

¹Mordecai Tayebwa and ²Palesa Natasha Mothapo

1 Makerere University Lung Institute, Uganda

2 Research Support and Management, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa

Background & Rationale

Equitable research partnerships are central to the success, impact, and sustainability of global research initiatives. As African universities increasingly engage with regional and international partners, issues of trust, communication, power asymmetries, and leadership structures become critical determinants of partnership effectiveness. Our experiences at the Makerere University Lung Institute (MLI) and Nelson Mandela University (NMU) position us uniquely to reflect on how well-designed partnerships can advance research delivery, strengthen institutions, and build long-term collaborative ecosystems.



Makerere University-Nelson Mandela University Collaboration



IREX UASP Alumni Network Launch, October 2025



Madiba Nexus International workshop on balancing equitable partnership, January 2026



Makerere University and Nelson Mandela University sign an MOU to strengthen collaboration in addressing Africa's development and health challenges.



"We must grow partnerships within Africa first. True collaboration begins when both sides contribute equally, share capacity, and build self-reliance."

Prof. Azwinndini Muronga
Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research, Innovation & Internationalisation
Nelson Mandela University
*At the Makerere-NMU Partnership Operationalization Meeting, 7 Oct 2025

Key Insights & Practical Lessons

1. Trust and Communication as Partnership Foundations

- Regular communication reduces risks and misalignment.
- Transparency builds credibility across partners.
- Co-developing expectations at project onset reduces conflict.

2. Addressing Power Asymmetries

- Shared governance structures (e.g., co-chairs, alternating leads).
- Mutual agenda-setting to avoid donor- or Northern-driven priorities.
- Value recognition of all partners' strengths—not only technical capacities.

3. Strengthening South-South Partnerships

- S-S collaborations foster contextual learning and shared problem-solving.
- They reduce dependency on Northern intermediaries.
- They build continental research capacity and leadership pipelines.

4. Sustaining Collaborations Beyond Funding

- Embed partnerships into institutional processes and strategies.
- Invest in capacity strengthening, not only project outputs.
- Develop long-term roadmaps and successor grants.

5. Leadership and Governance for Sustainability

- Leader-to-leader trust accelerates decision-making.
- Clear governance prevents duplication and conflict.
- Leadership commitment ensures continuity during transition periods.

Our Achievements in Practice

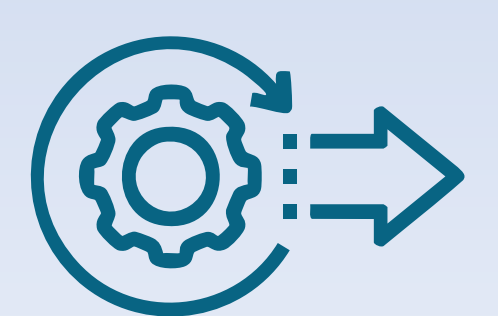
From Principles to Practice: Our Network's Impact



Grant Mobilization: Secured \$5M+ in collaborative funding, with 65% of grants now jointly led by South-South Principal Investigators.



Institutional Legacy: Established a formal MoU & Governance Charter, embedding partnership beyond projects. Trained 30+ staff in GCP/data management.



Equitable Outputs: Achieved 75% African first/senior authorship in consortium publications. Maintained 95% partner retention across grants.

Reimagining research partnerships requires an intentional focus on equity, mutual benefit, leadership, and sustainability.

By strengthening South-South networks and embedding partnership frameworks within institutions, African universities can shape a more inclusive and transformative global research landscape.