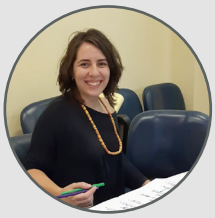
Research Across Borders: Our Journey as Early Career Researchers in a Transnational Project



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Abstract: This article reflects on the experience of two early-career researchers participating in international research projects focused on post-pandemic urban dynamics: "Impact of COVID-19 on Accessibility, Mobility, and Livelihoods of Marginalised Groups in Cape Town, São Paulo, and the Ruhr Area (ICOLMA) and "Planning within global comparison in a post-pandemic scenario" (PROPASP). It explores how working across South Africa, Brazil, and Germany shaped our understanding of comparative research, fostered collaboration, and created opportunities for professional development. Rather than focusing on results, we share the behind-the-scenes processes - highlighting methodological innovations, cultural exchange, and the value of building knowledge across borders.

Introduction

The ICOLMA project (Impact of COVID-19 on Accessibility, Mobility, and Livelihoods of Marginalised Groups in Cape Town, São Paulo, and the Ruhr Area) was not just a research project; it became an opportunity to experience collaborative research in a diverse, transnational group. As young researchers, we were invited into a team working across three continents, involving over 25 researchers from three universities. It was a chance to witness up close how the pandemic affected people differently, especially those already on the margins of society.

The goal was to understand how the pandemic impacted people's mobility, access to services and opportunities in particular, marginalised groups. But very early on, we realized that even shared terms - such as "marginalisation" - carried very different meanings in different contexts. The work was not only about collecting data. It was about complex negotiation of concepts, methods, and tools across different academic traditions. It required openness to diverse perspectives and, above all, it taught us how valuable this complexity can be.

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In this article, we want to share not what we researched, but how we experienced the process of building knowledge in an international context. From countless online meetings to in-person field visits, from writing collaboratively to navigating funding systems - we want to reflect on the paths we have taken and the many lessons learned along the way.

Building Research from Different Realities

One of the most enriching aspects of the project was precisely the challenge of constructing a research framework across different contexts. Cape Town, São Paulo, and the Ruhr Area are shaped by distinct socio-spatial structures, governance systems, and historical legacies. These differences influenced how we approached questions, interpreted concepts, and selected methods.

This diversity, rather than being a limitation, became a powerful learning opportunity. As young scholars, it forced us to constantly re-evaluate our assumptions and to engage in deep conversations about the foundations of our work. Working within an international team meant not just coordinating across time zones or institutional calendars - but also learning how to listen, adapt, and contribute meaningfully in a group where perspectives diverged.

The work rhythm was grounded in regular online meetings, including monthly Jour Fixe sessions that helped us stay aligned. But beyond structure, the experience of managing and participating in the workflow of a research team that spanned such diverse local realities shaped the way we now think about doing research itself.

Collaboration in Practice

In-person exchanges added a completely different depth to the project. Through ICOLMA, we had the opportunity to travel for field visits in the three case study areas. These visits were moments to get to know the local contexts and each other, to observe, discuss, and reflect together. Being physically present, walking through the neighbourhoods, visiting universities and community organizations, brought a new level of insight and connection.

Each of us had different experiences depending on our roles in the project. One of us travelled to Germany to meet colleagues at TU Dortmund, and the other joined research visits to South Africa and Brazil. These trips were more than academic obligations - they helped us build networks, understand institutional settings, and develop long-term collaborations. They also showed us how important informal conversations and mutual curiosity are when doing international research.

The contrast between online and in-person collaboration became clear. While digital tools were essential for keeping the project on track, field visits gave us the chance to engage in more nuanced and open-ended discussions. It was in those longer, sometimes exhausting, conversations that ideas really took shape.

From One Project to Another

During ICOLMA, it became evident that comparing cities with such different structures required a more robust methodological framework. That is how a second project - PROPASP (entitled "Planning within global comparison in a post-pandemic scenario: theories, methodologies, and strategies to compare metropolitan cases") - was initiated. Built in partnership between researchers from the Federal University of ABC (UFABC) and TU Dortmund, PROPASP aimed to develop a comparative framework.

Funded by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) and German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) through a bilateral call for research cooperation between São Paulo and Germany, PROPASP reflects how academic collaboration also depends on institutional support and funding opportunities. These programs allowed us to expand our work, travel internationally, and deepen connections between research teams.

Although PROPASP involved only São Paulo and Dortmund directly, the project remained closely linked to ICOLMA. Its main goal was to produce a set of analytical criteria to enable meaningful comparison among the three cities. This was developed through a qualitative meta-analysis of literature on comparative planning in post-pandemic metropolitan contexts. Instead of working only with already published studies, we conducted an active meta-analysis - systematizing findings and building descriptors while ICOLMA was still ongoing (Momm et al, paper submitted).

This methodology culminated in the presentation of a comparative framework at a large in-person ICOLMA workshop in Dortmund (Figure 1), attended by representatives from all three countries. Together, we validated and refined the structure, creating a shared base for comparing results across contexts.

Figure 1. ICOLMA Meeting in Dortmund, 25th - 29th Nov 2024.
Source: photo by Tanja Schnittfinke, 2025.

Local Engagements, Broader Impacts

While our research was mostly academic, the connection with institutions and communities in each city added another layer to the experience. In Dortmund, the project led to a close relationship with the city administration, including the Youth Affairs Department and the Sociology Department, which later supported our data collection efforts. In São Paulo, the research team also engaged with authorities from the Transport and Health departments and with women-led households social movements in marginalized areas. This fostered connections with the university and local researchers - many of whom are now developing related studies. These local engagements not only supported our research but also contributed to making our work more grounded and impactful.

Final Reflections

Participating in ICOLMA - and later, in PROPASP - has been a formative experience. As early-career researchers, we were not just observers but active participants in shaping how international research is done. We learned how to navigate funding schemes, how to work with people from different disciplines and backgrounds, and how to turn challenges - conceptual, practical, cultural - into moments of growth.

This path showed us that research is not only about delivering results. It is also about the process: about learning how to ask questions together, how to listen to other realities, and how to build knowledge that is both rigorous and rooted in real-world complexities.

And perhaps most importantly, we learned that research does not have to be solitary. It benefits from being collective, dynamic, and transformative - especially when built on trust, curiosity, and collaboration across borders.

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