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# A guide to Effective Collaboration and Learning in Consortia

Building resilience to rising climate risks







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## List of Acronyms

ASSAR	Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions
BRACED	Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters
BRECCIA	Building Research Capacity for sustainable water and food security in sub-Saharan Africa
CARIAA	Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia
DECCMA	Deltas, Vulnerability and Climate Change: Migration and Adaptation
DFID	Department for International Development
FOFA	Future Climate for Africa
GCRF	Global Challenges Research Fund
HI-AWARE	Himalayan Adaptation, Water and Resilience
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NERC	Natural Environment Research Council
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PLACARD	Platform for Climate Adaptation and Risk Reduction
RiU	Research into Use
SHEAR	Science for Humanitarian Emergencies and Resilience



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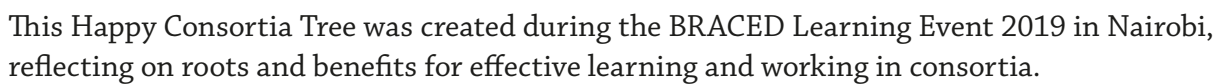
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# 1. Why we wrote these guidelines

Working in the complex context of climate change adaptation and resilience, individuals and organisations are often required to work together in consortia across disciplinary, institutional, geographical, and cultural boundaries. Working in large consortia offers great opportunities for addressing complex problems. It enables those with a wide variety of technical skills and other capacities to come together and devise more integrated responses. However, diversity of backgrounds and approaches to issues means that joint identification of challenges and solutions can be complex. Without explicit attention to roles, responsibilities, and relations, a variety of obstacles may undermine or obstruct effective collaboration and achievement of intended goals.

This guide shares some examples and lessons learnt from a range of consortia operating across different programmes. We provide some pointers for researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to work and learn together in complex consortia, which should lead to a smoother process of arriving at more effective adaptation and increased resilience for the most vulnerable.

While our lessons have been drawn from programmes concerned with building resilience and adaptation to climate change, many of the lessons learned about working in consortia will be relevant to a much wider set of contexts.

We hope that this guide will inspire you and help to establish effective transdisciplinary learning processes and co-production of knowledge with a diverse range of stakeholders.



## 2. Our process of writing these guidelines

The writing of this guideline was a collaborative effort by many people over the course of an eighteen-month period. We shared experiences across several large programmes and consortia with a research or implementation focus, and the result was a series of guidelines that we hope will be useful to consortia in designing and implementing programmes in the future.

The data for this guide were collected through learning surveys from three consortia (Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters - BRACED; Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions - ASSAR; and Deltas, Vulnerability and Climate Change: Migration and Adaptation, DECCMA), qualitative interviews with BRACED partners, and other learning research and critical reflections gathered from the BRACED, Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA), Future Climate for Africa (FCFA) and Partners for Resilience consortia. It also includes a set of twelve narrative qualitative interviews from partners in BRACED and insights from the Learning Reviews of the four CARIAA programmes. In total, more than 400 stakeholders contributed their insights and learning to this guide. We are grateful for all these contributions.

The writing process was a collaborative one, consisting of face-to-face meetings, virtual engagements, and jointly writing and editing this document.

## 3. How to use this publication

We have written this guide to stimulate the thinking around working together in large-scale collaborative programmes. Often the challenges encountered may be overlooked or their importance underestimated. We do not intend to provide a single recipe for how to design and implement effective collaborations in consortia, but we wish to share our collective learning and experience, in the hope this may be useful for others to avoid some of our mistakes and possibly to learn from some positive examples. Most of all, we hope that this publication will inspire readers to explore innovative and effective ways of collaborating and learning within consortia.



This guide is intended for various audiences:

1. **Donors and decision makers**, by providing some pointers to shape effective programmes and consortia
2. **Potential project proposal developers and consortia members designing and planning for a new consortium** or in the process of implementing collaborative programmes and looking for inspiration to stimulate effective collaboration.

We have structured the guide along a **timeline of a consortium-based programme**, starting at the call for proposals and ending with the conclusion of the programme. We have highlighted **eight principles** that we find particularly significant and suggested a brief **checklist** of questions that might encourage reflection on the process. Although the principles are presented in a chronological order, many of them apply beyond the specific moment in which they are presented and will be of interest to the range of audiences envisaged above and not just the one the section is targeting. This is a reflection of the “messiness” involved in calling for, designing, and implementing such large-scale collaborations.

We also include a **range of examples** from practice and thoughts from consortium members to bring the guide to life with **real-life stories** of challenges or successes contributing to learning in this community of practice. **Principles of good practice**, all distilled from our experiences, are highlighted with a check mark.



**Examples from practice**



**Real-life stories of successes and challenges**



**Principles of good practice**



**Short explanation of terms and concepts**

This guide is a work in progress, and as such, we welcome your comments and feedback.

We trust that you will find several ways of using this guide. By asking some questions for you to consider, we hope to support your planning, reflection, and learning process within current or future consortia.



## 1. Navigating learning processes in consortia: an overview

Embracing complexity has been recognised as an important basis for addressing the challenges of our time, including especially the rising climate risks. Working in large and diverse teams can help to advance understanding of systemic challenges, mobilise different types of knowledge, create synergies, and develop appropriate responses. However, working in partnership with diverse stakeholders and across disciplines can be challenging. Co-production of knowledge is a complex process and can often be frustrating to the partners, especially when they have to bridge different perspectives, values, types of knowledge, and ways of working. To overcome these challenges and effectively learn together, partners should feel ownership of the process and its outcomes.

We have reviewed how a range of transdisciplinary programmes and consortia have addressed these challenges in the past decade and hope that this guide will help future programmes and consortia to become more effective learning organisations, combining diverse forms of knowledge to respond effectively to the complex climate-related challenges of our time.

Consortia vary in focus and objectives. Some are primarily about **implementation** of specific interventions, often working at the grassroots level with vulnerable communities. Others are oriented more toward transdisciplinary **research** that aims to generate new and useable evidence. Others mainly aim to influence or support **policy formulation** (at local, national, or global levels). Many consortia include elements of two or all three of these focal areas. While some of the principles of working in consortia differ depending on the focus of a specific consortium, we hope that this guide will provide all readers with concrete examples to inform and inspire their practice.



### What is co-production?

The term co-production has been interpreted in many different ways. In the context of this guide, we use the term to describe the process of sharing learning and producing new knowledge while engaging with diverse groups of knowledge-holders. This could include

partners from different academic disciplines or representatives of different types of organisations or sectors. The learning process values all perspectives, and the endeavour is to jointly formulate new knowledge.



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Linking learning and practice in a consortium is a continuous process that often integrates past learning from other processes whilst envisaging the consortium's contribution far beyond the project timeframe. The ongoing work of communities of practice on certain aspects of climate change adaptation contributes to a body of knowledge that surpasses single programme and project results and embraces all existing aspects of theory and practice. A consortium should have ongoing engagement with the wider discourse around the issues we focus upon in order to contribute meaningfully to a larger community of practice.

The graphic below illustrates how the principles for working in consortia described in this guide are important in the lifespan of a consortium, and how the consortium is embedded in the wider environment/system, engaging with respective communities of practice in a continuous way.

## What is a community of practice?



For Etienne Wenger, learning is central to human identity. A primary focus of Wenger's work is on learning as social participation - the individual as an active participant in the practices of social communities and in the construction of his or her identity through these communities. From this understanding develops the concept of the community of practice: a group of individuals participating in communal activity, experiencing and continuously creating their shared identity by

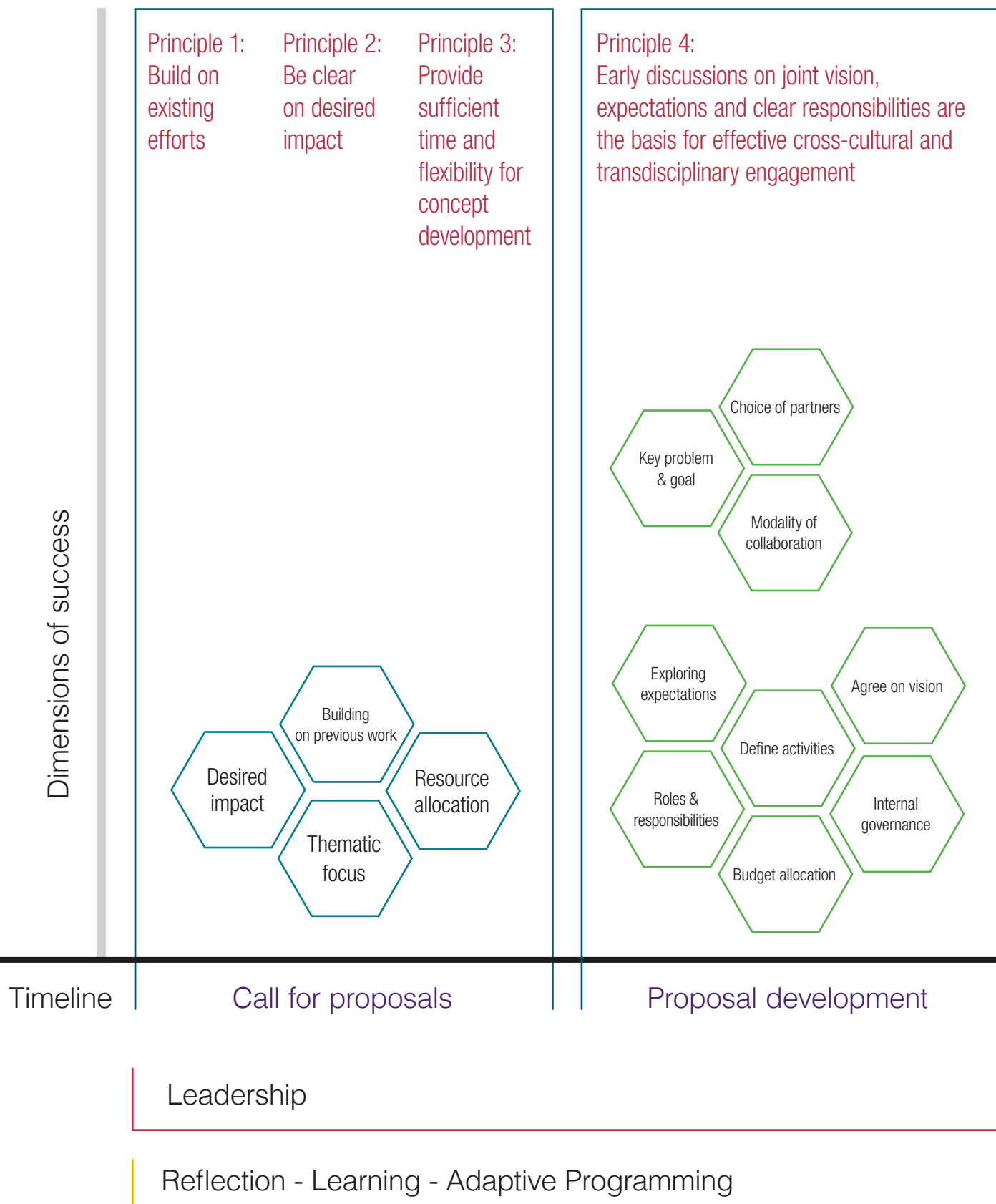
engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities (Wenger et al., 2002). Often individuals who contribute to the community of practice have been part of a specific thematic discourse (theoretical and/or practical) for many years. Active communities of practice use established mechanisms to share knowledge and develop the capacities of individuals in the field as well as contributing to the overall societal discourse the particular theme pertains to.



# Learning in Consortia

**Figure 1:**

Principles for supporting effective collaboration and learning throughout the project timeline.



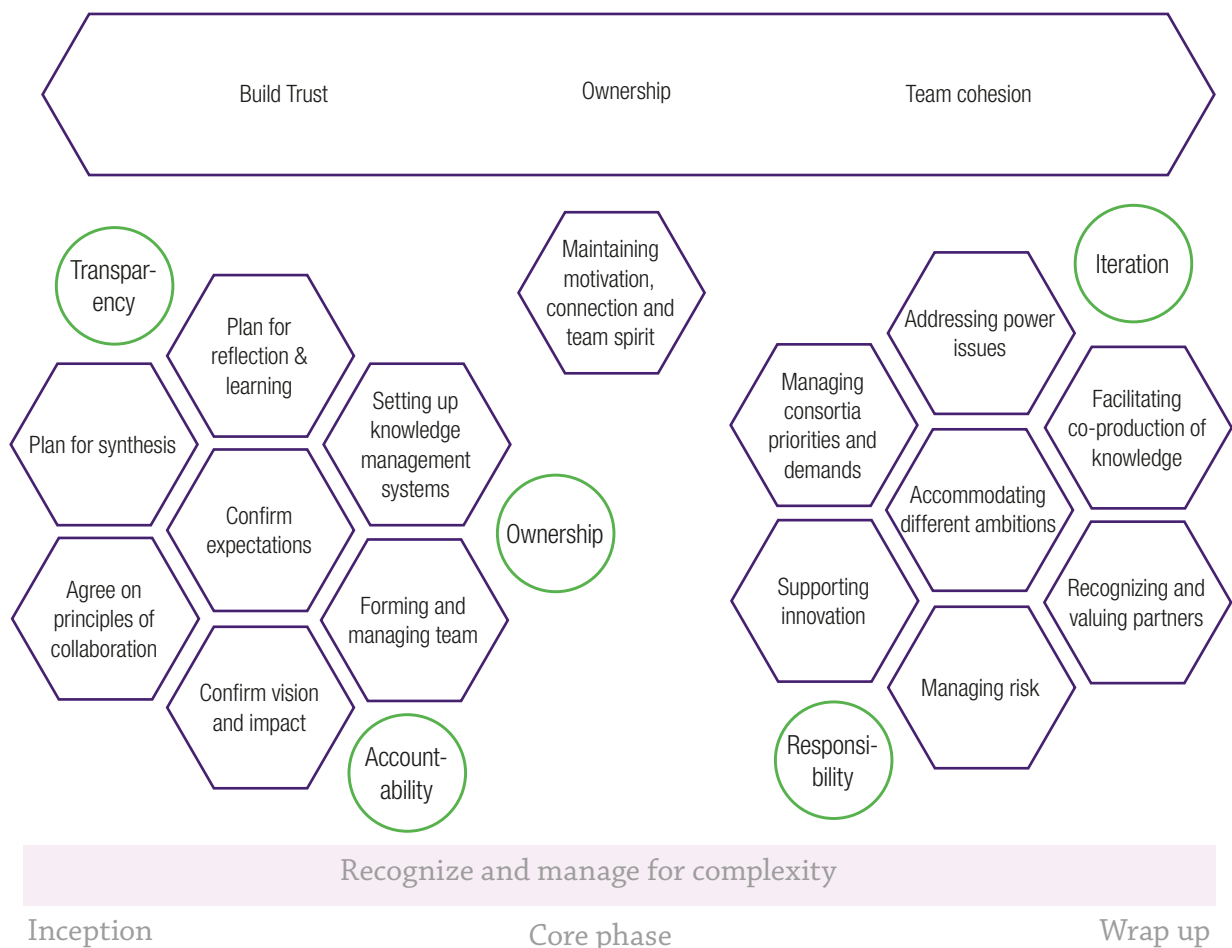


Principle 5:  
Build trust and strong relationships - it is key to unlocking effective transdisciplinary collaboration

Principle 6:  
Address diversity in the consortium by establishing a shared and transparent governance structure

Principle 7: Maintain motivation, connection and team spirit

Principle 8:  
Create and implement appropriate mechanisms for reflection, learning and course correction



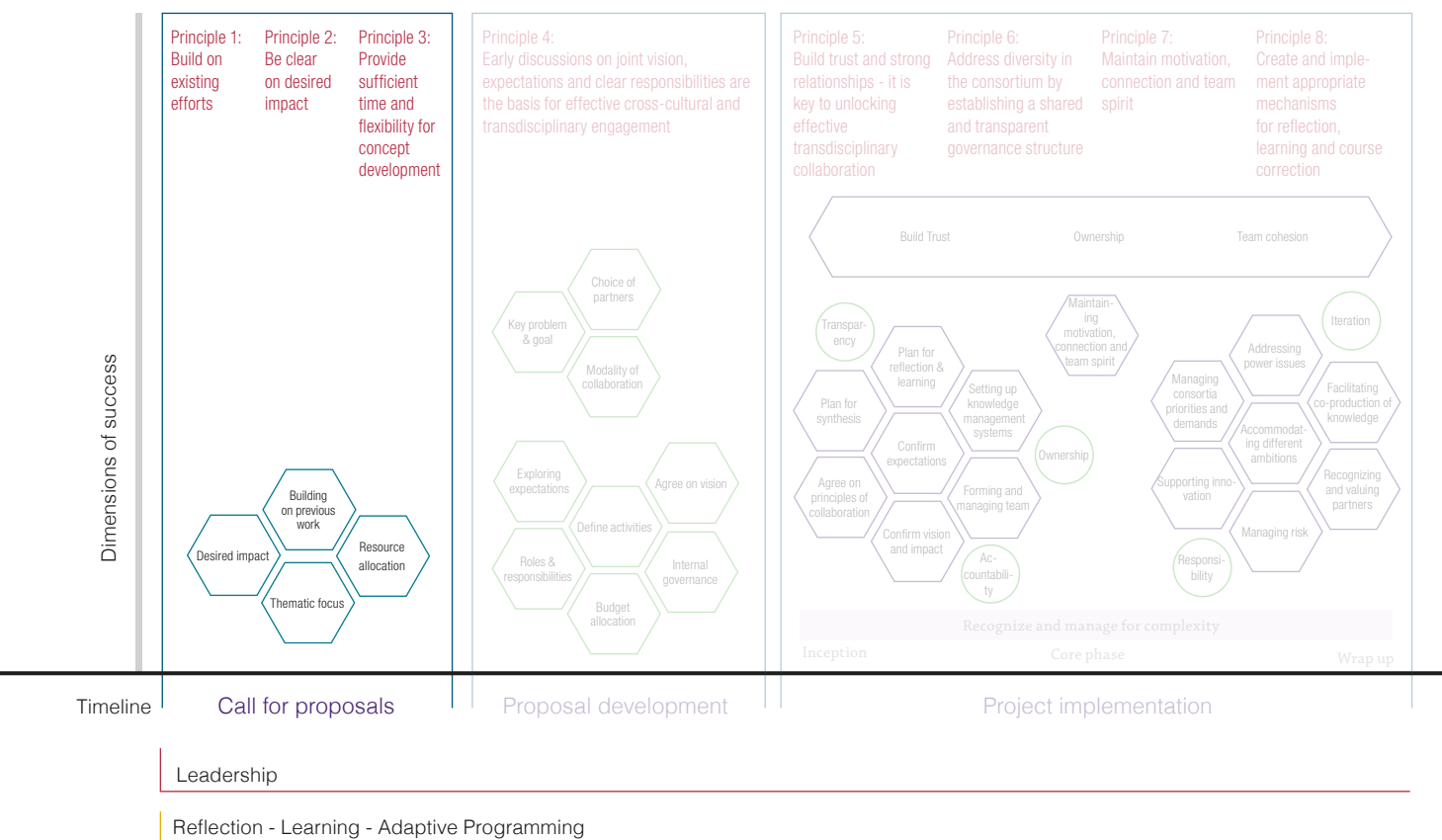
### Project implementation





## 2. Paving the way for effective and impactful consortia and projects: Calling for proposals

The call for proposals is fundamental in laying the foundations for effective collaboration across a range of stakeholders and can be instrumental in shaping inspiring and innovative learning processes in consortia. The principles that follow lay out a range of considerations that could assist donors and funders in this phase, though they will be equally interesting and applicable to project proposal developers.





### Principle 1: Build on existing efforts

#### What are key challenges?

- Funders often feel pressured to prioritise new approaches, ideas, or focus areas over supporting or building on ongoing existing processes, notwithstanding their potential contribution to the goals of the call.
- Similarly, calls for proposals (and the proposals themselves) sometimes appear to exist in a vacuum. They often fail to consider parallel work supported by other funders, existing initiatives that one could build on, or the development context and priorities as determined by national and/or global policy processes and local realities.

#### Possible action

- ▶ The definition of a clear **thematic focus** for the call for proposals is critical, as this is the point of departure that will likely determine the scope and emphasis of the consortium. While extensive scoping of ongoing local, regional, or global adaptation and development initiatives can be time-consuming, this will allow a programme to align more closely with existing initiatives. It would allow new proposals to contribute more effectively to currently implemented strategies and support local, national, or regional development pathways more effectively and sustainably, supporting a deeper understanding of complex systemic change.
- ▶ Consultative processes and dialogue between funders and relevant stakeholders (including prospective project proposal developers) around the thematic focus and scope of a call for proposals can strengthen programme relevance and local ownership and thus effectiveness of interventions.
- ▶ Calls for proposals should require a statement on how the proposed initiative builds on past initiatives, avoids replication or redundancy, and responds to local and national development priorities.
- ▶ The proposal development process should explore different types of knowledge (including traditional knowledge) and support their consideration and inclusion in the proposal development process.

#### Checklist

- ☐ Has the thematic focus of the call for proposals been identified in a consultative manner, building on past initiatives and considering national development pathways?
- ☐ Does the call for proposals support and not undermine local or national development pathways?
- ☐ Does the call for proposals require the recognition and integration of existing research and developmental efforts in the field?
- ☐ Does the proposal effectively include diverse types of knowledge?



## Principle 2: Be clear on desired impact

### What are key challenges?

- A programme's desired impact should be the key determinant of its length, and this will depend on whether its core focus is implementation, research, or policy influence. Funders often expect outcomes and impact in all three areas, in increasingly short periods of time.
- Funders often set unrealistic expectations about the time needed for project activities and outcomes to be integrated into ongoing processes that support national, regional, or global development pathways.
- Achieving impact often requires the ability to be flexible and responsive to windows of opportunity, which can conflict with rigid budgeting, implementing, or reporting systems (e.g. tied to strict monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems and log frames, where outcomes are predetermined and need to be closely adhered to).
- Funders should be aware that reporting on impact in policy and practice requires significantly different approaches to M&E than those traditionally used for programme delivery. This is due to the challenges around the issue of attribution versus contribution and the finite lifespan of a programme or project, which means that many of the more impactful results may be achieved once the project ends.
- Research-focused consortia may face challenges when seeking to implement research for impact programmes unless a strong element of co-design and knowledge co-production is included, and consortia partners extend beyond the academic realm.

### Possible action

- ▶ Calls for proposals need to be clear and realistic about the desired impact they wish project proposal developers to achieve, and funders should determine the **length of the programme** accordingly. In cases of research for impact programmes, sufficient time needs to be allowed to produce high-quality research *and* research uptake in policy and practice. Feedback from partners highlighted an ideal *minimum* of four years. Implementation- and policy-focused projects should plan for five and eight years respectively as a minimum threshold to result in sustainable and significant impact. Project proposal developers also need to think about and work towards impact throughout the project and not just once results have been produced (i.e. likely to be very close to the end of the project).
- ▶ In order to achieve longer-lasting impacts, projects need time to actively engage and consult with the wider community of practice and affected local stakeholders, share results as they emerge, and take on new lessons learnt from elsewhere.





## 2. Paving the way for effective and impactful consortia and projects: Calling for proposals

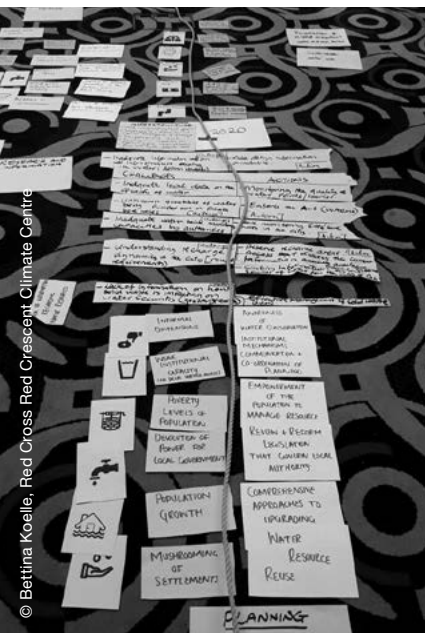
- ▶ Calls need to encourage consortia to include partners that are likely to contribute to the achievement of impact (e.g. practitioners, policy and government partners), and the use of participatory approaches, methods, and tools (e.g. co-design, co-production, experiential learning) that are likely to lead to uptake of project findings.
- ▶ Funders and project proposal developers need to have clarity on their broad desired results and impact, but ideally, there should be a degree of flexibility on how the results can be achieved and how responsive implementers can be to windows of opportunity. This is closely tied to issues of **adaptive management** and the design of M&E and learning systems. In addition, maintaining open lines of communication and building a relationship of trust between funders and project implementers is critical in this respect.
- ▶ Effective collaboration within transdisciplinary teams requires a certain amount of planning to achieve synthesis between different strands of the planned project and to ensure cross-pollination between different teams. It is important that this is not an afterthought but is an integral (and budgeted for) aspect of the overall consortium process, supported by all partners.

### Checklist

- ☐ Is the call for proposals realistic in its expectations of impact, in terms of length and nature of the project?
- ☐ Does the call for proposals require the formation of a diverse team (including the inclusion of different skills that increase the chances of impact)?
- ☐ Does the call for proposals require the inclusion of approaches and tools that are conducive to the achievement of impact?
- ☐ Are M&E systems and requirements sufficiently flexible and able to evolve alongside the project?
- ☐ To what extent is adaptive programming and learning encouraged (including in the allocation of budget)?
- ☐ What mechanisms are in place to track impact beyond the life of the project?
- ☐ Do strict requirements around the programme's thematic or geographical scope or team composition curtail or enhance opportunities for impact?



# Learning in Consortia



**Adaptive programming** is important when working in a complex system, with a diverse team, and in highly unpredictable environments that require innovation and flexibility to be able to respond to different challenges. It is crucial that effective reflection and learning processes within consortia are (i) encouraged through the call for proposals, (ii) resourced in the proposal development phase, and (iii) actively implemented during the operational phase of a programme or project.

Adaptive programming is often in direct contrast to rigid log frames and reporting requirements. It is important that the call for proposals encourages and allows for structures and processes that will actively support adaptive programming, which in turn supports effective and appropriate implementation. A theory of change developed by all partners can strengthen an approach of adaptive programming if it is supported by regular reflection and course-adjustment within the team and enabled by the conditions set by the funder.

In the same vein, **ways of learning** within the consortium should be planned for and implemented in a flexible manner, in consultation with the team and other external partners (e.g. from the community of practice) to ensure sound integration and systemic learning. It is important to consider budget implication - and make allowances for this in the call for proposals and consortium budget. This is particularly important as transdisciplinary learning processes are often most effective when undertaken in face-to-face meetings.



## Consortia for impact

It is important to be cognisant of potential factors that may be more conducive to achieving impact. These can include the geographical coverage of the consortium, the composition and reputation of partners, their history of prior collaboration, or the existing relationships that partners have with stakeholders on the ground. In the case of CARIIA, for example, the Himalayan Adaptation, Water and Resilience (HI-AWARE) Research consortium is working in four study

basins shared by four Himalayan countries that are geographically and culturally linked. The consortium is led by ICIMOD, an inter-governmental learning and knowledge-sharing centre with a strong reputation and robust relationships with policy actors in the region. This has created a fertile ground for the research activities and findings to contribute to ongoing national and regional policy processes, as well as impact on the ground through a series of pilots.



### BRACED insights:



Resilience-building is not determined just by what you do but how you do it. Implications for design: Project designs need to clearly show the pathway for identifying and assessing the logic, sequencing, and integration of the right combinations of activities and actors, in addition to a clear understanding of the processes that will lead to change. At the programme level, the theory of change (ToC) needs to provide an overarching vision while retaining some level of specificity of the projects' underlying assumptions.

(Source: Silva Villaneuva et al.: *Routes to Resilience -insights from BRACED final year, 2018*)



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### Partners for Resilience - Working with a theory of change

The Partners for Resilience programme started in 2011 with resilience-building activities on the ground. In the second phase of the programme, from 2016 to 2020, the participating consortia are focusing on capacity-building of civil society and lobby and advocacy work with a strong focus on knowledge management and evidence generation to support this. In the second phase, programme planning and reporting has changed from using a log frame to a theory of change. As such, the programme is steered much more by the implementing teams than the central coordination team or donor, and all

partners agree that this has brought benefits in terms of flexibility to apply adaptive programming in practice. This is especially important in the context of climate change adaptation and resilience-building, which does not follow a linear cause-and-effect relationship, and in lobby and advocacy work, where the context is continually changing over the duration of the project. As part of routine programme monitoring and evaluation, each country programme reviews its theory of change twice a year and is able to make changes to programmed activities.

### CARIAA

Adaptive programming was a key component of CARIAA's programme design, with significant resources available in an "Opportunities and Synergies Fund", which aimed to enable project partners to act on emerging windows of opportunity, fostering transdisciplinary collaboration and mutual learning around common problems (Cundill et al, 2018). One of the earliest approved initiatives was for the design of a learning framework to support consortia in their learning on the effectiveness of their research for impact activities (CARIAA, 2017).





## Principle 3: \_\_\_\_\_ Provide sufficient time and flexibility for concept development

### What are key challenges?

Calls for proposals often have rigid requirements with respect to the selection of partners, the timing and modality of putting a proposal together, and the way budgets are determined and allocated:

- Calls for proposals are often aimed at a specific geographical scope, at times in response to particular geopolitical pressures. This may push consortia to include a hotchpotch of partners (or a mix of diverse geographical and cultural contexts) that are not necessarily effective, compatible, or financially sound.
- Creating the space for collaborative proposal development processes can be challenging, especially when including diverse partners. Often project proposal developers do not have the resources to cover staff time for such activities; face-to-face meetings are expensive and often time-consuming, especially when dealing with diverse teams from different geographical regions.
- The proposal development process is often dominated by the more influential key partners, and some local (often less influential) partners might not have full ownership of the developed proposal. This can lead to conflict in the implementation stage.
- The time frame in which calls for proposals and guidance documents are decided on and released is often inadequate for enabling effective consortium-building and implementation.







### Possible action

- ▶ Encouraging a flexible scope while including some basic minimum requirements around the geographical scope, number of partners, and size of projects might allow partners to propose innovative partnership modalities, building on past experience.
- ▶ The call for proposals should encourage diversity. Depending on the desired impact and programmatic focus, including a mix of different perspectives (including partners with expertise in implementation, research, or policy focus) will contribute to innovation, cross-sectoral learning, and a varied skill set that can lead to more effective responses.
- ▶ Funders should financially support full proposal development processes and encourage the participation of all partners.
- ▶ Enough time should be allowed for collaborative processes of proposal development if these are to set the foundations for effective consortium-building and implementation.
- ▶ Funders should be cognisant of the impact of different models of financial management on the effectiveness of a partnership, including how conducive this is to promote learning and sustainable impact or results.

### Checklist

- ☐ Does the call allow for flexible scope of proposals, including in the selection of consortium partners?
- ☐ Is adequate resourcing provided for the proposal development process? Does such resourcing support all partners to actively engage in the proposal development process and to have full ownership of the proposal?
- ☐ Has the proposal development process effectively included all partners in a process of co-creation?
- ☐ Are project proposal developers encouraged to be innovative in the process of proposal development?
- ☐ Is adequate time provided for project proposal development?
- ☐ Have the pros and cons of different models of financial management been acknowledged and used to determine the most adequate way forward?



## Existing team vs new alliances?

The composition of teams is important and will shape a range of aspects, from the programme's effectiveness to the ways in which learning takes place within a consortium. Paying adequate attention to this is relevant both for donors, who are defining requirements in their calls for proposals, and for proposal development leads, who may be tasked with inviting individuals or organisations to join a collaboration.

When supporting the formation of teams, it is important to consider that existing teams can be very effective in working

together if they have succeeded in finding a common language and established a culture of collaboration and learning. New alliances can be more challenging and may require more time to reach a productive working style that includes all partners. However, new alliances can give new impulses and produce innovative results due to the new perspectives brought by a more diverse range of partners.

In the IDRC-funded Climate Change and Water programme, a series of projects were encouraged to include policy-makers as well as researchers

in their consortia. An end-of-project workshop brought together the transdisciplinary teams from across Asia and South America to reflect on their experiences of working together. Policy-makers and researchers noted how it had been necessary to exhibit empathy for each other's contexts when learning to work together. Teams of policy-makers and researchers or transdisciplinary communities of practice that had previously worked together often chose to participate jointly in the project to build on shared learning (Vincent et al, 2018).



## Centralised vs decentralised budget holders for adaptive programming? Thoughts on financial management models

Discussions around budgets can often reveal power struggles and tensions within consortia and can strongly influence different partners' levels of engagement. Financial management of consortia can follow

- (i) a centralised model, whereby one lead organisation manages the core consortium budget and liaises with partners around resource allocation;
- (ii) a decentralised model, whereby each partner organisation holds its own budget and is responsible for

financial reporting to the donor; (iii) a mixed model, whereby the consortium lead and a number of institutional partners have a dedicated budget for the duration of the project, while other organisations are brought in by these lead partners to support specific aspects of the project. It is important to note that each of these models results in different impacts on collaboration, power dynamics, accountability, levels of ownership, ease of implementation (e.g. administrative burden),

degree of adaptive programming and innovation, etc. For example, while a centrally managed budget offers more control to the lead organisation, it can also result in feelings of frustration or loss of ownership of the consortium processes and results among the other partners. A decentralised budget will avoid repeated budget negotiations, but it relies on the commitment of all partners to contribute to the overall objectives and to support adaptive programming.



## 2. Paving the way for effective and impactful consortia and projects: Calling for proposals



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“One of the most valuable experiences within DECCMA was meeting some very nice people who I would like to collaborate with in the future”

*(DECCMA Researcher)*

“One of the most valuable experiences within DECCMA was working with a huge array of experts within the international development arena: the networks and relationships I have built within the consortium and programme will be maintained and useful for future projects.”

*(DECCMA project management team member)*



“Knowing what other consortiums are doing, learning from their experiences, that is very useful. A variety of people, with a variety of experiences and expertise. They are helping us.”

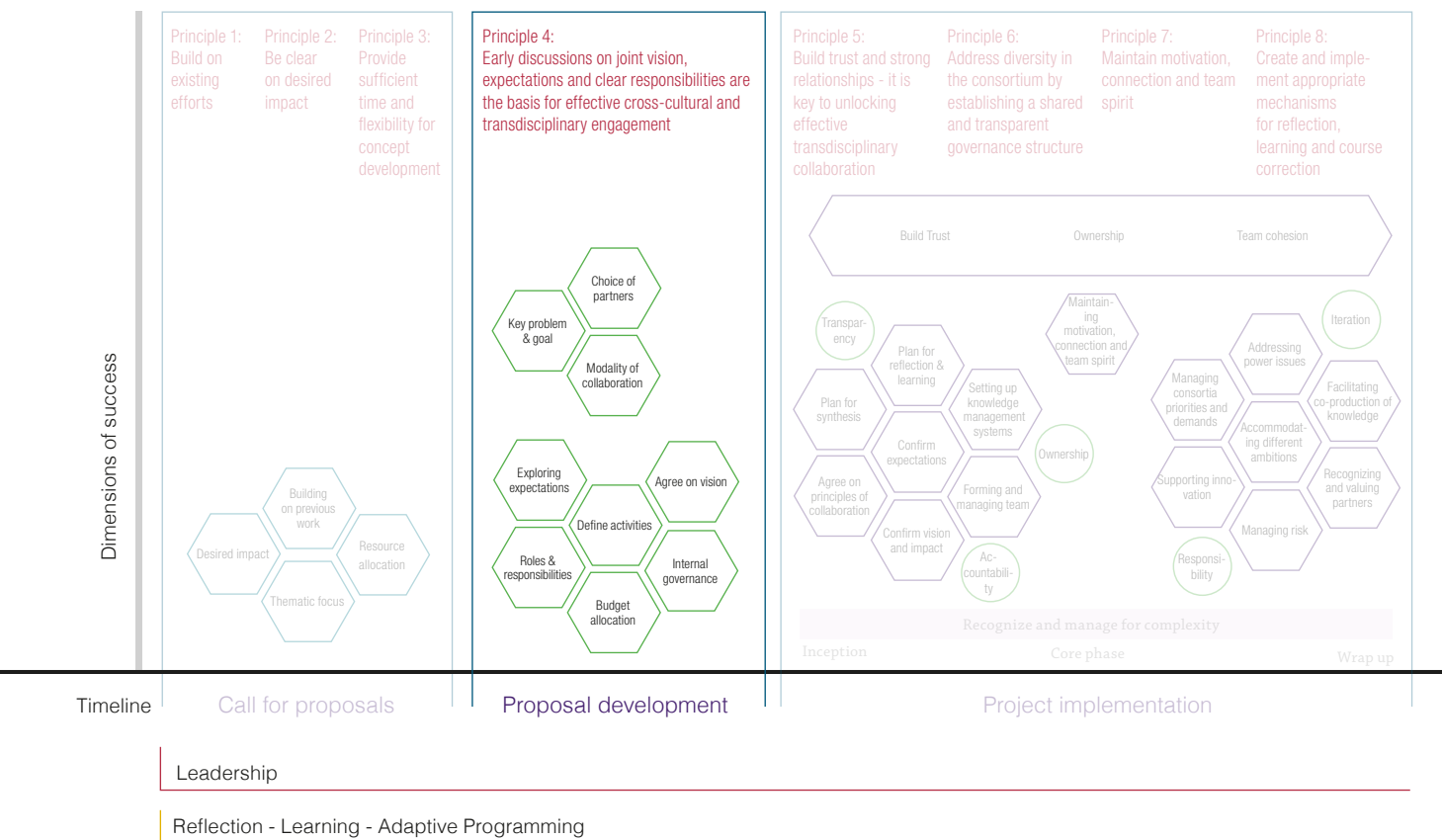
*(BRACED practitioner)*

“Regardless of the funding model, transparency is required. As one DECCMA researcher said, “*I feel that policy governing consortium-based funding needs to be discussed openly to make it publicly available.*”



## 3. Designing effective consortia and projects - Concept note and proposal development phase

The development of a concept note and proposal in response to a funding call lays the foundation for future collaboration within the team. In this **formative stage**, the basic **pillars of collaboration and trust** are established, and important decisions are taken on the scope of the project. As these processes often take place under time pressure, it is often easy to forgo important processes and tools that will ease collaboration, learning, or adaptive programming. However, these need to be an integral part of the initial plan in order to be adequately resourced, supported, and owned by all consortium members.







## Principle 4:

Early discussions on joint vision, expectations, and clear responsibilities are the basis for effective cross-cultural and transdisciplinary engagement

### What are key challenges?

- Proposal-writing processes are often unfunded and confined to tight timeframes. Consequently, many organisations are not in the position to contribute adequate resources (time, funds, and “mental space”) to participate effectively in proposal development processes. They rely on the expertise and capacity of the initiating partner organisations.
- The process of designing and forming a consortium generally takes place in the context of uncertainty as to whether the proposal will actually be successful. This means that proposals are often put together under pressure, by a limited set of partners (or individuals) who can set time aside, without paying adequate attention to a number of critical elements that will lay a solid base for the development and implementation of a programme or project (see below).
- A highly competitive process can place a burden on participating organisations, as some partners are competing with organisations within the same community of practice and therefore possibly undermining current or future collaboration within a certain thematic field.
- The range of partners that project proposal developers select is often determined by the call for proposals. At times, this means that new partners are included without being clear about how they will collaborate effectively. Barriers between individuals from different cultural, disciplinary, or language backgrounds might lead to the establishment of dysfunctional consortia if inadequate attention is paid to creating the preconditions for collaboration at an early stage.

### Possible action

Composing a consortium team and drafting the initial proposal is a delicate process, which requires collective attention and agreement on a number of matters. Ideally this should happen face to face.

- ▶ The **development of a joint vision and formulation of key objectives** should be soundly rooted in ongoing processes and practice and ideally be supported by a consultative process with the community of practice or project beneficiaries. The formulation of a theory of change can support teams to agree on their vision and underpinning strategic principles, assumptions, and activities, and it will support the project implementation process. While this step might be time-consuming and challenging, it is an important prerequisite to effective working and learning in consortia. If the common vision is not ensured at the proposal-writing stage, the consortium will have to return to this in the inception phase and might have to repeat the planning process to ensure all partners are on board.
- ▶ **Clarity on expectations:** It is critical to explore and discuss different partners' expectations as early as possible, including what partners would like to achieve (e.g. desired impact), how they would *expect* and *like* the consortium to work, what they are prepared to commit to, what skills they bring to the partnership, and what goes beyond their organisational niche, budgetary issues, etc. In addition, it's a sound idea to discuss clearly as a group



# Learning in Consortia

what being part of a consortium implies (e.g. commitment to working collaboratively and comparatively, the difference between working in single disciplinary teams versus multidisciplinary consortia) and the amount of additional time that partners will need to dedicate to the coordination and administrative aspects of the project.

- ▶ It is key to define **activities and a timeline**, which should include learning activities, monitoring and evaluation elements, reporting requirements, knowledge management, and engagement with the wider community of practice. Similarly, **allocation of roles and responsibilities** within the consortium, based on the range of skills, expectations, and interests that different partners bring to the table, is a key step that needs to be discussed in the proposal development phase. Often, depending on the call for proposals, this detailed planning process can take place once the proposal has been awarded or as part of a proposal development grant (after approval of the concept note).
- ▶ In the proposal development stage, partners should hold the first round of discussions about the **modality of collaboration** (including ways of agreeing on project topic, focus, size, contents, roles) and consortium **governance structure** (including mechanisms designed to deal with internal conflict and tensions). Developing a governance structure prior to implementation can help avoid misunderstandings and frustration within the consortium team later on. This can then be reviewed from time to time and adjusted as part of the adaptive programming cycle of the consortium.
- ▶ A critical aspect in proposal development, which is often a source of tension between partners, is the

negotiation around **budgets**. It is important that the lead organisation facilitates the budget discussion with all partners in a collegial and transparent manner, while ensuring that the resultant budget is realistic. Depending on the organisational structure, the project lead is often the budget holder and therefore is responsible for effective project delivery of the overall consortium (depending on its financial model). This can lead to tensions with other consortium partners, and it is important that these are resolved during the budget negotiations so as to ensure that the consortium members are clear on their roles and responsibilities, have a good understanding of the actual processes, and feel able to implement their contribution within the available budget.

- ▶ Key issues to consider in the **allocation of different budget lines** are ensuring that sufficient funds are kept for face-to-face meetings (critical for initial relationship-building and making progress in the work) and for M&E, knowledge management, and learning. It is also important to think about the proportion of full-time versus part-time staff to be included, as creating a large consortium with many people with a small proportion of time (e.g. less than 10%) allocated to the project often just adds to administrative and coordination burdens while bringing little added value. The issue of sub-contracts with local partners (in the case of decentralised or mixed budget methods) should also be discussed openly, clarifying a range of expectations from power issues to financial reporting. If the donor allows, a degree of flexibility in the budget should be maintained for responding to unexpected opportunities (e.g. tied to impact), to support synthesis, and to allow adaptive programming to be implemented effectively.



#### Checklist

- ☐ Is there a clear agreement on a joint vision and how the different partners are going to contribute towards this?
- ☐ Has the team agreed on how it will work together, and does this account for the extra challenges posed by the multiple disciplines involved and the degree of coordination required for such large-scale endeavours?
- ☐ Have budgets been formulated jointly and agreed to between partners?
- ☐ Do activities and budget consider face-to-face time, learning, M&E, and knowledge management?
- ☐ Have consortium partners made their expectations clear, and do they feel they are equal partners?



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“One of my most valuable learnings in ASSAR is around the enormous transaction costs – time, travel, interpersonal – involved in such a large project. My learning has been:

- (i) make sure you have the resources for these transaction costs;
- (ii) the importance of full-time people rather than small bits of many people, because of the delays that happen when many people are needed on a task, but they are all working small bits of time not at the same time;
- (iii) the importance of ensuring a shared approach is agreed as soon as possible after a consortium grant is landed –not something that can be taken for granted as emerging from the (often frantic) process of proposal development.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

“There is too much to digest and act on, especially considering the amount of time allocated to the project –4 days a month.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

“It is critical to first agree [to] the rules of engagement, reporting, and responsibilities top down and bottom up. When a large number of senior members of a team have already worked together on similar project(s), you cannot assume that the same approach will work for a new project”

*DECCMA Researcher*





## Why discuss expectations and the importance of reflection?

During a reflection session held during the last annual meeting of ASSAR, project members were asked to say what they wish they had known before the beginning of their involvement in the project. Here are some responses:

“I wish I had known...

... what was expected from me.”

... that partner x was rubbish and that I had not invited them into the consortium.”

... the complexity of the ASSAR project before... I may have prepared myself mentally differently.”

... about research into use before I started working on ASSAR; I would have designed the project differently.”

... the volume of work required in ASSAR.”

... more about how collaborative projects function.”

... more about ‘interdisciplinary research’ and ‘adaptation’.”

... the importance of developing relationships first rather than outputs/ workflows.”



## It is never too early to think about leadership

Leadership in consortia is a key ingredient in facilitating effective collaboration and transdisciplinary learning. It is important that a clear structure supports ownership and participation of all partners and that the leadership function facilitates a process of joint decision-making, reflection, and learning, drawing on all strengths and skills within the team. The project leader needs to be able to motivate, inspire, and keep the team engaged. One of the most challenging aspects of leadership in large-scale collaborations is maintaining the delicate balance between keeping in mind the big picture about what the consortium intends to achieve and knowing enough about the different pieces that make up the project to be able to work cohesively and achieve maximum impact in a strategic manner. Thinking about different leadership styles is also important, and we would like to encourage consortia at an early stage to be clear about what type of leadership would best support collaboration and effectiveness in a specific group of partners.



“From an organisational point of view, I’ve learnt how important leadership is to the success of a consortium-style project. Through their actions, leaders either inspire or demotivate staff members and either promote or hinder effective working environments. Their actions, therefore, have a direct bearing on the project’s overall productivity and success.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

“I am still not sure if a consortium as large as ASSAR is just too big – perhaps something half the size might have hit the sweet spot in terms of advantages of consortium work versus advantages of being small and nimble and manageable.”

*ASSAR survey participant*



## Which partners to include in a consortium?



As mentioned before, the choice of partners to include in a consortium can be tricky, especially given funder requirements in the call for proposals. Risky decisions may need to be made between including known partners with whom a good working relationship exists, and bringing in new partners with different skills, institutional mandates, or strategic expertise. The number of partners in a consortium is critical, and it is important to be well balanced to ensure diversity of stakeholders, skills and expertise, balance in terms of gender and of

southern and northern perspectives, and a composition of research and practice that matches the consortium goal. Depending on the aim and objective of the consortium, anywhere between three and ten partner organisations can be effective if they have appropriate learning mechanisms in place and include all necessary perspectives and skills. It is important to be cognisant of power issues that may result from gender and south-north issues and to address these openly as early as possible.

## BRACED insights:



Key ingredients of success

for improving knowledge, understanding, and commitment towards climate and disaster resilience

### **Knowledge sources:**

A variety of different types and sources of knowledge is critical to ensuring it is relevant and context-specific, achieving buy-in and ownership at all levels in order to effect change.

**Actors:** Engaging and working with the right actors (either those with technical knowledge or who are locally trusted) is essential to support changes in behaviour and uptake of new practices.

(Source: Silva Villaneuva, P et al: *Routes to Resilience -insights from BRACED final year, 2018*)

## Knowledge management



In order to effectively contribute towards the wider community of practice, it is important to plan for effective **knowledge management** at the level of the programme and consortium. Ideally the knowledge management component supports, facilitates, and stimulates effective learning within and across the different consortium members and the wider community of practice, in addition to documenting outputs, outcomes, and impact, and facilitating internal and external communications. Many tools can be used to promote effective knowledge management,

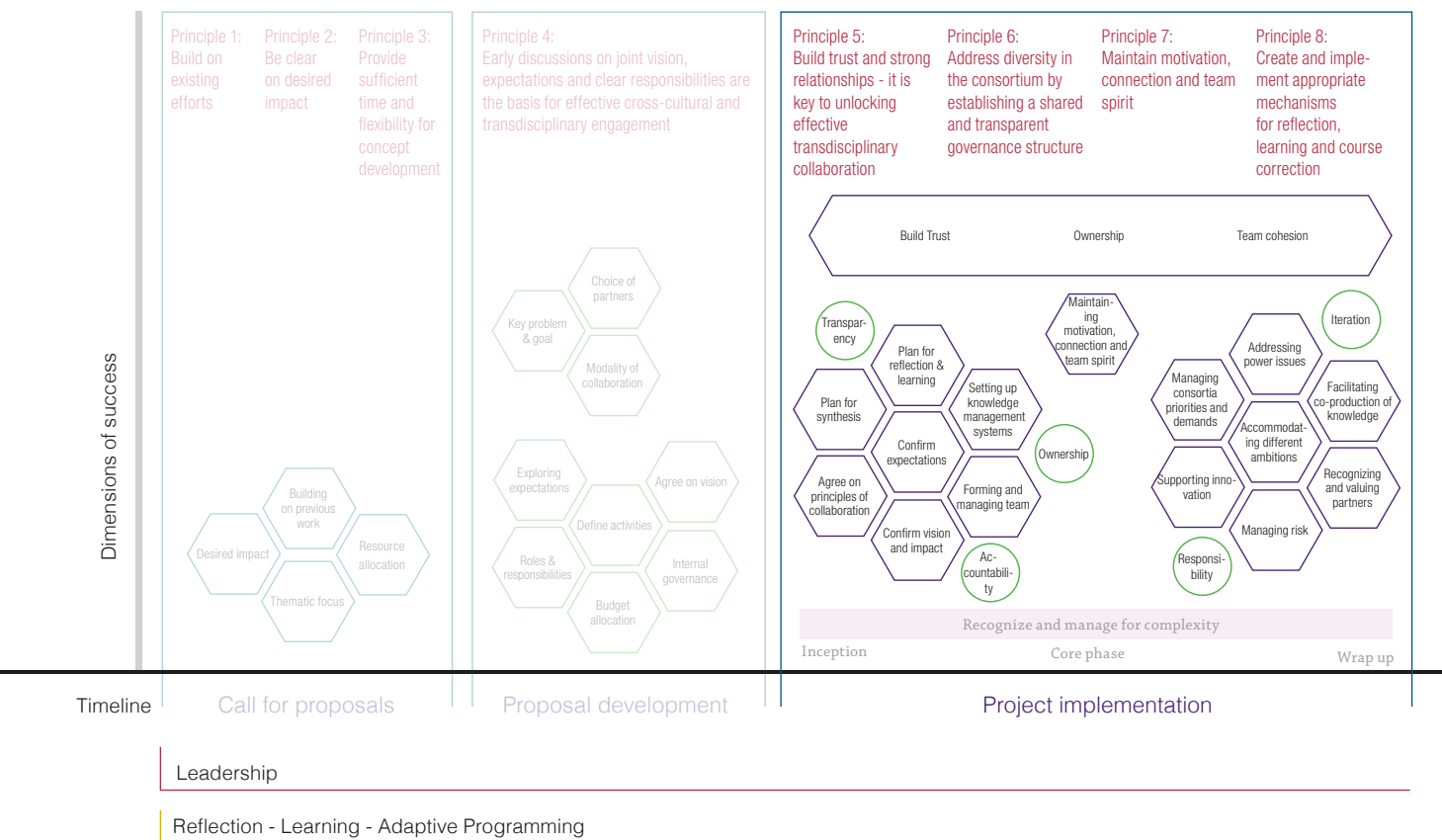
and different models have been applied in existing programmes. While the overall objective of most knowledge management functions focuses on cross-programme learning and facilitation of learning and uptake of project outputs, the way this is implemented will vary significantly.

It is important that participation in the programmatic knowledge management is a joint responsibility of all partners and that provisions are made in budgets and work plans to support this engagement.



## 4. Implementing transdisciplinary projects - Project inception and implementation phase

The success of the implementation phase depends to a large degree on the groundwork put in place during the design and proposal-development process. If the foundation is solid, many of the necessary structures and processes will already be clear and need only be implemented. However, if the process of proposal development was rushed, and the partners were not able to contribute adequate time and energy to planning the project, it is important to do so at the earliest opportunity during the **inception phase** and to start building a strong team while putting in place effective mechanisms for learning.





### Principle 5: Build trust and strong relationships – it is key to unlocking effective transdisciplinary collaboration

#### What are key challenges?

- Consortia often include many new partners that have not worked together before, coming from a range of different disciplines, cultures, geographies, and institutional mandates, making collaboration tricky unless there is a specific investment in building trust.
- Relationship-building is often overlooked and taken for granted, as focus is often placed exclusively on deliverables and achieving project goals and objectives.
- Large-scale transdisciplinary collaborations often comprise partners that are geographically dispersed and span a number of countries and time zones. Insensitive handling of the challenges posed by working remotely across diverse teams can undermine effective collaboration.
- Unresolved conflict within teams can lead to the undermining of trust, weakened relationships, and poor collaboration, ultimately resulting in less effective outcomes and lower impact.

#### Possible action

- ▶ During the inception phase of a project, it is important to start by **confirming the vision, the desired impact, partners' expectations, and activities and processes** for the coming years. As these discussions will invariably have linkages to the planning of budgets and time allocations, the beginning of a learning journey should ensure the establishment of sound partnership relations alongside the planning process.
- ▶ Establishing a sound team, based on **trust, ownership, and team cohesion**, is one of the most important investments that one can make at the beginning of a project, particularly if new partners that have not worked together before are involved. Formal and informal activities that contribute to such aims are critical.
- ▶ The importance of **face-to-face meetings** has been acknowledged by many teams, and while often expensive and logistically challenging, it is an important investment to ensure sound working and relationship-building within the team.
- ▶ At this stage, it is also advisable to **co-develop the values upon which the collaboration** between partners is built, e.g. respect for contributions, appreciation of differing perspectives, transparency within the team, etc. If these have been well articulated, they will not only provide a sound basis for collaboration but will also facilitate processes of self-correction when tensions or conflicts arise. Subsequently, regular check-ins, maintenance, and processes that support internal learning and reflection are critical for effectively working together, to achieve transdisciplinary learning, and to draw on the diversity of knowledge of all project partners.
- ▶ Building relationships and trust in a new team can be supported by the **design of interactive and experiential learning processes** at regular intervals. Designing these processes with the consortium members (or at least a delegated smaller team of partners) will strengthen ownership of these learning processes and allow for a vibrant design that addresses the learning agenda and focuses on project deliverables and contents.



# Learning in Consortia

## Checklist

- ☐ Has face-to-face time been adequately budgeted for, especially during the inception phase, to build trust and team cohesion?
- ☐ Do partners feel ownership of consortium vision, processes, and results?
- ☐ Have joint values that will underlie the implementation of the project been jointly developed?
- ☐ Are mechanisms in place to address surfacing tensions or conflict, and for reflection?
- ☐ Is the team able to resolve conflicts and learn from this process?
- ☐ Do all partners feel they are considered in the project's governance and implementation?



## Building trust within organisations - Principles for effective partnerships

Building trust within a consortium and between individuals is an important enabling factor to work collaboratively and across disciplines and cultures. This process is ideally a continuous one, supported by putting systems in place that promote collaboration and mutual support and that safeguard against actions that could undermine trust.

It is useful to design learning processes that ensure a sound working team that is able to reflect, learn, and adapt in the course of the learning journey. There are many useful exercises to help this process along, and new teams might consider engaging an external facilitator to guide them.





“Collaborating with partners with different subject and institutional backgrounds was one of the biggest challenges, which resulted in a lot of time spent in gaining trust and understanding. Also, finding common ground in research questions and methodologies as well as the problem of scales in terms of data –climate scientists vis-à-vis social scientists.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

“I think the most essential ingredients for working across very different institutions are trust and transparency. Trust is something that has to be built over a period of time, but for it to happen, transparency is essential. There should also be a strong and clear leadership for this model to work. I think the desired impact of such large undertaking must clearly be outlined at the start of the project, and everything has to follow that.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

“Strong partnerships and trust have been slow to develop due to the lack of time spent together. Google Hangout and emails take much longer to develop trust than handshakes and hugs.”

*ASSAR survey participant*



### Joint vision and trust need to be established at all levels - the Partners for Resilience case

Especially in large, multi-country consortia, it is important to invest in a joint vision and partnership relations at multiple levels. In a competitive environment where consortia have to balance being ambitious enough to get a grant and realistic enough to be able to deliver on the proposed activities, it is important that decentralised teams are not overlooked. If a consortium agrees with the proposed course of action and has established trust only at the headquarter level, but not at a decentralised (e.g. country) level, there is a real risk for implementation. In multi-country programmes, the level of success of agreeing to a joint vision and building a partnership will vary from country to country. However, the importance of these decentralised processes, leading to ownership, understanding, and trust should be emphasised. This is especially pertinent when programmes are complex, innovative, and ambitious.

The Partners for Resilience Alliance is currently in the second five-year phase. Starting from the proposal stage of each of the phases, emphasis was placed on organising country process workshops, for prospective partners to get to know each other and agree on a way of working. This included, for example, joint assessments and problem analyses, geographic selection and work plans. In the countries where partners had previously worked together in the same or a similar constellation, there was initially a marked difference in how quickly implementation could start.





## Principle 6: \_\_\_\_\_ Address diversity in the consortium by establishing a shared and transparent governance structure

### What are key challenges?

- Large consortia invariably bring together diverse personalities and styles of communicating, engaging, and working. This can lead to tensions and conflict, as well as delays tied to differences in style and the efforts required to address these. It is critical to jointly develop a governance system that guides how the consortium works together.
- If the governance systems are not understood and embraced by all members of a consortium, internal tensions, distrust, and conflict may arise. Governance principles sometimes reflect only the values and mechanisms that the lead organisation(s) or funder deem appropriate, and which are imposed on all partners within the consortium in a top-down manner.
- Collaboration can be undermined by rigid and inflexible governance or budget structures.
- Time zones, language preferences, varying access to virtual communication (including issues around internet speed, power stability, etc.) and issues of accessibility (e.g. transport, ability to obtain a visa for reaching a joint team meeting) can severely limit participation of certain partners. The lead organisation's or funder's assumptions and expectations may not hold in the context of less resourced partners or areas with less developed technical or organisational infrastructure.

### Possible action

- ▶ Agreeing on the **internal governance system** and **principles of collaboration** in a transparent, collaborative way is critical to establish a shared modality of working together synergistically. It is important to discuss how decision-making will be undertaken, responsibilities shared, accountability and transparency ensured, processes of reflection and learning integrated, etc. While it is important that all partners have ownership of the overall process and are clear about their level and way of engagement, the degree of formalisation of such agreements (e.g. through a written partnership agreement, an MoU, a verbal agreement) is up to individual consortia.
- ▶ **Working styles and cultures:** While creating a team environment that appreciates this diversity and supports these different styles is important, one should not be naive about the additional time and effort such dedicated processes require. This should therefore be a consideration when it comes to deciding and committing



## 4. Implementing transdisciplinary projects - Project inception and implementation phase

to a project's deliverables, as levels of ambition need to be realistic and correlated to the constraints imposed by the partnership. At the same time, it may be necessary to discuss minimum requirements and standards for effective collaboration (e.g. relating to response timeframes, delivery of cross-partner outputs, rules around authorship), which can be formalised in a partnership agreement.

- ▶ **Geographical disparities:** It is critical to consider the limitations posed by different time zones, languages, access to communication technologies, and issues of accessibility when planning for effective collaboration. It is advisable to openly discuss the power differentials that result from these differences and to address them specifically, e.g. by providing additional support to certain partners. Once again, such considerations are important when committing to certain deliverables and processes, to ensure the project is being realistic with respect to what its partners can achieve.

- ▶ **Conflict management:** When working in consortia, it is important to establish mechanisms for

### Checklist

- ☐ Are governance structures clear and transparent and understood by all partners?
- ☐ Are the constraints imposed by different working styles and geographical disparities adequately addressed (to the extent they can be) and accounted for?
- ☐ Can project members address tensions or conflict within the consortium effectively?
- ☐ Are crises and conflict recognised as opportunities to improve learning and organisational structure or consortium performance?

surfacing and managing tensions and conflict in the team as early as possible, such as through integrating reflection processes and implementing regular health-checks that will allow consortium members to express any frustrations they may have. If conflicts are not addressed, they can seriously hamper the ability of a consortium to work effectively and to create synergies between different types of knowledge. These processes provide an excellent opportunity for learning from crises, conflict and failure, addressing the challenges in innovative and effective ways, and for adaptive management.

- ▶ In the course of the consortium's lifetime, it is important to **regularly reflect on these principles and the processes of collaboration** and to jointly tweak and adjust them as needed.





## Anukulan/BRACED

The project was implemented in Nepal in January 2015; it builds resilience and adaptive capacity of more than 500,000 poor and vulnerable people. The project aims especially to support women and children suffering from climate extremes and disasters in Western Nepal. It is rated as one of the best performing projects among the fifteen BRACED projects implemented in Asia and Africa. One of the major reasons for this success is the effectiveness of collaboration within the consortium, harnessing the contributions of the partners.

Led by iDE (International Development Enterprises), the project has seventeen partners –seven international partners, four national partners, and six local-level partners. The consortium is multi-disciplinary with a mix of research organisations, universities, thematic experts, and implementing organisations. With clear roles and responsibilities, accountability and line of command, the project partners meet regularly, share knowledge and experiences, participate in national and international events, and contribute to enrichment of the overall project performance.

The key lessons learnt from the Anukulan consortium are:

- The consortium partners should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
- There should be openness and transparency in decision-making.
- There should be regular meetings, consultation, and sharing of learning, plans, and progress among the partners.
- Issues and concerns should be addressed promptly in a participatory manner.
- Due recognition and respect for each other's contribution is necessary.
- Periodic meetings at senior levels are important to discuss and decide about all aspects of the project including coordination and institutional issues.
- There should be frankness in dealing with inconsistencies, if any.
- It is necessary to foster project identity and everyone's ownership in the project –unity in diversity.
- There is a need to develop a single project reporting structure.

## Diversified governance structures in BRACED



In the PRIME project in Ethiopia, Mercy Corps is the consortium lead, but the project is divided into five technical components to which all consortium members contribute. However, each of these is managed by a different lead organisation, resulting in a flatter and more decentralised management structure.

It is important to point out that governance structures of various consortia within one programme can vary, in order to accommodate the partners and objectives of the respective consortia.



### In consortia, power issues can play out in many different ways

It is critical to openly recognise, discuss, and address, to the extent possible, the different forms in which power is held and manifested in a consortium. This can play out in a number of ways, such as through disciplinary biases, differences between lead partners and sub-partners (e.g. in how decisions are taken, or opportunities made available), between researchers and practitioners, through issues of language, gender, and north-south divides, etc. Issues of power and unaddressed frustration, tensions, or conflict can undermine effective collaboration in consortia and need to be discussed openly through health checks, reflection processes, and if needed, formal conflict mediation.

*In the case of ASSAR, survey participants referred to power issues in the following ways:*

*“Sometimes, [a problem was] the tendency of disciplinary bias and dominance of certain research lenses/ approaches over others, which is a common challenge in any interdisciplinary team.”*

*“Too much time spent in conveying ideas and convincing scientists and partners having different subject backgrounds; sometimes opportunities are skewed in favour of lead partners (maybe due to the nature of contracts and funds availability).”*

*“As with all things involving human interactions, politics does come into play; attempting to balance egos and expectations to come out with useful end products has sometimes been a challenge.”*

*“ASSAR is male-dominated at levels of influence.”*

### Challenges tied to different working styles, geographies, and cultures in the ASSAR project



Halfway through the ASSAR project, a survey was conducted across all consortium members to ask what they had learned to date, what had been lowlights and highlights of their time in ASSAR, and challenges and benefits of working in a consortium. The issue of differences in working styles and cultures stood out across a number of responses:

*“All members of the consortium work in different ways (e.g. work culture, organisational structure). It is a challenging yet useful experience.”*

*“One of the biggest challenges has been the delays in delivery from key researchers on manuscripts, and differing ideas of productivity.”*

*“A challenge has been working in tight timeframes, particularly on inter-region collaborative work where not all participants are as keen or interested in participating towards collaborative research.”*

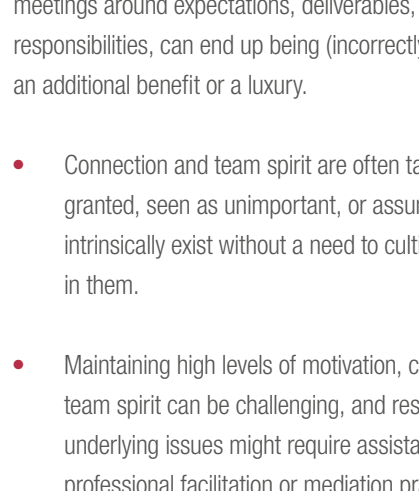
*Keeping up/down with multiple institutions’ pace. So much is lost in translation while working across different contexts and disciplines.”*

*“Staying focused when feeling as though some meetings are very dragged out and inefficient (and the need to reflect on whether this is in fact just a feature of different ‘cultural’ styles).”*





## What are key challenges?

- If insufficient time and attention have been dedicated to building relationships and to agreeing on a transparent governance structure, clear joint vision, objectives, overall framework, activities and workplan, consortium members may feel lost about what the project intends achieving and how they are meant to contribute. This may lead to frustration and a feeling of disconnect in the team.
  - Dispersed teams that are divided by geographical, time-zone, logistical (e.g. access to technology), disciplinary (e.g. using different languages), sectoral (e.g. research vs. practice), or cultural (e.g. impacting work styles) boundaries can easily drift off in different directions during the course of a project and feel disconnected. This is particularly the case if insufficient resources and time are allocated to face-to-face meetings, which help to reach a common understanding, build relationships, and rekindle connection and motivation.
  - Individuals who have only a small percentage of time allocated to the project can feel even more removed, especially because attending team meetings may eat up one or two months' worth of their time on the project.
  - Individuals are motivated by different factors. Large-scale research collaborations require significant time and resource investment in coordination, project management, "chasing" of partners, and group calls or meetings. These are activities that do not motivate –and often frustrate – academic partners who are rewarded based on the publications they produce. Furthermore, individual publications are easier and faster to produce than joint ones, meaning that there are few systemic incentives for the collaborative research work required in consortia.
  - Project partners generally prioritise their individual and institution's commitments over the cross-partner, cross-thematic ones, which, unless discussed clearly in early meetings around expectations, deliverables, and roles and responsibilities, can end up being (incorrectly) considered an additional benefit or a luxury.
  - Connection and team spirit are often taken for granted, seen as unimportant, or assumed to intrinsically exist without a need to cultivate and invest in them.
  - Maintaining high levels of motivation, connection, and team spirit can be challenging, and resolving underlying issues might require assistance of a professional facilitation or mediation practitioner.
  - Issues of staff turnover can seriously challenge the institutional memory within the consortium and undermine working relationships with partners.





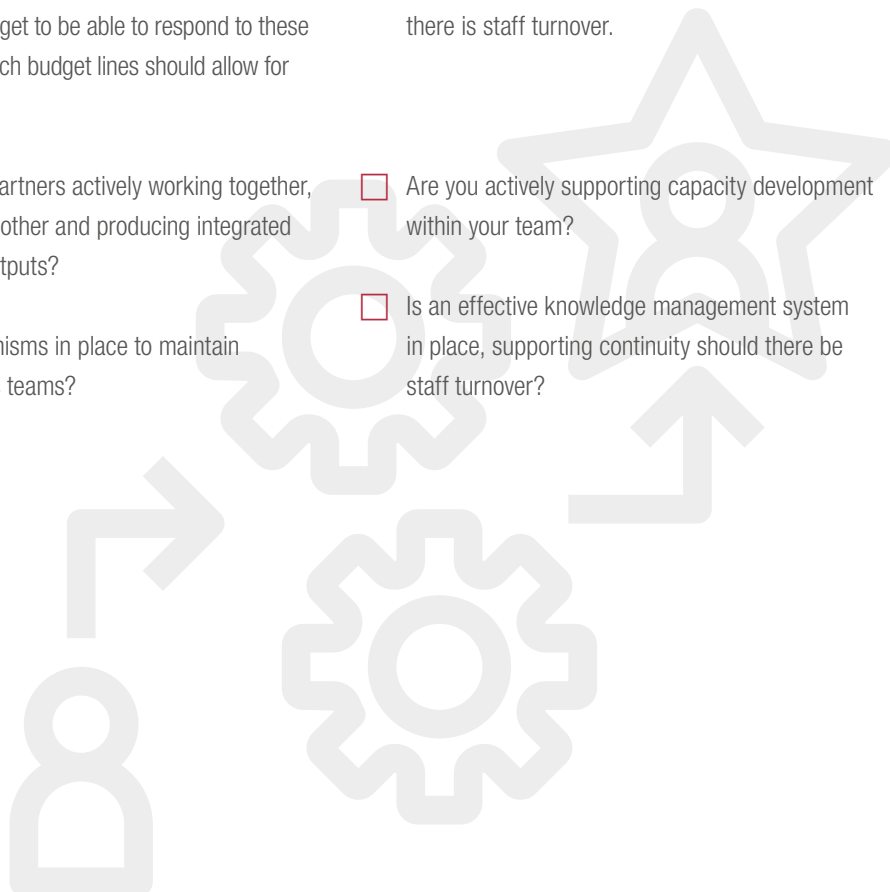
## 4. Implementing transdisciplinary projects - Project inception and implementation phase

### Possible action

- ▶ As mentioned before, ensure that sufficient time and resources have been allocated for face-to-face time, which can help cultivate relationships to strengthen connection and shared motivation across partners. The use of innovative and creative team activities can help in this respect.
- ▶ Use different ways to maintain dispersed teams' connections and ensure all team members can access project-wide communication.
- ▶ Support capacity development within a consortium and create actively new and stimulating ways of learning.
- ▶ Try to understand which types of incentives motivate different partners and individuals and allocate a portion of the budget to be able to respond to these diverse needs. Such budget lines should allow for flexibility when the budget is designed.
- ▶ Explore culturally appropriate ways to maintain motivation within the team –involving all consortium partners.
- ▶ Facilitate regular reflection to ensure that tensions can surface early and can be addressed by the team.
- ▶ Build learning and co-creation into the consortium design with responsibilities lying with all organisations.
- ▶ Design an effective knowledge management system that can be implemented and updated in the course of the project. This will help to maintain continuity if there is staff turnover.

### Checklist

- ☐ Are consortium partners actively working together, challenging each other and producing integrated and innovative outputs?
- ☐ Are you actively supporting capacity development within your team?
- ☐ Are there mechanisms in place to maintain motivation across teams?
- ☐ Is an effective knowledge management system in place, supporting continuity should there be staff turnover?







## “ Staying in touch by sharing weekly digests within the team

ASSAR developed a weekly digest in the early stages of the project to keep everyone informed about important documents and deadlines, past and upcoming meetings, items to celebrate (e.g. new outputs, ASSAR coverage in the media) and external opportunities (e.g. webinars, interesting publications, scholarships). The use of humour and interesting tidbits of information in the cover email was critical to raise people's interest. These weekly digests were shared every week for the entire duration of the project.



“I haven't got much responsibility or pressure. But it has been challenging trying to stay 'involved' with the project when writing up my thesis. When I was conducting my research, I felt that I was contributing to the ASSAR project in some small way. However, as time has passed, I don't know if my research will be valuable to the project, and I don't know if the ASSAR consortium would even find it interesting.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

“Being invited to the annual meeting allowed me to put faces to names, something that has very much helped in working with a wide range of colleagues. Before this experience, it was easy to feel left out of discussions.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

“One challenge has been getting the right talent and keeping them inspired through the research process.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

Trying to get people to comment on/add to the draft concept note for the synthesis paper, and trying to get people to respond to a poll to fix a date for a Google Hangout to discuss the draft synthesis paper and seek firm commitments were two of my biggest challenges.”

*ASSAR survey participant*



### Principle 8:

## Create and implement appropriate mechanisms for reflection, learning, and course correction

### What are key challenges?

- Teams often underestimate the additional efforts required to communicate effectively within diverse and transdisciplinary teams and do not see the need for a structure supporting reflection and learning.
- Budget is allocated only to activities linked to deliverables, and budget allocation for learning, communication, and transdisciplinary engagement is overlooked.
- Reflection within the team might be treated as a “bonus component”, not budgeted for, and cancelled if pressure on delivering project outputs becomes too great.
- Learning from failure is not always seen as a strength but as a project weakness. This can prevent important lessons from surfacing and early course corrections from taking place.
- Power struggles around influence and budgets can undermine effective reflection and learning in consortia.
- Often there are no formal ways to express frustration or tension within the consortium, leading to unresolved pressures and stress within a team.
- Working with multiple languages can be a huge challenge in diverse teams, and this can lead to loss of ownership and fragmentation within a consortium.
- The management of a large number of diverse tasks can be challenging when working in a diverse consortium. The numerous requests, number of virtual or face-to-face meetings, and substantial email traffic can be perceived as overwhelming to some consortium members.

### Possible action

- ▶ Plan for and implement regular reflection sessions that allow consortium members to express any frustrations they may have and to bring existing conflict and tensions to the surface. Reflecting on the ways of working within a consortium may help prevent “burn-out” of team members, while ensuring that effective collaboration can take place.
- ▶ Regular reflection and learning sessions allow team members to explore challenges and to jointly decide on course corrections and adaptive programming. Ensure that the governance structure of the consortium allows all team members to voice their frustration or surface tensions.
- ▶ Plan and implement processes that allow effective learning from crises, conflict, and failure early, addressing the challenges in innovative and effective ways. Ensure that such learning is documented and can influence adaptive programming.
- ▶ Innovative approaches resulting from reflection and learning are especially important as they have a synergic effect: they can support team motivation and learning, lead to new insights and knowledge, and contribute towards the larger community of practice.
- ▶ In the course of the implementation of a consortium, it can be stimulating to support out-of-the-box approaches and facilitate the use of innovative methods. If these are embedded in an active learning process, they can advance our understanding of transdisciplinary work and co-production and possibly transform our practice.



# Learning in Consortia

## Checklist

- ☐ Are project teams effectively reflecting on their process and practice?
- ☐ Have different processes of reflection appropriate to different groups been explored?
- ☐ Is project implementation periodically reviewed in light of the learning within the team?
- ☐ Is the team's learning journey documented and reflected upon at regular intervals?
- ☐ Are co-production processes inclusive, and are they balancing the ambitions of various consortium members?
- ☐ Are principles and ways of working to address language barriers in place?
- ☐ Are mechanisms in place to seek to balance administrative and content-related tasks for consortium members?
- ☐ Are innovative approaches used to support transdisciplinary work in teams?



## Recognise and manage for complexity

Complex challenges require a diversity of partners and stakeholders. This in turn brings a new complexity to the team, which requires new structures and processes to support the emergence of co-produced transdisciplinary knowledge. Recognising this complexity and appreciating the opportunities while managing the challenges is important. This can happen through the facilitating of cross-cutting thematic areas or strategies, or ongoing learning processes such as learning labs and virtual platforms, to name but a few. It is important to ensure that team members are not feeling overwhelmed by the complexity and retreating into their single-discipline comfort space.



## BRACED insights:

Adaptive and flexible programming approaches are essential to deal with potential trade-offs and mitigate the risks of future maladaptation. Projects and programmes need to look beyond the immediate project timeline to see what can be achieved over a longer time period; move beyond solely focusing on achieving the goal of accessing climate information; and improve understanding of what to do with this information once accessed. To maximise the potential of climate information (climate science and climate variability), projects also need to work with experts that truly understand the current and future climate within the project region to ensure that projects do not inadvertently lock communities into negative (maladaptive) pathways.

(Source: Silva Villaneuva, P et al: *Routes to Resilience -insights from BRACED final year, 2018*)



### When working collaboratively on large, complex projects, tensions emerge in many realms



The results of the ASSAR survey indicated a number of areas in which different ambitions clashed and led to pressures within the consortium. These included the navigation of tensions between researchers and practitioners, given their different priorities (academic impact versus research uptake) and the timing of activities:

*“Research processes are going very slow, and we need to keep stakeholders engaged without concrete activities on the field.”*

Another source of tension was between focusing on research versus project management activities:

*“I was part of too many working groups in the first year or so, which took up a lot of time. Again, [it] made focus difficult, especially finding time and energy for the research side (which is a pity as I am a researcher, not a programme manager type).”*

Tensions between the project mandate versus institutional expectations also surfaced:

*“One of the challenges has been matching consortium expectations with institutional expectations (aspirations) and being able to do justice to both.”*

Given the complexity and amount of time that ASSAR required for multiple activities, it is no surprise that many tensions surfaced when ASSAR members had to choose how to spend their precious time:

*“The other challenging task is to switch between multiple and often different tasks (e.g. working on a video vs writing a paper).”*



“We’re under-capacitated and overcommitted/expected. There are high expectations and not enough capacity when things take so long and so much is needed. Working in consortia is very difficult – requires lots of time –for relationship-building, keeping everyone in the loop, consulting, building capacity (getting everyone on the same pages), etc. You have to spend a lot of time doing things that are not a priority for your career –or not recognised by your institution.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

“Yes, it’s been challenging on all fronts, dealing with the diversity of minds and concepts, but in a good way. Surviving this means anything else can be survived.”

*ASSAR survey participant*

### Accountability and flexibility: managing transdisciplinary teams



Managing transdisciplinary processes can be challenging if the reflection process suggests that far-reaching adaptive programming is necessary, but the funder does not accommodate a possible change of structure or mandate because of being bound to certain programmatic priority areas. Accountability, often assessed through the completion of project milestones, can hamper flexibility and adaptive programming and learning in consortia.



## 5. Wrapping up and documenting learning

Once the consortium comes towards the end, it is important to focus on its legacy, including the project outputs/deliverables and their impact. It is also useful to take stock of what the consortium has learnt about collaborating and learning in consortia - the meta-learning of the project. This meta-learning can support the wider community and individuals to actively consider lessons from past programme(s) and how to improve approaches and systems in a new consortium for improved learning and greater transdisciplinary impact.

If the consortium managed to actively reflect and learn, implement adaptive programming, and ensure sound knowledge management while engaging with the wider communities of practice, most of the work has been done when reaching this stage. It is then useful to think strategically about sharing these insights and further improving the practice of planning for and implementing consortia in complex contexts.

A learning process in consortia that values partners and maintains a positive team spirit while engaging with the wider community of practice is more effective in generating results and sharing them more widely over the lifetime of the consortium. It also results in strong networks of capacitated and skilled individuals, likely to engage with a variety of complex challenges in the future, putting the gained skills into use and developing them further.

Innovation and the potential of junior team members to grow within a consortium deserve a special mention. We observed that in many consortia, younger team members are especially passionate about finding integrated solutions for complex challenges. In creating spaces where team members can innovate and are encouraged to think out of



### New capacities as legacy

If a consortium managed to implement an effective and reflective learning process throughout, its team members carry forward a powerful legacy: the skill of working in complex teams and engaging in transdisciplinary co-creation of new knowledge. This skill is universally usable and could hold the key for innovative and transformative approaches to address the complex challenges of our time. It should thus be considered a key part of a project's legacy.





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the box, one can harness some of the most important skills when navigating complex systems: creativity, innovation, and the ability to address global challenges in a more effective way.

The new capacities developed, the new relationships, and the co-produced knowledge form part of a longer learning journey. While a particular consortium may come to an end, these important learning relationships continue and allow exploring new ways of learning within complex systems, drawing on diverse experience.





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