RefLex and the Possibility of Transformative "North-South" Research Collaborations

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06.02.2026 doi: 10.59704/e21ba6514af3a004

On 20 November 2024, Humboldt University of Berlin (HU), through the Berlin University Alliance (BUA), became a signatory to the *Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations*. This piece positions and introduces the key argument of the *Africa Charter*, posits its relevance as a benchmark for *RefLex*, a new Centre for Advanced Studies at HU, and proposes a set of queries to guide its operationalisation within the Institute and possibly beyond in similar "North-South" initiatives.

I offer these reflections drawing on my close involvement in the development of the intellectual underpinnings of the *Africa Charter*, the coordination of the initiative to advance its implementation, and the BUA signature to it.

Transformative research collaborations

Co-created by Africa's major higher education (HE) constituencies in 2023, the *Africa Charter* offers a new conceptual and normative framework for thinking about and for overcoming the multi-layered power imbalances that continue to pervade and are reproduced through joint academic inquiry between actors in Africa and counterparts, particularly the "global North".

The *Africa Charter* emerged in the context of expanding international, particularly "North-South", scientific cooperation, alongside an intensified debate – largely led by the Global North – on the need to ensure equitability in such collaborations. It shifts the locus of consideration firmly to the "South" and calls for moving beyond typical ideas of "equitable research partnerships" (ERP) to reconsider what genuine equity in collaborations needs to entail and, ultimately, what it is for.

Drawing on anti-, post-, and decolonial and other critical scholarship from the continent, the *Africa Charter* uses the heuristic of a set of concentric circles to locate, unlike ERP frames, not only tangible, visible power asymmetries – for example, those resulting from unequal resources and infrastructure across partner institutions, as well as from how labour, decision-making, and leadership over joint outputs are organised within collaborative projects. In addition, the *Africa Charter* identifies more fundamental power imbalances that have to do with the kinds of knowledge that are produced. These emerge through the dominant use of Eurocentric ways of knowing, concepts and theories, former colonial languages, and standard ideas about 'development' in the production of new knowledge in, for, or about the continent.

The *Africa Charter* calls for a new mode of "North-South" collaboration that redresses *each* layer of power imbalance. It argues that such a collaboration is, potentially, *transformative*. If adopted widely as best and standard practice across fields, it carries the potential to rebalance the unfavourable and peripheral positioning of Africa in the global academic research system overall.

Such rebalancing, ensuring that scholars, institutions, and knowledge produced from the continent take their rightful place in the global production of academic knowledge, is the *Africa Charter's* ultimate goal. It frames this ambition as a matter of equity and social justice, of advancing Africa's political and economic aspirations, and of fostering a richer and more potent and pluriversal global academic effort that is better equipped to address the crises and challenges facing humanity today.

In signing the *Africa Charter,* the BUA leadership signalled not only an agreement with its diagnosis. It

also presupposed (perhaps problematically) a readiness of its faculty, senior management, and professional services staff to pursue a realisation of the *Africa Charter's* principles and aspirations through changes to policy and practice.

RefLex as a potential site for exploring a transformative collaboration mode

RefLex is a new Centre for Advanced Studies of the Humboldt University of Berlin that encompasses 'South-North' dialogue and inquiry on the "South-North" encounter in contestations of dominant colonial foundations and concepts of law worldwide. As such, *RefLex* is ideally positioned to attempt a deliberate pursuit of a collaboration mode aligned with *Africa Charter* ambitions.

Doing so needs to begin with open and critical exploration of the positioning and orientation of *RefLex*, drawing on the individual and collective *reflexivity* of the Centre heads, research staff, fellows, and interlocutors.

The following set of foundational queries, which are reflective of the *Africa Charter's* core argument, could serve to guide and structure a collective exploration:

On positionality and positioning:

- Who is in the room? What are their institutional and personal positionalities vis-à-vis "North" and "South", bearing in mind the ambiguities and overlaps inherent in both terms? What power dynamics exist or arise among them?
- What orientations, values or "politics" inform the scholarship of those in the room? And how, if at all, do these relate to concerns about equity and social justice in academic knowledge production or material lives?
- What joint overall ambition for RefLex – between deepening intellectual insight and the fostering of "after worlds" – is to be forged from this?

On multilayered power imbalances and how to address them:

- What implications arise from RefLex's current positioning as a unique intellectual effort funded and administered by a Northern institution; led, directed, and framed by two Northern scholars and centred on the elaboration of a concept proposed by them; undertaken in English; and taking place, geographically, in the North?
- Does a need arise for intentionally shaping RefLex approaches with respect to (i) the epistemologies, languages, theories, and concepts that are privileged in structuring the inquiry and (ii) conscious or unconscious assumptions about the nature of "development" and the positioning of North and South in relation to it?

On institutional design:

- What need, if any, arises for deliberate institutional recalibration in light of these implications? How might decisions concerning epistemic priorities, language, leadership and authority, the physical location of deliberation, and processes of decision-making be intentionally shaped to address the asymmetries identified above?

The very fluidity and envisioned continual reconstitution of *RefLex* – through successive cohorts of fellows – would allow for the iterative development of rich perspectives and conclusions in answer to these foundational questions. It also promises to generate progressively deeper insights into the very experience of seeking to apply the *Africa Charter* and into the relevance of its propositions for the field of law and for the "global South" beyond Africa. As such, *RefLex* stands to contribute substantively to the further elaboration and refinement of the *Africa Charter* argument itself.

Beyond *RefLex*, the proposed questions may also serve as a frame to guide the exploration of and distillation of learnings on a transformative collaboration mode in other similar "North-South" research initiatives.

A proposed outline for the way forward

To realise this potential, three constants in the process of *RefLex* will be essential. One is the need to create and protect – for each cohort – dedicated and "safe" space to support the open reflection and reflexivity described above. The other is to establish parallel mechanisms to foster conversations between and, progressively, across cohorts. The third is to devise a careful and rigorous method to distil, capture, track, and further analyse the key strands of thought and understanding as well as further queries and lines of inquiry emerging over time. With the official launch of *RefLex* on 11 February 2026 – and given the importance the Centre places on engaging its own practice – discussion on putting in place such parameters could begin.

In doing so, *RefLex* could help chart the potential for rebalancing "South-North" research relations that lies in the collaborative engagement, resource sharing, and leverage of Northern institutions – if done *reflexively*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Aboderin, Isabella: RefLex and the Possibility of Transformative "North-South" Research Collaborations, Verfassungsblog, 06.02.2026, doi: 10.59704/e21ba6514af3a004.

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Langzeitarchiviert bei IntRechtDok unter: doi.org/10.17176/20260206-153151-0.