



UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: Assessing Europe-Africa Research Partnerships

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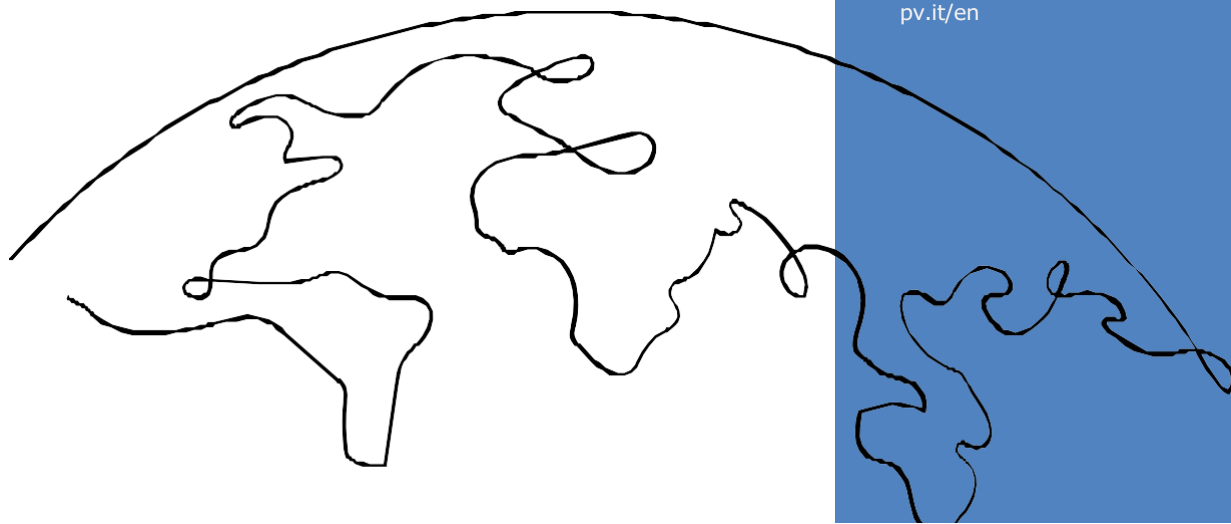
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Introduction

To foster international cooperation, especially with Developing Countries, the University of Pavia offers 10 scholarships annually to visiting scholars. Established in 1996, these scholarships provide recipients with the opportunity to stay at the University of Pavia for a period ranging from 4 to 12 weeks. The University of Pavia currently has a network with approximately 165 CICOPS scholars spanning over 50 diverse countries in the Global South.

This report presents the results of a survey submitted to African researchers participating in the CICOPS fellow program and carried out in April 2024. Its objective was to gather data concerning research collaborations among African CICOPS fellows and universities or institutions in Europe and Africa. The specific focus was on the differences between Africa-Africa and Europe-Africa collaborations, how to rebalance these differences, the actions to strengthen collaboration between Europe and Africa, the professional benefits from the CICOPS scholarship, and the objectives and the activities of a possible forum established by CICOPS and involving its fellows.

By examining collaboration patterns and assessing their implications, this study aimed to provide actionable recommendations for enhancing research cooperation and promoting academic growth on both continents, inspiring hope for a brighter future of academic collaboration.

Understanding the characteristics of collaboration between European and African universities and intra-African collaborations in research is essential for maximising the impact, efficiency, and equity of research efforts, ultimately contributing to advancing knowledge and addressing societal challenges on both continents.

Following four decades of collaboration with African institutions, embarking on this analysis is a testament to the University of Pavia's commitment to African communities. By delving into the characteristics of its collaborative efforts, the university can glean valuable insights, drawing lessons from previous experiences. Armed with this knowledge, the institution can chart a strategic course for future collaborations with African universities, reinforcing its support for scholarship and catalysing sustainable development within the region. The results from our study also contribute to the current debate within the Piano Mattei for Africa that represents Italy's commitment to a sustainable and equitable partnership with African nations, emphasising energy, economic growth, and addressing shared challenges.

Methodology

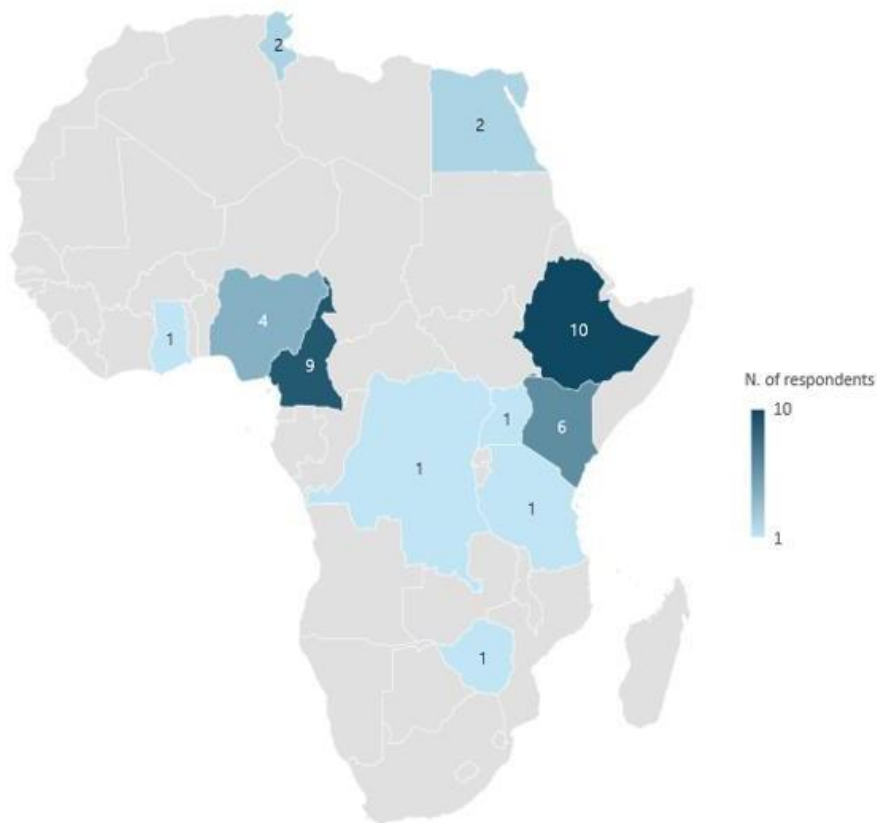
This survey aimed to collect information on research collaborations of the African CICOPS fellows with universities or institutions in Europe and Africa. The goal of the study was to acquire insights that could guide future efforts to cultivate stronger research partnerships between Europe, particularly Italy, and Africa, while also assessing the impact of programs like CICOPS on academic development.

Additionally, we evaluated the potential interest in establishing a forum among the African CICOPS Fellows. The survey, administered through Google Forms, was disseminated to 95 CICOPS fellows who had engaged in mobility programs after 2005 and are, therefore, still professionally active in the research field. Nonetheless, emails from 8 recipients were returned as undeliverable. Consequently, we were able to reach 87 African CICOPS fellows. Information was collected from 12 to 30 April 2024.

Sample and its features

The survey received responses from 38 African researchers, representing 44% of the contacted African CICOPS fellows. These respondents hail from nine diverse African countries: Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Number of respondents by country



The survey respondents represent eight different scientific sectors affiliated with various faculties or departments (Table 1).

The participation of respondents from these different scientific sectors, faculties or departments, and African countries enriches the survey responses' quality, relevance, and impact.

According to the survey results, nearly 66% of the participants reported having research collaborations with universities based in Europe and 68% with African institutions.

Including African researchers with and without collaborations allowed us a more balanced perspective of the investigated aspect. This has enriched the insight from our analysis, improving our understanding of the benefits, challenges, impact, and outcomes of such collaborations, potential barriers to collaboration, and areas for improvement.

Collaborations with European Universities were reported in countries such as Italy, Germany, France, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, Poland, and Switzerland. The number of collaborations also varied, with some respondents having one or two, while others reported having over ten.

The responses to the survey question regarding collaborations within African countries varied considerably. While some respondents indicated no collaborations or collaborations solely outside of Africa, others mentioned collaborations in specific African countries. These countries included Algeria, Nigeria, Benin Republic, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Congo-Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somaliland, Chad, Guinea, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Libya, Morocco, Algeria, Togo, Ghana, and Uganda. The number of collaborations also varied, with some respondents having one or two collaborations, while others reported having three, four, or even more collaborations across different African countries.

Table 1 – Respondents by scientific sector and department or faculty

Scientific sector	Department/faculty
Biological Sciences	Cellular and Molecular Biology Faculty of Science/Department of Biochemistry Food Science, Nutrition, and Dietetics Biotechnology Food Science and Technology Science/Botany Health & Human Sciences Arthropod Pathology Unit Faculty of Sciences, Department of Biochemistry Sciences/Chemical (Biochemistry) Nursing Sciences Faculty of Education/Biological and Geological Sciences Department
Earth Sciences	Geodesy and Geodynamics Geography and Environmental Studies Remote Sensing School of Earth Sciences
Social Sciences	Economics Agricultural Economics Social Sciences Management and Public Policy Human Development Department of Anthropology Rural Development and Agricultural Innovations Sociology Educational Psychology
Physical Sciences	Faculty of Science/Department of Organic Chemistry Faculty of Science/Department of Inorganic Chemistry Department of Chemistry
Engineering	University Institute of Technology Engineering
General Sciences (Interdisciplinary)	Science Faculty of Sciences Faculté of Sciences
Humanities	Language Faculty of Archaeology, Egyptology Department History
Computer Science	School of Computing/Information Technology

Main differences between Africa-Africa and Europe-Africa collaborations

Examining the dichotomy between Africa-Africa and Europe-Africa collaborations through the lens of empirical evidence reveals a complex interplay of factors shaping research dynamics. Table 2 identifies ten main areas in which these differences have emerged.

European-African collaborations are indicated as characterised by a fertile environment conducive to scientific inquiry, primarily attributed to substantial financial investments from European stakeholders. These investments give African institutions access to advanced research infrastructure and increased research budgets, catalysing scientific progress and fostering technology transfer. This facilitates the diffusion of knowledge and expertise from Europe to Africa.

On the other hand, collaborations between African countries often face major challenges due to financial constraints. According to our survey respondents, insufficient infrastructure and limited access to research funding are hindering collaborative research initiatives in Africa. The lack of substantial financial support impedes scientific inquiry, causing many promising research endeavours to stagnate. Furthermore, disparities in structural frameworks further demarcate the collaborative landscape. Partnerships between Europe and Africa operate within a structured framework that is defined by international agreements and institutional alliances. However, collaborations between African countries face a more complex terrain as they have to navigate regional frameworks like the African Union, grappling with inherent complexities and bureaucratic hurdles inherent to intracontinental collaboration. An analysis of the themes that form the basis of research focus and methodology shows that there are different approaches that guide collaborative efforts. Collaborations between African countries prioritize the idea of sustainability and rely on local knowledge to address local challenges. Meanwhile, collaborations between Europe and Africa are more focused on data-driven research, utilizing the combined expertise of European partners to find solutions to complex scientific challenges. Furthermore, the idea of working together is influenced by how people view mutual respect and fairness. African researchers often confront scepticism and bureaucratic impediments when engaging in Europe- Africa collaborations, reflecting broader dynamics of power and institutional bias. Conversely, Africa-Africa collaborations are underpinned by a shared identity and mutual respect, fostering a collaborative ethos rooted in solidarity and collective enterprise.

In the field of scientific research, having sufficient resources is indicated as a crucial factor in determining the outcomes of studies. Collaborations between Europe and Africa tend to benefit from ample financial support and access to advanced research infrastructure, which makes it easier to achieve ambitious research goals. On the other hand, collaborations between different African countries often struggle due to a lack of resources, which hinders their ability to turn scientific inquiries into concrete results.

Rebalancing the differences

The respondents to our survey offer a comprehensive array of strategies, summarised in Table 3, to rebalance the disparities between Africa-Africa and Africa-Europe collaborations.

Financial Empowerment and Infrastructure Development are pillars upon which equitable collaborations are built. Suggestions abound for bolstering African institutions through increased funding and infrastructure enhancement. Calls resonate for the fortification of research facilities and laboratories, creating fertile ground for scientific inquiry to flourish. Moreover, the clarion call for streamlined funding mechanisms echoes through the corridors of academia, advocating for accessible pathways to financial support untethered by bureaucratic entanglements. Capacity Building and Knowledge Transfer emerge as linchpins in the quest for collaborative equilibrium. Proposals advocating for training sessions and staff exchange programs seek to cultivate a cadre of skilled professionals equipped to navigate the complexities of collaborative research. Within this framework, the imperative of traditional knowledge exchange takes centre stage, recognising the wealth of traditional wisdom embedded within African communities and its potential to enrich collaborative endeavours.

Table 2 – Differences between Africa-Africa and Europe-Africa collaborations

Area	Description
Funding opportunities	Europe-Africa collaborations tend to attract more funds and grants than Africa-Africa collaborations. This financial support enables access to better research facilities, infrastructure, and larger research budgets.
Resource and Technology Transfer	European institutes often possess better research facilities and funds, facilitating technology transfer to African partners. Africa-Africa collaborations face limitations due to the lack of resources and funding in partner African countries.
Spillover Effects and Knowledge Transfer	Europe-Africa collaborations generate higher spillover effects regarding knowledge and networking transfer than Africa-Africa collaborations. This is attributed to the transparency and availability of research grant opportunities in Europe-Africa collaborations.
Structural and Policy Frameworks	Africa-Africa collaborations are guided by regional frameworks like the African Union and Regional Economic Communities, while Europe-Africa collaborations operate within agreements such as the Joint Africa-EU Strategy and the Cotonou Agreement.
Research Focus and Methodology	Africa-Africa collaborations tend to focus on local sustainable solutions, often starting from primary knowledge. In contrast, Europe-Africa collaborations often rely on secondary data and aim to address issues with better-equipped European labs.
Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing	Europe-Africa partnerships offer opportunities for capacity building and stronger links, while Africa-Africa collaborations promote unity and development among African nations.
Bureaucratic Challenges	Some respondents highlight European bureaucratic challenges, which can hinder collaborations due to perceived distrust or visa issues.
Perception and Respect	There's a sentiment among African researchers that they are not always treated with respect in European collaborations, with concerns about being seen as potential thieves or undeserving of support.
Technology and Financial Capacity	African universities often lack technology and financial capacity compared to their European counterparts, making technology and knowledge transfer essential in collaborations.
Equipment and Funding Availability	Europe-Africa collaborations generally have better access to advanced equipment and adequate funding compared to Africa-Africa collaborations.

Table 3 - Strategies to address the disparities between Africa-Africa and Africa-Europe collaboration

Strategic area	Description
Financial Support and Infrastructure Development	This is a prevailing theme. Suggestions range from bolstering research facilities and laboratories to providing grants specifically tailored to Africa-Africa collaborations. Additionally, calls for less bureaucratic and more accessible funding mechanisms are highlighted, aiming to streamline the application process and enhance researcher engagement.
Capacity Building and Training	Several respondents emphasize the critical need for capacity-building initiatives, including training sessions for technicians and researchers. This entails equipping African universities with the necessary expertise to utilize research equipment effectively and manage collaborative projects. Moreover, proposals for staff exchange programs and joint research endeavours aim to foster knowledge exchange and skill development.
Promotion of Traditional Knowledge Exchange	Acknowledging the richness of traditional knowledge systems, suggestions advocate for promoting traditional knowledge exchange within collaborative frameworks. Collaborations can yield more contextually relevant and impactful outcomes by recognising and integrating local perspectives into research agendas.
Strategic Partnerships and Consortiums	Collaboration frameworks such as consortiums and joint research networks emerge as strategic avenues for fostering intracontinental and intercontinental partnerships. By facilitating interactions between African countries and European counterparts, these platforms aim to catalyse collaborative research efforts and promote knowledge sharing.
Streamlined Funding Mechanisms	Calls for simplified and accessible funding mechanisms resonate throughout the responses. Proposals for dedicated funding calls with modest budget sizes and reduced administrative requirements seek to democratise access to research funding and encourage broader participation.
Alignment with Development Priorities	The suggestions emphasise the importance of aligning research agendas with development priorities and underscore the need for research activities to address pressing challenges facing African societies. Collaborations can yield tangible socio-economic impacts by directing resources towards solutions that directly benefit local communities.
Cultural Sensitivity and Trust-Building	Respondents recognise the importance of cultural sensitivity and mutual respect in fostering effective collaborations. They advocate for trust-building measures and respectful engagement between partners. By cultivating an environment of trust and inclusivity, collaborations can flourish and yield enduring partnerships.

Actions to strengthen collaboration between Europe and Africa

The responses provided offer many potential activities to strengthen European-African research collaborations. They are summarised in Table 4.

The survey responses propose a comprehensive approach to enhancing collaborative research and partnerships. They suggest initiating joint programs and training opportunities for young researchers to facilitate cross-continental knowledge exchange and skill development. Additionally, emphasis is placed on embracing collaborative research endeavours supported by various forms of assistance, including technical, financial, and instrumental support, to drive groundbreaking discoveries. Cultivating internship and staff exchange programs is also recommended to foster a culture of collaboration and mutual learning among researchers. Furthermore, the responses highlight the importance of strengthening research interests through programs like CICOPS and designing joint degree curriculums to deepen collaboration and academic mobility. Other suggestions include multiplying training sessions across technical domains, enhancing infrastructure development and equipment-sharing initiatives, organising cultural events to foster mutual understanding, and engaging in joint research initiatives addressing societal challenges. The responses also advocate for offering long-term scholarships and funding programs, encouraging the formation of research networks and consortia, and providing technical assistance and infrastructure support. Finally, the survey underscores the significance of facilitating mobility between researchers from different continents, establishing linkages for fellows to engage in collaborative research, and establishing dedicated funds for collaborative activities to ensure sustained support for ambitious research goals.

Professional benefits derived from the CICOPS fellowship

The responses regarding the professional benefits derived from the CICOPS fellowship paint a comprehensive picture of the impact on participants' careers (Table 5).

The survey responses reflect a range of benefits experienced by participants of the CICOPS fellowship program. Firstly, individuals have gained access to cutting-edge technologies like InSAR, enriching their research methodologies and technical expertise. Secondly, the fellowship has served as a platform for skill enhancement, with participants acquiring proficiency in specialised software and laboratory techniques, thereby strengthening their research capacity. Moreover, the program has fostered collaborative research endeavours, facilitating partnerships and enriching participants' academic networks. Additionally, some respondents have seized supervisory and leadership opportunities, honing their skills and assuming responsibilities within their academic communities. The fellowship has also provided avenues for publication and presentation, elevating participants' academic profiles and contributing to scientific advancement. Furthermore, participants have benefited from international exposure, expanding their professional networks and fostering cross-cultural exchange. The program has bolstered career advancement and recognition, enhancing participants' competitiveness in the job market and acknowledging their research prowess. Lastly, the fellowship has granted access to valuable research resources, supporting participants' endeavours and opening doors to further academic opportunities.

Through these experiences, participants have not only advanced their own careers but also contributed to the advancement of scientific knowledge and innovation on a global scale.

Table 4 - Potential activities to strengthen European-African research collaborations

Potential activities	Description
Joint Programs and Training Initiatives	Introducing joint programs for young researchers and encouraging short-term training opportunities can invigorate the research landscape, fostering cross-continental knowledge exchange and skill development.
Collaborative Research and Support Mechanisms	Embracing collaborative research endeavours supported by instrumental, technical, and financial assistance paves the way for groundbreaking discoveries propelled by the synergy of diverse perspectives and expertise.
Internship and Staff Exchange Programs	Cultivating internship and staff exchange programs facilitates the cross-pollination of ideas and expertise, nurturing a culture of collaboration and mutual learning.
Strategic Partnerships and Joint Degrees	Strengthening research interests and exchange programs like CICOPS and designing joint degree curriculums offer a pathway to deepening collaboration and fostering academic mobility.
Capacity Building and Training Sessions	Multiplying training sessions across technical domains equips researchers with the tools needed to navigate collaborative research projects effectively, ensuring a robust foundation for impactful outcomes.
Infrastructure Development and Equipment Sharing	Enhancing cooperative visit programs and funding initiatives for research equipment acquisition addresses resource gaps and promotes equitable access to essential infrastructure.
Cultural Sensitivity and Research Ethics	Organizing workshops and cultural events fosters mutual understanding and respect, nurturing an environment conducive to fruitful collaboration.
Community Engagement and Policy Dialogue	Engaging in joint research initiatives that address societal challenges promotes evidence-based policymaking and drives positive change at both local and global levels.
Scholarships and Grant Opportunities	Offering long-term scholarships and funding programs provides vital support for researchers, enabling them to pursue collaborative endeavours with confidence.
Research Networks and Consortia	Encouraging the formation of research networks and consortia facilitates collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the exchange of best practices across different disciplines and regions.
Technical Assistance and Infrastructure Support	Providing funding and technical assistance for research infrastructure development strengthens research capabilities and facilitates collaborative projects.
Mobility and Exchange Programs	Facilitating mobility between European and African researchers nurtures cross-continental partnerships and fosters a vibrant research ecosystem.
Fellowship Engagement and Funding	Establishing linkages for fellows to engage in collaborative research and providing funding support ensures sustained momentum and impact.
Funding Mechanisms	Establishing dedicated funds for collaborative activities ensures sustained support and enables the realisation of ambitious research goals.

Table 5 - Professional benefits derived from the CICOPS fellowship

Professional benefit	Description
Access to Advanced Technologies	Participants have gained access to state-of-the-art technologies, such as InSAR (Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar), enabling them to engage in cutting-edge research methodologies and expand their technical proficiency.
Skill Enhancement and Research Capacity Building	Through the fellowship, individuals have acquired proficiency in specialised software and laboratory techniques, enhancing their research capacity and equipping them with the necessary skills to tackle complex scientific challenges.
Engagement in Collaborative Research Endeavors	CICOPS has served as a catalyst for collaboration, fostering joint research initiatives and facilitating partnerships with esteemed institutions and researchers. This collaborative ethos has enriched participants' research experiences and broadened their academic networks.
Supervisory and Leadership Opportunities	Some respondents have utilised the fellowship to lead research activities and supervise projects within larger groups, honing their leadership skills and assuming roles of responsibility within their academic communities.
Publication and Presentation Opportunities	The fellowship has provided platforms for the dissemination of research findings, leading to publications in esteemed journals and presentations at conferences. These opportunities have elevated participants' academic profiles and contributed to the advancement of scientific knowledge.
Networking and International Exposure	Participants have benefited from exposure to diverse research environments, cultures, and academic systems. This international exposure has facilitated the expansion of professional networks, fostering collaborations and promoting cross-cultural exchange.
Career Advancement and Recognition	The CICOPS fellowship has bolstered participants' credentials, enhancing their competitiveness in the job market and garnering recognition within their respective fields. This recognition serves as a testament to their research prowess and academic achievements.
Access to Resources and Opportunities	The fellowship has granted participants access to a wealth of research resources, including laboratory facilities, libraries, and collaborations with renowned scientists. This access has provided invaluable support for their research endeavours and paved the way for further academic opportunities.

Objectives and the activities of a forum among the CICOPS fellows

The survey showed that 37 out of 38 respondents viewed the idea of establishing a forum for African CICOPS fellows positively.

The objectives of a possible forum among the survey participants encompass various aspects aimed at fostering collaboration, networking, and professional development (Table 6).

The proposed objectives of the potential forum are to provide participants with access to diverse academic resources, facilitate networking opportunities, organise skill-building workshops, host conferences for research presentation, support African researchers in securing funding, establish a robust network for knowledge sharing, foster professional development and peer learning, and enhance the visibility and impact of the research partnership between Italy and Africa through annual forums.

Recommendations and conclusions

The recommendations from the present study underscore a comprehensive strategy aimed at nurturing equitable and sustainable collaborations between African and European institutions.

In terms of financial empowerment and infrastructure development, the focus lies on bolstering the funding mechanisms and enhancing infrastructure support for African institutions. This entails fortifying research facilities and simplifying financial assistance procedures to create an enabling environment for scientific inquiry, free from bureaucratic hurdles.

Capacity building and knowledge transfer are other vital aspects of the recommendations. The emphasis is on cultivating a proficient workforce through structured training sessions and reciprocal staff exchange programs. These initiatives aim to facilitate the exchange of traditional knowledge, enriching collaborative endeavours with diverse perspectives and expertise.

Collaborative research initiatives are advocated to drive innovative discoveries. This involves promoting joint research endeavours supported by technical, financial, and instrumental assistance. The goal is to foster a collaborative culture among researchers, encouraging participation in internship and staff exchange programs to facilitate cross-pollination of ideas and methodologies.

Strengthening research interests is a key focus area, aiming to deepen collaboration and academic mobility. Strategies include designing joint degree programs and organising technical training sessions to address mutual research interests. Cultural events are proposed to enhance mutual understanding and foster engagement in research endeavours tackling societal challenges.

Long-term scholarships and funding programs are recommended to sustain ambitious research goals. By providing continuous support, such initiatives aim to empower researchers and facilitate the formation of robust research networks, thereby leveraging collective expertise for impactful outcomes.

Facilitating mobility and linkages is essential for promoting collaborative research engagements. This entails establishing strong linkages between institutions and providing dedicated funding to support collaborative activities. Promoting mobility between researchers from different continents is advocated to facilitate cross-cultural exchange and collaboration, enriching the collaborative landscape.

Considering these recommendations, the CICOPS scholarship programs promoted by the University of Pavia are crucial in advancing the recommendations for fostering equitable and sustainable collaborations between African and European institutions. By providing financial support, capacity-building opportunities, and avenues for collaborative research, scholarship programs contribute to the development of a skilled workforce, the advancement of knowledge creation, and the promotion of cross-cultural understanding and collaboration on a global scale.

Establishing a forum among African CICOPS fellows adds value to the recommendations by providing a collaborative platform for knowledge sharing, capacity building, research promotion, advocacy, mentorship, and cross-cultural understanding.

Table 6 – Possible objectives and the activities of the forum

Objective	Description
Exposure to Academic Resources	The forum could aim to expose participants to academic resources, including research materials, publications, and educational opportunities, thereby enriching their knowledge base and supporting their scholarly endeavours.
Networking	Facilitating networking opportunities, participants can connect with peers, mentors, and potential collaborators from diverse backgrounds and disciplines. This networking can lead to collaborative research projects, knowledge exchange, and professional growth.
Skill Building Workshops	The forum could seek to organise skill-building workshops and training sessions to enhance participants' research skills, project management abilities, and other professional competencies. These workshops aim to empower participants with the tools and knowledge necessary for success in academia and research.
Organising Conferences	Another objective is to organise conferences or symposiums where participants can present their research findings, engage in scholarly discussions, and showcase their work to a broader audience. These conferences serve as platforms for knowledge dissemination, academic exchange, and collaboration.
Access to Research Funds for African Researchers	Addressing the need for research funding, the forum aims to explore avenues for securing research funds for African researchers. By providing information on funding opportunities and facilitating partnerships with funding agencies, the forum aims to support research initiatives in Africa.
Professional Development and Peer Learning	Through online discussions, webinars, mentoring programs, and social events, the forum aims to foster professional development and peer learning among participants. By creating a collegial environment, the forum encourages multidisciplinary research collaboration and supports the career advancement of fellows.
Enhancing Visibility and Impact of Research Partnership	The forum aims to enhance the visibility and impact of the research partnership between Italy and Africa by holding an annual CICOPS Fellows Forum (CFF). This forum provides a platform for fellows to showcase their research outputs, share experiences, and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in their respective fields.

