Background: Health research has the potential to generate knowledge that may be used to improve health and health equity. This has led to calls for African governments to dedicate at least 2% of their national budgets to health research, but such resource allocations have never been achieved. Rather, the majority of health research in Africa continue to be funded by high income countries (HICs) and involves collaborative partnerships between researchers in HICs and those in Africa. These research partnerships have many benefits but they also raise ethical issues related to justice and fairness in global health research.

Methods: The “Research for Health Justice Framework” [1] makes recommendations on how global health research partnerships may foster the ideals of justice through their: selection of research populations and questions, research capacity strengthening, delivery of ancillary care and the provision of post-trial benefits. We applied these criteria to a collaborative genomics research consortia in Africa (an exemplar of global health research in Africa).

Results: The results show that the lack of national health research priorities in most African countries hinders the intention of global health actors to use global health research as a means of promoting global health equity. Furthermore, capacity building efforts need to be more coordinated and monitored. The responsibility for this lies in a number of actors.

Conclusion: The potential for global health research to improve the health capability of populations in Africa will require that attention to be paid to research that improves the health of people in Africa and that global health research partnerships identify, first and foremost: what kind of capacity strengthening is required and who is responsible for this activity. African governments and research institutions can play to help global health research improve health and health equity in Africa, in ways that are sustainable.