

Sustainable Cross-Border Partnerships as Academic Diplomacy: A Reflexive Europe–Africa Case Study

Djiby Anne

University Mohammed VI Polytechnic, Morocco

Lisbeth Clausen

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

ABSTRACT

In the context of geopolitical tensions and accelerated digital transformation, cross-border partnerships increasingly play a key role in sustaining academic diplomacy through knowledge co-creation. While internationalization has traditionally focused on student mobility, limited attention has been given to individual initiatives and how these can evolve into sustainable research collaborations supported by hybrid mobility and digital mechanisms.

This paper examines how an encounter during an International Teacher’s Program in 2022 in France led to multi-country collaboration and co-writing linking Denmark, Senegal, and Morocco. Drawing on a 2-year qualitative case study based on collaborative documentation, fieldwork in Senegal, reflective interviews among partners, and digital interaction archives, the study employs an inductive thematic analysis to identify enabling mechanisms of sustained cross-border cooperation.

The results reveal four interrelated dimensions of sustainable academic diplomacy enabling collaboration across geographic and institutional transitions: (1) relational capital built through immersive mobility, (2) embedded mobility combining physical and contextual presence, (3) knowledge co-production grounded in local perspectives, and (4) digital continuity.

This study proposes an evidence-based framework for global partnerships. It contributes by redefining academic diplomacy through micro-level collaboration, demonstrating how individual researchers act as diplomatic agents,

using interrelated mechanisms, and by considering digital tools as epistemic infrastructure rather than merely logistical support. It also provides practice-informed insights for universities seeking to integrate hybrid internationalization strategies with equitable global partnerships in uneven geopolitical contexts.

Keywords: Academic diplomacy, cross-border collaboration, digital continuity, Europe–Africa partnerships, hybrid mobility, internationalization, knowledge co-production.

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INTRODUCTION

Cross-border collaborations have become an important feature of internationalization in higher education, redefining the global engagement approach of institutions in terms of exchanges, education and research. Higher education institutions seek to engage with the global community, promote cross-border partnerships, and contribute to the advancement of knowledge and understanding of the implications at the personal, institutional, and national levels (Adoui & Seilstad, 2025). Through this form of collaboration, the individuals involved have the opportunity to explore different cultures, languages, and perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the world's diversity (Lopes et al., 2024).

While internationalization has traditionally focused on student mobility, some studies have given attention to the fact that cross-border collaborations are sometimes person-dependent and driven by individual researchers (Sakamoto & Chapman, 2011). Recent research also suggests the crucial role of structured knowledge exchange mechanisms, such as joint research projects, in sustaining long-term partnerships (Nowaak, 2026). However, limited attention has been given to how these individual initiatives can evolve into sustainable partnerships.

The Europe–Africa historical partnership has been a marker of cross-border collaboration. It is also framed as North–South collaboration and has often been seen as asymmetric, vertical, and unidirectional (Nshimbi et al., 2023), particularly in the context of geopolitical tensions. In the field of higher education, it is more related to how knowledge is co-produced and the level of reciprocity in different exchanges. Consequently, there is growing emphasis on reconfiguring these partnerships toward more reciprocal and equitable forms of collaboration.

As COVID-19 accelerated the shift to new ways of communication and collaboration, institutions started thinking of what is known as digital transformation. Internationalization is now being shaped by the need to navigate crises and address emerging challenges (Vakulenko et al., 2026). In higher education, digital transformation refers to the profound and comprehensive integration of digital technologies, tools, and strategies across all aspects of academic institutions to enhance and revolutionize the learning, teaching, administrative, and research processes (Memarsadeghi & Varshney, 2020, as cited in Adoui, 2024). Although it plays a prominent role in the internationalization of higher education and in facilitating collaboration and communication, institutions still have much to do to achieve the digital transformation that this era requires (Alenezi, 2021). This requires leveraging digital mechanisms as real infrastructure for advancement in higher education and for the sustainability of collaboration.

This paper aims to position sustainable cross-border collaborations as a form of academic diplomacy enacted at the micro level. It examines how an individual encounter leads to multi-country collaboration that links Denmark, Senegal, and Morocco and how digital tools and hybrid mobility models mitigate challenges while sustaining equitable research dialogue. Thus, the study suggests that individuals can act as real academic diplomats where institutions may fall short. It argues that individual partners can act as academic diplomats, which complement efforts made at the institutional level.

This paper contributes to shifting the analytical focus of academic diplomacy from institutional to micro-level practices. It also suggests a processual framework, which is based on four interrelated mechanisms—relational capital, embedded mobility, knowledge coproduction, and digital continuity—as enablers of sustainable collaboration. The paper also proposes reframing digital tools as epistemic infrastructure that significantly contributes to maintaining collaboration when combined with in-person mobility.

Drawing on a 2-year reflexive qualitative case study, the study integrates collaborative documentation, fieldwork in Senegal, reflective interviews among partners, and digital interaction archives. The authors position themselves as participants in the very processes of the collaboration, enabling reflexive analysis of both the research process and the partnership dynamics. Inductive thematic analysis is used to identify the mechanisms that sustain cross-border collaboration. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 situates the analysis within the literature on internationalization, academic diplomacy and soft power, and Europe–Africa partnerships. Section 3 elaborates on the methodological framework and reflexive positioning of the researchers. Section 4 presents and analyses the empirical findings, and section 5 presents the conclusions, implications for practice, limitations and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization is widely used to describe the international and global dimensions of higher education (Knight, 2004). It is the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, function, or delivery of postsecondary education (Knight, 2015). Internationalization can take several forms, including institutional agreements, student mobility, curriculum development, and research collaboration. It then concerns both institutional and individual dimensions that shape the global engagement of higher education institutions.

Studies emphasize that the internationalization of higher education is fundamentally about bridging cultures, fostering mutual understanding, and preparing students to thrive in a globally interconnected world (Adoui, 2024). However, the focus has long been on institutional agreement and student mobility, and a few have shed light on the importance of individual collaboration initiatives as drivers of internationalization.

Scholars have recognized the role played by individual initiatives in cross-border partnerships. Of course, many cross-border collaborations fall into the institutional framework, and some successful initiatives may originate through the activities of individual faculty members (Sakamoto & Chapman, 2011). Nevertheless, limited attention has been given to understanding how individual initiatives, such as research collaborations, are sustained over time in contexts shaped by hybridization and digital transformation.

Academic Diplomacy, Science Diplomacy, and Soft Power

The concept of academic diplomacy requires a clear definition and scope and is influenced by various historical, political, and cultural factors. (Rojas, 2023). Academic diplomacy encompasses all academic work that can contribute to peaceful international relations (Laakso, 2024), as higher education institutions and universities act as agents for cultural mutual dialogue and understanding. Academic diplomacy can contribute to conflict prevention if academics have the freedom to be agents of peace (Laakso, 2024). Rojas (Rojas, 2023) refers to these agents as “academic diplomats”. Academic practitioners and leaders can be successful mediators by focusing on practical issues and building trust, even when official relations are deadlocked (Laakso, 2024).

Academic diplomacy overlaps with broader concepts such as science diplomacy and soft power, which need to be analyzed as well. Science diplomacy covers all practices in which science and technology intersect with foreign affairs and international relations (Ruffini, 2020 cited in Laakso, 2024). It promotes cooperation between scientific communities (Nshimbi et al., 2023). Soft power can be defined as the ability to attract and persuade others through non-coercive means,

such as cultural values and diplomatic solutions (Adoui, 2023). As a form of diplomacy, soft power can be achieved through various means (Adoui, 2023), and higher education institutions are ideal places to direct soft power, using intangible power to attract people to the country (Draissi et al., 2025). The example of Morocco, which has embedded itself sustainably within European research networks, mobilizes scientific cooperation as a lever for international visibility, institutional recognition, and scientific soft power (Azzouzi & Makhroute, 2025).

While these concepts are often used interchangeably, the study focuses on academic diplomacy and its micro-level dimension, achieved through research collaboration. It places academic diplomacy as generated from relational collaboration among individual researchers.

Europe–Africa Partnerships

Africa and Europe share a long history of socio-economic and political interaction. The relationship between them has a troubled past, however. It has historically tended to be vertical, unidirectional and asymmetric, in favor of Europe (Nshimbi et al., 2023). This contrasts with the partnership role, which is to strengthen ties between allies and build relationships with new partners (Chou et al., 2024).

Recent studies point to the importance of redefining the relationship into one that is less hierarchical (Nshimbi et al., 2023). Historical shifts in African–European relations have the potential to change the existing unbalanced positions between Africa and Europe. Science diplomacy through equitable knowledge co-creation and knowledge coproduction (Nshimbi et al., 2023) has been identified as a mechanism to facilitate this shift.

While the discussions are largely focused on institutional prestige and the macro level, less attention is given to the micro level and the need to assess collaborations according to reciprocity, capacity-building potential, knowledge coproduction, and respect for local research agendas (Ndaipa et al., 2026) to develop sustained dialogue and negotiation processes.

Hybrid Mobility and Digital Mechanisms for Sustainable Partnerships

International collaborations were reshaped after the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst for virtual and hybrid mobility. While traditional mobility has always been physical, recent developments highlight the need to combine it with virtual mobility. This relatively new shift is described by Bruhn-Zass as “hybridization of internationalization” (Bruhn-Zass, 2022).

Digital technologies can facilitate cross-border collaboration, enabling students and researchers to connect and collaborate regardless of geographical boundaries (Adoui & Seilstad, 2025). The internet has brought people closer, making distances less significant (Aydin, 2021), and solutions such as online meetings allow for international collaboration (Smith, 2024). Therefore, many

virtual communication tools facilitate communication between students and teachers at a distance and make it easier to discuss academic issues, interact, and conduct joint research. (Demianiuk et al., 2024).

Despite its importance and necessity, existing research highlights the risk of digital mechanisms. According to Oanda et al., there is the risk of focusing on short-term, more transactional partnerships rather than deeper, more sustained collaboration that is based on trust (Oanda et al., 2022). Nonetheless, they recognize that the future of mobility for research collaboration is hybrid and assisted by technology (Oanda et al., 2022).

As mentioned above, many studies on internationalization address institutional collaboration and focus primarily on the student dimension. A few studies have examined microlevel dynamics, such as individual cross-border research initiatives that lead to sustainable collaboration. In addition, the concept of academic diplomacy is applied mainly at the institutional macro level, and less attention is given to the role of individual cases of academic diplomacy. Finally, while digital mechanisms are considered solutions to facilitate collaboration, they are rarely seen from the perspective of infrastructures for sustaining long-term collaboration.

This study contributes to the debate by exploring the essential role of cross-border individual initiatives as a significant lever of academic diplomacy. Drawing on a two-year qualitative case study of a Denmark–Senegal–Morocco partnership, we identify four interrelated dimensions of sustainable academic diplomacy: (1) relational capital built through immersive mobility, (2) embedded mobility, (3) knowledge co-production grounded in local perspectives, and (4) digital continuity. Together, these dimensions offer a practice-informed framework for understanding how micro-level collaboration can scale into equitable, multi-regional academic partnerships.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This article emerges from the authors' collaboration on two case studies in a recently published monograph, *Women Entrepreneurs in the Circular Economy: Global Experiences* by Emerald Publishing (Clausen, 2025). The authors are from Denmark and Senegal and spent a month in Dakar conducting research and developing the cases collaboratively. The primary unit of analysis thus is our cross-border collaboration, but the fieldwork and research for the two cases serve as the empirical context through which the collaboration process is observed. The first author is a local academic in Senegal now situated in Morocco. The broader project led by the second author includes cases from Japan, Indonesia, Lebanon, Denmark, Senegal, the United States, and Colombia. The overall aim was to generate greater awareness and international visibility regarding the

challenges faced by women entrepreneurs while examining how they navigate structural barriers within their local contexts (Van Den Ende & Van Marrewijk, 2015). The study conceptualizes women's entrepreneurial experiences as heterogeneous practices (Thompson et al., 2020), employing a comparative case study approach to identify key components of their ventures (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009).

The research design followed a qualitative, ethnographically informed case study approach developed through collaborative international fieldwork over a two-year period (see Appendix A). This approach thus enabled us to study what (Welter et al., 2017) describe as everyday entrepreneurship, observing entrepreneurial practices as they unfold in daily contexts and real time (Thompson et al., 2020; Van Burg et al., 2022). Rather than focusing only on firm performance or business outcomes, the study seeks to understand entrepreneurship as a socially embedded practice shaped by gender relations, institutional contexts, cultural norms, and everyday work practices. This approach required close engagement with our case participants, as we sought to triangulate interviews with in situ observations to produce thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of everyday practices and sense-making rather than relying on decontextualized or purely self-reported accounts.

A guiding metaphor for the process was the idea that researchers must “walk a mile in someone else's shoes” to understand lived experiences. This metaphor informed three questions for our collaborative effort:

1. How could we gain sufficient access to understand the entrepreneurs' lived experiences?
2. How could we write up observations to be interpreted meaningfully across cultural contexts?
3. How could our observed experiences be translated into case studies that preserve entrepreneurs' voices while allowing analytical interpretation?

These reflections shaped our joint fieldwork in Senegal as well as subsequent discussion and conference preparations. Collaborative work in Senegal also revealed the limits of assuming that cultural familiarity or language competence alone provides sufficient insight into entrepreneurial practices. Field engagement has demonstrated that entrepreneurship is shaped not only by cultural values and language but also by less visible contextual dimensions such as personalities, business norms, institutional arrangements, and everyday practices. As one of us later reflected,

“Working together made me realize that understanding culture and language is important but only part of the picture. Collaboration revealed how many other factors shape entrepreneurship in practice—personalities, business norms, everyday practices, and local institutional dynamics.”

The first author’s embeddedness in the Senegalese academic and entrepreneurial ecosystem enabled access to networks, interpretations, and conversations that would have been difficult to achieve otherwise. Senegal collaboration therefore became an important site for reflecting on how cross-cultural research benefits from dialogue between locally embedded and externally positioned researchers. In this sense, the research process itself became a form of knowledge co-production in which we collectively interpreted empirical realities rather than simply documenting them.

Case Study Approach and Data Sources

Case studies provide a rigorous framework for qualitative inquiry and guide both methodological procedures and empirical presentation (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Fieldwork was conducted in April 2023 in Senegal, with the former higher education institution of one co-author serving as the institutional base. We studied two women entrepreneurs based in Dakar.

Our empirical material draws on several complementary qualitative data sources generated during the collaborative research process. These include collaborative case development and approval by the publisher, field observations and interviews conducted during fieldwork in Senegal, and interviews with experts, government and funding institutions, educators and incubators, all of which are stored in our own digital archives documenting our ongoing communication.

Table 1: Overview of Interviews, Observations, and Fieldwork Context

Founder	Main Interview (Location & Duration)	Total Interviews	Network Participants	Observational Events	Location (with Co-authors)	Virtual Observations
M Taylor	Three-hour interview at host institution (audio-recorded)	9	Tailors (3); Delivery (1); Textile wholesale (2); Customers (2); Entrepreneurial expert (1)	Textile wholesale market; New store; Main store workshop	Dakar, Senegal (with co-author)	Instagram page
S Natural cosmetic products	Three-hour interview at host institution (audio-recorded)	6	Family (5); Entrepreneurial expert (1)	Host institution; Family home (crème production)	Same as above	Homepage; Instagram

Semi-structured Interviews

We conducted extensive semi-structured interviews with the founders (approximately three hours each), focusing on the organization of their ventures,

including functional structures, business models, and communication processes (Mintzberg & Van der Heyden, 1999; Pentland, 2012). Access to multiple business sites was granted as trust developed, thereby enabling in-depth observation and engagement with employees and stakeholders across different organizational settings (see Table 1).

Fieldwork and Observation

Senegal cases emerged from joint fieldwork conducted in Dakar and surrounding areas. Together, we visited entrepreneurs' businesses; observed production practices; and interacted with employees, customers, family, students, and local networks. Fieldwork took place during the month of Ramadan, which influenced daily rhythms of work and social life. Research during this period provided insight into how entrepreneurial activities intersect with religious practices, family responsibilities, and community expectations.

We spent time in locations where entrepreneurial activities unfolded in everyday contexts, including textile markets, production workshops, retail stores, and local neighborhoods. Observing these environments enabled us to examine production practices, labor relations, and the connections between entrepreneurial work and broader social life. One example concerns the compensation system used in a fashion enterprise. Instead of formal wage tracking, tailors recorded completed work by keeping small snippets of fabric from each garment they produced. These snippets were later used to calculate payment. This practice illustrates how entrepreneurial activity may operate through locally embedded systems of accounting and trust that remain invisible in interview data alone. While this practice appeared mundane or taken for granted to the local researcher, the curiosity of the visiting researcher rendered them analytically visible, allowing implicit norms and informal mechanisms to be documented and interpreted. In this way, the outsider's perspective became an asset in surfacing otherwise overlooked dimensions of everyday tailoring practices.

Field observations also highlight how entrepreneurial work intersects with gendered expectations and family responsibilities. For example, one entrepreneur continued developing and marketing cosmetic products while simultaneously managing childcare responsibilities and extended family obligations during Ramadan. We were invited into her home, where the visit began with the customary sharing of small cups of strong, sweet tea—an important social ritual that structured the interaction before any discussion of work could unfold. Observing these dynamics provided a more nuanced understanding of how entrepreneurial practices are embedded in everyday social life, where boundaries between home, family, and business are continuously negotiated.

Collaborative Documentation and Digital Archives

Throughout the project, we documented our collaboration through shared notes, drafts, and internal reflections. These materials captured how interpretations evolved through dialogue, comparison, and collective sense-making. Such documentation reveals that the research process itself was iterative and relational. Case narratives were produced during interviews and follow-ups and developed through repeated discussion and revision among us. These materials therefore provide insight into how interpretations emerged through interaction rather than through isolated observation.

Because the project involved researchers located in different countries, a substantial part of the research process for the entire book occurred through digital communication. For the Senegalese cases, emails, online meetings, and shared documents formed a digital archive documenting how we coordinated fieldwork, discussed interpretations, and jointly developed case narratives. These digital infrastructures supported both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration and allowed researchers to maintain dialogue despite geographical distance. They also documented the evolution of ideas and interpretations throughout the project.

Analytical Framework and Interview Protocol

Prior to fieldwork, the second author developed the Women's Entrepreneurship (WE) model (see Appendix B), which is grounded in cross-cultural management, entrepreneurship, and organizational behavior theories (Clausen, 2025). The model comprises ten dimensions of entrepreneurship, which informed a standardized set of guiding questions.

These questions were shared in advance, and all the participants were asked. Moreover, the research design remained flexible to accommodate different forms of interaction and relationship-building within each entrepreneurial context. This enabled data collection through individual and group interviews, as well as observations in offices, markets, factories, events, and other business environments (Van Burg et al., 2022).

Data Generation and Interpretation

The semi-structured format of the interviews encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences and develop their own narratives (Bruni et al., 2004); thus, we applied a narrative interpretive approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). All the interviewees are identified by name to acknowledge their contributions.

Data sources include interviews with founders, team members, family, and community stakeholders, forming the empirical basis of case studies (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Maxwell, 1996; Spradley, 1979). Both focal entrepreneurs reviewed and validated the factual details and interpretations. The validation process involved iterative feedback and negotiation. For instance, one entrepreneur

requested last-minute changes, including renaming her company and updating her personal circumstances, which required adjustments to the case narrative.

In total, approximately ten hours of interviews were recorded and transcribed by the second author. The material was structured into narrative case accounts organized around the ten themes of the WE model. While the thematic structure is consistent across cases, the depth and emphasis vary. The analysis draws on interview data, field observations, and informal interactions (Clarke et al., 2024).

Analytical Strategy

Following fieldwork, we situated the findings within the literature on international entrepreneurship. We adopted both an inductive and abductive approach, iteratively developing interpretations through engagement with empirical material and existing theory, as well as through discussions with coauthors working on related cases.

Our analysis followed an inductive qualitative approach aimed at identifying patterns emerging from the empirical material in relation to the ten questions asked. Rather than beginning with predefined theoretical categories, analysis developed through repeated readings of field notes, interview transcripts, collaborative reflections, and digital correspondence.

The coding (see Appendix C) and data gathering process proceeded iteratively and were guided by patterns related to field engagement, cross-cultural interpretation, and our ongoing negotiation of how to understand everyday entrepreneurial practices in local business contexts. Importantly, coding was not an individual exercise but a collaborative and reflexive process in which interpretations were continuously discussed, challenged, and refined across the research teams in the larger project. Codes emerging from the Senegal case study and the collaboration process included themes such as trust formation and access, work–family intersections, indigenous organizational practices, embedded labor relations, and the negotiation of gendered expectations.

Case writing was conducted on-site in Senegal by the second author over several days, with continuous input from the first author to refine interpretations and ensure alignment with the theoretical framework. Draft case analyses were circulated and revised repeatedly, allowing different perspectives to challenge assumptions and refine interpretations. This iterative sensemaking process reflects qualitative approaches in international entrepreneurship research that emphasize interpretation across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Nummela & Welch, 2007).

Reflexivity and Positionality

Throughout the research process, we remained attentive to issues of reflexivity and positionality. Cross-border research often involves linguistic and cultural translation, requiring careful consideration of how meaning is produced

during interviews and observations (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). The research collaboration was shaped by our differing socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. The first author is based in Senegal, where approximately 95% of the population is Muslim and a minority Christian community exists, whereas the co-author is based in Denmark, where this composition is largely reversed. This dynamic enabled a continuous interplay between insider and outsider positions, enriching both interpretation and reflexive awareness.

Some interviews were conducted in French, although whenever possible, they were conducted in English to facilitate transcription. In situations where local expressions required clarification, the first author translated French or Wolof expressions to support interpretation across linguistic boundaries (Nummela & Welch, 2007). Reflexivity also involved attention to how stories were communicated, not only to their explicit content. As our first author explained, “To make sense of what we observed, we paid attention not only to what was said but also to the language, silences, gestures and contradictions that shaped how stories were told.” This interpretive attention reflected the intersubjective production of meaning in qualitative research (Welch & Piekkari, 2006) and required ongoing awareness of how our own backgrounds and institutional affiliations shaped both access to the field and interpretation of data (Van Maanen, 2011).

RESULTS

The studies revealed four interrelated dimensions that together constitute our framework of sustainable cross-border collaboration (Figure 1). These four dimensions—relational capital, embedded mobility, knowledge co-production, and digital continuity—function as a dynamic cycle. The dimensions emerged through iterative coding and comparison across interviews, field observations, and collaborative reflections. Each dimension represents a recurring pattern identified across multiple data sources rather than a single observation.

Relational Capital and Field Access

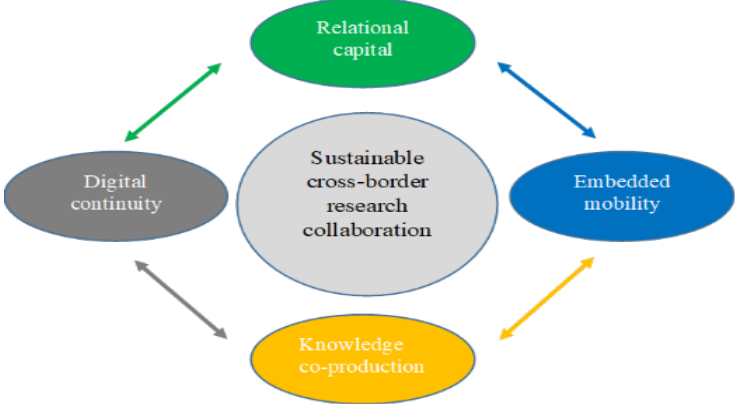
A central finding concerns the importance of relational capital in gaining access to entrepreneurial environments. Access was not given. Trust formation emerged as a gradual process built through repeated interactions with entrepreneurs and their networks rather than through one-time interviews. Understanding entrepreneurial realities requires sustained engagement in the environments where entrepreneurial activities occur. Relationships were developed through repeated presence in markets, workshops, community gatherings, and business spaces. Showing up became important.

For instance, the introductory interview with the first entrepreneur was conducted at the host institution and was quite formal. After the first exchange, she invited us to go to the market and then to her tailoring workshop to walk us through

the whole process, including management practices. These interactions enabled informal conversations and observations that revealed insights beyond those captured in formal interview settings. In addition, initial interactions with entrepreneurs were brief and more formal. However, through multiple encounters, these interactions evolved into longer and more casual conversations and invitations into more private workspaces.

Such encounters also involved moments of negotiation and vulnerability. As participant observers, we occasionally encountered situations that challenged our expectations or cultural comfort zones. Navigating these experiences required sensitivity to local norms and awareness of how we were perceived by participants. These dynamics reflect ethnographic accounts of the “awkward encounters” that often arise during participant observation (Koning & Ooi, 2013) and with accounts of the emotional dimensions of fieldwork (Hume & Mulcock, 2004).

Figure 1: *Framework of sustainable cross-border collaboration*



Embedded Mobility

Mobility played a key role in enabling contextual immersion. Rather than conducting research from a distance, we moved through the environments where entrepreneurial activity occurred and observed the practical organization of work as it unfolded. This mobility allowed us to document locally embedded entrepreneurial practices that might otherwise remain invisible. Observations of production processes, compensation systems, and workplace interactions revealed organizational practices grounded in local norms and relational trust.

For example, some interviews were conducted during Ramadan and in the home of the entrepreneur. In one instance, discussions about the cosmetic production process naturally shifted between the production of the product and parenting responsibilities. The entrepreneur sometimes responded to her children’s needs before continuing her explanation. Such observations reveal how professional activities are embedded within cultural and social spaces.

Field immersion also highlights how entrepreneurship intersects with broader social roles and responsibilities. The above example of an entrepreneur managing both product development and family responsibilities revealed how entrepreneurial work is embedded within everyday life. These observations demonstrate the value of studying entrepreneurship as a socially embedded practice rather than as abstract business performance.

Similar forms of contextual immersion occurred in other country contexts within the broader project, such as in terms of participating in environmental initiatives in Indonesia or visiting rural communities in Colombia. Together, these experiences illustrate an ethnographically informed approach to entrepreneurship research that balances participation with observation (Koning & Ooi, 2013).

Knowledge Co-production

A key insight emerging from the study in Dakar concerns the importance of knowledge co-production in cross-cultural entrepreneurship research. Rather than treating entrepreneurs solely as sources of data, we sought to interpret their experiences within locally meaningful social and institutional contexts. Inspired by feminist standpoint approaches, the research design encouraged women entrepreneurs to articulate their own experiences of entrepreneurship (Swail & Marlow, 2018). The interview questions therefore addressed issues such as work-life balance and gendered expectations directly.

The collaborative authorship of the case studies reinforced this orientation. Through ongoing dialogue among researchers, entrepreneurs, and local stakeholders, interpretations developed gradually and were refined through shared reflection. In this sense, we became co-authors and co-creators of knowledge alongside the entrepreneurs whose experiences formed the basis of the cases.

Case drafts, for example, were shared with both entrepreneurs to review, comment, and ask for adjustments where necessary. One of them asked for changes in the final draft to reflect recent developments in their personal situation. These interactions demonstrate how case narratives were not unilaterally produced but were accomplished through iterative dialogue and negotiation between researchers and participants.

Digital Continuity

Although field engagement provided the empirical foundation of the project, digital communication infrastructure played a crucial role in sustaining collaboration. Online meetings, shared documents, and email correspondence enabled researchers to coordinate fieldwork, discuss interpretations, and jointly develop case narratives across continents. These digital tools supported both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration and maintained relational continuity between periods of fieldwork.

For example, ongoing digital exchanges such as email and virtual meetings allow document revision, interpretations and analysis of the case narratives after the fieldwork. These digital interactions also help validate the cases and obtain consent to publish from the entrepreneurs. Digital collaboration therefore functioned not only as logistical support but also as intellectual infrastructure for collective interpretation and joint authorship. Even beyond institutional transition, the partnership continues to be sustained through digital continuity.

Together, physical field engagement and digital collaboration formed a hybrid research infrastructure that enabled comparative case development and sustained an ongoing process of collaborative knowledge production.

DISCUSSION

Drawing from our analysis, we identified four interrelated mechanisms that enable sustainable collaboration and foster academic diplomacy. First, relational capital built through immersive mobility helps develop mutual respect and trust and fosters collaborative, deep and sustained relationships (Bletscher & Hellmann, 2022) beyond institutional agreement. Trust in the field was not immediate but emerged and evolved through repeated interactions and presence. Second, embedded mobility into local contexts ensures that knowledge is grounded in local perspectives and makes visible entrepreneurial practices that would otherwise remain invisible. Observations in markets, workshops, and homes revealed the embeddedness of activities within cultural, social and religious routines. The third finding, knowledge co-production has been achieved through dialogue and reciprocity. This results in shared intellectual production in which entrepreneurs play a key role as co-creators. This emerged through iterative validation processes with participants to review and contribute to case development through negotiation and collaboration. Finally, we found that digital continuity sustains collaboration across distances, with online meetings, shared documents, and asynchronous correspondence functioning as intellectual infrastructure rather than merely logistical support. Digital mechanisms also supported refinement and interpretation processes that complemented fieldwork. It also enabled the collaboration to continue beyond institutional transitions.

The findings demonstrate how sustainable academic diplomacy may be enacted within uneven geopolitical landscapes through hybrid digital and relational mechanisms that function as spaces for reciprocity, trust-building, and negotiated collaboration. Empirical materials show how the four dimensions were interrelated. Most importantly, the combination of physical and digital mechanisms proved to be essential during the active research period and in maintaining the partnership beyond it.

For practice, the findings suggest that universities and funding institutions should recognize micro-level research collaborations as catalysts of academic

diplomacy and support them through sustained engagement mechanisms that extend beyond short-term projects. They should also encourage the leveraging of digital mechanisms as an integral part of their internationalization strategies to expand their reach and influence while fostering greater cultural diversity and increased transnational collaboration (Adoui, 2024). Finally, institutions should acknowledge that cross-cultural research collaboration adds value not only to outputs but also to the relational processes through which knowledge is co-produced.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on a 2-year reflexive research collaboration case study, this study aimed to explore how sustainable cross-border academic partnerships can function as a form of academic diplomacy. The findings show four interrelated mechanisms derived from the interview analysis, field observations and collaborative documentation, which together constitute a framework for sustainable cross-border collaboration. A key contribution of this paper is to highlight how micro-level research collaborations can serve as levers of academic diplomacy beyond the institutional level. It also suggests interrelated mechanisms for sustaining collaboration and repositioning digital tools as epistemic infrastructure rather than mere logistical support. Such initiatives, if recognized and supported by higher education institutions, can strengthen their diplomatic and developmental role in uneven geopolitical contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitation of the study lies in its design, which is based on a single case of an encounter that evolved into sustained collaboration and co-authorship. While the study enables a processual case, it clearly limits empirical generalization. Another limitation is the reflexive engagement of the authors who used co-designed and collaborative documentation. This may reduce analytical distance and detached objectivity, potentially affecting the interpretation of the findings. Analytical circularity is also another weakness, as the analysis relies on data shaped by the partners involved. Future research should focus on comparative case studies across different contexts, different disciplines and models of partnership. This will enable testing, refinement, validation, and possible reconfiguration of the framework identified in this study. Future studies could examine how the four mechanisms identified operate differently depending on the type of collaboration.

AI Use Disclosure Statement

The authors used AI-assisted tools (specifically, ChatGPT) to support language refinement, structural editing, and clarity. All intellectual content, analytical decisions, interpretations, and conclusions are entirely the authors' own.

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DJIBY ANNE, PhD, is Academic Partnerships Manager at University Mohammed VI Polytechnic (UM6P), Morocco, where he develops international academic partnerships and mobility initiatives. With over 15 years of experience in higher education, he has combined teaching, academic leadership, and international engagement across Africa and beyond. A Fulbright Visiting Scholar alumnus, his work focuses on academic mobility, internationalization, and English for professional and academic purposes. Email: djiby.anne@um6p.ma

LISBETH CLAUSEN, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), Denmark, with 25 years of experience as a researcher and educator. Her work focuses on entrepreneurship, intercultural communication, and the circular economy, particularly the role of women entrepreneurs in driving sustainable innovation. Her recent book, *Women Entrepreneurs in the Circular Economy: Global Experiences*, draws on research across seven countries to explore how women founders overcome cultural and structural barriers while creating social and environmental impact. Email: lcl.msc@cbs.dk
