

Empowering research participants in the Global South?

a reflection of Wageningen social scientists

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Abstract

In the past few years, several protests and movements surrounding the topic of equal rights have been set into motion with the goal of fighting against inequality and for the empowerment of marginalised or vulnerable groups. Inequality is also commonplace in the research world when it comes to the relationship between academics and research participants, including in development studies. In this research, empowering research is defined as a research that reciprocates its research participants in the short term for their participation and goes beyond the ethics of doing- no-harm. The aim of this thesis is to increase empowering research practices of research participants in development studies from the Global South. It does so by understanding what empowering research means to social scientists from Wageningen University and how they configure their positionalities and responsibilities when conducting research in the Global South. The research focuses on the comparison between faculty members, PhD candidates and post- doctoral researchers from the chair group Knowledge, Technology and Innovation. It compares existing literature about how to conduct empowering research and what its pitfalls are to the lived experiences of KTI social scientists. The results show that, even though reciprocity and empowerment of the research participant is important to the respondents, there are several external factors that make it challenging to conduct empowering research. It also discovered many similarities between faculty members, PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers. The most important one being the abstinence of the use of the term empowering and working with other concepts instead. The analysis further reveals how instead of conducting empowering research as a whole, respondent's research rather include empowering factors that can empower it's participants in the long- and in the short term.

Keywords

Empowering research, Global South, Development studies, Social scientists, WUR, Positionality, Responsibility

List of abbreviations and figures

WUR: Wageningen University and Research

COM: Strategic communication

KTI: Knowledge, Technology and Innovation

CPT: Communication, Philosophy and Technology

Figure 1: Researcher's responsibilities

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1. Introduction

In the past few years, several protests and movements surrounding the topic of equal rights have been set into motion with the goal of fighting against inequality and for the empowerment of marginalised or vulnerable groups. In 2015 for example, the ‘Ni Una Menos’ (‘not one less’) movement kicked off in Argentina to fight violence against women, a movement that also led to addressing other women’s issues like employment opportunities and the right to abortion. ‘End SARS’ emerged in Nigeria in 2018 to raise awareness of police brutality (Soken-Huberty, n.d.). In 2013 ‘Black Lives Matter’ was founded in the United States to combat white supremacy and end police brutality against black people (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). LGBTQ+ community movements have also become more active for queer people’s rights (Morris, 2019).

Inequality is also commonplace in the research world when it comes to the relationship between academics and research participants, including in development studies (Currie-Alder, 2014). Diane Lewis (1973) explains how, since the beginnings of traditional anthropology, researchers have enjoyed occupying a privileged position in relation to their research respondents in the form of having a well-paid job and higher living standards compared to local and often marginalised communities from the Global South who typically receive minimal pay if anything. Furthermore, Ida Dupont (2008, 201) also states that *“up until now, the focus of the discussion on our responsibility to research participants has largely been on the avoidance of unethical treatment of research subjects”*. By contrast, it is argued that the focus should go beyond the ‘*doing-no harm*’ paradigm which focuses on exactly that: doing no harm to the research participant. Rather the focus should shift towards an ‘ethics of empowerment’ paradigm which would entail researchers actively working on the well-being and development of research participants. Of course, other strategies aimed at empowering participants may also take place. However, Dupont also explains how this paradigm shift is only occasionally seen in the field of social sciences.

Members of the social sciences faculty at Wageningen University (WUR) are also teachers and research supervisors. Therefore, their beliefs and ways on how to conduct research in development studies could be passed on to students, who could become the next generation of researchers. These beliefs are rooted in a researchers’ positionality. Positionality is important since it plays a crucial role in how a scientist configures their responsibilities towards the participant when conducting research (Holmes, 2020) and therefore also in making a shift towards empowering research. *“Being reflexive about their positionality allows researchers to see where they are located in the grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations, and knowledge production”* (Sultana, 2007, 376). Engaging in such arguments, this thesis will map out how the positionalities of social scientists are configured at Wageningen University when engaging with marginalised and vulnerable communities.

To be more specific, this thesis focuses on the chair Group Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (KTI) that belongs to the CPT-E section of WUR. Focusing on this Section is interesting because their strategic focus is to develop a better understanding of social issues such as human relations, democracy, equity and ethics in relation to technical issues in fields like agriculture, but also food, health and ecology (Wageningen University and Research, n.d.). Next to faculty members, KTI also has PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers with diverse cultural and academic backgrounds conducting research for the chair group. Having said so, this thesis compares how faculty members, PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers from the KTI chair Group at WUR involved in development studies in the Global South configure their positionalities and responsibilities towards their research participants.

1.1 Problem statement

For my thesis internship I chose a social innovation company whose expertise lay in conducting qualitative research. My focus during this internship was on social inclusion. Social inclusion was defined by the company as working together with the community in question in order to respond to their needs and being able to create positive change in their lives. Shortly after starting I realised that power imbalances between researchers and the community in question played a very important and dominant role in the field, even if this was unintended, especially when the community in question belongs to minority and/ or marginalised groups. The lack of reciprocity when researchers want to engage with minority and/or marginalised groups is one of the aspects that caught my attention the most. I myself as a researcher had underestimated this aspect as well. Because of my intention of contributing to a better future for the community in question, I intended to ask members of these communities to participate in a project or in interviews but did not think of offering any compensation in return except for the hope that their participation would improve the situation of their community and of future generations. However, according to an interview with inclusion expert Fatoş Ipek-Demir, this is also how most researchers go about their research practices. Community members are expected to provide information for free, while the researcher gets paid by the hour to interview them. Now, if researcher and research participant belong to the same social class this situation doesn't necessarily have to have a negative effect on the research participant. Nonetheless, in cases where there is a substantial difference between the two parties it can become exploitative instead of empowering (Dupont, 2008).

1.2 Knowledge gap

In the following chapter I explore how theory in the literature suggests applying certain methods and paying attention to certain aspects of a research process can ensure a movement from a 'doing-no-harm' paradigm to an 'empowering' paradigm. However, it also shows how, when applied in practice, they are not always as successful as the theory suggests. It also shows how there are multiple aspects related to a researcher's positionality that influence the extent to which a research practice can be viewed as empowering or not. Moreover, little is known about the position and experiences of social scientists at Wageningen University surrounding the topic of empowering research. Therefore this thesis will map out how social scientists from Wageningen University configure their responsibilities and positionalities when conducting research with marginalised groups of the Global South and how, if at all, this relates to the notion of empowerment.

1.3 Aim of the thesis

This thesis is a response to the knowledge gap. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to understand what empowering research means to social scientists from Wageningen University and how they configure their positionalities and responsibilities when conducting research with marginalised groups of the Global South. To do so, the following general research question was developed:

How do social scientists from Wageningen University configure their positionalities and responsibilities when conducting research with marginalised communities of the Global South and how do these relate to empowering research?

In addition to the general research question, the following four research questions have been developed:

1. What **responsibilities** are social scientists at Wageningen University confronted with when conducting research in development in the Global South?
2. How do social scientists at Wageningen University reflect on their researcher's **positionality** in relation to their research participants throughout the process?
3. For research that is aimed at facilitating change processes, at what **level** is that change configured and how does that unfold if at all, into the **empowerment** of research participants?
4. What do social scientists at Wageningen University see as **enabling and disabling factors** empowerment of research participants?

1.4 Outline of the thesis

The thesis begins with giving an insight to the literature that created the basis of this research and of the theoretical framework. I continue by explaining the methodology that was used to conduct this research, followed by the research results that descended from the empirical data that was collected. The sub questions were also answered in this chapter. Thereafter, the discussion and conclusion chapter explain the analysis of the data and what the results meant for this thesis and the main research question. Lastly, a set of recommendations for further research were presented.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical underpinning of this thesis. It thereby serves as the foundation for understanding the research results. The theory presented in this chapter has also created the basis on which the interview questions were drawn from. The chapter starts by addressing the concept of empowering research as often used in literature and clarifying how it is understood in this thesis. Then it continues by explaining the relation between empowering research and a researcher's positionality. Lastly, it addresses topics that authors have found important in regard to empowering research and what must be taken into consideration when trying to achieve it.

2.1 Empowering research

There is an ongoing debate and critique on the use of the term 'empowerment'. When speaking about empowering research, the mere use of the word 'empowerment' gives the impression that the researcher is rooted in deficit thinking (Deckert, 2017). This means that when a person uses the term 'empowerment' it conveys the impression of a powerful researcher who can give power to powerless research subjects and communities. Deficit thinking has its roots in a time when classist and racist ideologies played a very important role in society. It was firmly believed that certain groups of people were inherently deficient and therefore powerless whereas the researcher was inherently powerful (Davis & Museus, 2019). Researchers, rooted in deficit thinking, even unintentionally, can therefore enhance the exploitative research paradigm and slow down the process of shifting towards a paradigm of empowering research (Anderson, 2013). In her article *A Level Playing Field: Conceptualising an Empowering Research Framework for Criminologists Who Engage with Marginalised Communities* (2017), Deckert explains how a researcher's definition of empowerment can make the difference between being exploitative or empowering and how this understanding is influenced by their positionality.

In this thesis, empowering research is understood from a counter imperialist perspective: "*Empowering research is not about giving or sharing power unilaterally but it seeks to equip all research parties with more power than they had before the research process started*" (Deckert, 2017, 566). This definition implies that power relations within a research are dynamic and therefore are constantly shifting between actors. It sees all parties as experts of their lived experiences and makes sure to look at ways in which all parties can come out of the process having gained something that is meaningful to them. In this research empowerment is directly related to reciprocity and a research project is considered empowering when the research participant is reciprocated, in the short-term, at an individual or community level and on their own terms. However, it cannot be ignored that the mere fact is that a researcher conducting research already creates an imbalance in positions (status) compared to the research participants. Moreover, differences in education, economic background and ethnicity enhance the chances of the researcher to be perceived as to have some kind of privilege (Noel, 2016).

2.2 Research positionality

Jacobson and Mustafa explain a researcher's positionality as follows:

“The way that we as researchers view and interpret our social worlds is impacted by where, when, and how we are socially located and in what society. The position from which we see the world around us impacts our research interests, how we approach the research and participants, the questions we ask, and how we interpret the data” (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019, 1).

The concept of positionality is something that is complex and can vary over time (Naples, 2003). It is important to this research since it plays a crucial role in how a scientist configures her or his responsibilities towards the participant when conducting research (Holmes, 2020), one of those responsibilities being the extent to which the researcher feels responsible for their participants' well-being and empowerment. One example of this is explained by doctoral student Florence Ashley (2021) from the University of Toronto explaining how a researcher who is not conscious about a participant's well-being can lead to research that will, at some point, cause research fatigue on research participants. Ashley states that research fatigue can be interpreted as a phenomenon research subjects experience due to being interviewed repetitively about the same topic which leads subjects to feel overworked. When research does not contribute to any positive change it can cause participants to have a negative psychological and emotional impact on the subject. In her article, *For Marginalised Groups, Being Studied Can Be a Burden*, Huckins (2021) explains how indigenous communities, for example, get asked the same questions repeatedly, without considering if and how the questions asked might benefit the community. As a result, community members feel used and frustrated.

Positionality may also influence the extent to which a researcher finds it important to conduct research that is useful to its participants. Clark's (2008) work points out how a majority of research and study results do not even contribute to social development or policy change. Deckert (2017) confirms this adding how *'most social scientists remain either entirely invisible or publish exclusively for the academic realm and thus for peer recognition'* (Deckert, 2017, p. 563). In an interview, Florence Ashley (2021), doctoral student from the University of Toronto stresses the need for a shift in culture across science. This should be one that would deny approval of studies that are most likely to contribute to research fatigue and do not consider the need and empowerment of the research community.

2.3 What the literature says about conducting empowering research

Reciprocity

In this research, reciprocity is considered the most important aspect of research. The presence or absence of it defines whether a research project or practice can be considered as empowering or not. Subedi (2006) highlights the importance of negotiating the terms of reciprocity when conducting research with communities from the Global South. Researchers have tended to assume that the community in question will automatically benefit from the research results which is not always the case. However, he also explains that questioning the motivation of the researcher to go beyond their own academic promotion is necessary, since intentions of the researchers to empower the community do not always seem genuine. Therefore, the author stresses the importance of co-producing the research results to help ensure that they might be beneficial for the community.

Reciprocity in the form of economic transactions has raised the question of whether it can be done in a way that is fair and responsible to research participants. In these cases, entities like the institutional Review Board (IRB) can assess what is fair and whether this consideration can even be done. Power inequalities in research have also been examined in the form of a reciprocal exchanges of labour and goods: *“To initiate a reciprocal relationship, a researcher might ask participants to identify what needs*

to be studied, to encourage participants' collaboration during the research, and/or to share findings directly with participant's (Reinharz, 1992, cited in Trainor & Bouchard, 2013, 996).

The research method

One of the methods that the literature has identified to conduct research that is empowering for its participants is (participatory) action research. This method, as described by Ida Dupont (2008), provides the opportunity to co-create knowledge that is useful for the research participant together with the researcher which is usually done through research, education and sociopolitical action. Research participants can also be empowered through the research process in which participants learn how to develop their own knowledge and skills (Reason, 1994) that can strengthen their position in the process towards self-determination (Deckert, 2017): *“All participants work collaboratively with the researcher at all stages of the project—identifying a research topic that they feel is important and relevant, creating research designs, developing methods of recruitment, taking part in data collection and analysis, and deciding how the findings should be used and disseminated”* (Dupont, 2008, p. 202).

However, Boogaard (2021) explains how merely applying participatory research methods does not guarantee the inclusion and acceptance of research participants' epistemologies. Epistemic justice is therefore an important aspect to consider when applying participatory methods if the aim is to conduct empowering research. Boogaard's argument is based on a case study conducted in rural Mozambique where local epistemologies were not considered as valuable and/ or equal to the ones of the Western researchers. Boogaard emphasises the need for the acceptance and inclusion of African epistemologies in Western science.

Besides applying certain research methods to achieve empowerment, Ross (2017) explains how a researcher can create situations during their research that allow participants to be in a more powerful position, for example during interviews. The author mentions that by giving the interviewees the possibility to also ask questions back to her, she feels like - even though there is no sure way of knowing whether this was an empowering moment for the interviewees - she at least felt the vulnerability that her interviewees might have felt when answering her questions. Ross emphasises the *“potential of open-ended interviewing methods to allow alternative perspectives to be heard and this empower the participants articulating these views”* (Ross, 2017, p. 11). However, the researcher does continue to have the power to make and limit the respondents' space to share their knowledge as much as the researcher allows.

Power differences

According to Cummings et.al. (2021), despite the fact that researchers in development studies often conduct their work with good intentions and with the hope of creating a better life for their research communities, it cannot be denied that there is a sense of coloniality behind it. Coloniality is not necessarily maintained by researcher's actions but rather by the language used to describe these actions such as 'allow participants to have more power', *“to share power with participants”* (Dupont 2008: 202, *emphasis added*), *‘to let go [and] to open a space for [...] participants to have power’, to ‘equaliz[e] the inherent power differential’, to ‘let participants have a say’, to ‘let [...] stakeholders define the problem’, to ‘allow “nonprofessional” researchers room to engage’.*” (Deckert, 2017. p. 561). In these cases, the researchers themselves decide to give up some of their own power to give to someone else. The question here is whether that supposed power shift is also felt by the participant or only by the researcher. Power imbalances are also represented in the use of categorizations like 'Global South' and 'Global North'. The use of categories is not only used by the Western population but has also been internalised by people all over the world (Arce & Long, 1987).

Another way in which power imbalances are present in social sciences is through 'othering' or 'otherness'. When speaking about 'othering' what is meant is the differentiation that we as humans make between us and individuals that we consider to be different from ourselves, also known as 'the other'. According to Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012) getting to know the other is one of the major reasons why research takes place. Especially in qualitative research, studying the other offers a potential emancipation from stereotypes because it aims at getting to know each individual's personal story. *"However, the desire to know the Other can be a potential source of dominance [...] Writing about the Other arouses questions of representation, and specifically the risk of Othering, that is, the risk of portraying the other essentially different, and translating this difference to inferiority"* (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012, p. 299).

Managing expectations between researchers and community members

According to Wilmsen (2008) when striving to conduct empowering research it is important to manage expectations regarding the research goals, processes and outcomes of the researcher and those of the community in question together with the tensions that these decision processes might create. An important question that remains in these processes is who decides the focus of their research? If not enough attention is paid to the expectations, research could end up being rather extractive instead of empowering.

Wilmsen (2008) also emphasises that the duration of the effects constitutes the main differences between a research practice that is empowering and one that is extractive. The longevity of research effects depends on two factors: (A) The amount of control that community members have over decisions regarding research outcomes and the results; and (B) the extent to which the research process allows community members to develop skills and confidence that will be useful to them to continue improving their situation in the future. However, sharing the task of deciding a research goal or outcome does not come without repercussions for the academic community.

Co-designing a research project with the community based on their agendas and goals would create the perfect empowering research scenario as defined in this thesis. However, the role of researchers is also to produce theory to the university or academic community that is valuable to the faculty by presenting the data collected through (participatory) research. The university is an entity that claims to be the primary institution that produces and spreads knowledge: *"Depending on the community involved, this claim may reinforce the uneven relationships of power that constitute all types of research with communities"* (Wilmsen, 2008, p. 121). As academic social scientists, their main role is to develop theories and methods related to their discipline that will be presented and evaluated by the academic community they belong to. The problem is, that as soon as the definition of research agendas is no longer in the hands of the researcher but in those of the community, the framing role of the researcher is put into question since this is what allows the researcher to create insights that are relevant for their faculty (Wilmsen, 2008).

Often, researchers do not manage to get policy developers to take research findings into consideration. Therefore, they continue to not contribute to social transformations and to produce research results that are only shared in academic discourse. Researchers need an established impact strategy in order to achieve making the voice of the participants be heard (Deckert, 2017): *"Most advocates of empowering research name 'giving voice' to marginalised populations as their key motivation, but rarely explain by whom these voices will actually be heard"* (Gibbs 2001; Paradis 2000, as cited in Deckert, 2017). If academics do not manage to secure a way for their research results to be included in policy development,

the chance is that claims of research to empower communities may be being used as a tactic for participant recruitment. Researchers who do not claim to achieve social change but rather look at ways in which the research results can be useful to their research participants are often seen as insignificant but may even be in fact authentic and realistic. By being clear about this, expectations towards all parties involved are better managed and possibly more easily met.

In conclusion, there are several topics that the literature presents as relevant aspects to consider regarding the topic of empowering research and how to achieve it. In general, one could say that everything comes down to a researcher's positionality and their interpretations of what is important in research. In other words, it defines how a researcher configures their responsibilities and what choices they make starting by the mere definition of the concept of empowerment. Furthermore, the topics that stood out were: (A) the importance of reciprocity, which forms of reciprocity to work with and what their motivation behind research (in development studies and in the Global South) is; (B) which research methods to apply since it influences the role of the researcher and therefore the extent to which a community is seen as a research subject or rather a participant of equal power; (C) the management of expectations between the researcher and the research participant; and (D) the extent to which the research is designed to meet the needs of the community in inquiry. From this survey of the literature I derived the following set of interview questions.

1. Researchers' positionality
 - a. What is your motivation to engage in development studies (in the Global South)?
 - b. What kind of change is aimed at through your research and at what level? (Policy, system, community or individual level?)
 - c. How do you perceive the role of the community in your inquiry?
 - d. How do research goals and outcomes come to be?
 - e. Where does your engagement in research start and end?
 - f. What research methods are applied and why?
 - g. Reciprocity
 - i. How important is it to you?
 - ii. In which ways do you reciprocate?
 - iii. Who decides what?
2. The notion of empowering research
 - a. What concepts do you use to facilitate change?
 - b. Would you use the concept of empowerment?
 - c. What is your understanding of empowering research?
 - d. In which ways, if at all does your research empower its participants?
 - e. How have decision making processes come to be?
3. Researchers' responsibility
 - a. What responsibilities do you have as a researcher?
 - b. How are these responsibilities translated into practice?

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the research methods of data collection and data analysis will be described. Additionally, the ethical considerations, limitations to the research and my own positionality will be discussed. The research methods are based on a qualitative research design and were used to answer the main and sub-research questions.

3.1 Data collection

This thesis is explorative and comparative. It is explorative since it intends to understand researcher's perceptions, experiences and attitudes towards the topic of empowering research and their positionality and responsibilities therein. It is comparative because (a) it compares what the literature says about how empowering research can be achieved to what researchers' experiences are in practice, and (b) because it also compares views of faculty members to those of PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers.

Literature review

The basis of this thesis was formed by literature review. The literature review consisted of academic papers surrounding the following three topics: (1) About the concept of empowering research; (2) about the impact of researcher's positionality on empowering research; and (3) about aspects that influence the extent to which a research might be empowering or extractive to its participants. Several themes stood out from which the theoretical framework was formed and from there, the research questions. These themes also formed the basis for the questions of the conducted semi-structured interview with which the research questions were answered. The themes are mentioned below.

Interviews

Over a period of 8 weeks 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The list of interviewees was created together with KTI faculty members Phil Macnaghten and David Ludwig. The CPT-E section consists of four chair groups: Strategic Communication (COM), Education and Learning Sciences (ELS), Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (KTI) and Philosophy (PHI). This research focussed primarily on faculty members, PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers from KTI with the exception of one faculty member of the chair group COM. Nevertheless, the key point of comparison in this research is between faculty members, PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers.

The interview respondents were recruited through email. First, Phil Macnaghten sent a general email to inform faculty members, PhD candidates and post docs about my thesis followed by a personal email sent by myself two weeks later. For this thesis it was intended to have a heterogeneous group of respondents in order to increase the external validity of the research, and to see whether different demographic characteristics could influence how the respondents reflected on their positionality. After recruitment, the group of people willing to participate in the research consisted of 9 faculty members from CPT (8 from KTI and 1 from COM), 5 PhD candidates and 2 post-doctoral researchers from the

CPT section of Wageningen University. PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers are part of the Global Epistemologies and Ontologies (GEOS) group, which is a research project of KTI, including David Ludwig. The faculty member respondents all came from the Global North, as did the post-doctoral researchers. For the PhD candidate respondents, 4 respondents were from the Global South and 1 from the Global North. Regarding experience in the field in development studies, all faculty

members, postdoc researchers and one PhD candidate have had experience with working in the field in development studies. The other PhD candidates have had either little experience or were currently working on their first field work experience during the time of the interview. See table 1 below with the interview itinerary.

Semi-structured interviews

The interviews conducted were semi-structured. This type of interview was chosen because it creates a more informal environment which gives the respondent the freedom to express what is important to them. It also allows the researcher to adapt to each individual respondent and ask follow-up questions in an open-ended manner. Semi-structured interviews are led by an interview guide with open-ended questions based on topics that are derived from a theoretical framework (Bernard, 2017). Open-ended questions allow respondents to formulate their answers in their own words instead of presenting a set of predefined questions, giving the data more diversity and depth, allowing the researcher to better understand the respondent’s view (Allen, 2017). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, all interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams, a communication and collaboration platform. The open-ended questions were based on the following themes.

1. *Researchers responsibility*
2. *Researchers positionality*
3. *The concept of empowerment*
4. *Tensions that arise during research*

The interviews were conducted in Dutch and English depending on which language was preferred by the respondent. For some respondents from the Global South, doing the interview in a language that is not their first, created some ambiguity when responding to the interview questions. This then also created ambiguity when transcribing the interviews and analysing the data. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix 2.

Table 1: Interview itinerary

Reference	Position	Date	Time	Location
Respondent 1	PhD candidate	January 11th , 2022	15:00 - 16:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 2	KTI Faculty member	January 13th, 2022	15:00 - 16:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 3	KTI Faculty member	December 17th, 2021	16:30 -17:30	Online (Teams)
Respondent 4	KTI Faculty member	December 7th, 2021	15:00 - 16:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 5	PhD candidate	January 11th, 2022	17:00 - 18:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 6	PhD candidate	January 12th, 2022	16:00 - 17:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 7	PhD candidate	December 22nd, 2021	15:00 - 16:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 8	KTI Faculty	December 21st, 2021	13:30 - 14:30	Online (Teams)

	member			
Respondent 9	PhD candidate	December 16th, 2021	12:30 - 13:30	Online (Teams)
Respondent 10	KTI Faculty member	December 20th, 2021	11:30 - 12:30	Online (Teams)
Respondent 11	COM Faculty member	December 21st, 2021	14:30 - 15:30	Online (Teams)
Respondent 12	Post-doctoral researcher	December 20th, 2021	10:00 - 11:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 13	Post-doctoral researcher	January 5th, 2022	15:00 - 16:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 14	KTI Faculty member	January 10th, 2022	16:00 - 17:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 15	KTI Faculty member	December 16th, 2021	17:00 - 18:00	Online (Teams)
Respondent 16	KTI Faculty member	February 8th, 2022	10:00 - 10:30	Online (Teams)

3.2 Data analysis

The theoretical framework was taken as the basis for the data analysis. First, the interviews that had been conducted in English were transcribed verbatim with help of the Microsoft Teams transcribing tool which I then complemented manually since the programme does not transcribe very precisely. The interviews conducted in Dutch were transcribed verbatim by an external party that works with a strict non-disclosure agreement of their client's data. The transcripts were then summarized through discourse analysis in order to get the main ideas out of the interviews. This allowed me to get a better overview of the data and to see comparisons and similarities between the respondents' data.

The analysis continued through traditional thematic analysis with the help of the software programme Atlas.ti, a tool designed to facilitate the organisation of qualitative data (Friese, 2014). Thematic analysis helps identify, analyse and report patterns, also known as themes within the collected data, organising and describing the data in more detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allowed me to identify different categories of codes that were classified into overarching themes within the respondents' discourse on the topic of empowerment and how they reflect on their own positionality within the topic of empowerment. To do so, I proceeded to code the verbatim transcripts. Coding is a practice in almost every qualitative analysis in which text is broken down into sections that are then grouped together with sections of data (words or entire sentences) with similar information to create new meanings in relation to the theoretical framework (Elliott, 2018). Three stages of coding were applied as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

1. Open coding, in which labels (codes) are applied to sections of data. Also called emergent codes and are not predefined. The codes emerge from the interpretation of the researcher which can therefore be seen as part of the analysis.
2. Axial coding, in which the codes identified in open coding are merged or pulled apart into subcategories and later on into themes.
3. Selective coding, in which the themes are then compared to initial themes defined by the theoretical framework.

Starting with open coding has the advantage that theory is not imposed upon the data but it allows theory to be formed from the data (Blair, 2015). This step allowed the researcher to compare the themes that were used to formulate the sub research questions with the themes that emerged from the data analysis which differed slightly. This allowed the research questions to be reformulated into questions that are really pressing to the respondents.

3.3 Ethics

Since empowerment research is closely related to the topic of ethical treatment of the research participants, extra attention was paid to this topic during the research.

At the start of each interview the respondent was asked whether they would like to stay anonymous. Most of them preferred to stay anonymous since it allowed them to speak more freely during the interview. The respondents were also asked to give permission to record the meeting to which all of the respondents agreed. Consent was also asked verbally to use the data of the interviews in this report.

Reciprocating the respondents in their own term was also paid attention to. This topic was brought up during the interviews. Respondents mentioned it being enough if they could read the thesis once it is finished. In addition to this, the results were also presented during a KTI colloquium to which all the respondents received an invitation. Some respondents asked to read into the transcripts of their interview, which they also received by email.

3.4 My positionality

How did I develop my ideas about empowerment?

When I started my thesis I came with a set of assumptions. I had recently finished my internship in which I realised I had never really reflected on the topic of reciprocity in research. This discovery led me to think about why I had never reflected reciprocity in research more specifically before, a thought that I connected to my masters courses and most specifically to my teachers. How do my teachers reflect on the topic of reciprocity? What is their positionality regarding their research participants? Do my teachers not believe this is important?

During the master, the topic of positionality had indeed been discussed and how ethnic and cultural differences can influence the interactions between researcher and research participant. During the course CPT-23804 Introduction to Communication and Innovation prof.dr.ir. C (Cees) Leeuwis also talked about the importance of paying attention to what the research participants need in order for a project to do good instead of more harm. He gave the example of how during innovation processes it is

often assumed that the innovator, most of the times an outsider, believes to know what a farmer needs in order to create more profit, and when the innovation is not applied by the farmer these are labelled as ignorant. The latter indeed shows an example of deficit thinking which is explained in the theoretical framework chapter and how important it is to pay attention to this topic.

According to the literature there are several aspects in a research process that a researcher can take into consideration to make sure a research project goes beyond doing no harm and towards empowerment of their respondents. Therefore, at the beginning of the thesis I also assumed that there is no real reason for why a researcher would not be empowering besides the researcher's positionality towards their participants.

Through my research I developed my learning and got a more nuanced idea about the reality of a researcher in development in the context of development studies. Positionality plays a very important role since in the end it is the researcher's decision to participate in a research project or not. However, besides having good will, the context in which social scientists have to conduct research does not facilitate the process of empowerment. There are many other actors who are needed for a research to come about with which the researcher has to negotiate the terms of a project. It is not a linear process.

Since I am not a social scientist myself who has conducted development projects in the Global South, it is important to reflect on the fact that I am an outsider in relation to my research participants and wrote this research from an etic perspective (Naeke et al., 2011). Writing from an etic perspective means that the interpretation of the researcher will impact how the reality of the respondents is represented in the research (Geertz, 1973), since "*it is the researcher who ultimately chooses which quotes (and, therefore, whose "voices") to include*" (England, 1994, p. 250). With this responsibility in mind I tried to represent the respondents' views as objectively as possible since it was my intention to understand the respondents' realities rather than to criticise their practices.

3.5 Limitations

Even though the research methodology was carefully thought through, some limitations are inevitable and will be explained in this section. First of all, the research was intended to give an overview of the different views regarding the topic on empowerment of the KTI, COM and ELS chair groups. However, the participants that did respond to the recruitment email were mostly from KTI and only one respondent from the COM chair group. With this in mind, the external validity of the research is reduced.

Secondly, the diversity in cultural and academic background between the PhD, post-doctoral researchers and faculty members was achieved. Gender diversity was also aspired, however, all faculty members except for one were male. In the PhD and postdoctoral group the vast majority was female. Since the study is not specifically about gender studies, it does not limit the study significantly, yet, it would have enhanced the validity of the study since gender is part of a researcher's positionality. Respondents of this study were also already engaged in topics similar to empowerment throughout their own work and research for which they might contain a bias. Due to limited time the scope of the research was not broadened to include participants from for example technical faculties to compare positionalities and experiences.

Thirdly, due to the Covid-19 pandemic measurements, the interviews were not conducted face-to-face but via Microsoft Teams. In the first place this was not a limitation, however poor internet connection did cause some trouble to understand the respondent clearly.

Lastly, as mentioned in the previous section, through the process of coding and categorization of the data, one must remember that what is considered relevant for the research mostly depends on the researcher's subjective perspective. Therefore, the objectivity of the research is reduced which should be taken into consideration when reading the results.

4. Results

This chapter presents the results of the empirical data collection together with its analysis. The themes that emerged during the analysis form the structure of this chapter and therefore also of the answers to the sub-questions.

The sub-questions that this chapter aims to answer are as follows:

1. What **responsibilities** are social scientists at Wageningen University confronted with when conducting research in development in the Global South?
2. How do social scientists at Wageningen University reflect on their **positionality** as researchers in relation to their research participants throughout the process?
3. For research that is aimed at facilitating change processes, at what **level** is that change configured and how does that unfold if at all, into the **empowerment** of research participants?
4. What do social scientists at Wageningen University see as **enabling and disabling factors** empowerment of research participants?

It starts by giving an overview of the responsibilities the interviewees are confronted with when conducting research in the Global South. It continues by explaining how the positionalities of the respondents are configured regarding the topic of reciprocity and ethics in research and what their motivations were to engage in development studies in the Global South. Then it gives an overview of the respondents' views regarding the concept of empowering research and identifying what the possible empowering factors are within the research conducted by the respondents. At last, it shows which challenges and possibilities the respondents experienced in regard to conducting empowering research.

1. Negotiating responsibilities in research practice

During the interviews, it quickly became clear that when conducting research in development studies respondents are confronted with the task of negotiating and balancing responsibilities towards (A) the research participants and (B) the funding organisation, the university they work for and the respondent's research team (Figure 1). At the same time, the latter have been identified by the author as external factors that influence the extent to which a research can be empowering when weighed against the internal factors, represented by the respondent's positionality. Both factors are elaborated below.

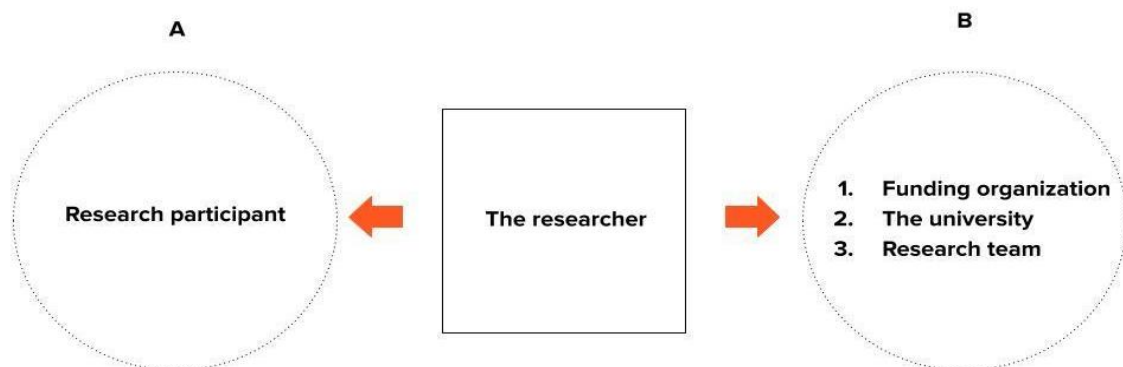


Figure 1 Researcher's responsibilities

In order for a research project to take place in development studies, funding is needed to finance the project. In the case of the interviewees, funding is usually provided by a donor organisation. This can be a governmental institution like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Dutch Institute for Scientific research (In Dutch NWO, Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek), private donors, non-governmental organisations or the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), to name a few.

But, what does it mean to be dependent on a donor organisation for funding? This entails that negotiations take place between the donor and the researcher about what the funding will be spent on. Respondents try to make their research proposals fit into the agenda of the donor so that their idea remains the original but will also convince the funder to invest in it. The interviewees explain how once the researcher agrees to work on a project, they have the responsibility to work on the agendas as agreed upon in the research proposal. Furthermore, the time frame given to work on a project and complete the donor's agendas is often relatively short.

“There's often a lot of pressure in terms of having to collect scientific development data, not community relevant, getting that published, building your academic career, satisfying the guidelines of your grant agencies, and your work” (Respondent 4).

They also explain how donors have high expectations in regards to the research outcomes as specified in the research proposal. In order to get funding for a project, researchers are often expected to make promises about the outcomes of the research and the impact that it will create beforehand. Something that can be found challenging and even odd by respondents.

“What is strange is that a lot of research is based on funding. So then there are often projects that have had to be sold to a financier and that can be an NWO, a development organisation, whoever. So the goal formulation is partly defined. And what I always try to guarantee is that it also has a scientific objective.” (Respondent 15)

The interviewees stated how these outcomes need to be made tangible for the donor in order to be taken more seriously which often results in having to present the research outcomes in a quantitative manner, something that, for social scientists, is difficult since their research is mostly qualitative. Besides, as one respondent explains, impact is only visible after quite a long time, time that they as researchers often do not get from the donor.

Another responsibility that researchers have is towards the university. One interviewee explicitly stated that when working in academia, a researcher is expected to work on a number of projects and that this is becoming increasingly more. Next to this, researchers also deal with the responsibility of having to publish a certain amount of academic papers and building their career.

“Nowadays academia is turning into a neoliberal production factory. If you want to stay in academia then you have to acquire projects” (Respondent 10).

When working on a project, a researcher usually does not work individually but together with other researchers. Therefore, there is also the responsibility towards the colleagues that the researchers are working with. Any action or decision that one makes as a researcher will not only affect the individual but the whole team:

“And it's not only me or research, but a team of researchers and my supervisor, who trusts us to not destroy everything he built for so many years.” (Respondent 1)

PhD candidates are also confronted with responsibilities that largely determine the course of a project. In order for a PhD candidate to conduct their assignment, just like academic researchers, they are in need of funding. With PhD candidates this funding comes in the form of a funded proposal for which they have to apply. In order to receive the grant, the PhD candidates either have to present a proposal in which they explain what the goals and aims of their research will be and what they will entail, or to apply to be the researcher for a research project that has been successfully funded by the PI. Similar to academic researchers, PhD candidates also have to promise certain outcomes that will satisfy the funding body in order to receive the grant:

“If you do a PhD for example before you get into the field, you need to develop a proposal. They (PhD candidates) have to convince a lot of people that you kind of know what you're going to do so you have a concrete plan that you have it all thought through. So if you were to write a proposal saying, well, the community seems nice and I just go there and we'll just spend 3 months there and we figure out what the issue of my PhD is. That's not, that's not going to fly.” (Respondent 4)

Furthermore, PhD candidates also have a responsibility towards the University and themselves to stick to a time frame in order to complete their assignment and to graduate:

“I had to write a thesis. I was trying to figure out how to conclude it”. (Respondent 1)

To summarise, respondents find themselves in a constant deliberation between their feeling of responsibility towards their research participants and responsibilities towards the funding organisation, the university and their own research team. Negotiations with funding organisations regarding the terms of the research are inherent to a research process and crucial in creating possibilities for conducting empowering research.

2. Positionalities of the researchers

During the interviews, the topics of ethics and reciprocity were thoroughly discussed. This section analyses the positionalities of respondents regarding these topics when conducting research in the Global South. It gives an overview of the respondents' reflections on their responsibilities towards the research participants. At lastly, it mentions the motivations of the respondents to engage in development studies and most specifically in the Global South context.

a. Reciprocity

The respondents on the whole mentioned that they believed that reciprocity and giving something back to their research participants is important. A few mentioned how compensating their own respondents for their time and information is self-evident and actively look for ways in which their project could give something back to their research participants, especially in projects that are not designed to directly have community benefits:

“I cannot accept that you have to be the researcher that ‘does not meddle in other people's lives’. I think that is a statement that is incorrect. Some researchers say ‘yes I don't meddle in people's lives, I only observe’. And that's not how I conduct research.” (Respondent 16)

This commitment towards research participants was mentioned in several interviews. Three respondents for example mentioned having strong principles about the type of projects that they work on. One faculty member explicitly mentioned not working on projects in the Global South where there is no room for negotiation in terms of the research goal. There must be room in the research goals that are also of interest to the Global South party involved for them to benefit from the project:

“In any case, I never go into research without first having succeeded in getting that (organisation from the Global South) involved. So I always have something to offer. I want that too, otherwise I don't think it's legit. So you are always trying to offer something.” (Respondent 11)

“[...] and that is exactly the consideration that I make: 'can I make a difference or can I indeed get some sort of control over where the project is going?' so it's not necessarily that I need to have a very visible or very direct influence on the formulation of the goals. But it may also be the case that estimates or wants to know that there is enough room and flexibility in the formulation of goals to be able to work out and contribute my own input and my own say” (Respondent 8)

Respondents mention how in several cases their topic of research is too theoretical and mostly aimed at academia. Therefore, giving back by sharing the research results is of no use to the community. In these cases, multiple respondents agreed on the importance of co-creating a project with the community, specifically aimed at giving back something that is of importance to the community:

*“It is about what you can give back to those who work with you in **their** terms, not in your terms.”* (Respondent 5)

“During my first year in the PhD I saw how much we tried to decide what people needed. Like how we can give something to them but we forgot to ask them. And we can just ask what they want. ‘How do you think we can help?’ And then we can see if we can do it or not and tell them.” (Respondent 7)

However, amongst the faculty there were a few respondents that mentioned being aware of the fact that not all their projects have been equally empowering. Some in fact have been rather extractive and less responsible after reflecting on them. One of the explained:

“Not all research makes a difference in society, sometimes it works, that's great and sometimes it doesn't. But then you have always trained someone who might make a difference in the future”. (Respondent 3)

Several faculty members mention how at the beginning of their careers and during their study years not much attention was paid to topics like reciprocity or empowerment of research participants. One of the respondents explains how the topic of reciprocity nowadays has become more of an issue. This has led to be more reflexive about possible power imbalances and extractive practices:

“How I was brought up as a researcher: I learned little about these kinds of considerations. Well you have to work ethically, ask nicely, but back in my day informed consent, we didn't even ask about that. That was not discussed.” (Respondent 10)

The importance of being transparent towards their research participants was mentioned by respondents, especially when their research would not reciprocate on a community or individual level. The reason being that they wanted the choice whether to participate in the project or not to be left up to the people themselves. That way no false expectations would be created:

“You can also be explicit and say ‘I need you, I can’t give you anything in return, I hope you find it valuable yourself to contribute to knowledge about the form of cooperation you are involved in.... I’m relatively explicit about that. ‘I have nothing to offer you. I have my own interests.’.”
(Respondent 15)

To which another faculty member reacted saying:

“And that’s what I call extractive research. I think I’m looking for a more balanced relationship. But you have to realise that in many settings and contexts this is simply not possible.”
(Respondent 16)

One of the PhD candidates that also works as an independent researcher explained how giving back to master students that do field research for members of faculty can and should be improved as well. The respondent expressed how the Wageningen University does not pay much attention to this still:

“...and for me that made no sense. I didn’t mind. Eventually they said ‘OK, fine, that’s your money’ and they are super supportive and I love them, so that’s fine. But the mere fact that they were shocked that I wanted to do something that is just so evident and obvious and it is just not ethical to exploit our students. I mean that was crazy.” (Respondent 5).

To summarize, transparency and reciprocating the research participants for their time on their own terms is seen as an important aspect of research. There appears to be room for improvement on the matter, as faculty members mention starting their careers in a time where little attention was paid to reciprocity. Awareness and self-reflexivity of the latter has helped improve their practices. Being transparent towards community members when a project will not be of their benefit, brought up contrasting views amongst faculty members.

b. *Ethics*

Ethics in research was also discussed during the interviews. The topic came to discussion from two different perspectives: as the researcher in the field and as the supervisor of research. Overall, respondents found the topic important and one that should not be taken for granted saying:

“I think it’s becoming increasingly important and I think there are two things that I find very important. One is to be transparent so that they really ask for consent. I think this is really like the minimum condition at the time. I mean if I just talked to people and then just to make notes and then publish them without them knowing this is really not ethical. I think you got the minimum condition and the other one is also to talk about territory and and uh, also to inform communities to ask communities whether I can enter certain territories and not just take it for granted that this is just a, let’s say, national territory.” (Respondent 13)

The topic of asking for consent also appeared in three other interviews. One respondent explained how a letter of consent is usually a formality that is used to protect researchers rather than the researched

party. Respondents also stressed the need for asking for consent verbally and recording it instead since letters of consent are often difficult to understand for the person asked to give consent:

“So what we do a lot is filming informed consent. We ask the interviewee to tell us why you are participating in the interview? And we got that on film. That is actually the same as such a written form, only you can often see if people understand from their answer.” (Respondent 14)

To the contrary, respondent 12 explains how being aware of the need for ethics is not obvious in all organisations and there is a need for improvement on this matter:

“I actually think they don't have a no- harm ethic. Sometimes it is completely missing in a way.”

Nevertheless, one faculty member with a Global North background (Respondent 10), stood out by taking a rather critical standpoint on the topic saying *“ethics are more of a topic now, but should not go on to the point where it makes research impossible.”* This respondent also explained how in the past, the term colonizing scientist has been used to describe the researcher and his work. Unjustly, the respondent explains, since it has never been the intention to mistreat somebody, nor have his respondent given any sign of feeling mistreated:

“I think it's quite a strong term and have decided for myself that I will become less active because I don't want to be active in a political game all the time. Then I think I'll just do western science in a western society.” (Respondent 10)

On the contrary, a respondent from a Global South country mentioned how it is not necessary to go to the extremes where researchers from the Global South are only allowed to do research in that part of the world. The emphasis should be laid on remaining critical of one's positionality and self- reflexivity:

“[...] if you go with an attitude of 'I'm here, I'm very different from you, but I want to learn something from you and perhaps I can give you something', you create this sense of mutual exchange, wherein you are in no way superior.” (Respondent 5)

One faculty member who is also a PhD supervisor explained how he believes the topic of ethics gets pulled out of context when students write a research proposal. He explains how writing a separate paragraph about ethics rather works as a justification for practices that are rather extractive. Instead, the respondent proposes that the topic of ethics should be taken into consideration throughout the entire proposal. For example when thinking about the research method that will be used and how the research goals will be formulated:

“So yes, and that is the danger of using ethics. It becomes kind of a band-aid that you stick on somewhere or a sticker that says: 'ok it's approved'.” (Respondent 8)

c. Motivations to work in development studies and in the Global South

PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers mentioned their motivation to conduct research in development studies to be connected to the recognition and inclusion of indigenous knowledge in academia. This has to do with the fact that there seems to be a serious disconnect between indigenous ways of living and the policies that govern them. Respondents also mentioned how important it was to create awareness amongst indigenous communities about the fact that their knowledge of their culture

is just as important as the knowledge that Western researchers bring with them. This awareness would help to see more worth in themselves and their knowledge since this is apparently often lacking:

“I chose this academic path because I realised how people from communities knew little about academia and vice versa. People from communities also didn't realise how much knowledge they have to give to a researcher since they thought ‘the researcher knows everything’ ”. (Respondent 7)

“I think it is important to make information accessible to indigenous communities.” (Respondent 13)

Faculty members' motivations on the other hand were more varied. Some faculty members mentioned having rolled into the field of development studies during their careers and on request of WUR students who are interested in these topics. Two respondents mentioned having started with sociology of the Western context because they felt out of place working in development studies, especially in the Global South, being from the Global North themselves:

“I studied development sociology in a very grey past and then you had two kinds of sociology. You had development sociology and you had Western sociology. So I ended up studying Western Sociology because I thought, somewhat out of the uneasy feeling of ‘who am I to interfere in the affairs of people in Africa or Latin America, they can do that themselves.’ ” (Respondent 3)

Other faculty members explained how they started off in development studies by looking at it from the technical side. However, the technical innovation ethos seemed to come with a strong attitude of superiority towards the individuals who were supposed to benefit from the innovation which the respondents did not appreciate. Co-creation and working together with the community in questions was missing and therefore made the change towards the social side of development studies:

“I felt, I was actually happy again because those were people I could work with on an intellectual basis on an equal footing” (Respondent 15).

When asked about what motivations there were to work in the Global South context, faculty members mentioned no specific reason for it besides finding it interesting to look outside of their own societal context and see if they could contribute to any kind of positive development. On the contrary, most PhD candidates mentioned their personal and familiar connection to the Global South as they had grown up there. One post-doctoral researcher mentioned finding it much more gratifying compared to working in the Global North since changes are more visible. It also seems like she can contribute more in the Global South than in the Global North:

“I like making the most out of my own privilege (education) to try to change things that I understand because I am Mexican and because I can relate more. Not entirely, because of course I'm a mestizo woman. I'm not an indigenous woman I mean. It's very different. But I do think that I can understand a bit better. So mostly development issues that not only Latin American countries are facing, but other countries just because. We are not from the Global North, you know.” (Respondent 5)

To sum up, faculty members, PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers believe ethical behaviour in research is important and necessary. However, one post-doctoral researcher and several PhD

candidates mentioned that paying attention to ethics appears to not be the norm in development studies and there is much room for improvement. Faculty members also explained that, after reflecting on it, not all their work included reciprocity towards the community in inquiry, since reciprocity was not discussed much during their studies and the start of their careers. The discussion of whether a researcher from the Global North should conduct research in the Global South to avoid accusations of colonising behaviour was also brought up. As a response, one PhD candidate from the Global South expressed it being a matter of attitude towards the participants and not one's cultural background. When talking about motivations to engage in development studies in the Global South, PhD and post-doctoral researchers mentioned having a drive for inclusivity of indigenous communities' knowledge. The majority of them also happen to have a personal connection to the Global South context. On the other hand, faculty members' motivations varied.

3. The question of empowerment

This section gives an overview of the arguments respondents made regarding the topic of empowerment in relation to their own research. Firstly, the opinions of respondents regarding the concept of empowerment in itself are presented. Secondly an overview is given of how, if at all, respondents thought their research fits within the empowering concept.

Use of the term 'empowerment'

When asked about whether the researchers would use the term empowerment, there was an overall hesitation about using the term 'empowering', the main reason being that they believed the word 'empowerment' already embodies a sense of power imbalance between the researcher and the researched party, saying:

“Even if empowering is about the power of the community, there is another part of the word that has this kind of unidirectional connotation: I am the one who is empowering them and that is often something that I feel can be misleading.” (Respondent 4)

With this in mind, researchers also believed it to be a powerful allegation to assume that one as a researcher can empower someone else. However, respondents are well aware that there is a power difference between them and the research participants. The mere fact that they have the role of the researcher creates a power difference:

“I would not say that I am very powerful and that I can make a change, but on the other hand it is not like we are invisible and we do not have agency and that we do not influence them somehow. So I am very aware of that and I try to be careful with whether I am making any change that might make them uncomfortable.” (Respondent 1).

“Well, in our field you are always aware that there are power differences. But we study those power differences. So our kind of research tries to create transparency and make power differences more insightful... that those power differences exist and what you could do with them or how you could deal with them” (Respondent 3)

According to respondents, the term has even become meaningless in the past years not least because it has often been used as an excuse rather than used as a tool to create positive change for the research participants:

“The understanding about empowerment and the way it is then implemented in a way often does not have anything to do with empowerment I would say. It is almost the same as with gender in a way that it has become a matter of counting heads.” (Respondent 12)

Instead, respondents mentioned using alternative concepts with similar goals such as: transformative research, the capability notion, decolonization, trans disciplinarity, the enhancement of research methods, studying power relations, conceptual analysis, co-creation, self-determination rights, knowledge integration, non-commodity, advocacy, avoiding research fatigue through visual problem tracing, to name a few:

“No, I don't think I used the concept of empowerment. I think I like the idea of transformative research more, in the sense that they (the community) have this power to transform my research or transform me. I probably also have a lot of power to make some kind of change or...I wouldn't say that I'm very powerful to make a change, but on the other hand it's not like we are invisible and we don't have agency, and that we don't influence them somehow.” (Respondent 1)

Two PhD candidates and one faculty member explicitly mentioned how they try to use terms that are less academic since often, traditional communities are not familiar with the terms used in academia:

“Sometimes I'm a little bit allergic to institutional, institutionalised academic research. Uh, yeah, so all these terms (empowerment). I think I have an anarchist background myself. The idea that there is an institution that empowers other groups. Yeah, I don't believe in that.” (Respondent 6)

“We absolutely do not use those concepts in the field, because no one understands what it is about. That is real scientific jargon [...]. In research you try to match the language of the person you are in contact with as much as possible.” (Respondent 14)

Most of these terms however are intended to create change at a higher level, say at a system or policy level. This means that the positive effect the researchers hope to have at a community or individual level will possibly only be seen on a longer term. The explanation for this relies mostly on the idea that to create *real* change, as the respondents call it, it is necessary to not only look at individual problems but to look at the broader picture that is keeping the problems sustained. For example, one respondent said:

“We also have our students research: 'what are the political relationships or the institutional arrangements or the rules of the game that keep things going?' So we actually ask system questions. You can also have people look at individuals, but we try to look at systems.” (Respondent 3)

It appears that out of the 16 interviews, two were the exception. One will be explained here and the other is elaborated on in the following section. The topic that this respondent concerned himself with is directly aimed at creating change at community level, namely through grass-roots development and working on projects that are created bottom up:

“communities are often very dependent on their own limited resources. And actually the central question we ask in that project is: 'how can you strengthen that?’” (Respondent 8)

Nevertheless, other respondents did mention aiming to also reciprocate on community level seeing as communities that participate in research today will not see change, if at all, for a long time if only aiming at creating change on a higher level:

“We will die before we see it change.” (Respondent 5)

To summarise, there was an overall hesitation about the term 'empowering' and a preference to work with other concepts that are aimed at creating change at a higher level. The idea behind this is to tackle aspects of a system that are sustaining individual and community level issues as they are. A small part of the respondents actually worked on research designed at creating change at a community or individual level. Furthermore, the use of academic terms in general was criticised by several researchers, since they are hard to understand for people in the field who are mostly non-academics and therefore are not inclusive.

Empowering factors

Most respondents explained that their aims towards creating change operated at a policy and system level rather than at an individual level. However, their research also managed to contribute on an individual level. This section describes the factors within a research that allowed the research participants to benefit from the respondents' projects in the short and long-term.

a. Empowerment in the long-term

Two respondents mentioned that the way their research is beneficial to their research participants is by giving space and voice: space to express their knowledge and voice in the sense that they make sure the voices of excluded or vulnerable communities are heard outside of their own circle. This is done in two different ways. The first one is by working on a transdisciplinary tool that allows indigenous knowledge to be translated to western academic terms so that this can also be understood and applied by western academics in ways that reduce the dichotomy between indigenous and western knowledge. The second way in which respondents are helping to make voices heard is through video problem tracing. Here, voices of marginalised communities are recorded during interviews in which they discuss the issues that they are confronted with. These interviews are then shown to policymakers for example that can help induce policy change for the benefit of the interviewed participants:

“Individually, one may not even be empowered. But the voice itself is more widely supported and heard elsewhere. So, you ultimately hope that it will have an impact on that particular sector from which that voice comes.” (Respondent 14)

Video problem tracing also has the aim of contributing to the decrease of research fatigue caused by repeatedly interviewing the same individuals with the same questions which is considered a more immediate empowerment. With video problem tracing the interviews are taped and can be shown infinite times to researchers in need of the information without bothering the interviewees. It is also used on an educational level to teach students how to properly listen to a filmed interview with the same purpose of avoiding research fatigue:

“We often do it for students, precisely to counteract that research fatigue and provide training in listening. Because what is such a person really saying? A lot of comments we get back are about their English being so bad that they cannot understand it. But that's the research situation.”

It's not that their English is bad, the problem is that you don't speak their local language.”
(Respondent 14)

In order to avoid imposing a project on a community, one respondent mentioned being strict about not being the one that starts up a project nor decides what practical steps must be made. His research empowers in the sense that it helps research participants to identify possible causes of a problem that they might be facing from which the right research question can emerge. He does this by making information and knowledge visible to the community in question:

“I think part of the work, where I fit in, that you could have the empowering effect, is that I am appreciative of what people do and that I want to be able to make that explicit.” (Respondent 15)

b. Empowerment in the short-term

Respondents mentioned several examples of how their research has been empowering in the short-term. The first involved working on research (topics) designed for immediate empowerment such as supporting the development of local entrepreneurship. In these cases, the research participants benefited from the research process as well as from the longer-term outcomes of the research:

“What comes first for me is whether there is indeed enough room to contribute something to a grass root perspective or whether it can indeed have positive effects for the possibilities that people have to improve their poverty situation or otherwise improve their situation.”
(Respondent 8)

Empowerment in this case was realised by thinking about how the research process can help to solve a pressing problem for the research participants. In this case, the research participants learn from playing an active role in the process. The respondents mentioned two methods used through which this can happen, namely (participatory) action research or science like programmes. When involved in the process, people are involved in data collection and analysis that leads to them getting a better understanding of their situation and can use this information to know their worth and defend their positions in negotiations for example. By involving the community in the process, they might also acquire new practical or analytical skills and capacities that they might be able to apply in other cases in the future:

“You can certainly see that. That people open their eyes, that they make new contacts.”
(Respondent 10)

Several respondents mentioned designing a secondary project together with the community in order to reciprocate for the time and information that the community has provided the research team with. Several examples of co-produced projects were given by the respondents of which this is one:

“We talked with their authorities and with a bunch of people and then we asked them ‘so we're not going to give you money’. We're not going to give you a development project with millions like before. So what is it that you want but that it's for everyone?” (Respondent 5).

While a few respondents mentioned compensating respondents for their time with the same amount that they would have earned by working on their daily jobs, several respondents explained being cautious with using monetary compensation since it comes with a lot of responsibility:

“Compensation is also something tricky, where you have to see how you're doing it in order to not end up doing more harm than good.” (Respondent 4).

One of the postdoctoral researchers mentioned how monetary compensation can be seen as acceptable or unacceptable depending on the country where research takes place saying, *“monetary compensation is normal in sociology while anthropologists say it is a no-go”* (Respondent 13). Monetary compensation can also create unintended bonds or expectations between the researcher and the respondent.

c. Short-term and long-term empowerment

Advocating for Global South actors in partnerships with Global North actors and involving them in the research goal definition is a way in which respondents try to ensure the Global South party's needs are represented. By working on self-determination rights, several respondents advocate for indigenous communities to be able to become autonomous and be able to decide for themselves about topics that concern them. This can happen when working on changing policies that restrain indigenous communities' autonomy.

In their role as supervisor, faculty members have the power to guide their students towards conducting research that is more or less empowering, for example through the approval or rejection of research proposals. With this in mind, two of the respondents mentioned paying attention to their students not pre-defining their research goals completely, seeing as it could lead to research not being relevant to the community at all. Instead, they prefer their students to keep an open mind about the research goals until these have been discussed with the research community:

“It only becomes clear during the course of an investigation what is really interesting or what is really important or what can make a difference and what not.” (Respondent 3)

To recapitulate, due to the level on which the respondents usually operate, namely on system or policy level, they would not fit precisely into the empowering category entirely. However, it also became clear that the research projects did have factors that allowed their research participants to benefit from the projects in the short and long term.

4. Enablers and disablers

During the interviews respondents mentioned several aspects they came across while working on development projects that either disabled or rather enabled the extent to which they could conduct work that is empowering to their research communities. In this section I highlight the challenges (disablers) and possibilities (enablers) that have influenced the work of the respondents in terms of empowerment as shown in Figure 2.

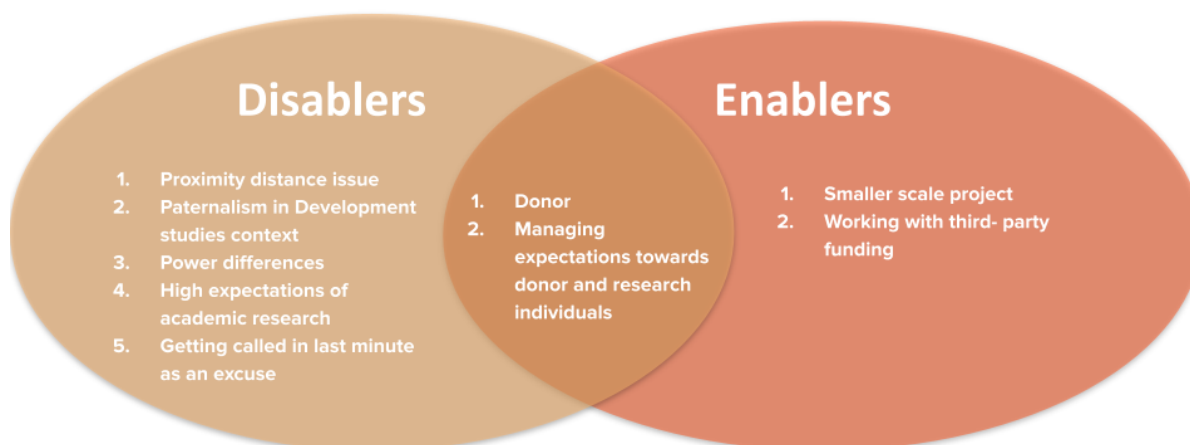


Figure 2 Overview of disabler and enablers of empowering research.

a. Disablers

i. Proximity-distance issue

Several respondents addressed the fact that there is a proximity-distance issue between researchers and their research participants. Two aspects were mentioned that lead to this observation. Firstly, often at times, the (lead) author that writes about Global South development is not the one who conducts the actual research. This can lead to a disconnect between what is happening in reality and what is being written in academic papers. PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers mentioned working in the field and having direct contact with the research participants in inquiry through interviews, participant observation or other moments of interaction. On the contrary, even though the intention of visiting the research sites are there, the vast majority of faculty members mentioned rarely going into the field themselves. Their fieldwork is conducted by PhD candidates or by post-doctoral researchers, the most common reason for this being lack of time to actually visit the research sights by faculty members:

“And so as far as the projects in developing countries are concerned, oftentimes the actual research is done by a PhD student or a post-doc. And that my role is often guiding a project. I always go on field visits if possible, preferably a little longer and several times. But that is not for longer periods of fieldwork itself, that is not part of it, so that is more difficult to arrange.”
(Respondent 8)

Secondly, the authors of academic papers on topics of the Global South are, more often than not, individuals who do not belong to the group that they are writing about and who often lack degrees of self-reflexivity in these cases. Respondent 5 gave an example of her own experience while working in gender studies saying:

“They (researchers) are not bad people or anything, it's just that they cannot see what they are doing because it's just very far away from them. It's in the book. It's in their brain. They can write amazing articles about it, but then they don't live with them. They're not those women. So, there's always this sense of detachment.” (Respondent 5)

ii. The development studies context

In development studies there often appears to be a residual paternalistic attitude towards communities and individuals that do not belong to the Global North or who are not European. One respondent

explained how this paternalistic attitude is not only present in depictions of the community they are conducting research on but also towards other fellow colleagues within the organisation. Deficit thinking is often still strongly present. As explained in the theory chapter, researchers rooted in deficit thinking tend to believe that they are inherently more powerful than their research respondents leading (at least unconsciously) to a sense of superiority towards their research participants. Respondent 12 explains how oftentimes she has come across fellow researchers making comments like *“oh those farmers don't want to change, they don't understand us, they have poor mindsets”*. Respondent 8 also explains how many projects try to or are about teaching farmers something new, assuming they are not doing things right or even lack knowledge.

Respondents also mentioned how development studies can itself create power imbalances and inequality within communities instead of creating a positive change through their research. In farmers communities for example, this happens when researchers only speak with elite farmers or farmers who are already more developed thereby excluding the rest of the community from the project. Not only does this affect the external validity of the project but also can worsen imbalances within the community. One respondent gives an example of her experience saying:

“It was just chaos. Basically there was an intervention that divided the entire community and they were just really upset with having researchers and international development agencies coming there, doing good and then not really or just helping some people, and not the rest.” (Respondent 5)

iii. Power differences

Respondents mentioned situations encountered in the field that made their goal of co-creating with their research community more difficult, especially with communities that have few resources. Two respondents mentioned how the fact that they arrive at the community by car already creates a sense of power difference between them and the community. One of these respondents continued by explaining how, when working in the African continent, the fact that she is a white person also added to the scepticism that was created by their means of transportation. To reduce this feeling of power difference she decides to use other means of transportation and with only a few, hopefully local research teams:

“So, one of my things that I've done quite a lot was actually deliberately choosing not to take the organisation's white 4x4 with the driver, but just take motorbikes and move around by motorbike and just go with my translator”. (Respondent 12)

Another respondent explained how it is not quite as easy to find out what it is the community wants or needs since they are not always honest with the research team:

“Well, when you arrive with the car and it says water management, then you know for sure that the first thing they start talking about is: we have problems with the water.” (Respondent 8)

iv. High expectations of academic research

Academic researchers experience pressure to acquire projects and publish academic papers to rank up in the academic world. However, according to one faculty member expectations are high in the sense of the amount of projects but also in the type of projects that academic researchers are being asked to do. Wageningen University is very eager to answer questions posed by research participants where this actually fits into the line of work of a different work branch:

“I think as an innovation scientist, these kinds of processes don't need any research at all. They just need an innovation supporter. And if they already have knowledge questions, they are not of a nature that academic research has to be done on them.” (Respondent 10)

v. Getting called in last minute

Several respondents explained how social scientists are often included in the last stages of a project. They are often a tool used to get a project approved by the donor. During these projects they are also used as a communication tool in the sense that they are asked to make sure that the community goes along with the technical innovation and does not cause any trouble. In these situations, it is hard for the social scientist to make sure the project coincides with the participants' needs.

b. Enablers and disablers

i. The donor and the university

The type of donor organisation and the university involved can function as both enabling and disabling factors. In the first section of this chapter, researchers and PhD candidates were seen to face responsibilities towards several parties when working in development study contexts. Especially in relation to the research goals, the donor organisation is often viewed as more disabling than enabling; for example, having to work for donors with predefined research goals and with little room for negotiation of these goals. Respondents also mentioned having to promise outcomes and impact that a project might create in order to receive the funding beforehand. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the NWO were mentioned as two entities that tend to work with fixed and pre-set goals:

“Sometimes you get involved in projects... if you want to get financing for that you have to promise numbers of how many farmers you will make life better for, and I think it's pretentious already.” (Respondent 15).

Another way in which the organisation might be disabling or enabling is the extent to which a researcher is allowed to publish positive results as well as critical findings about the project and most importantly the process of the project and the organisation itself. Development organisations tend to not appreciate publications in which they or their project is not portrayed positively. For other researchers it is difficult to learn from 'bad' practices when they are nowhere to be read about:

“You do your data analysis, which is all good and fine as long as the results are rather positive. But then when you come with these more critical results that actually to some extent, say well, some of the actions you took or some of the methods you choose did not work, or maybe had a negative outcome, then I got quite some pushback because that's not very beneficial within a context where you depend on the money and depend on the continuation of your projects.” (Respondent 12).

The donor that funds a research can also be disabling or enabling seeing as they are also not always interested in reciprocating to their respondents. It is not simply an issue of whether there is a budget or not but rather what the donor is willing to finance. Furthermore, the involvement of multiple donors can make the aspect of reciprocity more complicated:

“Of course, then you have a budget for compensating your participants. I don't think it was ever a problem. The problem was much more about what kind of projects can I fund? Because many big

businesses will not be interested in proactive elements or supporting local entrepreneurship”.
(Respondent 2)

Responsibilities that PhD candidates face are also disabling seeing as they also have to present a proposal for their research in which research goals are already largely defined without co-creation with the community in question. Besides, time and budget constraints also lead to ethical considerations taken in the beginning of the process to be set aside when needing to finish their project:

“If you want to stay in academia, for example, you have to publish certain things. There is time pressure and you have to collect data whatever it costs. And then all these ethical reflections and ethical considerations that you have a lot of time to reflect upon at the very beginning when you have a lot of time to think about it, clash with reality.” (Respondent 6)

On the contrary, working on smaller scale projects and working together with third party funding organisations seems to improve the chances of co-creating research goals:

“Yes, in smaller projects we often have more control than the larger projects where the framework is already set and you have to collaborate with other people. In a smaller project you can often make your own decisions and put your own spin on it.” (Respondent 14)

“And that is why, in a sense, third-party funding research is more attractive from that point of view, because then you are much more in dialogue with those who are going to participate to see what the goals of the research could be.” (Respondent 11)

If for some reason, a researcher will not be able to reciprocate to its research participants, several respondents stressed the importance of managing expectations and being transparent about it. Not only towards the research participants but also towards the donors.

To summarise, there were several factors that enabled and disabled the researchers’ empowering research practices. Respondents mentioned a proximity-distance issue, aspects of the development studies context, power differences, high expectations from academic research and getting called in at the last minute as disablers. The type and size of the donor organisation and the standards of the university were mentioned as factors that could work as enabling as well as disabling.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this research was to understand what empowering research means to social scientists from WUR in their own research practices and how they reflect on their positionalities and responsibilities when conducting research with marginalised groups of the Global South. This was coupled with the goal of making a step towards making social science practices more empowering for their research participants. This research has been of an exploratory nature because it intended to get a better understanding of how social scientists at WUR reflect on their positionality regarding empowering research, without providing conclusive results. For these reasons, the main research question was kept broad: *“How do social scientists from Wageningen University configure their positionalities and responsibilities when conducting research with marginalised communities of the Global South and how do these relate to empowering research?”*. 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted over a timelapse of three months to conduct the data in order to answer the main research question. A summary of the main findings of the empirical research are presented below.

5.1 Summarising the findings

Respondents find themselves in a constant deliberation between felt obligations of responsibility towards their research participants and responsibilities towards the funding organisation, the university and their own research team. Negotiations with funding organisations regarding the terms of the research are inherent to a research process and crucial in creating possibilities for conducting empowering research, especially when it comes to defining the goal and the output of a project, since this is where most tensions occur. Researchers have to calculate carefully how they negotiate the terms of their research in the proposal to make it fundable for the funding entity.

The sense of responsibility towards their research participants to give something back for their time and information is closely linked to their positionalities. Respondents believe ethical behaviour in research is important and necessary and they added several examples of how this belief is put into practice. However, PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers confirmed that attention to ethical treatment of the research participants appears to not be the norm in all development projects they have been a part of, especially in terms of reciprocity, meaning that the research participants do not always receive something in return for their time and information. Faculty members explained how during their study years and beginnings of their careers, these topics were not paid much attention to. However, the concern also arose from a faculty member that ethics could become disabling for researchers and is becoming a political game. The question of whether a researcher from the Global North should conduct research in the Global South to avoid accusations of colonising behaviour emerged from the later argument. Is it a matter of cultural background or simply of attitude? Additionally, contradicting arguments were made surrounding the idea that being transparent towards research participants when a research project would not reciprocate is enough to avoid exploitative research. Furthermore, up until now, ethics and reciprocity in students' research proposals have been written in separate parts of the proposal, and according to a faculty member, they often worked as a band aid to justify exploitative research practices. Instead, according to the respondents, the topic of ethics should be woven into the entire proposal.

When talking about motivations to engage in development studies in the Global South, PhD and post-doctoral researchers mentioned having a drive for inclusivity of indigenous communities' knowledge.

The majority of them also happen to have a personal connection to the Global South context. On the other hand, faculty members' motivations varied. Their reasons for engaging in development studies in the Global South were also linked to wanting to contribute to creating a better life for those in need of it. However, most faculty members ended up in the development sector in the Global South due to a request from the university and students from the Global South.

When it comes to the use of the term 'empowerment' there was an overall hesitation, since the use of the term might automatically create a sense of power disparity between the researcher and the participant. Therefore, respondents preferred to work with other concepts. These concepts are aimed at creating change on a policy or system level but have similar goals as 'empowerment' does, such as self-determination, co-creation, self-determination rights, knowledge integration, non-commodity and advocating for Global South parties. Furthermore, the use of academic terms in general was criticised by several respondents. The main reason being that they are hard to understand for people in the field who are mostly non-academics and are therefore not inclusive. By aiming at creating change on policy or system level, respondents' practices would not fit into the empowering category entirely. However, it also became clear that the projects did have factors that allowed their research participants to benefit from the projects in the short term, such as monetary compensation or co-creating a separate project designed to give back to the community; but also on the long term, for example by working on a tool that will help give indigenous knowledge the same acknowledgements as academic knowledge.

Next to their good practices, respondents explained several aspects that enable these practices but also disabled them from conducting research that is more empowering. Proximity-distance issue, aspects of the development studies context, power differences, high expectations from academic research to tackle issues that fall outside of their range of work and getting called in at the last minute were some of the challenges faced. The type and size of the donor organisation and the standards of the university were mentioned as factors that could work as enabling as well as disabling factors.

5.2 Discussion and conclusion

This section will address the wider significance of the findings in relation to the research topic, based on the themes and literature presented in the theoretical framework chapter. The section continues with a set of recommendations for future research and concludes with a look back on my own positionality. The results are discussed in a similar order as presented in the summary above and therefore starts with the topic of researcher's responsibility.

In regard to researchers' responsibilities, the interview respondents showed that the process of writing up an empowering research proposal and conducting it is not as linear and simple as it seems. There are several external factors besides a researcher's positionality that influence the extent to which a researcher is able to conduct empowering research. The process is therefore more nuanced and complex than much of the literature assumes and does not only depend on a researcher's will to conduct empowering research. The constraints and possibilities imposed by the funding organisation is a factor with much influence on the research process. When writing up a research proposal, the researcher must formulate their research proposal in such a way that also suits the donors' expectations and goals, but still maintains the original essence of the proposal. Respondents explained how the extent to which a funding organisation finds it important to fund research that gives back to the community will either facilitate the negotiations or make the process more challenging. In the literature, Subedi (2006) makes

a point about doubting whether developing organisations have intentions beyond creating their own promotion and success. Therefore the author stresses the need to include co-creation of research goals in research proposals.

Faculty members as PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers mentioned having responsibilities towards the university. For faculty members in order to stay in academia, there are high expectations in terms of the quantity of publications in a relatively short amount of time. One faculty member explicitly mentioned academia becoming a *neoliberal production factory*. Faculty members and post-doctoral researchers also cope with similar responsibilities and time pressures. In their case, to conclude their theses in order to graduate. These responsibilities towards the university makes them conduct research in a way that will get that job done however possible. Respondents explain how, as a result, the situation leads them to neglect the ethical aspects of the projects that were carefully thought of in the ethics section of their proposal. For students, one faculty member who is also a supervisor of research, proposed that more attention be paid to the research proposals so that the topic of ethics is included through the whole proposal instead of in a separate paragraph. This way it is not used as a band aid to justify research with an extractive character. For these reasons, it might be helpful to explore the possibilities to focus more on quality rather than on quantity regarding academic publications and student reports.

The next topic that will be addressed is the positionality of the respondents regarding ethics and reciprocity during research. In the problem statement I mentioned how I questioned whether my lecturers, and other social sciences faculty members at WUR, considered reciprocity in research to be an important issue. The results showed that overall, respondents believed reciprocity and ethics to be important when conducting research. Contrary to what was expected, there were no significant differences between faculty members (with Global North backgrounds), PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers (most of them with Global South backgrounds). However, based on the results, it does seem to be that PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers are more eager to connect with their participants, create bonds of trust and reciprocate than was expressed by faculty members. The literature showed how different aspects of a researcher's positionality, such as cultural background, can influence the extent to which one finds these matters important. Their eagerness could be related to the sense of familiarity that PhD candidates from the Global South have with their own country, as expressed during the interviews. In addition, for faculty members, the topic of reciprocity and ethics is not something that they have engaged with and reflected on since the beginning of their careers. For more than a number of respondents, such considerations have evolved and come into focus during the last few years. They explain how this was not a current topic during their study years and therefore, teachers did not motivate them to go beyond the 'doing not harm' ethics. The fact that PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers are still in training or have graduated more recently, in times where ethics and reciprocity are more spoken of, could also substantiate this contrast with faculty members. Having said so, combining researchers with diverse cultural backgrounds and of different generations could increase the sense of responsibility of a research team as a whole to go beyond doing-no-harm in research. However, further research is needed to confirm it.

Due to reasons mentioned above, faculty members expressed that not all of the research they have conducted has been directly beneficial for their research participants. Sometimes this is still the case. In these situations, respondents explained how one of the ways in which this is dealt with is to be transparent about such realities. In this way it becomes possible for the research participant to decide for themselves if they go along with the research or not. The choice is left up to the individual. This interview finding is in line with the literature chapter, where Deckert (2017) explains how being

transparent and genuine about a lack of reciprocity of a research practice is more genuine compared to one of promising positive impact -which is hard to guarantee- or where it knowingly will not be achieved. In this way, expectations are managed and less harm is done. However, another faculty member strongly opposed this idea saying that transparency is being used to justify the conduct of extractive research. Thus, managing expectations through transparency can indeed represent a form of respect towards the autonomy of a research participant to make their own decisions on whether to participate or not. Nevertheless, it can also be interpreted as a way of covering up extractive research. What this means for this research is that within KTI there are different interpretations of what is ethical and what not. This could indicate the need for further research to get a better understanding of what it means to conduct ethical research. Based on the definition of empowering research used in this thesis, transparency on its own is not enough to justify not giving back to the research participant. As a matter of fact, the question could be posed of whether there even is any valuable justification for not reciprocating since, according to respondents, it appears to be a matter of priorities and not of means or lack thereof.

The next discussion point is related to the development studies system. The system in which development studies take place does offer some opportunities to conduct empowering research; however, it also makes it rather difficult to do so as well. Based on the results, the academic research system and the role of the researcher can disable as well as enable empowering research practices. The first point I want to argue is about the role of the academic researcher. In the best scenario, research is specifically designed to work on an issue that is important to the community. For this to happen, the research goals and outcomes must be co-designed by the research community and the researcher. The literature as well as the interviews, proposed challenges in regard to this argument. Wilmsen (2008) explained how the role of the academic researcher is to formulate the research questions that, in their eyes, will contribute to the academic realm. If the research question were to only be based on the needs of the community in question it means rethinking the role of academic researchers as a whole. Furthermore, it would be difficult for academic researchers to contribute to their faculty's knowledge. Therefore, respondents suggest a separation between research that conducts research for the academy and researcher whose task is to work on projects aimed at answering questions of the community in inquiry. However, this separation of branches might create the idea that academic researchers in the development world do not need to pay attention to the needs of the community in inquiry which is something we want to prevent and make sure it does not worsen. If not, the situation as it is today would remain unchanged. With this in mind, further research could focus on the possibility of research that aims at academic excellence to also become aligned with research that responds to community needs. The possibility of combining academic research with industrial research is an ongoing debate. I use industrial research as an example here since it is aimed at not only creating knowledge, like academic research, but actually answering questions for a project or organisation (Esham, 2008) which I compare to answering questions or needs of a community. According to scientist-entrepreneur Javier Garcia Martinez, collaborative research as it is usually called, should not be a problem since "*a so-called barrier between academia and other sectors is no more than a state of mind. To me, it feels all part of the same thing. It's our own mindset that puts different activities in different silos*". (García Martínez, 2022, as cited in Gould, 2022, p.1). Professor of Public Policy and the Director of The Policy Lab at the University of Melbourne, Jenny M. Lewis explains how collaborating with different types of research has multiple benefits such as increasing chances of getting funding and gaining tacit knowledge. Furthermore it increases the possibility of creating visible impact on the communities. However, she also explains how research collaboration amongst social scientists seems to be lacking. The author mentions the possibility of the desire for autonomy to be a reason for why social scientists are not

embracing collaboration. Nevertheless, there is still need for further research to determine whether this is true or perhaps there are other influential factors.

Additionally, I want to discuss the proximity-distance issue that appeared in several interviews. This issue is shown in two different ways in the interviews, the first one being the physical distance between the researcher who writes about development studies and publishes about it and the research participants. As the empirical data showed, the researcher who leads the writing of articles is often not the one who has done the fieldwork. Therefore, there is an apparent disconnect between the reality of the research participant and the reality of the writer, also often referred to as ‘helicopter science’ (Haelewaters et al., 2021) which creates ideal conditions for a proximity-distance issue to develop. This disconnect between realities also enhances what the literature chapter describes as *othering*, a phenomenon that comes with the risk of portraying the other as essentially different, and translating this difference to inferiority.

The second way the proximity-distance issue is present lies in the cultural and demographic differences between the researcher and the research participant, especially when the researcher is from the Global North and the research participant from the Global South. The literature and respondents from this study mentioned the issue as being more about a matter of attitude of the researcher than one determined from social and demographic differences. However, the fact that the researcher does not have access to the lived experience of the participant and has not had to deal with problems like their participants have, can create a distance that might lead to the researcher not understanding or even caring enough about the participant and the improvement of their situation. Again, this enhances the sense of *otherness* and can enhance the issues that this brings with it. Also, my respondents explained how this attitude is indeed still an issue in these contexts. Deficit thinking remains strongly present in development studies settings, especially from Global North researchers towards research participants but also research colleagues from the Global South context. The difference in cultures thus still plays a significant role in defining whether or not research is designed to empower their participants. With this in mind should we aim to only include researchers with lived experience into the research process to reduce the gap? According to recent research, the vast majority of the papers published about development in the Global South are authored by researchers from the Global North (Amarante et al., 2021). This confirms that the proximity-distance issue and by implication deficit thinking might be a bigger issue than we think and is therefore valuable to do further research on.

At the beginning of the literature chapter I explained how the mere use of the word ‘empowerment’ gives the impression that the researcher is rooted in deficit thinking (Deckert, 2017). This means that when a person uses the term ‘empowerment’ it conveys the impression of a powerful researcher who can give power to powerless research subjects and communities. The empirical data supported the literature in the sense that respondents believed the word has a rather paternalistic connotation; the concept implies a sense of superiority that they do not agree with. Therefore respondents explained rather using other concepts that appeared to have similar goals as empowering research. At the beginning of the research I had no trouble using the concept ‘empowering research’ since it was clear to me that it meant paying attention to reciprocity in the short term. However, hearing how the concept was interpreted as paternalistic by respondents, and seeing that I felt the need to explain my interpretation of the word because I myself became uncomfortable using it, it quickly led me to abstain from wanting to apply the concept ‘empowerment’. Úcar Martínez et al. (2017) substantiate the fact that the concept of empowerment still has multiple different interpretations in social sciences and that the meaning of the word varies per researcher. ‘*One constant in all research is the insistence on the complex nature of the concept and the need to clarify its meaning*’ (Úcar Martínez et al., 2017, p. 407).

Therefore, I conclude that it might have a more positive impact to focus on the goal of empowering research which is making sure a project is designed to give back in the short term rather than on the concept of empowerment and the meaning of it.

This thesis has contributed to the general understanding of how social scientists at WUR configure their responsibilities and positionality towards their research participants in development studies. It has also provided insights to different ways in which respondents try to reciprocate to their research participants giving other researchers points of attention to reflect on when attempting to go beyond- doing-no-harm. Therefore, it has contributed to an academic purpose of filling the existing knowledge and research gap. Furthermore, the research has allowed me to develop my positionality regarding the topic of empowering research as well. Through the research I developed my learning and got a more nuanced idea about the reality of a researcher in development in the context of development studies. I still believe that one's positionality plays a very important role since in the end it is the researcher who decides whether to advocate for a research that reciprocates or not. However, besides having good will, the context in which social scientists have to conduct research does not facilitate the process of empowerment. There are many other actors and factors who are needed for a research to come about with which the researcher has to negotiate the terms of a project. It is not a linear process. At last I have also reflected on the use of the word 'empowerment' and 'empowering research'. What seemed as a word that represented the type of research that I would want to conduct, is no longer a concept that I feel comfortable working with. Instead, and if at all, I would much rather work with concepts like emancipatory research or simply advocate for research that is designed to have beneficial effects on its research participants. This applies not only for the Global South or development studies context but in any other context as well.

5.3 Recommendations

At last there are several recommendations for further research that emerged from this thesis. There is still much to be explored surrounding the topic of ethics and what it means to conduct research that is ethically correct. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore whether combining researchers with diverse cultural backgrounds and of different generations could increase the sense of responsibility of a research team as a whole to go beyond doing-no-harm in research. Next, further research could focus on the possibility of research that aims at academic excellence to also become aligned with research that responds to community needs to increase the chances of academic research actually becoming more empowering for its participants. For this, it is important to analyse why social scientists are struggling with engaging in collaborative research. As this research has focussed only on social scientists from KTI (and one from COM) the results are specific to this case study. Therefore it would be interesting to explore whether social scientists from other organisations or universities produce different findings. Lastly, it might also be interesting to apply this research on funding organisations of development projects seeing as they play an important role in development studies contexts.

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7. Appendices

Appendix 1 Recruitment mail Phil Macnaghten to CPT-E faculty members

Dear CPT-E Colleagues

This is an advance warning that a MDR student of ours, Dagmar Haas, will be approaching a number of you to request an interview. She is researching how CPT-E researchers and faculty configure their responsibilities and positionalities with regards to their research subjects with a particular focus on marginalised communities in the Global South.

I do hope you will find a spare hour to undertake an interview with her (her interviews are scheduled for December and January).

With best wishes

Phil & David

Appendix 2 Interview guide

Interview questions

ASK FOR CONSENT TO RECORD!

Ask about anonymity!

Interview questions:

Introduction: I have a set of questions related to three main topics: Researcher's responsibility, researcher's positionality and the notion of empowering research. But First I would like to know a bit more about you as a researcher...

What is your professional background?

How long have you been working as a scientist/ teacher at WUR?

How come you wanted to become a researcher and also a teacher?

What research topics are you most interested in?

How long have you been engaged in development studies in the Global South?

What's your **motivation** to engage in the Global South context?

What role have you played in these studies?

Responsibility

SORT OF CHANGE

How does your research contribute to change? **At what level?**

What **concepts** do you use to facilitate that change?

What is the **goal of that change?**

- How does this goal come to be? Who decides?
- Do you consciously think about **who** is supposed to benefit?
- Do you see a **tension between your research goals and giving back to the subject?** How do you negotiate these tensions?
- What is the **motivation** behind the research?

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHED PARTY

What role would you say does a research party play in your studies? (only as information providers?)

Does this play a role in defining the research **method? is that important?**

What are **tensions?**

In which phases of the research are they involved?

How do you engage with the researched party in your research? **On what level?** (personal? through a contact person, etc)

What is the purpose of the engagement? When you engage, how do you do this, where does it start and where does it stop?

RECRUITMENT

How do you recruit? What reason do you give your subjects to participate in the research?

In which ways has your research given back to the researched party? (Is there any direct compensation? Yes in which form?)

How do you negotiate the researcher role and advocate for the subject?

Positionality Pay attention to who brings up something about their positionality.

During history there has been a strong power difference between researchers (often white elites) and the subjects... In what ways, if at all, do you notice this?

How do you manage differences in positionality between you and your researched party?

Empowerment

How do you engage with empowerment of the researched party? To what extent, if at all, does your research relate to empowerment of the subject?

Is it a useful term? Yes, no? Why and which terms would you use otherwise? grassroot stem zichtbaar en hoorbaar maken.

What are the challenges to put them into practice? Are there challenges?

Does the research empower on an individual level?

How do you feel in cpt these methods of empowerment are being included in reality? and where not and what are the tensions? Why yes and why not?

How do you address the power difference between you and the research subjects? How do you think cpt is doing this?

Do you have to justify the ethics?