



# Shaping Ethical Global Health Collaborations in Latin America: A Call for Host-Country Leadership in Policy Development

## How to cite

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Over the past three decades, global health initiatives in education, research, and practice have grown exponentially (1). Numerous programs have fostered collaborations between institutions in high-income countries (HICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). While often framed as mutually beneficial, these partnerships frequently reflect a paternalistic model, with power imbalances shaping resource allocation, agendas, and decision-making, which are often dominated by HIC institutions (2).

Latin America—a region characterized by cultural diversity, strong traditions, and community values—continues to face profound health inequities shaped by complex social, economic, and political factors. These realities create both opportunities and challenges for global health collaborations (GHC). To address them, Latin American institutions must advocate for equitable partnerships that distribute benefits fairly and value local expertise as much as foreign technical knowledge (3). The time has come for Latin American nations to redefine the narrative by assuming leadership in shaping sustainable and ethical GHC that prioritize local needs, equity, and sustainability.

## Trust: The Cornerstone of Collaboration

Trust lies at the core of successful GHC, underpinning alliances at local, national, and international levels (4). It is built through honest communication, mutual respect, shared values, joint decision-making, and reciprocity. Trust is cultivated through consistent and equitable practices over time and is crucial for achieving sustainable outcomes that respect all stakeholders.

\* Bilingual Community Engagement and Research. E-mail: [nvalencia@vcu.edu](mailto:nvalencia@vcu.edu). [orcid.org/0009-0000-4346-6271](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4346-6271).



Building trust requires open communication, transparency, reflection, and bidirectional knowledge exchange (4). This includes openly sharing information, setting clear expectations, and critically evaluating past actions and decisions. Honest self-assessment and openness to feedback reinforce accountability and mutual respect (1). Without trust, even well-intentioned collaborations can falter.

## Host-Country Leadership

Leadership from host countries is pivotal to ethical GHC. Too often, Western partners unconsciously perpetuate a “savior complex” (5), advancing external agendas rather than aligning with local priorities. While HIC institutions bring valuable resources and expertise, projects must be rooted in local leadership to ensure cultural relevance, community ownership, and long-term sustainability (6). By prioritizing host-country leadership, collaborations address systemic inequities and ensure that local needs remain central within a framework of shared values.

## From Paternalism to Partnership

Traditional GHC have often relegated LMIC partners to supporting roles such as fieldwork or data collection, while HIC partners controlled agendas, funding, and dissemination (6). This power imbalance is ethically problematic and strategically ineffective (7). Truly effective collaborations require equitable, two-way exchanges where local stakeholders are actively involved throughout all stages—from conceptualization to implementation and evaluation.

## Equity and Mutually Beneficial Partnerships

Equity is fundamental to ethical GHC. Historical power imbalances have frequently resulted in outcomes that favor HIC institutions, including data extraction for academic gain or interventions aligned with external agendas rather than local priorities. LMIC partners are often included only at the proposal stage, with their involvement diminishing during decision-making or dissemination. For example, in research collaborations, HIC institutions commonly determine the agenda, design studies, secure funding, analyze data, and publish results in costly journals inaccessible to local partners (3). Meanwhile, local experts, who bring cultural knowledge, contextual understanding, and linguistic competence, are undervalued. Ethical GHC must ensure shared ownership and recognition across the entire process, guided by principles of justice, respect, and reciprocity (7).

## Ensuring Sustainability

Sustainability is a core requirement of ethical GHC (8). Short-term projects may achieve immediate outcomes but often fail to address structural causes of health inequities or build local capacity (9). Ethical collaborations should focus on capacity building, infrastructure development, and knowledge sharing to ensure that benefits extend beyond the lifespan of individual projects, leaving meaningful and lasting legacies.

## Emphasizing Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity extends beyond language or customs to encompass historical, social, and economic contexts. Respecting host countries requires recognizing their health systems, professional expertise, and regulatory structures (8). Collaborations grounded in cultural respect foster mutual learning, bridge divides, and strengthen trust, ensuring that partnerships are impactful and contextually appropriate.

## A Call to Action for Latin American Leadership

Latin America has both the opportunity and responsibility to lead in shaping ethical GHC. This entails creating policies and frameworks that guarantee equity, ethical practice, and alignment with local needs. Governments, academic institutions, and non-profits must set high standards, ensuring accountability among foreign partners. Six priorities should guide this regional effort:

1. **Prioritize shared values, mutual benefits, and reciprocity.** Ensure tangible benefits for local communities and stakeholders.
2. **Include local leaders in decision-making.** Engage local experts throughout all project stages, granting them genuine leadership roles.
3. **Focus on capacity building and sustainability.** Strengthen infrastructure and local expertise for long-term impact.
4. **Emphasize transparency and accountability.** Maintain open communication and hold all partners to their commitments.
5. **Respect cultural contexts.** Foster an environment of mutual respect for traditions, values, and local systems.
6. **Develop policies to guide collaboration.** Establish clear standards that define responsibilities and expectations, ensuring equity across partnerships.

## Final Thoughts

As Latin America navigates the opportunities and challenges of GHC, it has a chance to lead by example. By prioritizing trust, equity, reciprocity, sustainability, and cultural respect (1, 4), the region can redefine global health collaborations, setting new standards for fairness and effectiveness. Outside of emergency aid, it is not ethically justifiable to establish a GHC without meaningful input from local partners and stakeholders (8). The moment for action is now, and the responsibility rests with Latin American leaders to develop ethical frameworks and policies that ensure collaborations truly benefit the communities they serve

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