

WORKSHOP REPORT

Creating Flourishing and Resilient Communities in Africa

Version 01 / 20 December 2023



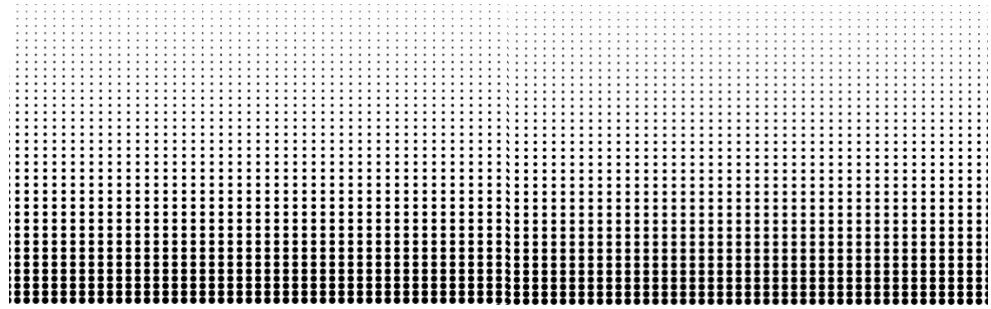


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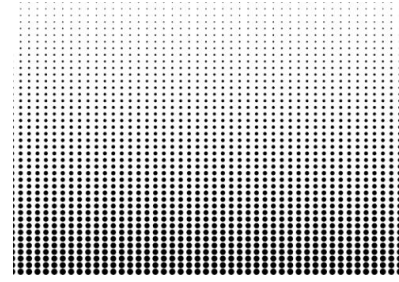
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Executive Summary



The University of Oxford is host to a great range of research aimed at fostering flourishing and resilient communities and building capacity in Africa. As yet, research across the University is only loosely connected, and a meeting was held on November 14th, 2023 at Christ Church, with the aim of making connections across a diverse range of researchers to drive new ideas for projects. It is our belief that research conducted by Oxford with many of its partners could be much more than the sum of its parts if successfully united.

The meeting set the stage for a more integrated and collaborative approach to research that supports resilience in Africa bringing together 41 Oxford academics across 5 departments. Our aim was to leverage new partnerships to create impactful proposals for funding, contributing to sustainable development and climate resilience on the continent.

The group identified five areas where there was both a need for collaboration and opportunities for Oxford researchers to support new research. These areas provided the premise for the group discussions:

- 1) Youth employment / adolescent health (& demographic dividend)
- 2) Social ecological resilience in conflict settings
- 3) Innovation ecosystems
- 4) Agency & power, local agenda ownership
- 5) Infrastructure, technology & governance
- 6) Some cross-cutting themes emerged across the various group discussions:

Working with traditional authority and belief systems, and thus engaging in local partnerships, is seen as crucial.

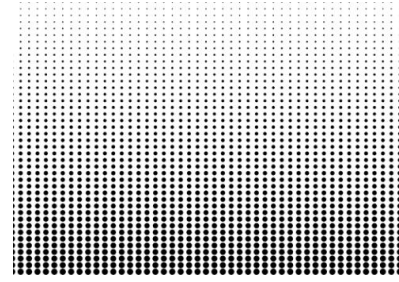
- Agendas must be set by communities through co-creation processes, following established best practices to ensure African agency and leadership.
- Funders should move from short-term agendas, largely driven by the Global North, to those set by the communities we wish to help. Oxford scientists should champion longer-term engagement.
- We should avoid the pitfalls of excessive "projectisation" and instead focus on systems and meaningful impacts.

The group acknowledged that resilience needs to be built from within, rather than imposed from outside. Previous technology-driven projects, relying heavily on foreign expertise, have had limited success. The consensus was that the University's role should be to support African leaders, communities, and researchers as they address their challenges.

These are promising examples of an initial attempt to drive research collaboration across Oxford and in deep collaboration with African experts – including academics, decision-makers, and civil society – to foster flourishing and resilient communities in Africa. A number of next steps emerged: foster discussions for partnerships, organize central Africa meeting for research agendas, host Oxford dinner for in-depth analysis



INTRODUCTION



This report summarises the discussions and goals of a recent meeting held on 14. November 2023 at Christ Church, University of Oxford, aimed at enhancing research collaboration among University of Oxford scholars to help support flourishing and resilient communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Africa's diverse cultures and conditions, coupled with its rapidly expanding population, offer both opportunities and challenges. Many countries on the continent are already facing huge financial losses and health problems due to climate change and over the next several decades, this is expected to worsen potentially undermining their development.

The first in a planned series of three meetings, this initial gathering was convened to pinpoint the specific issues at hand. The University of Oxford is host to a broad spectrum of research aimed at building resilience in Africa. Until now, these research activities have been loosely connected. The meeting aimed to explore how these efforts could be better integrated to create a more substantial collective impact. The meeting was also prompted by new funding opportunities that could support increased collaboration. The objective was to map ongoing projects, foster partnerships, and, through further engagement, develop comprehensive proposals eligible for the identified funding dedicated to this research field. These proposals would then be eligible for recently identified funding sources interested in this area of research.

It featured numerous academics 41 from various departments (incl. Engineering, Medicine, Geography, Governance), as well as the [African Oxford Initiative](#) (AfOx), see Appendix A for a list of attendees.

Structure of the Meeting

The meeting was structured into several key segments: (i) welcome remarks and a brief introduction, (ii) idea generation, (iii) breakout sessions, and (iv) other. Refer to Appendix B for the detailed agenda. These segments are elaborated upon in the following sections.

Brief Introduction

The meeting began with welcome remarks outlining the meeting's purpose, followed by a brief introduction of the participants. Each participant was asked to share: (a) their current position and background, (b) their current work and areas of expertise, and (c) the connection of their work to resilient communities in Africa. Subsequently, the '[Open Spaces](#)' concept was introduced, highlighting an approach that promotes open discussions and the exchange of ideas, in contrast to the restrictive nature of traditional meeting formats.

The conversation evolved to discuss the role of Oxford University's research in tackling climate-related challenges, it was stressed that solutions for protecting and enabling African communities to prosper should be led by African leaders and academics. Researchers from the North are to support, rather than lead, these efforts.

Idea Generation and Break-out

Before the meeting, each participant was requested to contemplate two ideas concerning issues that required attention in relation to the resilient and flourishing communities in Africa. Participants explained their ideas to one another in pairs, focusing on both broad and specific challenges and considering the desired outcomes, and what is required to achieve these outcomes from a community's perspective. Following this, the ideas were explored further in group discussions, where each participant was allocated three cards. A participant would place a card on the table each time they contributed to the conversation, thus limiting themselves to three contributions. The cards were not reissued until everyone had the opportunity to speak, ensuring that all voices were heard. This approach facilitated a rich exchange of diverse viewpoints and opinions on the ideas put forward, prompting participants to think critically about practical steps and intervention points. Eventually, each team was instructed to select the top ideas to take forward into a wider group discussion. Over a dozen ideas were put forward, voted on by all participants, and from this process, the following five topics were identified, and breakout groups formed.

- 1) Youth employment / adolescent health (& demographic dividend)
- 2) Social ecological resilience in conflict setting.
- 3) Innovation ecosystem
- 4) Agency & power, local agenda ownership
- 5) Infrastructure, technology & governance



Discussion groups were formed around these topics, participants were given the opportunity to change groups in the principle of Open Spaces, when desired. The results from the break-out discussions are described in detail in Section 3.

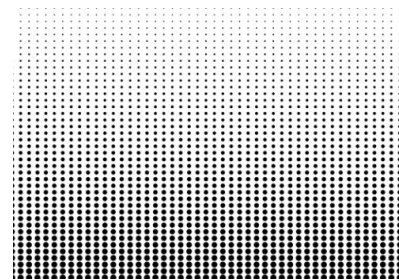
Side initiatives

Additionally, to capture the depth and breadth of activities and collaborations among those present, a number of posters were placed around the room to supplement the idea-generation work. These included the following topics; the information is detailed in Appendix C.

- Other Oxford Researchers Who Should be Here
- African Research Institutions We Work With'
- Ongoing Projects in Africa



RESULTS DISCUSSION GROUPS



Youth Employment / Adolescent Health (& Demographic Dividend)

Issues raised

The discussion identified challenges related to Africa's youthful population and the economic and social framework needed to harness its potential. Key points include **managing rapid population growth** by improving access to health, education, jobs, and security, while also enhancing quality of life. Strategies discussed encompass controlling the demographic transition, enhancing education and job creation, and establishing social security.

The dual focus of **youth-focused projects** was highlighted, to manage and also utilize the youth as a resource for innovation and job creation, considering the prevalence of qualified yet unemployed individuals. The team noted that the job market shows a mismatch between the higher qualifications of young people and job availability, with a preference for formal sector jobs despite their scarcity—70% of people prefer the formal sector, but only 5% of available jobs are in the formal sector. There is a misalignment between vocational training expectations and job market realities (e.g., training as a lawyer does not guarantee a job in this profession), with late exposure to career prospects and exploitative internships exacerbating the issue. Suggestions included integrating entrepreneurship into education and engaging the private sector through tax incentives to foster entrepreneurship, rather than relying on funds from the Global North. The high demand for secure public sector jobs, in stark contrast to limited availability underscores the need for a broader approach to job creation and expectation

Key Question: *How can we guide, influence, and prepare for the demographic transition in Africa in a way that supports climate goals?*

management—one African country received 125,000 applications for its 5,000 jobs advertised in the public sector.

Increased youth employment could also help address issues such as youth-pregnancy. It was highlighted that this may, however, be challenges due to the ethics relating to the unique ethical and privacy **challenges working with the adolescents**. An example of healthcare was given where it was noted that adolescent services often being less resourced compared to maternal and child health because countries can claim equal or even greater success in improving the health of younger populations and they perceive this as easier to achieve.

Desired outcomes, intervention points and next steps

The team then identified several steps that could help overcome the issues identified private/public partnerships that create demand for the right jobs. This involves disseminating information about in-demand jobs and skills to better align vocational training with market needs. Furthermore, the success seen in Nigeria with funding local start-ups should serve as a model for other countries. Nigeria's confidence in local solutions to local problems suggests a mindset shift that could be beneficial elsewhere. Academics can play a crucial role in this transition by researching effective models, advising on policy, and guiding the narrative towards self-sufficiency and empowerment.

Social and Ecological Resilience in Conflict Settings

Issues raised

The team explored the concept and **definition of 'resilience'**, recognising its multifaceted definitions but generally agreeing that it leads to adaptation, with social and ecological resilience being mutually supportive. They discussed the **vicious cycles between conflict and climate change**, where conflict exacerbates ecological issues, and climate change worsens conflict. Climate change's role in depleting resources, often a source of conflict, was noted, with the Sahel region serving as a prime example of this dynamic. This also highlights political and ecological conflicts amidst external interests from countries like Russia and China.

The group also acknowledged the **displacement of people** as a form of conflict, exacerbating issues in receiving areas. The case of Burundi was used to illustrate how political transitions and lack of long-term vision can undermine systemic stability, like health systems. The team noted the trend of areas becoming uninhabitable due to environmental disasters, leading to displacement, friction, and violence, leading to areas being "hollowed out".

Finally, the discussion covered the challenges of **working across different scales** (local, regional, national) given how often different actors have power at different levels and hence the need to cognisant of this and flexible in approach. The team also emphasized that human rights must be part of economic development, particularly benefiting the poorest, noting how it is common for national economic growth to be driven by coercive extractive industries that diminish certain populations or geographies while favouring others.

Key Question: *What are the links between ecology and conflict and conflict and ecology?*

Desired outcomes, intervention points and next steps

The team highlighted the need for **bottom-up solutions recognizing a 'shared destiny'** and building social partnerships resilient through conflict. They stressed the importance of **learning from research and successful models**. Managing resources effectively, like the Nile, was seen as critical to preventing large-scale conflict.

Understanding and **working with traditional authority and belief systems**, such as the concept of a 'taboo forest', was identified as examples of how practical outcomes can be achieved through deeper cultural understanding. The team argued against government bypassing to agencies, advocating for engaging with inefficiencies and corruption to build sustainability. They emphasized the need for **community-led co-creation in setting agendas**, suggesting the use of serious games for this purpose.

- The team then went on to identify specific intervention points. These included, for example:
- leveraging satellite data for meaningful insights;
- acknowledging the effectiveness of remittances and informal networks in high-conflict areas; and
- learning from positive (and negative) deviance examples like Mozambique's disaster preparedness and the Wunliet peace conference, where the LSPLA guerrilla movement facilitated dialogue between conflicting communities, was highlighted as a model for conflict resolution.
- The team advocated for reviewing existing and previous projects to learn from them, to mitigate the challenges in research within conflict and environmentally stressed areas.

Issues raised

The team explored broad conceptualizations of innovation utilising **indigenous knowledge systems**, highlighting its potential beyond new technology, and the often-overlooked existing knowledge within communities. The need to shift development narratives away from short-term results and good news stories was discussed, advocating for recognizing innovation as a long-term agenda beyond typical political and funding cycles.

Challenges related to the feasibility and scale of innovations were examined, questioning whether large-scale implementation is always beneficial compared to smaller, experimental approaches that could allow for faster learning and adaptability. Emphasising the need for **adaptable, innovative and learning systems** not just one monolithic system. The importance of local commercial links was emphasized, particularly in **bringing local investment and private sector support to local innovation**, while also addressing the risk aversion commonly seen in these sectors—there is a clear need for de-risking.

The group also discussed the concept of '**collective wins**', where innovations benefit all community members, such as through improved natural environments. They underscored the importance of realistic goals, advocating for 'better' rather than 'best' solutions in the real-world context.

Key Question: *What do we want Innovation to achieve and how do we support this?*

Desired outcomes, intervention points and next steps

The team identified the need to define a clear vision or goal for innovation, **focusing on creating value for people, addressing needs and enhancing well-being**, which may not always align with economic wealth. This vision should be collectively valued, long-term, and engage various sectors, ensuring buy-in from all stakeholders and importantly harness the 'best' of local knowledge.

There was a consensus on the importance of paying more attention to what different communities value, **moving away from Western-dominated perspectives on poverty and well-being**, and conceptualizing the vision to include social value - away from traditional economic ideologies) - focusing on community needs. They team highlighted that it is essential to bring in businesses, investors, and non-traditional but essential players into innovation programs.

Understanding the role of systems was identified as a crucial intervention point. This includes acknowledging foundational assets like power and communications infrastructure which cannot be overlooked in favour of novelty goods. It is crucial to understand the systems operated in by diagnosing real problems, understanding the absorptive capacity of the system, evolving existing systems, and creating enabling systems that support and incentivize value creation.

The team highlighted the importance of moving from innovation to testing, learning, and scaling, especially for local innovators. This process should include acknowledging the importance of governance, not being naïve about corruption, changing incentives to reduce it, and allowing for legitimising failures if it supports learning. The approach requires multi-skilled, multi-layered teams that can work effectively within these systems.

Issues raised

The team delved into essential characteristics for resilience in infrastructure, such as multi-level governance and an understanding of local needs, with examples from Zambia and Kenya. The importance of community engagement was highlighted, encompassing aspects like project handover, training, and maintenance. This process could leverage existing groups like SACCOs to facilitate the transition and ensure sustainable handover. It was, however, noted that while community engagement is often perceived to be more relevant for rural areas, it is equally important in cities.

The responsibility of Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) in sustainable delivery and financing of both large and small infrastructure projects was stressed, and need to use their convening power to ensure stakeholder engagement. The governance of infrastructure planning was highlighted, as there are many community needs to consider and prioritize. Tools like Social Return on Investment (SROI) could be useful but challenges around monetizing community impacts would need to be addressed.

Spurred from the previous point, the team addressed the potential for corruption in infrastructure governance where the potential for “political” and personally beneficial decisions supersedes community needs. Addressing corruption in infrastructure governance is therefore vital, acknowledging that this issue exists in both developed and developing settings. The group advocated for viewing infrastructure as a system to avoid the pitfalls of excessive “projectisation” that risk favouring election results. The potential role of the judiciary in creating accountability was discussed, with examples from countries like Pakistan, highlighting the importance of this in populist regimes.

Key question: *Infrastructure often doesn't get delivered well due to governance issues. How should we address this key bottleneck?*

Gaps in governance and accountability, particularly in terms of preferential treatment, were identified. The concept of 'Value for Money' could help address some of these challenges, as it might reveal where funds intended for publicly beneficial infrastructure are being misused. It was recognised that this information is difficult to access, thus the team emphasized the need for more data and benchmarks to understand and ensure it, acknowledging the challenges in data availability and interpretation.

Desired outcomes, intervention points and next steps

The team's overarching goal is to **improve accountability in infrastructure implementation**. This includes **rethinking infrastructure** in terms of what it enables for communities. It also includes **taking advantage of technology innovation**, including digitalizing monitoring data to enhance accountability and comparability. **Global accountability is also key**, this could be done by creating an international database for infrastructure projects to understand value for money and identify inefficiencies across projects. Finally, on a more local level, there is a clear need to improving handover processes between project implementation teams and local communities is also a key objective.

From a communities perspective, the team posed a few questions:

- How can we avoid excluding communities that lack an existing leadership structure?
- Is digitalisation a useful means of engagement in communities with low digital literacy? For example, is it feasible for a community to lead digitalised data collection when they are currently off-grid? This might be too ambitious, considering that many communities lack electricity.
- Is community ownership the best solution, and how can it be implemented? If a community identifies issues within a community-owned infrastructure system, how should they escalate the problem?
- The team highlighted the difference between communities identifying needs and suggesting specific projects. While various projects can meet the same needs, communities' preferences for certain projects might lead to inefficient fund allocation, as seen in Zambia where choices may not be the most resilient. Emphasizing a thorough needs-focused identification process over project-specific solutions is key. Aligning governance structures with community structures is also crucial for effective and relevant project implementation.

The team put forward several research topics involve conducting interdisciplinary research on accountability in infrastructure governance. Potential research could focus on "following the money" to track inefficiencies and create

benchmarks for accountability. It will also include further work on cost data for infrastructure construction. Addressing the challenges of data access in this field is critical, considering approaches to follow costs and engage with regulators.

Agency & Power, Local Agenda Ownership

Issues raised

The team discussed the challenges of ensuring **local ownership of agendas**, with a key concern being the isolated consideration of solutions, such as infrastructure projects. This highlights the need for an integrated, long-term strategy developed in collaboration with African colleagues, where solutions are considered from the outset and within the local context. Understanding the implications of any system change on other system parts is crucial.

The **transient nature of projects**, due to time and funding constraints, challenges meaningful engagement not only with communities but also with other in-country partners. This contributes to the ambiguity surrounding project ownership within communities, such as who is responsible for maintaining community-implemented infrastructure, and the issue of decisions being made on communities' behalf without adequate involvement. The current research paradigm, heavily influenced by the Global North, often excludes communities and other in-country stakeholders from setting the agenda. This exclusion, especially regarding communities, leads to a power imbalance, risking communities becoming overstudied, leading to research fatigue and decreased project buy-in.

The team also emphasised the need to **redefine the understanding of 'community'**, which is commonly understood in geographical terms but could also encompass institutions, practices, and activities, like religious beliefs. They questioned existing research and funding paradigms and noted that empowering communities in projects might require researchers to cede some power. This raises questions about the extent of power researchers are willing to relinquish and how the power dynamics can be shifted to genuinely shape the agenda.

Key question: *How can we promote and ensure genuine, local ownership of the agenda, not just token ownership?*

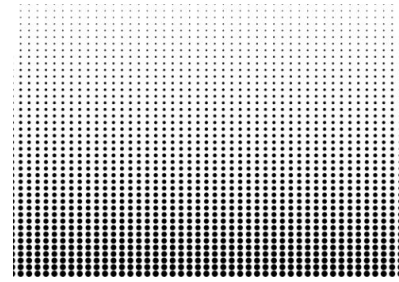
Desired outcomes, intervention points and next steps

The team aims for non-sectoral projects guided by a well-defined code of conduct and equal partnerships. Proposed intervention points include:

- An ethics requirement for a community liaison officer and the integration of sector-specific community workers (e.g., health workers) into research programs.
- Publishing research in local languages to increase accessibility and facilitate knowledge sharing by local stakeholders.
- Compiling best practices and engaging individuals within or adjacent to communities to maintain appropriate power dynamics—they can act as local champions.
- Influencing funding distribution to move away from being externally shaped.
- Finding a balance between traditional practices and innovative solutions, ensuring they do not compromise each other. An example provided was the recent Ebola outbreak, where there was a need to honour traditional burial practices while using clinically advised methods to stop the spread of the virus.
- Ensuring that marginalized groups are represented, which was also deemed crucial.
- Engaging community members in discussions about their understanding of 'community' and their sense of connection within it.

These approaches aim to foster a more inclusive and community-driven research agenda.

NEXT STEPS



The meeting confirmed that research conducted by academics at the University of Oxford with many of its partners could be significantly more effective than the sum of its parts if successfully united and led by African researchers. As outlined during the meeting, there is potential for significant funding if we can successfully devise an ambitious and comprehensive approach to achieving this goal. It was also found that, no matter what the topic, there are cross-cutting themes that apply to all issues identified. These were as follows:

- Agendas must be set by communities through co-creation processes, following established best practices to ensure African agency and leadership.
- Funders should move from short-term agendas, largely driven by the Global North, to those set by the communities we wish to help. Oxford scientists should champion longer-term engagement.
- We should avoid the pitfalls of excessive "projectisation" and instead focus on systems and meaningful impacts.

Furthermore, the meeting highlighted the following priorities:

- We should focus on real-world problems - applied, practical issues, not pure science.
- The priorities for research and the methods used should largely be set by African research leaders.
- All projects should include a component to support young African researchers, such as training on how to write journal papers and how to develop DPhil ideas to strengthen existing capacities.
- Projects should involve actors at all levels (incl. governments, civil society, academics), and these individuals should benefit from Oxford training in systems thinking, among other things, to help ensure sustainability and also facilitate co-benefits.
- Problems should be addressed outside of sectors for synergies and system-wide benefits.

There are **numerous proposed next steps**:

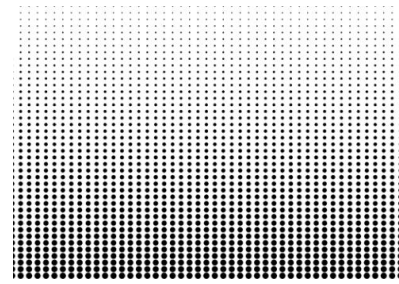
The logical next step is to shift the centre of gravity of our collective discussion to Africa. We believe we should aim to support greater discourse around priorities for research and the needs of African researchers in addressing these key areas. We aim to do this by:

- 1) Fostering discussions between African research leaders and Oxford colleagues who could offer support. The aim would be to initiate partnerships suitable for seeking funding. We could Oxford participants to colleagues in Africa (or ask them to

identify their own potential partners) where this is not done yet and conduct meetings to discuss project ideas and local priorities.

- 2) Organising a meeting in a central African location to allow for more African voices to drive research agendas, form partnerships, and build applications for funding. Then, in partnership with the funder and Oxford, develop a structure that would fund and support these initiatives.
- 3) Hosting a discussion dinner in Oxford that allows us to further deep-dive into the challenges and themes uncovered as part of this initial meeting.

APPENDIX



Appendix A: Agenda

Forum - Supporting African Academics to create Flourishing and Resilient Communities in Africa		
<i>Time</i>	Aim: learn about each other's work and to build proposals for new projects that would unite our efforts for greater impact.	<i>Duration</i>
10:00-10:15	Welcome remark 1. Purpose of this event 2. Rules of the game 3. Housekeeping	15min
10:15-10:45	Brief introductions (40secs each, everyone) 1. who are (current position, background) 2. what you working on and expertise (current expertise) 3. how your work links to resilient communities in Africa	25min
10:45-11:00	Introduction to "Open Spaces" and ideation Everyone to propose challenges that need to be addressed to creating flourishing and resilient communities in Africa.	15min
11:00-11:15	Tea break	15min
12:40-13:00	Break-out: Open spaces Teams are broken up into 4-5 groups in line with the themes identified	80min
12:40-13:00	Report back & next steps	20min
13:00-14:00	Lunch & reflections	60min

