

	Issue 8. Risk assessment, adaptation planning and evaluation
SC 8.16	Planning the next generation of adaptation research: how to coordinate, broker and amplify large research consortia to achieve development impact
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This session gathered perspectives on the following two questions: 1) What have been the strengths and drawbacks to transitioning towards large multi-project programmes¹ in terms of their ability to coordinate, broker and amplify adaptation research? And 2) Going forward, what can be done to ensure that large multi-project programmes get the most out of researchers and research projects collectively? The session was run in a ‘fishbowl’ format. Starting panellists provided short 3-5 minute introductory statements providing reflections and suggestions on the coordination, brokering and amplification of large research consortia. Once all panellists had presented, audience members were then encouraged to join the panel and share their thoughts and contributions on the topic. A wider plenary discussion then ensued. Below we summarise the key points of discussion.

Blane Harvey (ODI) highlighted how funders of adaptation research are faced with managing increasingly large investments with fewer staff and a growing ‘audit culture’. Accordingly, the need for centralised accountability and transparency are paramount. Blane also presented findings from a recent survey of researchers and programme managers involved in large adaptation research projects. Respondents noted that centralised knowledge management units (those that cover a portfolio of projects within a wider programme) received positive feedback. Units had made a helpful contribution to promoting learning amongst research projects and brokering researchers with decision makers. However, units were often brought in at a later stage of development and had little impact on research design. Survey results also highlighted the management burden and time costs of engaging with knowledge management units.

Ken de Souza (DFID) noted that, from a DFID perspective, the transition to supporting integrated projects and funding multiple large consortia is here to stay. DFID sees these models as a more effective way of managing resources. Initially DFID staff thought that this would be relatively easy to set-up and coordinate, but it has proven challenging and requires reflection on what has worked and what hasn’t. Ken explained that over time, research models have evolved to incorporate the same basic core structures, and have started to work reasonably well. He expressed surprise with the time taken to deliver results, wanting to know how DFID can support more effective start-up periods of adaptation research consortia. Ken outlined the importance of: 1) selecting the right commissioning process suited to the call, 2) designing incentives for partners to work together 3) getting structures in place to facilitate joint learning.

Anne Hammill (International Institute for Sustainable Development) presented from the point of view of leading a multi-stakeholder network. She explained that acting as a broker and intermediary between researchers and decision makers takes time to understand the incentives and interests of different stakeholders – often they vary considerably. Anne noted that relationship building is key to ensuring successful outcomes of large research consortia. This often takes a considerable amount of time and resourcing (it does not happen overnight).

Jean-Pierre Roux (Climate and Development Knowledge Network) reflected on experiences from the Future Climate For Africa programme. He expressed the need for adaptation research to deliver real impact. This can only be achieved by ensuring the correct incentive structures, and requires a procurement process that enables co-production with applicants.

Declan Conway (London School of Economics) expressed that the move towards multi-project programming and research impact is a positive one. It has allowed for greater collaboration between Northern and Southern institutions and encourages the uptake of research through knowledge brokers (creating a bigger splash for research). However, historically it has been difficult to apply for collaborative work of this nature. If the process of designing and running a consortium is rushed or forced then problems can be created later on. Looking at the different models on offer, there is no clear blueprint for what is most effective, a spread of different sizes makes sense

Amy Kirbyshire (CDKN) noted the importance of setting realistic expectations with regards to project design and composition. Effective collaborations can't involve everybody. It also requires researcher managers to be flexible: when opportunities arise seize them.

An audience member (from the Food and Business Knowledge Platform) highlighted how the Dutch government has funded several networks linking government, CSOs and researchers on collaborative research. It has benefitted substantially from a specific fund to promote researcher-practitioner engagement at the earliest stage, as well as a mechanism for supporting learning. Getting the incentives right has proven tricky however.

Roger Few (University of East Anglia) explained that while coordination between consortia may be outlined in the proposal, if it is not meaningfully embedded into the research process then collaboration will not materialise (or will be forced). We need clear directions and encouragement from donors at an early stage.

Han van Dijk (NWO) described how NWO has undergone a considerable shift in recent years. Their model is to: encourage joint proposal development; prioritise collaboration at the outset; and ear-mark funds for communication, engagement and capacity building. She praised the Dutch model, but was keen to know how incentives can be used to promote international networking and collaboration.

Bernard Cantin (IDRC) reflected on experiences from the CARIIA programme. He mentioned how difficult it is to broker knowledge. Bernard explained that often policy makers do not necessarily want direct access to researchers, but want to know how they can access evidence needed to make decisions. Often it is best for researchers to target technical staff within decision making organisations that can feed this up when drawn upon.

Sebastiaan Soeters (Utrecht University) noted that resources for pre-funding meetings were needed to facilitate collaboration. He explained that researchers don't have to (and can't) do everything. They need better access communication and knowledge brokering partners.

Fran Walker (ODI) presented from the perspective of the BRACED programme. She expressed the importance of: ensuring that joint research is done from the onset of programme design; and finding inclusive ways to collaborate away from the day to day work. She noted a great missed opportunity in the development phase of BRACED when projects were given a grant to move from proposal to planning but the knowledge managers were not in place yet.

She recommended small pots of resourcing to bring people together at an early stage as good practice and leading to effective results.

Discussion

In the plenary discussion, other audience members noted difficulties with spending large amounts of money on co-production given the need to justify spending public money. If trying new approaches there needs to be the option of pulling out when models are unsuccessful. The BRACED model of negotiating process and outcomes with the funder every year was also held up as a one that might be useful in other circumstances – allowing greater flexibility and change in direction. Moving forward, we need better communication of the successes and weaknesses of different models for delivering adaptation research. We should also be drawing on findings from other sectors – there is very little that is unique to adaptation or climate change research.

ⁱ *Large multi-project programmes can be broadly conceptualised as: 1. Pushing researchers and individual projects to work to a common set of objectives, often including a unified results framework and theory of change, through a range of different interventions; 2. Inviting larger “consortia”, comprised of different stakeholders and disciplines, to undertake the design and delivery of research projects; and 3. Often embedding centralised knowledge management and brokering units into the programme from its outset in order to improve research communication and promote the “uptake” of research into decision making.*