what is the reality when it comes to north-south (Finnish-African) cooperation?
 - b. Can you share your experience regarding the implementation of the cooperation/project? Was it a successful programme? Why?
 - i. What could the team have done to improve the outcomes?
10. What should Finnish stakeholders do to improve their collaboration with partners from the global south?
11. How do you distribute the work? Who is doing what in the consortium?

PROJECT EVALUATION AND IMPACT

Transition: I'm also very interested in the evaluation of such capacity developments, how we can measure what was 'developed' and what the possible 'impact' is...

1. Would you say that the project's outcome was/is going to be a quality product/service/outcome?
2. What were the indicators for reaching the set objectives of the project? Did you meet these indicators fully?
3. Did/does the given case project continue after the funding stops?
4. What are other prospective outcomes of the project?
5. Do you think the project contributed to sustainable development in the given target country/region?
6. How will the given cooperation/project yield any long-lasting and sustainable results? And do you have any plans on how you will measure the impact?
7. Do you think the project contributed to sustainable development in the given target country/region?
8. Do you remember how the impact / sustainability of the results were measured in this given cooperation?
9. Alternative question: Do you have any suggestions/ideas, how the sustainable results/impact of such cooperation can be best promoted?
10. Do you have anything to add on the assessment of the results of such cooperation?
12. Do you have anything to add to any of the questions asked before?
13. Do you have any questions?

Extra Questions:

What are the possible challenges of north-south HE cooperation?

What are the possible opportunities of north-south HE cooperation?

How do you think these cooperation could be further improved?

APPENDIX E Initial Codes from Thematic Analysis 1

ATLAS.ti report

Master's Thesis Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

Initial Codes and Code Groups

Filter:

Filter Initial Codes in Code groups

Report created by Orsolya Tuba on 27. Nov. 2023

Code Group	Codes (44)
SDG4 relevance* (Research Question driven code)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Directly refers to the SDGs ● Enhanced development cooperation to end poverty in developing countries ● Gender Equality in primary & secondary education ● Gender equality in access to pre-primary education ● Women's access to TVET education and to HE is ensured ● Develop technical and vocational skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship (ICT skills) ● Equal Access to education incl. persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and vulnerable children ● Literacy and Numeracy are achieved by youth and adults ● Sustainability, sustainable development, gender equality, human rights, diversity education are acquired by all learners ● Learning environments are built, upgraded for inclusion, safety, non-violence and efficiency ● Increase the supply of qualified teachers via teacher training ● Scholarship opportunities are expanded especially in STEM fields for least developed and African countries
Economic Interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Africa's economic potential for increasing development cooperation ● building capacity to meet the needs of the labour market ● Climate change and the role of HEIs ● Commodification of Education ● Economic interests of Finland in choosing partners/partner countries ● Finland is interested in investing in African countries ● non-academic partnerships to better link HEIs with the working life
Finnish Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● support of the Finnish Embassy / Embassies (HEI ICI) ● Project/programme contributes to Finland's Development Policy ● Finland's role to solve the global learning crisis ● Finland's expertise, values and strengths are driving the partnerships ● Finland helps African countries to increase security ● Finland can benefit from African expertise ● African diaspora in Finland
Ethical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● respect and good personal-level relationships in partnerships

Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Needs based partnership ● mutually beneficial partnerships, joint ownership in projects are crucial and evaluated (HEP) ● mutual learning is mentioned ● joint project preparation ● joint project implementation ● joint project evaluation ● human rights based approach ● defining results and targets together with partners ● aiming to enable equal partnerships
Development Cooperaion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developing and Least Developed Countries are in particular focus ● global development policy relevance and impact focus ● Lack of regional development policies in Africa ● Main beneficiary is the partner country in developing country ● multi-stakeholder partnerships for increased impact ● political and economic cooperation to solve climate change and health security in Africa ● political and economic cooperation to solve local and global challenges ● regional development policy in partner countries determine the relevance and focus of the project

APPENDIX F Codes from Thematic Analysis 2

ATLAS.ti report

Master's Thesis Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

Grouping of Initial Codes (96)

Filter:

Filter codes in group "Initial Codes"

Report created by Orsolya Tuba on 27. Nov. 2023

Document Group	96 Codes:
Impact, reporting phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Actual impact of the project is seen only after few years ● Challenging to foresee and create realistic results framework ● Challenging to measure the 'knowledge development' and results of the project ● Follow-up research done to assess capacity development outcomes ● Funder influence on designing unrealistic indicators ● Funder instructed quality control and reporting are connected to measuring impact ● Indicators leave room for interpretation ● Monitoring and indicators should not be guiding tools of projects, rather continuous evaluation is needed ● Need for follow-up studies to measure impact ● Quality assurance and challenge ● Reporting is challenging ● Reporting of impact is challenging due to time ● Sustainable outcome, successful training
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● African researcher diaspora in Finland is not recruited for capacity development projects ● Capacity development is seen as building knowledge - challenging to measure knowledge ● Capacity development is seen as internal learning for partner univ. ● Commitment and motivation of partners to maintain partnership ● Core individual changing workplace causes change within partnerships by bringing in their new employer institution ● Finnish coordinators are afraid to scare Southern partners away with the amount of commitments ● Finnish partner has been approached by Southern partner to collaborate ● History of apartheid and existing boundaries make African partnerships with European coordinators challenging ● Individual level, personal motivation of employees to maintain partnerships

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Multi-level stakeholders involved in project ● partnership is built on trust & understanding ● Partnership with long history ● Partnerships with more and less experienced HEIs bring challenges to projects ● Power imbalance in partnerships ● project approach to partnerships does not yield lasting results (long-term partnerships are needed) ● research capacity development is how HEIs are developing ● Resources of Finland are limited that creates challenge for partnerships ● Working with same partners on same issues creates more successful outcomes
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Budget planning is openly discussed ● Bureaucracy of Funding hinders efficiency and creates challenges for Finnish partners ● Funder influence on designing unrealistic indicators ● Funder instructed quality control and reporting are connected to measuring impact ● Funding call is relevant to given institution's priorities = motivation for project ● Funding creates discrepancy as it asks for equal partnership but coordinator needs to monitor partners' spending in GS ● Funding influences the focus of the project ● funding influences the time allocation of work tasks within project (more or less bureaucratic) ● Southern partners are dependent on Northern Funding and expertise to apply ● The need for funding in Finnish universities is the reason for establishing partnerships, projects. ● UAS has more admin personnel to work on project, less external funding is required
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adjusting to the needs of stakeholders from the Global South ● African researcher diaspora in Finland is not recruited for capacity development projects ● Bureaucracy in Southern universities is a challenge ● Cultural, Societal, Educational differences are discovered during implementation phase ● Dialogic, equal implementation and mutual learning is emphasised ● different context, culture is challenging in HEI CD ● Digital solutions for better accessibility ● Extra work and Time is invested in project ● Finnish project coordinator has the freedom to support equal practices in implementation ● Funder influence lessens during implementation and allows mutual learning ● In-person meetings contribute to more effective, equal projects ● Incompatible institutional cultures, structures cause challenges ● Jealousy among Southern partners/stakeholders negatively affected the project

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Partners were late with responsibilities, tasks ● Possibility of using AI for greater efficiency and saving resources ● Seeking feedback of stakeholders from the Global South ● Southern partners' feel more equal
Initiation phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capacity development is seen as building knowledge - challenging to measure knowledge ● Capacity development is seen as internal learning for partner univ. ● Difficult to tell what the main outcomes of the given project may turn out to be ● existing Finnish expertise is on demand by Southern partners ● Existing Finnish expertise is tailored to Southern partners' needs ● Inclusion of local languages and cultures ● Initial optimism when setting the targets and results framework ● needs analysis as a collaborative process ● Needs analysis is less of a collaborative process ● Preparation / beginning of project is challenging ● Previous projects done in the GS should be included in the needs analysis ● Project preparation based on dialogue ● Projects initiated based on personal connections ● research capacity development is how HEIs are developing ● Research-based project ● Southern partners misunderstood their responsibilities at project (initiation) ● Time challenge in project preparation
Results phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adopting the practice developed in partnership is a challenge ● Challenging to foresee and create realistic results framework ● Challenging to measure the 'knowledge development' and results of the project ● COVID altered the project results negatively ● Difficult to tell what the main outcomes of the given project may turn out to be ● Initial optimism when setting the targets and results framework ● project approach to partnerships does not yield lasting results (long-term partnerships are needed) ● Project brought increased South-South and regional collaboration, learning ● Results are only visible after project has ended ● Risk of trained trainers not passing on the knowledge to secure their careers ● Teachers who receive training may leave to advance their careers
SDG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Linking projects to SDG4 ● Scepticism towards SDGs meaning in practice ● SDGs help communicate concrete objectives of projects ● Translating expertise to SDG goals, targets
Project Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dialogic, equal implementation and mutual learning is emphasised

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Established senior researchers create inequality within Finnish teams● Extra work and Time is invested in project● Financial management is challenging in projects:● Funding creates discrepancy as it asks for equal partnership but coordinator needs to monitor partners' spending in GS● Global Diversity should be understood and acknowledged (risk)● In-person meetings contribute to more effective, equal projects● Inclusion of local languages and cultures● No/little time difference with African countries● Open communication for problem-solving● Resources of Finland are limited that creates challenge for partnerships● Success● There's equality in Finnish teams but also room to improve● Time resource management = risk management, not leaving anything to last min.● Unforeseeable local challenges (e.g.● Working in projects is extra time and effort to Southern stakeholders' work plan (challenge)
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