u'GOOD!?

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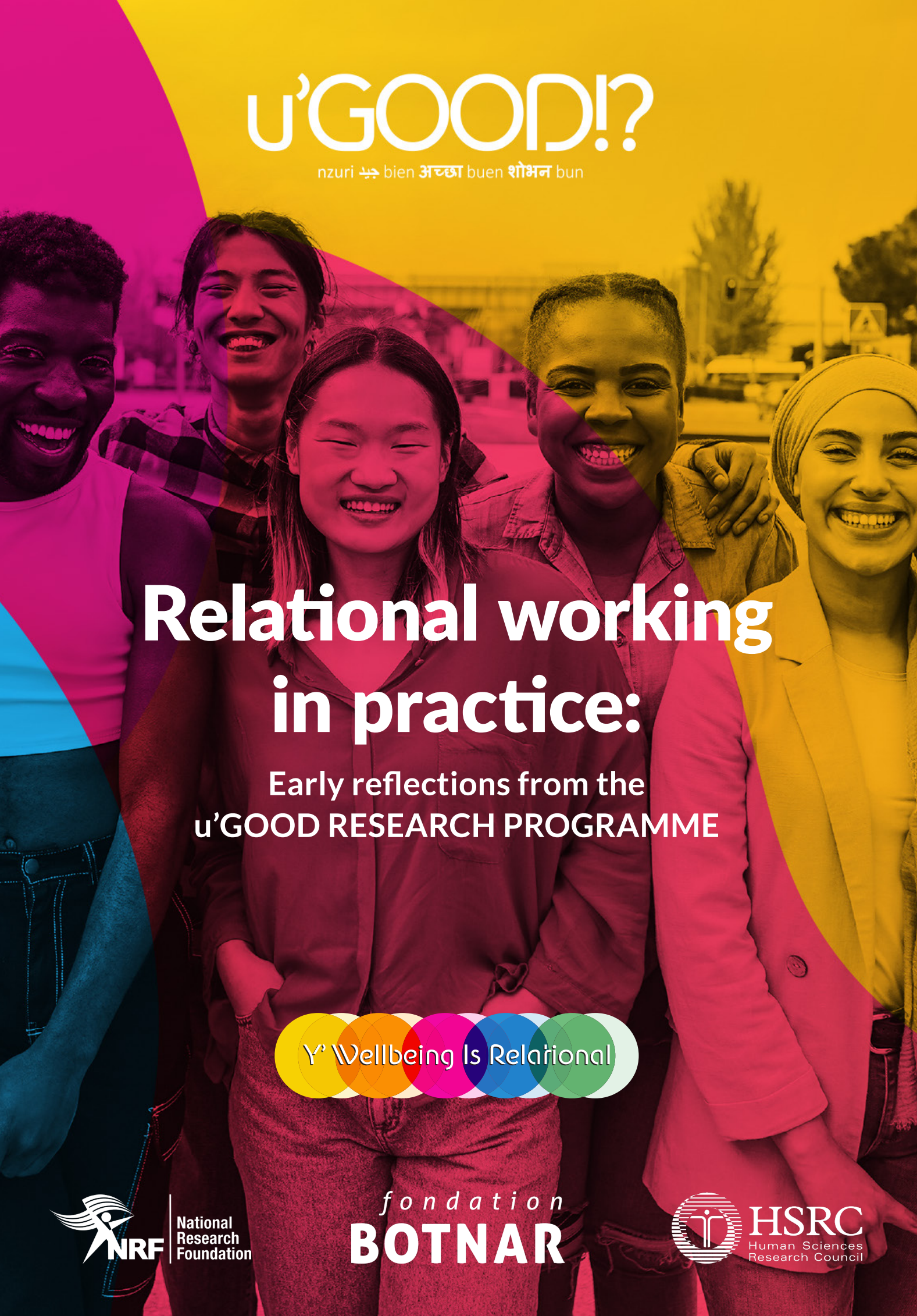

Relational working in practice:

Early reflections from the u'GOOD RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Y' Wellbeing Is Relational

NRF National Research Foundation

fondation BOTNAR

HSRC Human Sciences Research Council

Executive summary

Programme overview

u'GOOD is a collaborative 5-year research programme (2023/24 – 2027/28) and partnership between Switzerland's Fondation Botnar, South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF), and South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). It funds 23 research projects across nine countries in the Global South to advance the concept of Relational Wellbeing (RWB)—an approach that sees wellbeing as fundamentally and inherently relational, co-constructed through relationships between people, their environments, and institutional contexts. By focusing on young people's lives at the intersection of livelihoods, mental health, digitalisation, and climate change, u'GOOD aims to: 1) advance and test relational approaches conceptually, methodologically, and operationally, and 2) generate empirical insights on youth wellbeing challenges in urban and peri-urban settings, and how young people are addressing these. Through this work the programme aims to strengthen youth-centred, decolonised research and support systemic change in funding, governance, and knowledge production.

Principles for relational working in practice

Four **emerging principles** of relational working have shaped u'GOOD's first year:

1. Commitment to collective and collaborative practice
Building strong partnerships between funders, research teams, and young people through shared governance, advisory groups, and active youth participation.

2. Systemic and social justice orientation
Recognising how structures of power and inequality shape wellbeing, and foregrounding inclusion, equity, and sustainability.

3. Openness to change and adaptability
Embracing feedback, navigating bureaucratic barriers, and pivoting processes (e.g., broadening eligibility criteria, adapting evaluation tools).

4. Time and intentionality
Acknowledging that relational working requires sustained investment, slower decision-making, and deliberate attention to wellbeing, trust-building, and inclusion.

Strategic recommendations

u'GOOD's early learnings and reflection on relational working in practice suggest the following:

- **For Fondation Botnar:**
  Embed flexibility in funding parameters; extend design/onboarding timelines; model relational governance internally; balance accountability with learning.
- **For Global South Researchers:**
  Centre youth as co-creators; engage in reflexive practice on power and ethics; invest in interdisciplinary collaboration; balance academic rigour with pathways to social change.
- **For Intermediary Organisations (e.g., NRF, HSRC):**
  Ensure adequate resourcing and time; facilitate joint ownership across stakeholders; strengthen communication systems; build relational capacities (e.g., facilitation, inclusive leadership); share learning iteratively.
- **For Global South Funders:**
  Adopt trust-based grant-making; enable diverse participation in calls and reviews; support early-stage proposal development; simplify administrative systems; invest in long-term collaboration infrastructure.

This first year demonstrated that **relational working is not a single activity but an ongoing practice** — requiring collaboration, a social justice orientation, adaptability, and intentional commitment of time. These insights offer valuable direction for building equitable, impactful, and sustainable approaches to youth wellbeing research in the Global South.

About u'GOOD

The Programme

The u'GOOD Research Programme (hereafter u'GOOD) is a collaborative endeavour over five years between Fondation Botnar, South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF), and South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) to understand the value of employing Relational Wellbeing (RWB) to study, respond to, and improve the wellbeing of young people in the Global South.

Through the funding of 23 single and multi-country research projects across nine countries, u'GOOD encourages researchers to adopt a relational wellbeing approach at the intersection of young people's lives in relation to their livelihoods, mental health, digitalisation and climate change, to advance theory and test it conceptually and empirically. The programme is thus a multilateral, multi-partner, and multi-year research programme seeking to accelerate research into relational wellbeing and young people.

Goals and objectives

This programme, grounded in strong conceptual and empirical foundations, reflects a deep commitment to advancing a relational approach to wellbeing, and particularly, how intervention, funding, and research on youth wellbeing is done. The programme distils these intentions into the following objectives:

1. To test and further develop relational approaches to young people's wellbeing in conceptual, methodological, and operational terms; and
2. To generate empirical insights into key contemporary challenges with and for young people's wellbeing in urban and peri-urban environments, and how young people are addressing these.

The Conceptual Underpinning: Relational Wellbeing

The Relational Wellbeing framework applied in u'GOOD, builds on 20 years of research on wellbeing in the Global South (White & Jha, 2020). The focus is on how people come to live decent, satisfying lives while navigating challenges in community rather than only individually. White and Jha's (2020) approach identifies three critical dimensions of wellbeing: the relational (being connected); the subjective (feeling good); and the material (having enough). Furthermore, it argues that understanding wellbeing requires consideration of personal, societal and environmental drivers. u'GOOD conceptualises the application of RWB in research through prioritising three primary principles: namely, relational thinking, relational gathering and relational working (as illustrated in Figure 1).

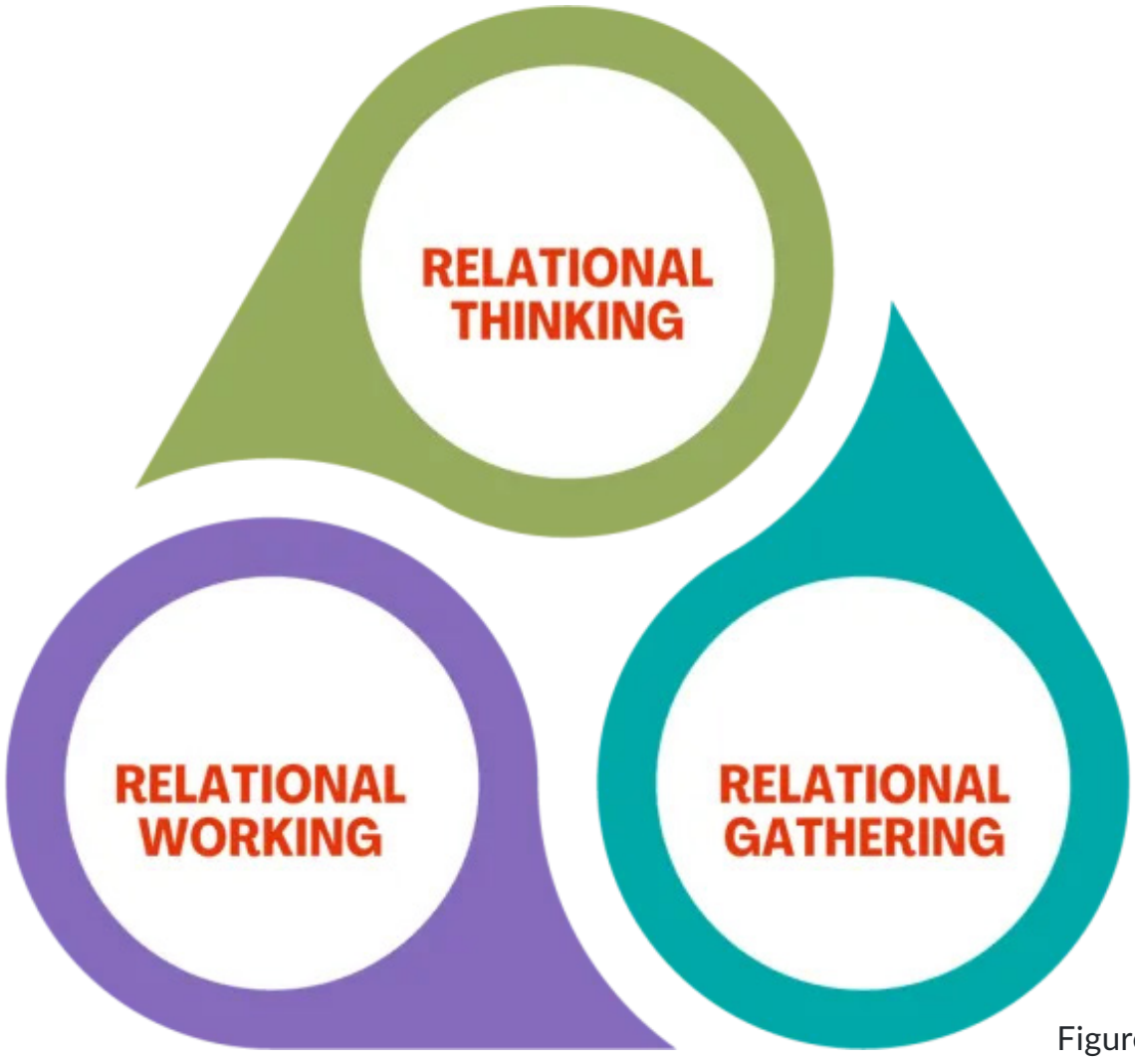

Figure 1

- **Relational thinking** means that well- being is understood as inherently relational, and co - constructed in relationships between people, their environment, and institutional contexts.

- **Relational gathering** involves incorporating methodologies (exploratory, empirical, intervention, evaluation, or testing) that embrace a collective, consultative way of gathering information to prioritise full, active engagement and involvement of relevant stakeholders to facilitate the co - production of knowledge, empowerment, and capacity building.

- **Relational working** expands relational gathering by focusing on collaborative practices in multiple dimensions of project implementation. This means employing ways of working within the research team, with various stakeholders and the beneficiaries of the research, intervention, or policy, to foster active involvement, participation and reflection from all.

Focus of the brief

"Strategic learning is the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches… to inform decision making about strategy… [it] occurs when organizations or groups integrate data and evaluative thinking into their work and then adapt their strategies in response to what they learn" (Coffman & Beer, 2011, p. 1).

The process of documenting 'in-practice' experiences offers valuable opportunities for strategic learning and understanding towards greater impact, particularly in complex programmes like u'GOOD. This aligns well with Fondation Botnar's own recognition of the importance of "develop[ing] its approach to grant-making and its strategic learning and evaluation (SLE) functions to ultimately increase its impact" (Fondation Botnar Strategy, 2024, p. 2). In particular a "relational approach to wellbeing" is one of the foundation's six working principles, adopted due to its resonance with their staff and board. Consequently, they are now seeking to implement this principle throughout their organisation but not in a dogmatic or siloed way. Instead, they hope, through the uGood programme to compare and contrast RWB with other models to find a holistic practice of wellbeing that will surface the added value of a relational approach for more impact in their investments.

Apart from being interested in testing the RWB approach and gathering insights through the funded projects, the u'GOOD implementation team is also committed to putting RWB into practice. A visit to Fondation Botnar in March 2025, where the different themes and cross-cutting units shared their work, highlighted the value of u'GOOD in generating learnings towards operationalising RWB in practice. It was evident that while the Fondation orients its work strategically and conceptually towards RWB, not all units share the same level of operationalisation and approach to what this means. It is envisioned that over the research programme's life cycle at least three learning briefs will be developed to engage critically with the three principles (relational working, thinking and gathering), in this brief however, the focus will be on illuminating relational working as it has emerged in establishing the research programme. Learnings will be updated from other sources over the coming years of the programme's implementation.

About the first year

The first year (beginning mid 2023) focused on consortium building within the implementation team, preparing and launching the research programme, and activities related to the selection of funded projects. The consortium building exercise included developing the partnership between NRF, HSRC, and Fondation Botnar; recruiting and onboarding external governance stakeholders such as the Youth and the Senior members of the Project Advisory Group (PAG); enlisting the participation of another member of the programme implementation team, FLOW Communications; and engaging with potential funded project teams.

The Call for Expressions of Interest (EoI) was opened in January 2024 and information sessions were held to strengthen the capacity of prospective applicants. Subsequently, following a review

process, a number of EoI applications (80 out of the total of 126 submissions) were invited to submit full research proposals. A total of 68 full applications were received with a final list of 23 projects being recommended and awarded. Further capacity strengthening events were undertaken with these applicants including support in interfacing with 'NRF Connect' (the NRF's application submission portal). Thereafter, full proposals were submitted, and the review process commenced. This involved further briefing and capacity strengthening of the PAG towards the review of full proposals. The final stages of the cycle involved the selection of 23 successful projects, undertaking due diligence of the beneficiary institutions, and onboarding the funded project teams. In parallel to supporting project teams to navigate varied institutional requirements to facilitate contracting, the programme team embarked on developing a Theory of Change, a communications' strategy, and an implementation plan for the Community of Practice to support programme implementation (2025-2027).

Putting relational working into practice

In this first year, an important and recurring consideration has been how to foster a culture of working relationally between a Global North funder, two Global research organisations who have distinct research-related roles and responsibilities, and 23 research teams who have been funded to conduct research on young people and relational wellbeing. FONDATION BOTNAR is a philanthropic funder situated in the Global North, with a specific mandate on how to support and intervene positively in the lives of young people. The NRF is a South African public funding agency (and within this programme serves as an intermediary funder) while the HSRC is a South African research organisation and science council specialising in development research in the humanities and social sciences. The funded research teams are from Global South public higher education or research institutions and were competitively selected through a two-stage application process (expression of interest and full proposal). It has been the synergies in orientation and commitment to fostering the quality of research on youth wellbeing from the South that has offered a pathway to move forward collectively. The scholarship of the programme's academic lead bear reference here both to how the team was able to orient this position and extend relational wellbeing as framework in practice.

Insights from the programme's academic lead

In the recently published Charter for Global South Youth Studies (Swartz, 2022), the u'GOOD academic lead, Professor Sharlene Swartz, addresses the way in which decolonised research and knowledge production may optimally occur. She notes principles linked to power, extraction and collectivity, all of which relate to attempts to work relationally.

Over the past fifty years since many former colonies embarked on political independence and forms of equitable knowledge production, a key call has

been for the Global South to no longer be regarded as a site for data extraction. The historical extraction of data from the Global South for analysis through Northern theoretical lenses has perpetuated a form of intellectual domination, which can only be countered through a deliberate decolonising of research practices. The principles of equitable research funding must therefore be directed towards supporting Southern scholars in their own knowledge production, enabling the development of contextually grounded theories and methodologies. This includes recognising collaborative, and collectivist rather than individualist ontologies which further support principles of epistemic justice. This shift is toward a fundamental social justice imperative, ensuring that Southern epistemologies are not merely included but are central to reshaping global scholarship.

Furthermore, achieving meaningful collaboration requires a commitment to 'epistepraxis'—the integration of theory, practice, and politics—whereby Southern scholars are empowered to speak back to power structures that have historically marginalised their contributions. Global North funders must move beyond transactional partnerships and instead invest in long-term, equitable relationships that strengthen Southern research ecosystems. This includes supporting South-South scholarly networks and ensuring that funding mechanisms challenge rather than reinforce existing hierarchies. By doing so, funders can play a transformative role in advancing epistemic justice and co-creating a truly global knowledge commons.

Of course, the quest for epistemic justice in research and knowledge production is complex and extends beyond funding relationships. Furthermore, with a commitment to relational wellbeing and a relational ontology, there is a need to create space for pluriversal ways of knowing so that former imbalances of power are not merely reversed but re-imagined for the benefit of both Northern and Southern scholars and young people.

Approach to assembling learnings

The learnings in this brief were primarily assembled through iterative engagements in meeting discussions, explicit questionnaires and reflection sessions among the programme implementation team as we explored ways to effectively operationalise u'GOOD as a multi-year, multi-stakeholder programme spanning multiple institutions, countries and project teams. Learnings were also gleaned through reflective questionnaires completed by the Youth and Senior members of the Project Advisory Group who participated in the research management and capacity strengthening activities implemented during the first year. Additionally, the strategic plan of Fondation Botnar, and the initial proposals from the NRF and HSRC to Fondation Botnar were consulted for further insights.

The three pillars of thinking, working and gathering operate in an interdependent fashion and are not easily separated or examined. Therefore, while this brief highlights the learnings towards relational working, elements of relational thinking and gathering might also be evident in the principles distilled. Moreover, while offering initial learnings on how Fondation Botnar might operationalise relational working as a philanthropic organisation, some insights will have broader application for funding and supporting intermediaries, Global South funders, as well as researchers in the Global South.

Emerging principles for Relational Working

The operationalised definition of relational working (see Figure 1) focuses on collective and collaborative practices in multiple dimensions of project implementation including within and between implementation and research teams; with the beneficiaries of the research; and with various stakeholders to foster active involvement from all. In the definition of relational thinking, wellbeing is understood as inherently relational, and co-constructed in relationships between people, their environment, and institutional contexts – a systemic approach. Implicit in both is the aim of bringing about social change in ways not easily possible through a more individualistic approach (or one focused only on individual human rights).

In documenting emerging principles for how relational working is best achieved, both definitions are helpful. From reflections between Fondation Botnar, the implementation team (NRF, HSRC, Flow Communications, and Advisory Group) four distinct principles were recognised: the need for ***collective and collaborative working*** between all role-players; adopting ***a systemic approach*** between people, the environment and institutions to bring about social justice; an approach ***open to pivot and change*** when needed to better serve the first two principles; and the amount of ***time and intentionality*** needed in order to work in such a manner. Each will be considered in turn.

Principle one: relational working requires commitment to collaborative and collective practice

By far the most obvious characteristic of relational working, as the term implies, is its commitment to working collaboratively and collectively. This operated at multiple dimensions: between members of the implementation team, between the implementation team and Fondation Botnar, through the establishment of a project advisory group, and by encouraging engagement between prospective research teams, young people and other stakeholders.

Between the implementation team and Fondation Botnar

A governance structure was set up that included routine meetings between the HSRC and NRF to create alignment but also to triage decision making with Fondation Botnar. Both the NRF and HSRC spent time including each other in various tasks assigned to one or the other organisation. For example, the NRF involved the HSRC in making sure the call documents and the review process reflected clear conceptualisations of relational wellbeing, while the HSRC included the NRF in recruiting members of the Project Advisory Group. This resulted in both maintaining institutional

memory in decision making when team members changed at the NRF, and when the NRF Connect application system presented difficulties, both teams and Fondation Botnar were able to assist researchers, and to respond to queries. These are all important practical illustrations of how relational working is facilitated by collective practice.

Regarding the nature and level of Fondation Botnar's involvement in this first phase of programme development, a few insights illustrate the ideal role of a philanthropic/funding organisation interested in fostering collaborative working. First, the multiple ways in which the Foundation was open to critique, push-back and challenge was appreciated and positive. This allowed some shaping of the focus and parameters of the research call which improved the appropriateness and alignment with the context of implementation, for example regarding the hard urban-rural divide the Foundation had in its strategy was tempered to urban and peri-urban; the age range of children 10-19 was increased to 10-24 to more closely align with definitions in the Global South (although not completely). Here it was difficult to determine which were non-negotiable parameters set out by the governance structures of the Board and which were strategic preferences. In one engagement with the Foundation, an implementation team member challenged the Foundation to remain a philanthropy that gives money away to implementing partners rather than becoming an implementing NGO itself. While this was well received, the existing strategy of the Foundation has not been completely informed by its current and prospective partners in the Global South.

A second insight concerns the lack of awareness by the implementing team, and the failure by the Foundation to make explicit the scope for negotiation and collaboration existing around certain funding parameters (for example size of grants, and whether planning grants could have been offered). This could have been more clearly communicated upfront.

A third insight towards collaborative working concerns the extent to which certain objectives framed by the funder's Board should drive the foci of some intellectual and conceptual tasks or deliverables. For example, even in the development of this brief it was not always clear the extent to which Board interests should frame how key principles for strategic learning should be distilled. To what extent should learnings be curated for the organisation and thus directly applicable to their current concerns or problems, and to what extent should the programme draw lessons as they see fit to driving the intellectual project and surfacing strategic learnings for a wider group of stakeholders?

Finally, reflecting on the the nature and number of meetings that took place in phase one of the programme in an attempt to work collaboratively is also helpful. The tension that exists between efficient use of time and the desire to work collaborative was often brought into focus when different iterations of the implementation team met leading to a feeling of having the same meeting in different forums repeatedly. It is thus important to reflect on when consultation is best needed and when a more pragmatic, less collaborative effort is needed to deal with practical objectives. This differentiation should be clearly framed at the outset of future partnerships.

Between the implementation team and Fondation Botnar

Collective practice through the meaningful engagement of young people and key stakeholders that prioritise youth from the Global South has also been essential. In this regard, the u'GOOD research programme framework (NRF and HSRC, 2023, p. 20) emphasised that:

"The involvement of young people in the programme and research projects will require commitment on the part of the programme and research teams to engaging in authentic and relational modes of working with young people. This would involve, for example, actively seeking out and listening to the perspectives of young people, taking the time to build trust and relationships with them, being responsive to their needs, and valuing their contributions."

The project advisory group

The establishment of the Project Advisory Group (PAG) constituted by both senior and youth members was a further example of collective and collaborative working. The PAG is responsible to provide ongoing strategic and scientific advice on the implementation of the research programme and comprises senior academic experts across three Global South regions (Asia, Africa and Latin America), thematic experts in climate change, digitalisation, livelihoods and mental health, and ten young people selected from the grant recipient countries. Members of the Project Advisory Group perform a key function by providing guidance relating to the substantive aspects of the programme from theoretical, research design, and methodological perspectives, but also in response to emerging obstacles. For example, when the programme foresaw potential issues with language and cultural diversity and access, a decision was made to add three additional continental advisors (for Latin America, Asia and Africa) to support a more culturally and linguistically sensitive call process. It is envisaged that these advisors will continue to bring insights to how context-specific insights might be incorporated into the programme of research.

This has not always been easy. There is an immense commitment of time and effort required to set up such structures. For example, the process of identifying and on-boarding the Project Advisory Group, presented some challenges. Alongside navigating the bureaucratic processes of appointment through the HSRC, practicalities around the barriers presented by language and time zone differences, setting a clear agenda for the group and ensuring all understand their roles and activities was highly complex. Despite these teething issues, there is a sense that openness and collaboration were key in capacitating and engaging members on the intentions of u'GOOD and the RWB approach applied in the programme.

"The initial process seemed slightly stop-start from my perspective as it was not clear what was happening regarding the constitution of the Project Advisory Group and whether this was going ahead. However, in general, the initiative has demonstrated efforts to build relationships" (Project advisory group: senior).

"The u'GOOD Team has been extremely supportive in explaining processes and answering queries from young people to support them in fulfilling expectations from the role of Youth [in the Project Advisory Group]. I am sure their continued support and collaboration … will help to sustain this level of meaningful adolescent and youth engagement throughout the program" (youth Project Advisory Group member).

Principle two: relational working must have a systemic and social justice orientation

The relationship between relational wellbeing and social justice is fundamentally intertwined. White and Jha argue that wellbeing is not an individual attribute but is produced through relationships, which are themselves shaped by structures of power, inequality, and recognition (White & Jha, 2020b). Consequently, a social justice agenda is essential for relational working, as it seeks to transform the social, economic, and political structures (in short, the systemic factors or drivers) that distort relationships and prevent certain groups from participating fully in the social fabric, or in the context of u'GOOD, in the programme of research. A relational approach to working therefore pays careful attention to inclusion, equity and the role of power.

The social justice agenda of u'GOOD

The u'GOOD call for research projects clearly stated that proposals should consider a systemic view of wellbeing and should be characterised by inclusion, interdisciplinarity and sustainability, in other words a social justice orientation. Mostly, the insights across the programme speak to how this orientation is emerging but not evenly developed across projects, although with the implementation team there are signs that this has been better achieved.

The HSRC and NRF as publicly funded institutions have a clear social justice and development agenda for South Africa, Africa and the Global South as part of their founding mission. For the HSRC this is operationalised as "social science that makes a difference" while for the NRF it is "transforming lives". Fondation Botnar in their strategy and working principles embrace both a human rights approach and "a systems view and practice" (Fondation Botnar, 2024: p. 9).

Blind spots and achievements of funded research projects so far

Funded research projects, at least in their proposals, show both an emerging social justice orientation, some blind spots and some very good examples of a systemic and social justice approach.

Blind spots

One key blind spot related to the request for an ecological mitigation, strategic learning and a youth engagement plan as part of the proposal. Not all projects engaged fully with this requirement. This could be because of a lack of capacity, the varied research management capacities across institutions, and the inability of researchers to engage with non-traditional research proposal requirements. However, a social justice and systemic orientation would require careful attention to these aspects as intrinsic both to the quality of a good project proposal but also the potential for relational working.

Empowerment and impact

With regards to empowerment and meaningful impact, some reviewers remarked that many submissions simply lacked this focus. A Project advisory group: senior, reflecting on the project proposals relating to the Livelihoods theme commented:

"I do not think the applications have drafted a project that gets to the heart of how the relational approach can be utilised in crafting decent and dignified livelihoods.... I do not think they are exploring how the theory can assist the global South reverse structural and economic disempowerment".

A youth Project Advisory Group member also commented on the lack of systemic and justice objectives in proposals: "Most applicants focused on academic rigor of their proposals while putting less effort on their explanation of potential impact in the community". Such insights highlight how the absence of a systemic and justice orientation to research limits the ability of projects to work relationally as they implement. Upon reflection, the programme implementation team could have done more to support teams to develop and clarify their impact pathways to meet the objectives of social justice.

Some projects, however, did illustrate this more systemic orientation in conceptualising their project proposals. One Project advisory group: senior asserted that they found it valuable that some proposals sought active participation of NGOs and community organisations, elaborating that:

"...in the Global South, there is an extensive network of community organisations that work -often with modest resources- to address social and community issues. Incorporating these organisations allows for a better understanding of the community and relational aspects that impact the problems at hand, and it may be key to their solution".

Whether this is as a result of the requirement of employing a relational approach (which argues for considering a broader range of stakeholders), or because the call required engaging non-academic actors, remains an open question at this stage. However, the positive implications for relational working that this holds, appears implicit.

Stewardship of resources and sustainability

As alluded, an intentional social justice orientation also highlights the importance of responsible stewardship of resources as a critical element of relational working. This means expressly considering how to support and improve the funded projects to promote sustainability, crucial especially within Global South contexts where resources are minimal and often not consistent. An example of this is found in the reflections on the value of youth involvement and consortium building within u'GOOD:

"Many projects sought to position young people as active co-creators rather than passive research subjects, helping to build their skills and agency. This approach not only improves the research's impact but also ensures greater sustainability beyond the life of the project" (Project advisory group: senior).

Another example, in response to the question of what Project Advisory Group members considered the strengths of submissions and what aspects surprised them, this Project advisory group: senior indicated:

"The involvement of local universities, NGOs, and partners was another strength, as it ensures long-term sustainability. The emphasis on collaborating with local institutions rather than relying solely on external expertise was a positive surprise, as it strengthens the relevance and applicability of findings".

While efforts towards sustainability are clearly acknowledged, there is also recognition that this is an element that could be strengthened throughout the programme, as noted:

"While youth and academic researchers benefit from capacity-building initiatives, there is less emphasis on providing technical training to community leaders or consulting firms involved in the projects. This could impact the long-term sustainability of initiatives" (Project advisory group: senior).

For the implementation team, it is also important to reflect on how the number of selected projects aligns with the principle of responsible stewardship of resources. The team considered whether difficulties in the review, awarding and preparation stage could have been navigated more meaningfully and in a more relational manner if the number of selected projects were reduced with larger amounts being available for funding. A learning towards improvement in this regard would be to include some reflection of the investment of resources applicants had to make in preparing applications.

For Fondation Botnar, this information would be useful in structuring future calls towards ensuring sustainability and adequate resourcing for projects even in the preparation and consortium building stages. This could take the form of pre-application grants or similar interventions. In retrospect, the lesson for the implementation team is to engage with the funder about whether planning grants and which other aspects of the envisaged grant-making process could be amended. Adding a planning grant in conjunction with reducing the number of funded projects could have enabled far greater relational working and more meaningful co-creation towards core programme objectives.

Finally, also related to stewardship was the co-funding made available by the NRF. This allowed the academic, preparatory and consultative work to proceed even before the contracting with Fondation Botnar was concluded. This could also be an important structure or element to consider including in future programme development. It facilitates co-ownership and commitment while developing a culture of relational working.

Achievements of the implementation team

Given the diverse contextual focus, interdisciplinarity and inclusion of various voices within u'GOOD, for the programme implementation team, working relationally meant foregrounding opportunities to disrupt power dynamics in interactions. Notions of power and its drivers had to constantly be confronted and navigated through mutual respect and a recognition of the value that all parties have towards the success of the programme. This was continuously spoken about in engagements with prospective research teams, including explicit talking about the inherent power imbalances between "funder" and "funded" especially in how resources are utilised, as well as in age and power imbalances.

The centring of youth voices

An important underpinning objective in u'GOOD is that the programme of research must be implemented **with, for, and by young people in the Global South.** This intentional effort to meaningfully involve young people in various aspects of the programme was clearly recognised as a strength by Project Advisory Group members, particularly youth members who noted:

"One of the key highlights … has been our active involvement … in the review of [proposals]… as it gave an indication that our viewpoints were central to the decision-making process, and also the feeling of being heard and considered".
"My contribution so far felt like it was valued and appreciated. This makes me more confident in the upcoming tasks … which in turn makes me more willing to engage".

Embedded within these reflections, are values of trust and mutual respect which seek to promote an ethos of inclusivity, active participation by young people as leaders and beneficiaries of the

programme, and access to opportunities for capacity development. It highlights how such an orientation frees individuals to be more willing to work relationally. Similarly, regarding u'GOOD's intentional foregrounding of Global South Youth studies theory and praxis, senior members of the Project Advisory Group described an appreciation for how this facilitates relational working through the inclusion and participation of multiple stakeholders. They noted that this improved the quality of the engagements, strengthened the sustainability of the programme, and demonstrated a commitment to working relationally, as mentioned below:

"One of the key aspects that has stood out to me in my involvement with u'Good is its strong commitment to amplifying voices from the Global South... the programme has been intentional about centring young people's experiences in ways that go beyond tokenistic inclusion... grounded in relational well-being [this] feels deeply aligned with equity-driven research, and I appreciate how it foregrounds local knowledge and perspectives rather than imposing external frameworks".

"The collaborative ethos has been evident in how research priorities are framed, ensuring that the work remains meaningful to the communities involved rather than being extractive".

Interdisciplinarity

The Project Advisory Group as a structure also allows working relationally as it enables leveraging the advantages of interdisciplinarity, recognised as a strength by numerous Project advisory group: seniors:

"Bringing together researchers from different academic traditions and geographical contexts has created a dynamic space for exchange".

"Another strong example of the Relational Approach in action has been the interdisciplinary discussions within the programme. Rather than imposing rigid methodological frameworks... the willingness to engage across disciplines—without dismissing perspectives that may not fit neatly into dominant academic paradigms—reflects a commitment to relationships rather than hierarchies of knowledge".

This interdisciplinarity will inevitably enrich discussions and advance capacity strengthening by exposing the various u'GOOD stakeholders (Project Advisory Group, project teams, broader Community of Practice members, and implementation team) to different contexts, disciplines, thematic topics, lived experiences, and expertise. In all, relational working can be structurally facilitated but depends on consistently prioritising and committing to enhancing the multiple voices that are implicated by the work.

In sum, these reflections highlight that relational working requires a long-term, social justice focussed and systemic perspective focused on inclusion, applying resources efficiently and also ensuring that efforts towards sustainability are structurally built into implementation.

Principle three: relational working means being open to change and pivoting when needed

At the heart of an intentionally emancipatory orientation to research in and for the Global South is the desire for processes that allow goals of relational working to be met. As is clear so far, while several challenges presented themselves in this unique partnership, reflections on learning as the process unfolded also allowed for changes to be made.

The programme implementation team

For the programme implementation team, a key challenge was navigating established bureaucratic systems that could hinder collaborative working. For example, it was difficult to develop ways in which to relationally traverse issues of governance and administration to ensure that project milestones could be achieved.

"Collaboration between the two lead institutions was not smooth from the start. It was not always clear who was taking charge through the calls for expressions of interest, and the review process, and what information was being communicated to the applicants. Therefore, it became clear that governance structures needed to be established. The project co-ordinators from each institution initiated regular check-in meetings and a sixth work package was added to the initial programme which focuses on governance and maintaining internal coherence" (HSRC Implementation Team member).

An important learning for us here was recognising that **co-ownership** in relational working is about **collaboration, consultation** and **transparency** in decision-making and action. The relational approach offered the team a shared language to describe their methodology, encouraging innovation while highlighting challenges like slower processes and interdependencies.

The issue of transparency emerged early on as a critical enabler of collaborative working. In this regard, it was important to be vulnerable and open about internal blockages and processes that could extend turnaround times on key activities. As an HSRC Implementation team member remarked:

"The team has grown in the trust and transparency required for relational working. While different work packages are led by either the NRF or the HSRC, there is a clear interdependence in terms of being able to complete different activities timeously".

When difficulties were encountered with the established NRF online application system (NRF Connect), all members of the implementation team were consulted to find a way forward. An NRF Implementation Team member reflected on the learnings from this challenge:

"The NRF IT system and how its unreadiness for the Expression of Interest phase was such a challenging time… opening up to Fondation Botnar regarding the challenges… built trust in the NRF team even more. Sometimes, we have felt, in the NRF like we needed to conceal some aspects because of the potential for embarrassment, and I think relational working calls for us to manage expectations in a proactive way. Choosing to tell the truth was powerful in building trust with all partners".

Through open dialogues about which components of the system could be amended, and which components needed new builds to implement, the application system for the EoI's and full proposals were developed – despite the long-standing existence of the NRF system, and despite the effort required:

"The sections and guidelines took a long time to develop, as they were created collaboratively between the NRF and the HSRC… [a] surprise was the number of applications received; all 12 countries were represented" (NRF Implementation team member).

While the implementation team fully recognised that the NRF would lead the grant-making component of this programme, opening the process for greater academic and content related input ensured greater alignment between partners but also clearer and collaborative positioning towards what would be considered good and bad quality proposals. In some instances, working together entailed one member of the team leading the development of content and consulting others, while at other times it meant sitting together, physically or virtually, to strategise an approach. Employing a relational approach to working enabled the team to work collaboratively to improve the call process, and to pivot as needed. The result has been a broader reach to potential applicants, and final proposals more closely aligned with the intentions of the programme.

The evaluation of proposals

Building on the principles of social justice and collective practice, relational working entails **ensuring spaces for co-creation and exploration of diversity.** This means constantly reflecting on how conventional processes and structures in the implementation of funding processes can restrict relational ways of working. Subsequently, it also means **identifying avenues through which rigid processes can be transformed to be more agile and, ultimately, more appropriate and able to dislodge silos and power imbalances.**

A commitment to work relationally was strongly illustrated in the Expression of Interest (EoI) and full proposal evaluation process. Beside the feeling from the **Project Advisory Group regarding their meaningful roles and inclusion as equals with the same evaluative power already described,** collective discussions further ensured the ability to modify processes and pivot when needed. For example, in recounting the proposal review process, members of the Project Advisory Group commented on the structure and procedure of the scoring system. **Their insights reveal that while the programme aligns itself with a relational wellbeing approach, the scoring system did not reflect this orientation.** It was thought to be mechanistic and in contrast to

the holistic and relational nature of the call and one Project advisory group: senior made the following remark:

"In my opinion, the evaluation system based on compartmentalised criteria, with a long list of aspects to be fulfilled or addressed, with scores ranging from 1 to 4, and with pre-established weights, implies an excessive fragmentation in the assessment of the value of the proposals".

A key learning for the team in this regard was to **be agile and unafraid to alter processes**; some processes however, in the interests of fairness will only be implementable in subsequent reviews.

A few other areas where adaptability and flexibility are needed include **the extent to which certain parameters of funding can be restrictive and not allow for the generation of contextualised knowledge that may facilitate positive changes to youth wellbeing.** In u'GOOD, for example, there was pushback from applicants regarding the notion of theory testing and whether this might restrict creativity. Similarly, some questioned the extent to which a focus on the 10-24-year-old age group as 'young people', as well as the urban context, aligns with the realities of this group in the Global South. While these focus areas were necessitated by Fondation
Botnar's priorities, **transparent discussions were held during capacity development seminars at the EoI phase of the programme to unpack the implications of these for research.**

Through these consultations, and subsequent engagements with Fondation Botnar, who remained open to insights drawn from the u'GOOD team, some amendments were made. For example, regarding age, it was ultimately agreed that although proposals must have a focus on the 10-24-year-old age group, those that want to include other age groups can still apply but need to provide a sound justification for this as it relates to their context. Similarly, adding peri-urban to the scope (which asked for urban), allowed a widening of the brief to include potential researchers' interests and contextual needs more reflective of Global South youth. In this regard, a youth Project Advisory Group member noted:

"The push back also on the requirement for an urban context as well as the category of young people in terms of age in the Global South was also a strength for me in that it represented a steadfastness from Global South scholars on influencing research on youth wellbeing in the Global South from its own contextual realities and nuances".

This **openness to change u'GOOD also extended beyond the academic focus, to incorporating research projects into the overarching Theory of Change and orientation to impact.** In this regard, the issue of theory testing was also problematised across the programme with the projects, implementation team and Fondation Botnar stakeholders. The monitoring, evaluation and strategic learning (MESL) framework was presented to shortlisted applicants who had the opportunity to engage with the different components and how their work would fit into the programme. It was **clarified that theory testing was part of the u'GOOD programme as a whole and does not have to devolve down directly into individual projects.** Further, given the relational working perspective of u'GOOD, a key priority was to **workshop the MESL framework**

with successful applicants and to be open to inputs without compromising the validity of the methodologies or biasing the outcomes. A key requirement for projects however remained the need to engage in one or more ways with relational wellbeing as a framework. Openness to change is important, but balancing this with the core objectives of the programme remains critical to ensure meaningful outcomes. This will be carefully navigated by the implementation team in consultation with Fondation Botnar but can serve as a potential exemplar of where the pitfalls and opportunities for such an approach lies.

Thus, **where push-backs occur it is important to embrace these with openness as they present opportunities for improvement and enrichment of processes and reflect in practice, a commitment to relational working**. As an HSRC implementation team member noted:

"It urged us to employ a more rigorous, defendable and clear position on our approach to employing relational wellbeing. This we feel improved the overall quality of the academic contribution but also ensured that the structure of the programme aligned with some of its key objectives".

In sum, **being open to change and criticism is a characteristic of relational working,** which holds positive implications for the various aspects of a research programme on youth wellbeing, be it academic, impact, process or experience related.

Principle four: relational working takes time and intentionality to achieve its outcomes

In the reflections and principles already recorded, it is clear that relational working requires both time and intentionality. This has been well illustrated in the learnings on collectivity and collaboration, in what it takes to ensure that goals of social justice are achieved, and systemic thinking occurs (between people, the environment, and institutions), and in the effort it takes to pivot and change direction and actions which do not serve relational working.

While the outcomes of a commitment to working relationally was positive, it must be acknowledged that working collaboratively is not always easy and may present some challenges. For one, **the multiple voices at times slowed down the process and, on reflection, more clarity and guidelines on roles and expectations might have given better structure and focus for all involved.** As a member of the HSRC implementation team noted concerning the large team of reviewers:

"The review of final proposals was hampered by the large variation of opinions by reviewers – this needed to be more comprehensively addressed. Some reviewers aimed their critique at studies without thinking about its relationship to relational wellbeing. This does not usually happen in a more open call".

Because staff engaged in the implementation team are busy with more than one project in their organisations, working relationally frequently resulted in stress and frustration associated with

the unusually long meetings held in an attempt to work relationally. On the other had where staff only had one job (i.e. were specially contracted to work on u'GOOD), their extra effort to take time to ensure outcomes were relationally met, also resulted in frustration and stress. It became clear that relational working needs reflections on its inherent tension to a culture of rapid work delivery, and greater investments of time and strategising, and that this ought to be planned prior to commencement of a programme and carefully discussed so that expectations of time commitments could be better managed.

Efforts made to intentionally promote well-being practices through all engagements were appreciated however, as one NRF implementation team member notes:

"We've had an interesting balancing act of relationality in how we work in this multi-institutional project, how we design the project and engage with interested researchers and the group of selected grantees. Fore fronting our personal wellbeing is a strength and different to any other project".

This balancing act of managing efforts to work relationally with the efficiency-driven environment in which members of the implementation team (and funded researchers) work is a conundrum yet to be solved. The key takeaway here is that relational working **takes time and to implement it well, a shift is required;** both systemically in terms of funding and our orientation to the grant-making process but also as core team members responsible for implementation. This 'time' component was initially experienced as 'delays' or extensions with some frustration around meeting predetermined timelines. However, taking time must not be confused with a lack of direction, but rather signifies investing in more opportunities for working and reworking together towards the common goal of programme success. In this regard, the **importance of finding the balance between efficient decision-making while ensuring practices that promote inclusion, collaboration and co-creation** is apparent. As reflected, relational working "emphasises agility and intentionality in project activities, which takes more time but can result in more impactful outcomes" (HSRC Implementation team member).

Recommendations

The first year of the programme offered valuable insights into what relational working means and how to operationalise this practice. In summary, it is clear that relational working is not one action. Rather it entails employing different activities that encourage active participation in decision-making towards building collaboration and partnership. Furthermore, relational working is ongoing and evolving, and requires paying attention to partners' needs, as well as concerns, to work towards a common goal. The following, audience-specific recommendations, directed at Fondation Botnar, intermediaries, funders in the Global South and Global South researchers, have emerged so far from these reflections. Nearly all reflect multiple principles of what it means to work relationally. In the tables below the principles covered by individual recommendations are marked with ticks.

Recommendations for Fondation Botnar	Systemic/ Social Justice	Collective/ Collaborative	Change/ Pivot	Intentionality/ Time
1. **Embed Flexibility in Funding Parameters:** Allow for contextual adaptation of funding criteria (e.g., age ranges, urban/peri urban focus) to avoid undermining local relevance and innovation.	✓		✓	
2. **Extend Design and Onboarding Timelines:** Allocate at least six months for pre-contracting relational processes, including trust-building, joint governance, and structural alignment with local partners.	✓	✓		✓
3. **Model Relational Governance:** Apply the Relational Wellbeing ethos within the Fondation Botnar's own internal structures, ensuring co-creation with grantees and advisory groups in programme shaping	✓	✓		
4. **Balance Accountability with Learning:** Recalibrate evaluation tools to be more holistic and relational (e.g., qualitative assessment, shared review processes).		✓	✓	

Recommendations for Global South Researchers	Systemic/ Social Justice	Collective/ Collaborative	Change/ Pivot	Intentionality/ Time
1. **Centre Youth as Co-creators:** Treat young people not as research subjects but as knowledge partners—throughout design, implementation, and dissemination phases.	✓	✓		
2. **Engage in Reflexive Practice:** Regularly reflect on power dynamics, institutional positionality, and the role of relational ethics in research processes.	✓			✓
3. **Apply the Invest in Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Embrace diverse methodologies and epistemologies that reflect lived experiences and plural forms of knowledge in the Global South	✓			✓
4. **Balance Academic Rigor with Impact Orientation:** Ensure that proposals demonstrate not only theoretical sophistication but also practical pathways to social change.).	✓			✓

Recommendations for intermediary organisations (e.g., NRF, HSRC)	Systemic/ Social Justice	Collective/ Collaborative	Change/ Pivot	Intentionality/ Time
1. **Plan for Adequate Resourcing and Time:** Ensure internal capacity (staff, systems, time) is in place to implement a relational approach, especially in pre-contract and governance phases.				✓
2. **Facilitate Joint Ownership Across Stakeholders:** Build co-led structures with shared decision-making and mutual accountability between research and funding partners. This includes being courageous to speak up if there is disagreement with the funder.	✓	✓		✓
3. **Strengthen Internal Communication Infrastructure:** Invest in collaborative tools, regular check-ins, and open reflection spaces to maintain coherence and shared vision.		✓		✓
4. **Champion Relational Capacity-Building:** Provide training and support for staff and partners to internalise relational working practices e.g., on facilitation, conflict resolution, and inclusive leadership. This applies both to the young people and other research partners.	✓	✓		✓
5. **Document and Share Learning Iteratively:** Treat strategic learning as a live process by producing short, periodic briefs and hosting peer-learning spaces across projects.		✓	✓	✓

Recommendations for funding agencies in the Global South	Systemic/ Social Justice	Collective/ Collaborative	Change/ Pivot	Intentionality/ Time
1. **Adopt Relational Grant-Making Models:** Move from transactional to trust-based grant-making by embedding principles of co-creation, responsiveness, and inclusion.	✓	✓		
2. **Enable Meaningful Participation**: Design calls and review processes that allow for diverse voices, including youth, community actors, and Global South researchers—to shape outcomes.	✓	✓		✓
3. **Invest in Early-Stage Proposal Development Support:** Provide targeted support (e.g., workshops, mentorship) during proposal design, recognising capacity disparities across contexts.	✓			✓
4. **Simplify and Align Administrative Systems:** Review internal processes to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic burden and ensure systems enable collaboration, not hinder it.			✓	✓
5. **Support Long-Term Collaboration Infrastructure:** Fund consortium-building, communities of practice, and post-project continuity mechanisms to ensure sustained relational outcomes.		✓		✓

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