

Difficulty to Connect: Impediments to Fostering Collaboration for Knowledge Creation among Developing Country Scholars

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Abstract

Developments in information technology have revolutionized the manner by which scholars and activists have created, established, or strengthened platforms for knowledge sharing and creation. However, it is observed that collaborations initiated by scholars from the north with the participation of scholars from the south produce more meaningful results when compared to south-south collaborations. This paper investigates the reasons for this using a case study involving a network of scholars and activists in developing Asia.

The study showed that there are at least three impediments to fostering south-south collaboration, namely, technology gaps, lack of thematic fit, and resource constraints affecting scholars as individuals and as members of a network. The research recommends facilitated collaboration that would address the key challenges indicated above. This would entail human, financial, and technical resources that would create an enabling environment for scholars in the south to pursue collaborative work.

Key Words: south-south partnerships, collaboration, knowledge creation

Introduction and Purpose

The seminal work of Convoco and Oxford Internet published in 2011 entitled “Geographies of the World’s Knowledge” reveals significant information on how knowledge in the world is produced and disseminated. Among the significant findings of that work is that while Asia corners the highest number of internet users, it ranks the third lowest in Wikipedia entries, the third lowest in terms of Google’s user generated content, and nowhere in the list of the top ten countries with frequently cited academic works. Africa, another region where most of the world’s poorest people live, ranked last in all of the categories.

The statistics reveals the state of knowledge creation and dissemination of the world. Social scientists argue, and the research mentioned above has proven, that indeed knowledge travels from the north to the global south (McFarlane, 2006) and in the context of development enterprise, knowledge comes as a “solution” than as something to think about and learn from

(Mawdsley, et al 2002, and Ellerman, 2002). Indeed, for the last ten years, knowledge creation is the monopoly of more advanced and wealthier economies.

However, in the last decade, significant improvements have been noted in the way scholars in the south are able to find their way to have their work gain acknowledgment and significance in both academic and policy debates. Starting 1970, collaborative work between researchers in developed countries (the North, hereafter) and developing countries (the South, hereafter), have emerged, giving voice to academics and practitioners from the South. While criticized to have only advanced research agenda of Northern scholars as research problems are formulated by the wealthier and more powerful counterparts (Baud, 2002), research methods being tied to the agenda of donors (Mohan, 2002), and interpreting research results to a largely Northern conceptualization (Briggs and Sharp, 2004), partnership arrangements between researchers or research institutions in the North with developing country counterparts have increased significantly in the last twenty years (Osama, 2008a).

The UK Office of Science and Innovation reports that internationally co-authored papers between 2000 and 2005 have significantly increased in the last ten years (Evidence, 2007). It has been widely accepted that collaboration between researchers from north and south, north and north, and south and south, improves the quality and impact of research (Osama, 2008a). While the rate of increase (or growth) of collaboration between north and south scholars, and between scholars of the south grew significantly, the number of these collaborations are small and does not even constitute 5% of the total collaborative work done by developed country scholars. One of the reasons why this is so is the fact that south-south collaborations “continue to suffer from failure to agree on values to base a more equitable framework for improved international cooperation” (Chandiwana and Ornbjerg, 2005, p.289). Further, it has been argued that many south-south collaborations fail because of significant funding or resource constraints (Osama, 2008b), competing interests, and “lack of appropriate institutional arrangements to foster cooperation” (Chandinawa and Ornbjerg, 2005, p.292).

This paper would like to analyse these issues further, and more particularly in Asia, by looking at activities that have been initiated by funding institutions to jumpstart collaboration work between developing country scholars. In this case, we looked into a collaboration activity funded by the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (IFP).

The paper is structured in three parts. The first part presents the efforts of IFP in establishing a network of scholars in Asia and the corresponding results. The second part discusses the reasons why there was relative failure to forge meaningful collaborative work between the scholars in the region. The final concluding section discusses recommendations on how to strengthen networks in the region to allow productive collaborations in knowledge creation.

Building a Network of Scholars: The IFP Experience in Asia

Since 2001, the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (IFP) has assisted more than four thousand developing country scholars from Asia, Africa, Russia, the Middle East and Latin America to pursue doctoral or masteral program in the United Kingdom, Europe, Canada, or the United States or in institutions of higher learning in their own countries or region. After finishing post graduate studies, the fellows go back to their home countries to continue contributing to its development, and to advance the cause of social justice and human rights. These fellows-graduates, then form into alumni associations in each of the countries in order to collectively respond to the challenge of development.

In July 2011, IFP provided funding support to Indonesia Social Justice Network to convene around 30 scholars and activists from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, India, and China in a meeting that discussed climate change and disaster management in relation to sustainable development. Indonesia Social Justice Network is an association of IFP Indonesian fellows. The conference was held in the city of Jogjakarta, Indonesia, in an area where one of Indonesia's most active volcanoes, Mt. Merapi, was located, and where recent eruption resulted to displacement of several families and further destitution of residents who mostly rely on farming for livelihood.

Figure 1.1 below shows the number of participants from the participating countries. As can be noted, the host country Indonesia has the most number of representatives. The other countries are represented by 3 participants each, with the exception of the Philippines that had 4.

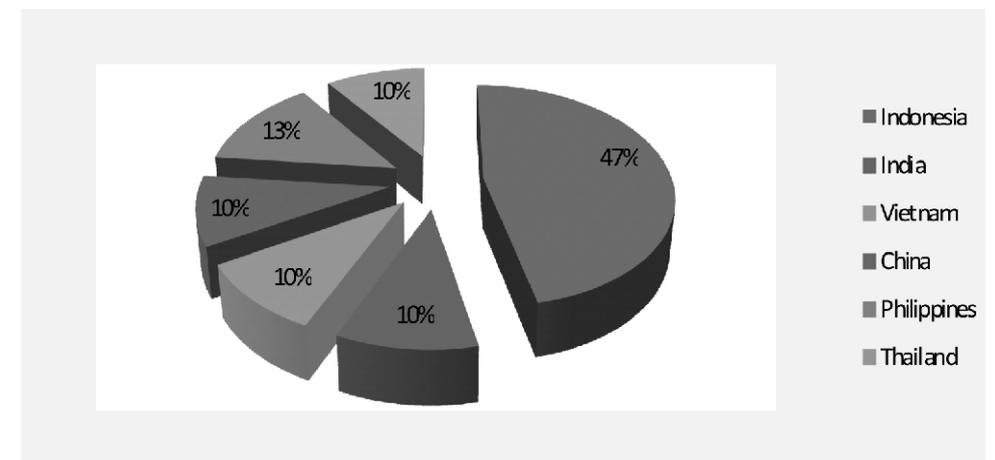


Figure 1. Countries Represented by Conference Participants

Fifty-three percent (30%) of the scholars in the conference are married, while the remaining are still single or had partners. Majority are mid-career

professionals in their 30's while a few are in the early stages of their career (below 30 years old). Almost eighty percent of the scholars are based in universities, while the remaining are in private companies, in non-governmental organizations, and in research institutes. Most of the participants completed their masters degrees through the IFP grants while ten percent (10%) are doctorate degree holders.

The conference provided an avenue for the scholars and activists to share their work related on climate change, environmental education and advocacy, human disasters, agriculture, disaster management, and humanitarian action. Conference papers were presented by scholars and case stories were shared by activists. It also provided a platform for discussion for the scholars and activists and an opportunity to initially look into potential areas of collaboration, including the creation of an e-group, a Facebook page, and an agreement to link individual association websites.

The gathering, culminated in the drafting of position that was envisioned to serve as a compass for the participants in their own individual work and in strengthening their cross-country collaboration on the issues raised (see Figure 2 below).

We commit ourselves to:

1. Actively participate in the assessment of climate change impacts in the region by blending scientific and indigenous knowledge and by engaging in researches that unravel and document both new and indigenous practices to adapt and to mitigate climate change.
2. Meaningfully engage in the assessment of the current capacities of individuals, communities, and governments in responding to the challenges brought about by climate change, by looking into exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity, in order to proactively craft short and long-term solutions.
3. Advocate, plan, fund, and/or implement, social services programs for the vulnerable groups - farmers, fishermen, women, children, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, elderly, immigrants - that respect their rights, enhance their local adaptive and management capacity, and empower them to respond proactively to climate change and manage disasters when they occur.
4. Participate in the process of forming and reforming policy agenda on climate change in each of our countries in the region through harnessing the strengths of the IFP network, sharing experiences and lessons learned, and advocating for greater budgetary and policy support for local initiatives.

Figure 2. Commitments Forged during the Conference

However, since that gathering, no significant discussion, activity, or plan formulation has happened to pursue the objective of cross-country and cross-discipline collaboration. The e-group did not materialize, and while a Facebook page was indeed created, it only gathered membership from very few Alumni. In this case, fellows from China were excluded as Facebook is currently banned in the country. The linkage between individual alumni websites also did not happen, and little, if none at all, happened to the collaboration work contemplated in the position paper.

Why did the planned activities fail to materialize? What prevented the fellows in pursuing collaborative work? What were the impediments to collaboration between the scholars and activists from the South?

These are the primary questions that this paper would like to address. To gather data to answer these critical questions, a survey was conducted in November 2011 among the 30 participants from the different countries in order to determine the difficulties in achieving collaborative work. The results were analyzed and validated with the members of country alumni networks through key informant interviews.

Impediments to Collaboration

The study showed that there are at least three thematic impediments in fostering south-south collaboration.

Obstacle 1. *There are technology gaps that hindered efficient connection between scholars and establish meaningful collaboration.*

In archipelagic countries as the Philippines and Indonesia, certain areas have weak or intermittent internet connection. Accessing the web and establishing or engaging in conversations with fellow scholars, for at least 57% of the total participants is difficult (see Figure 3 below). There are Indonesian and Vietnamese participants, who, because of location, are unable to access the internet for a week. For the others, while there is access, connection is slow or weak that attaching files, or engaging in instant messaging (Yahoo! Messenger, Google Talk, or Skype) is virtually difficult. In the case of China, Facebook, the only set up online collaboration platform after the conference, is banned all over the country.

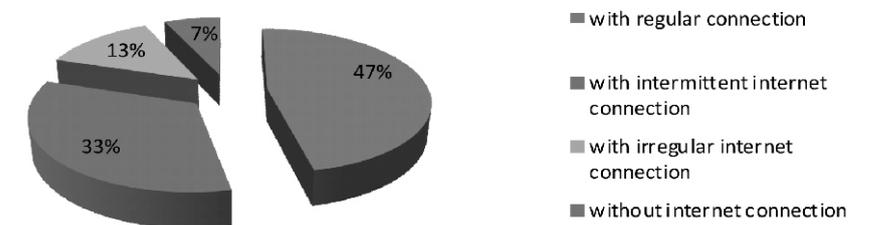


Figure 3. Status of Internet Connection of Scholars

The internet, apart from being a very valuable tool in scholarly research, is also the cheapest means of communication between scholars from the developing, and even the developed world. Geographic divide is oftentimes bridged through internet communications. But if scholars are deprived access to these, there is a significant problem for collaboration because the platform for convenient communication is not available.

Internet connection in this network is essential, because the scholars are based in different countries. Even those from the same countries do not reside in the same location. As the internet provides the cheapest means of communication among alternatives, access to internet is critical.

Access to the internet is also critical not only in terms of establishing communication between and among scholars in the network. It is also a means to access different resources that can assist the scholars in research work. Thus, the lack of internet access, apart from hindering communication among scholars, also deprived scholars to the different resources, like open access journal articles, that the scholars can use in their work, both individual and collaborative.

Obstacle 2. Scholars feel that there is a lack of thematic fit among the different scholarly interests, even though these are interrelated in terms of subject or cause.

Though the scholars and activists are asking the same questions, responding to similar challenges, and engaging in the same arena in development work, a common platform is missing, largely brought about by the differences in views and interests.

Differences are brought about by several causes as indicated below:

a. Environmental variations

Climate change impacts differently the countries that were represented in the conference. Philippines is plagued by constant typhoons, Indonesia is threatened by tsunami, Thailand by flooding, and several others. The geographic context of the countries and the places where the scholars live also are different. Some live in the cities, some reside in small island provinces or municipalities, some in mountainous rural regions.

Consequently, interests of scholars are different some are engaged in research work regarding climate change mitigation in coastal areas, others in climate change adaptation for agriculture in low-lying, frequently flooded areas, while some others are in disaster preparedness, management, and post-disaster rehabilitation for cities and urban areas.

b. Discipline bias

The scholars gathered come from different disciplines. The conference was attended by lawyers, agronomists, economists, teachers, anthropologists, communication specialists, environmental activists, psychologists, non-profit managers, court judges, sociologists, among others. The way the participants

view the issue or problems is differentiated. For example, environmental activists viewed climate change and disasters as caused by governments and companies from the global north while sociologists contended that it is a result of the actions of both developed and developing countries.

Despite the attempt of the conference to ensure a trans-disciplinary structure of the discussions, the manner by which the scholars propose strategic actions also is conditioned by the participant's discipline. For example, lawyer-researchers focused more on constitutional and legal remedies to mitigation measures while psychologists were concerned with post-disaster effects and strategies to lessen trauma on victims. Agricultural scientists proposed climate-resilient rice varieties while communication specialists argued for better use of communication in changing individual behavior and in influencing policy makers. It is not that these proposals do not have the opportunity for convergence. However, the scholars were not able to transcend disciplinary bias, probably because of limitations in time and resources to pursue further discussions.

Finally, while the scholars ask the same questions, the way to arrive at answers also differed. Some used qualitative methods as ethnography while others favor more quantitative methods like econometrics. For example, economists use regression analyses to establish connections between geographic context, national wealth, and resource use while anthropologists used story-telling and meaning-making as a way to discuss the changing motivations and the evolving experiences of communities in relation to natural resources and climate.

c. Disparities in social, economic, and political context

The countries are different in terms of social, economic, and political context. Governance system in China is different from that of India. Economic growth, as well as poverty condition differs across countries. The manner by which scholars view issues is contextual, though aware of the global nature of their questions.

Needless to say, collaborative work, in this context of differences could have been more productive. Comparative studies, for example, as to how governments in each country represented respond to the climate change challenge, will be an interesting piece of work that can be efficiently and effectively handled through scholarly collaboration. However, the platform by which the scholars will be able to pursue meaningful discussions, despite the differences in their interests, was not made available after the conference. The three-day conference in Indonesia provided the initial step, but this was not sustained after.

While the diversity could have served as a rich base from which to pursue collaborative work, it is also a huge impediment in fostering collaboration. The diversity inherent in this type of a network requires more time, more resources, and more discussions in order to produce meaningful work. If thematic or

collaborative meetings have been conducted after this initial conference, or if a funded action plan was developed with clear responsibilities among teams, it could have facilitated a more proactive approach in strengthening collaborative work among the scholars in the network.

Obstacle 3. *The scholars considered that the most significant is the issue affecting the achievement of meaningful collaboration is resource constraints, not only to scholars as individuals, but also to the scholars as a network.*

The scholars and activists in this study are first and foremost constrained in financial resources to pursue collaborative work as well as knowledge resources to ground their work on the current debates with the rest of the world.

Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program prioritized scholars from poor communities to participate in the program. Finishing a master's or a doctoral program from a developed country need not necessarily result to improved living conditions of the scholars when they return. As such, 80% the scholars interviewed in this study are earning less than 7000USD a year. Individually, the scholars do not have funds to pursue research work, though these may have been their interest, and the institutions where they work do not have funds either (See Figure 4). Also, the alumni networks organized by IFP for each country are very young some do not even have organizational funds while the others have not even met yet as an organization.

Scholars also face the significant weakness in accessing recent scholarly work related to their topics of interest. Ninety percent of the scholars do not have subscriptions to academic journals that interest them. All of them do not have access to academic journals on the web. The institutions to where they belong to also do not have institutional subscriptions. In this case, they only have access to abstracts, unpublished articles, and free academic content which may not necessarily aid them in their scholarly work.

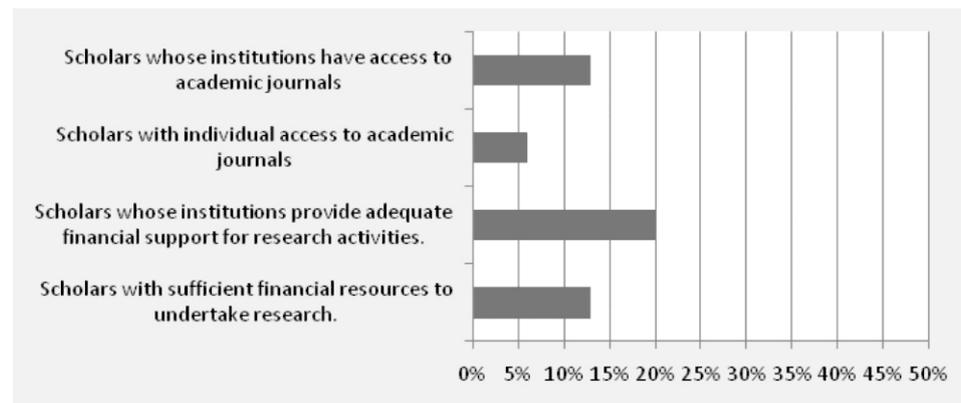


Figure 4. Scholars with access to resources

Figure 5 below shows us the many barriers that make collaborative work between scholars in the South difficult. While access barriers may seem to be the reason for the difficulty to connect, it is the barriers that are closest to the researchers that serve as the biggest stumbling block. Resource barriers crippled the imagination of researchers the belief that the insufficiency of technical and financial resources at the level of the researcher, his or her institution or country, discouraged them to collaborate, thinking that there can be nothing substantial to achieve because they did not have the means to pursue them. It is interesting to note that while the desire to collaborate was high, this desire was eclipsed by the strong belief that they may not be able to achieve anything significant because of their resource limitations.

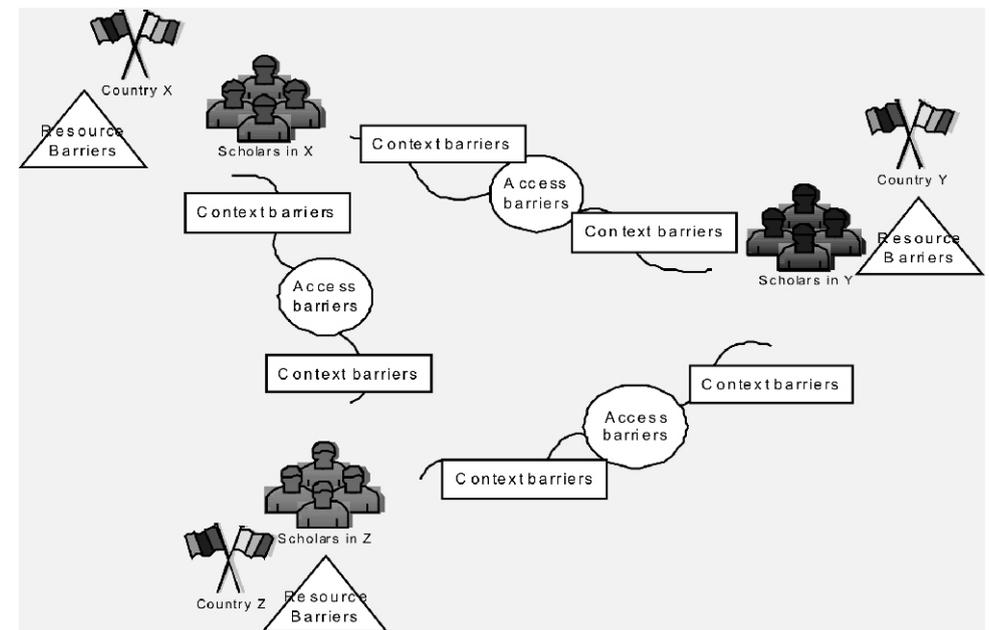


Figure 5. Barriers to Collaboration

This could probably be the reason why collaboration between scholars from the developed countries and the developing world increased significantly in recent years, because the nature of this collaboration need not necessarily face the problem of resource limitations (Bradley, 2007; Mayhew et al 2008). These collaborations are oftentimes fully funded, and scholars from the south benefit from the wide degree of access to academic resources of scholars from the north.

However, this type of collaboration is not without criticism. North-south collaborations have been criticized to have advanced the agenda, not of the individual researchers, but largely of its donors (McFarlane 2006). In the

context of partnerships between practitioners, but also true to scholars, north-south partnerships is characterized by unequal power relations (Johnson and Gordon 2006), with Northern scholars taking the lead and making the decisions (Baud 2002).

As collaboration is a difficult task, scholars from the South have a risk-averse behavior. For the scholars interviewed in this study, they'd rather not initiate steps to collaborate if they are not assured that they have the resources to pursue and see through the completion of expected outputs, because it would then be a waste of time and whatever meager resources they have.

The Future of South-South Collaboration

There is value in south-south collaboration and thus, there is a need to help facilitate this process. In a review of south-south collaboration literature, Osama (2008b) contends that there are at least three reasons why this type of collaboration needs to be pursued.

Firstly, there are "certain scientific problems – particularly those that result from specific common social or geographical environments – can favor collaboration between countries of similar socio-economic circumstances and scientific standing" (Osama, 2008b, p). This means that the context barrier identified earlier is not just a barrier. It is a hurdle, that when surpassed, is an advantage to scholars from the south as it magnifies context and how those scholars similarly situated can address the research problem in a more relevant manner. This is also a strong argument that comes from the results of this study.

The other two reasons that Osama asserts in the paper is that south-south collaborations broadens the overall opportunities for scholars from developing countries, and that it "provide opportunity for developing country researchers to help other developing country researchers develop an indigenous capacity to generate, manage, and utilize science and technology to address their needs". However, while the results of this study confirms the importance of these two benefits, it is only an aspiration, something that is worth achieving, but are virtually infeasible given the resource limitations and access issues earlier identified.

It is then important that something has to be done to enable scholars from the south pursue collaboration work. The results of this study recommend facilitated collaboration that would address the key challenges indicated above. It requires human, financial, and technical resources that would create an enabling environment for scholars in the south to pursue collaborative work as responses to the challenge of climate changes, disasters, and the call for a more equitable and sustainable development.

What do we mean by facilitated collaboration? How will this be possible?

It is an acknowledged reality by scholars from the South in this study that because of the limitations highlighted above, collaborative knowledge creation from among them is hardly possible without anyone taking the lead of the

process. Taking the lead oftentimes mean finding the financial resources, managing the research process, ensuring efficient and effective collaboration among researchers, and ensuring dissemination of results. While the latter two tasks can be handled by scholars from the south, the first two will prove to be difficult.

Facilitated collaboration is defined here as a process where participants to an initiative geared towards a particular objective undertake specific tasks with the assistance of a facilitator, or within a context of a planned collaboration support mechanism. In this case, there are at least two parties the participants and the designated facilitator with different sets of commitments. The facilitator in this case, will provide access to resources, both financial and technical, initially manage the research process with the intention to handover it to the participants in due time, assist in ensuring effective and efficient collaboration, and assisting the scholars in the dissemination of results.

Given the constraints identified earlier, the facilitator's role, at least in the context of this research, cannot be done by the developing scholars themselves. The suggestion to structure south-south collaboration through five modalities (Osama 2008b) – hub and spoke, senior-junior, equal partners, regional, or dispersed is not even possible, as these types of arrangements assume that participants are ready, that they have the resources and are capable to establish collaboration. The researchers subjected to this study are in their early stage, where most of their institutions are not in the same capacity as some of the developing country think-tanks. As such, while Osama's (2008b) recommendation may be tenable for researchers working in global think-tanks, or in fully-funded universities, this is not in the case of the researchers in this study, as they do not belong to any of them. As such, facilitated collaboration may be most appropriate for early career scholars. However, it has to be noted, that even developing country think-tanks face similar resource constraints, both financial and human (OECD 2008).

This paper argues that assistance to knowledge creation processes should be an international priority. In this case, facilitation process needs to be spearheaded by international actors. IFP, for example, as a program, folds up in 2013, but a similar platform should be provided to the scholars it has assisted to pursue collaborative work, mindful of the fact that there are similar problems in developing countries which needs solutions that are evidence-based. In this case, facilitators can be developed country think-tanks, or international research organizations, with the financial and technical resources to provide to developing country scholars. Somebody has to provide what Chandiwana and Ornbjerg (2003) calls as research leadership.

These facilitated collaboration processes should be designed mindful of the following characteristics group, task, technology, and context (Kolschoten et al 2006). Looking into these characteristics will address differences in discipline, lack of access to internet and other related technology, differences in context, and other related impediments. It has to be emphasized though, that the

research agenda has to be defined by the participants to the collaboration, and in the true meaning of facilitation, not identified by the facilitator.

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