

# Reimagining Knowledge Diplomacy: The Merian Centres as Catalysts of Plural Knowledge

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Knowledge is never neutral—it circulates within hierarchies of power, recognition, and legitimacy. From 10–13 October 2025, in Tunis, the five Merian Centres as well as scholars from different countries and disciplines, convened to interrogate these hierarchies and envision new architectures of transregional intellectual collaboration. Scholarship, reflexivity, and diplomacy intersect here, producing platforms where plural knowledge is both generated and politically enacted. This blog piece aims to discuss and highlight how plural knowledge production can work in practice through the Merian Centres.

In October 2025, Tunis hosted a pivotal moment for MECAM’s academic programme in 2025: the international conference *entitled „Re-thinking Peace and Conflict Studies in a Postcolonial World (10-11 October 2025)“,* immediately followed by a public Merian Family Meeting on *„Knowledge Diplomacy and South-South-North Cooperation: Revitalizing Bandung for the 21st Century in the Merian Centres Network“ (12-13 October 2025).* The conference was led by the [Postcolonial Hierarchies in Peace and Conflict network](#), a BMFTR-funded partner project, and co-organized as well as hosted by MECAM, highlighting the synergies between the global Merian network and broader transregional initiatives. Scholars and institutional representatives from the five Merian Centres — [MECAM](#) in Tunisia, [MIASA](#) in Ghana, [ICAS:MP](#) in India, [MECILA](#) in Brazil, and [CALAS](#) in Mexico— engaged in discussions that transcended traditional disciplinary boundaries and emphasised the ethical, political, and epistemic stakes of knowledge production, ranging from questions of the decolonisation of knowledge to strategies of scientific policy-making.

Reflecting on the events, Christine Hatzky, CALAS representative, noted that “both conferences impressively illustrated the importance of knowledge production in the ‘Global South’ for overcoming epistemic asymmetries, and how much we can learn from our partners in the Global South.” This sentiment resonates with scholarly critiques that call for a fundamental rethinking of knowledge hierarchies, a point powerfully articulated from Maghrebinian perspectives that challenge the very geographical and epistemological foundations of area studies (Boletsi, 2022). For Jörg Gengnagel, Director of ICAS:MP, “the Tunis meeting and its many fruitful encounters underscored the vital importance of South–South–North dialogues, showing that a deeper understanding of our diverse institutional and intellectual backgrounds is essential to shaping promising perspectives for future collaboration.” This calls for extraordinary efforts but is also rewarding. As Andreas Mehler, MIASA representative, put it: “the comfort of being part of a community that is much larger than one’s immediate surroundings helps us to form a solid basis of cooperation. In particular, the Tunis meeting invites us to incite even more reciprocal curiosity on aspects of social life that look only at first sight unrelated to “big” global issues.” Finally, on the level of content,

Laila Abu Er-Rub, Academic Coordinator of ICAS:MP, observed that “sustainable internationalism in times of rising global conflicts, climate change, and digitally mediated post-truth narratives, hate speech, and algorithms stood out as topics that pertain not only to the Merian Centres but to almost everyone, everywhere.” Addressing these complex challenges necessitates epistemic diversity, underscoring the urgency of engaging with Southern theories and methodologies to deuniversalize Northern thought and generate more pluriversal understandings of global phenomena (Connell, 2007).

A central question guided the deliberations during these events: how can research meaningfully engage with global inequalities in knowledge production without reproducing them? The answer was repeatedly reaffirmed: by centering Southern perspectives, interrogating inherited hierarchies, and fostering dialogue across differences. As articulated during the opening remarks, peace research cannot remain confined within university walls; it carries a social responsibility, one that demands careful attention to asymmetries in power and voice. Both the conference and the Merian Family Meeting brought together scholars from around the world – particularly from, and based in, the regions involved in and hosting the five Merian Centres – ensuring a truly multi-perspective discussion.

### **Knowledge Diplomacy: A Multidimensional Concept**

The Tunis gatherings underscored the strategic importance of the Merian Centres as key actors in knowledge diplomacy. As Christine Hatzky, the CALAS representative, noted: “The long-standing cooperation between the five centres has created new, cross-continental academic landscapes and built a strategic web of academic diplomacy.” Conceptually, knowledge diplomacy as practiced by the Merian Centres can be analyzed along three interrelated dimensions:

- **Diplomacy for Science**

This dimension involves creating transregional platforms that enable collaboration beyond hierarchical or state-centric frameworks. At the Merian Centres, this translates into a unique infrastructure for transregional cooperation. Key initiatives include the joint podcast series “Beyond Boundaries,” which has garnered over 15,000 downloads; structured bilateral exchange programs like the MECAM-ICAS:MP “Traveling Academy” in 2022, which facilitated in-depth methodological discussions with an 11-member delegation from the University of Tunis; and institutionalized coordination through regular meetings since 2019, including five Merian encounters at various centre locations, which provide dedicated spaces for strategic development. By fostering trust and reciprocity, the Centres generate spaces where knowledge circulates horizontally, challenging the traditional North-South power dynamics that often govern international academic exchange (cf. Flink & Schreiterer, 2010). This approach directly responds to calls for greater ownership of science diplomacy by actors in the Global South. As Malek Kochlef, responsible for International Cooperation at the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education, stated during the meeting, such diplomacy serves as a “catalyst

for new and meaningful South–South scientific collaborations” and a “framework for strategic responses to the persisting imbalances in international scientific collaborations.”

- **Science for Diplomacy**

This facet uses scientific cooperation as a medium for building trust, mutual understanding, and reinforcing epistemic equity. Here, knowledge diplomacy becomes a tool for social cohesion, translating research collaboration into a vehicle for fostering dialogue, confidence, and shared responsibility across regions (cf. Santos, 2014).

This is reflected in numerous initiatives. All five Centres regularly host joint roundtables on overarching themes, such as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (2021) or Climate Solidarity (2022). They also address foundational structural issues in global science through events like the roundtables on academic freedom and research ethics co-hosted by ICAS:MP, MIASA, and MECAM (March 2023) and by MIASA and MECAM (October 2024). Furthermore, cooperative knowledge production is central, exemplified by the "Extractivism Flying Academy 2023" in Tunisia, co-organized by MECAM with CALAS and the BMFTR-partner project [extractivism.de](https://extractivism.de). Additional formats include mutual visits by directors and coordinators, joint panels at annual conferences, and co-authored blog posts on the Trafoblog. Collectively, the Merian Centres focus on the transformative redesign of global scientific relations along three central axes: a) the decolonization of knowledge and methods, b) the critical analysis of asymmetrical knowledge economies, and c) the safeguarding of academic freedom and research ethics. Thus, they not only address substantive research questions but also systematically reflect upon and transform the very conditions of global knowledge production and exchange, with the overarching goal of achieving epistemic justice.

In the Tunis meetings, the network collectively explored South-South-North cooperation not as a one-way transfer of expertise, but as a co-creation where the Global South is recognized as an equal partner. As I emphasized in my opening remarks, “our work—on the decolonization of knowledge production, governance, academic freedom and epistemic justice—nourishes scientific reflection in the service of more inclusive, enlightened, and equitable global policies.”

- **Science in Diplomacy**

Finally, this dimension interrogates how knowledge can inform policy and global governance in reflexive and inclusive ways (cf. Fricker, 2007). It asks how research can actively shape the frameworks that define which knowledge counts as legitimate. At the Merian Centres, this involves embedding diverse epistemic traditions into policy-relevant scholarship, thereby advancing both normative and operational agendas for epistemic justice.

This is practically implemented through formats such as: The roundtable on "Multilingualism and Knowledge Exchange" by MECAM, MIASA, and ICAS:MP, which convened eight experts from three continents to develop concrete strategies for overcoming linguistic hierarchies in science. Numerous joint blog articles related to Academic Freedom on this Blog, co-curated by MIASA and MECAM, which explores the complexities of academic freedom in different regional and national contexts. Panel discussions on current challenges like renationalization and hostility toward science, such as those organized by MECILA with participation from ICAS:MP and CALAS, which directly engage with and seek to influence policy frameworks. By doing so, the Centres act not merely as neutral observers, but as active shapers of knowledge flows and global intellectual infrastructures.

### **A Forward-Looking Vision**

In this context, Evelyn Korn, Vice President for University Culture and Quality at the University of Marburg, emphasized the value of international partnerships within the Merian network: "MECAM is a prime example of meaningful knowledge cooperation and demonstrates how knowledge diplomacy can succeed in practice – through exchange on an equal footing and shared responsibility for fairer research collaboration. It is a great privilege for the University of Marburg to co-shape this centre together with the University of Tunis." Emna Beltaief, Vice-President of the University of Tunis responsible for relations with MECAM and Marburg University, added that the meetings highlighted the outstanding collaboration between the two institutions and foreshadowed future "exchange projects between students and lecturers."

The meetings in Tunis also yielded concrete plans for future collaboration, with several projects serving as examples of the network's dynamic growth. For instance, the centres agreed on the following initiatives:

- ICAS:MP and MECAM will conduct a comparative workshop in 2026 to bring "Southern" theoretical developments from Indian and Maghreb contexts into dialogue.
- The MIASA-MECAM cooperation will continue with a focus on comparing epistemic concepts, building on the model of the [international MIASA conference in Abidjan \(June 2025\)](#) with MECAM's participation.
- Furthermore, research stays for MIASA alumni fellows at MECAM in Tunis will be facilitated.

A further pioneering example is the planned establishment of a continuous program of thematic conferences. These will not only address the research priorities of individual centres but will also deliberately tackle the network's overarching theme: the transformative redesign of global scientific relations in the pursuit of epistemic justice. A prominent example is the planned Mecila Berlin Conference in December 2025, "Exploring the Conviviality-Inequality Nexus," which will involve scholars from all Merian regions.

## **Plural Knowledge and Institutional Reflexivity**

The Merian Centres exemplify horizontal, intergenerational collaboration through nearly thirty joint activities including publications, podcasts, workshops, and fellowship programmes. Yet beyond concrete outputs, the Tunis meetings emphasised institutional reflexivity: how can Centres sustain long-term collaboration while preserving epistemic integrity? How can they enhance visibility, coordinate transversal themes, and align communication strategies across centres and regions?

A central motif of the discussions was the notion of – what I labelled as – a contemporary “Bandung moment,” invoked explicitly in the framing question of the Merian Family Meeting: How can transregional knowledge collaboration be genuinely co-creative and equitable? This reference draws on the historical Bandung Conference of 1955, which symbolized the emergence of a politically and culturally assertive Global South and a vision of South-South solidarity (Chakrabarty, 2000). Yet, as the discussions emphasised, Bandung carries an ambivalent legacy: it is both an inspiration for non-hierarchical, dialogical knowledge relations and a cautionary tale against reproducing new forms of exclusion or epistemic marginalisation. Knowledge relations, therefore, must be deliberately reflexive, dialogical, and co-creative, attending carefully to who produces, circulates, and legitimises knowledge. The contemporary “Bandung moment” could therefore be understood as a heuristic for reflexive solidarity, in which transregional collaboration is sustained by self-questioning, attentiveness to power asymmetries, and commitment to co-responsibility. It also entails critical co-creation: knowledge is jointly produced, but always under conditions of tension, negotiation, and difference. This tension also reflects a gap that often exists between the ideals of promoting plural knowledge production and the actual practices of co-creation. For instance, the pressure of funding cycles, potentially differing expectations between scholars and funders, varying institutional practices and bureaucratic requirements, as well as the limits of academic freedom – both in the regions involved and in Germany – all play a role.

All the more reason, then, to reflect on and continue institutionalising the Merian Centres not merely as bridges between regions, but as platforms and catalysts for a plural and interconnected global knowledge order. By coordinating thematic projects, joint publications, and transregional fellowships, the network embeds ethical, epistemic, and political considerations directly into research governance. This approach challenges traditional North-centric knowledge hierarchies and positions the Centres as critical actors in shaping epistemically plural and socially accountable knowledge ecosystems.

## **Working Towards an Inclusive Global Knowledge Order – and a Long-Term Perspective for the Merian Initiative**

The Tunis gatherings highlighted the Merian network’s dual potential—normative and operational—demonstrating that scholarship, diplomacy, and reflexive ethics are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. By fostering co-creation of knowledge, promoting epistemic justice,

and reconceptualising global knowledge circulation as dialogical, the Merian Centres exemplify how research networks can integrate analytical rigor with normative responsibility. This spirit is much in line with a number of current initiatives from the Global South such as the [Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaboration](#), as Andreas Mehler pointed out.

This raises a central question: how can an interregional network meaningfully operationalise Knowledge Diplomacy in the 21st century? For the Merian Centres, this is an evolving process, approached through scholarly experimentation, institutional reflexivity, and transregional dialogue. The spirit of Bandung—invoking co-creation, horizontal collaboration, and recognition of the Global South—served as both inspiration and a heuristic guide, yet its legacy was treated with critical attention: not all aspects were directly applicable, nor was it adopted uncritically. Instead, it offered a conceptual lens for critical co-creation and reflexive solidarity, prompting the network to explore forms of global collaboration that are genuinely generative, inclusive, and ethically accountable, while avoiding the reproduction of new hierarchies.

By consolidating their identity as an interregional network of excellence in the Social Sciences and Humanities, the Merian Centres demonstrate that research is always embedded in complex social, political, and epistemic contexts. In bridging regions and epistemologies, they operationalise Knowledge Diplomacy as both an analytical framework and an institutional practice, ensuring that plural knowledge is produced, recognised, and mobilised in ways that are ethically sound and epistemically balanced.

In the spirit of self-reflection that underpins our approach, we must remain aware that a gap still exists between the ideals of pluralistic knowledge production and their practical realization — largely due to structural and political factors. Yet, the Merian Centres represent a unique initiative that comes remarkably close to achieving these ideals through their working formats and the active involvement and commitment of scholars and institutions from all the regions concerned. To further sustain and strengthen such a crucial endeavor, long-term commitment is essential – including in terms of funding. As Malek Kochlef from the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education emphasized in his welcoming note: “North-South relations in scientific research are increasingly characterized by funding volatility, science and technology protectionism, and aggressive competition for talent. These factors are exacerbating existing knowledge and development inequalities at the expense of the South. Developed countries are systematically leveraging science diplomacy to shape the agenda of scientific cooperations, whereas in the south they are still viewed through the lens of development aid.” Consolidating the Merian network is thus essential to sustain its intellectual momentum and global relevance. Strengthening inter-centre collaboration, shared infrastructures, and thematic coherence will not only deepen collective learning but also enhance the network’s visibility and policy impact. Building durable institutional ties – across disciplines, languages, and regions – ensures that the Merian Initiative evolves into a lasting framework for equitable global knowledge production and (academic) South-South-North cooperation. In this sense, consolidation is not merely an administrative task but a strategic and ethical commitment: to safeguard the spaces where inclusive, dialogical, and transformative knowledge can flourish,

and to secure a long-term perspective for the Merian Initiative as a cornerstone of an inclusive global knowledge order.

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