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# Enabling collaborative synthesis in multi-partner programmes

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## ABSTRACT

Multi-partner consortia have emerged as an important modality for knowledge generation to address complex sustainability challenges. Establishing effective multi-partner consortia involves significant investment. This article shares lessons from the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIIA), which aims to support policy and practice for climate change adaptation through a consortium model. Key lessons include the need to facilitate collaborative spaces to build trust and identify common interests, while accepting that this is not a guarantee of success; the importance of programmatic leadership to achieve synthesis; and the value of strategic planning in supporting motivation and alignment between partners.

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## Introduction

Widespread shifts are occurring in the way in which organisations design and manage research and programming for international development (Creech 2008; Jones et al. 2018). Interdisciplinary multi-partner collaborations are the modality organisations are increasingly pursuing, including the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), USAID, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). There are multiple reasons why this shift has occurred, one of which is a long-standing recognition that the grand, complex, and wicked challenges being engaged with necessitate new coalitions of actors from a wide variety of knowledge and action domains. In addition to the collaborative nature of these arrangements, one of the key means through which advances in research are expected to be translated into improved policy, programmes, and practice is through the synthesis of new knowledge from multiple research efforts, across a myriad of academic disciplines and diverse ways of knowing.

There are multiple ways in which synthesis contributes to impact on policy and practice. Synthesis can be a means through which the necessary transdisciplinary and collaborative work occurs, such as around a common theme of interest (e.g. vulnerability to climate change impacts) or in response to a demand for information (e.g. supporting a government to integrate issues of gender and social differentiation into their climate change adaptation policies). Synthesis can produce new knowledge, such as by aggregating examples from around the world to better understand gendered impacts. Syntheses can also be a means of validation, triangulation, and amplification of research results. Importantly, synthesis can reach new audiences, from influencing municipal policies to contributing to international decision-making (e.g. Conference of the Parties) and agendas (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals). Through these activities and products, syntheses help strengthen the impact of research.

This article shares ongoing learning from one organisation that funds research for development, IDRC, as it strives to meet global development challenges with appropriate forms of programming

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that pursue collaborative synthesis through a consortia model. After sharing the progression of IDRC's thinking with regard to programming within its climate change programme specifically, the experiences so far within the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA) programme are shared. CARIAA is a seven-year (2013–19), CAN \$70 million, multi-partner collaborative research programme involving more than 450 individuals, 18 core member institutions, and over 40 implementing partners. As the programme is ongoing, this article's focus is to share learning related to collaborative synthesis efforts, but not address the effectiveness or impact of these activities as they remain in progress.

Within the CARIAA programme, research is conducted in 17 countries in Africa and Asia to support adaptation to climate change on a diverse array of thematic areas. The programme fosters pioneering work at regional scales across the Global South using a "hotspot" model for organising collaborative consortia that takes account of the intersections among ecological, physical, and socio-economic systems (Cochrane et al. 2017; De Souza et al. 2015). One of the reasons CARIAA was designed as a collaborative multi-partner programme was to produce syntheses within and across research projects that bring together results to have greater impact – so that the sum is greater than its individual parts and partners. As a multi-partner programme designed for collaboration that is relatively well resourced, CARIAA integrated decades of experience and best practice to supporting collaborative science, and continues to adapt as new challenges emerge. It is hoped that insights from the CARIAA experience at this mid-point in the programme might support other collaborative research projects.

Macharia (2016) has noted that while multi-partner models are increasingly commonplace, there is a need for guidance and learning regarding their design and management. This overview and analysis of the CARIAA experiences and learning is shared as a contribution to address that knowledge gap. The article begins by contextualising multi-partner collaboration, and then outlining the evolving experiences and learning within the IDRC with regard to designing collaborative spaces and tools to enable synthesis. The challenges and successes that have emerged through the design and implementation of CARIAA are then shared, before concluding with key lessons about how collaborative synthesis can be enabled.

## Multi-partner collaboration in context

We frame the type of collaborations outlined in this article as "multi-partner" as a means to capture the nature of the relationships involved, as opposed to "multi-stakeholder" (e.g. Pattberg and Widerberg 2016), which we feel misses the sense of shared commitment necessary for the relationships described here. Multi-partner collaborations consist of "*a group of individuals from different institutions choosing to work together towards a common goal*" (Creech 2008, 3). The design, organisation, and objectives of collaborative, multi-partner efforts within climate change adaptation research vary widely, from short-term and goal-oriented efforts (e.g. a write shop to produce an article) to more open-ended and emergent initiatives spanning years (Harvey et al. 2017). In addition to CARIAA, examples of large, multi-partner projects within the climate change adaptation sphere include the Africa Climate Change Resilience Alliance (ACCRA), Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED), and the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN).

In reflecting on collaborative research in multi-partner projects, Lonsdale and Goldthorpe (2012) offer process-focused recommendations, based on the Adaptation and Resilience in a Changing Climate Coordination Network, such as clarifying goals, expectations, and boundaries. These findings build upon a broad set of literature about collaboration (e.g. Day 1994; Greene, Hart, and Wagner 2005; Huppe, Creech, and Knoblauch 2012). Pattberg and Widerberg (2016) suggest that broad generalisations about how collaboration can occur provide limited guidance, as the implementation and practice of collaboration is diverse and occurs in specific contexts. However, the authors identify conditions for improving collaborative action, which include the processes (goal setting, funding, management and monitoring), contexts (meta-governance, problem structure,

and socio-political contexts) and the actors (leadership and partners). Lang et al. (2012) highlight commonly experienced challenges, including those related to differing knowledge systems, time requirements, status and power asymmetries, unrealistic expectations, and bureaucratic barriers between institutions. In addition to learning from the literature, IDRC has learnt from a range of multi-partner collaborations that the organisation has fostered in the past, and which also influenced the design of the CARIIA programme.

### **Approaches to support multi-partner collaboration within the IDRC**

During the 1990s and early 2000s, IDRC funded an array of research networks, with the aim of promoting knowledge sharing, facilitating communication, and fostering innovation and change. During this period there was an increasing recognition that sustainability challenges could not be addressed by unidisciplinary teams, but required interdisciplinary and multi-partner engagement. IDRC, and other organisations at the time (Pittman, Tiessen, and Montana 2016), therefore experimented with ideas and practices that would enable and facilitate how interdisciplinary multi-partner collaboration could occur.

The early manifestations of interdisciplinary multi-partner efforts to enable collaborative research and synthesis focused on linking and networking, and specifically creating ways for different people to communicate and interact with one another. While this resulted in information sharing, it insufficiently translated into collaboration and synthesis. These activities did not sufficiently connect individuals so as to enable common work nor did they sufficiently provide the space, time, and resources that would enable mutual interests to develop into collaborative research and ultimately the synthesis of knowledge. Tuozzo and Tussie (2006), in their evaluation of ten years (1995–2005) of IDRC-supported networks, synthesised key findings related to governance and coordination. The key findings point out the importance of participation, context-specific structures, committed donor support, and leadership. While the networks were successful at linking individuals, and moving toward collaborative research, there were questions about sustainability, capacity requirements, and higher costs (Willard and Creech 2006). Furthermore, it became evident that linking around a common theme or purpose does not automatically lend itself toward the desired outcome of collaboration and synthesis.

As a means to facilitate more collaborative research, IDRC and other funders experimented with requiring multiple partners to co-apply in order to obtain funding. In some instances, this included seed funding that enabled potential partners to come together to connect and develop a collaborative proposal. In speaking about this modality shift generally, Creech (2008) argues that partnerships did effectively emerge in response to those calls, but were primarily a means to leverage funding and coordinate activity, but did not effectively translate into the “sum being more than its individual parts”. These activities, however, tended to result in interdisciplinarity at the periphery of scientific disciplines (Creech 2008; Pittman, Tiessen, and Montana 2016) and limited efforts toward collaborative synthesis.

A key lesson from these early experiments with programming that would foster collaboration and synthesis was that funding modalities required careful foresight and reflexive adaptive planning with regard to processes, resources and tools that would enable meaningful collaboration. While the progression appears linear, in practice the progression from linking researchers to collaborative research was a learning process. Different programmes within IDRC, and beyond, experimented with a variety of modalities, and learnt different lessons as they respectively engaged in partnerships with other donors. As an example, the inter-American Institute for Global Change Research took a proactive and engaged role in supporting researchers including the provision of space for experimental learning, facilitation, and mentorship (Pittman, Tiessen, and Montana 2016).

In the CARIIA case study presented in this article, it was a partnership with the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) that enabled learning from both organisations to inform the design of the programme. Innovative mechanisms to support collaboration, learning, and synthesis

were introduced at the outset of CARIIA. These included: hard and soft collaborative spaces, such as an intranet and working groups around common thematic interests; responsive additional funding mechanisms that could be secured to support emergent collaborative synthesis efforts; and annual “learning reviews” that brought together partners for face-to-face meetings. These processes were designed to enable diverse worldviews, knowledges, and perspectives to be shared, and to facilitate opportunities for novel collaborations and synthesis.

The following section presents background on the case study, and then shares lessons learnt so far, halfway through the CARIIA programme, on the design and outcomes of this multi-partner collaborative research project implemented by IDRC.

## **CARIIA background and design**

The CARIIA programme’s objective is to generate new knowledge that will support better informed policy and practice that will reduce vulnerabilities and increase the capacities of the most vulnerable to adapt to the impacts of climate change. The programme funds four multi-partner consortia and was envisioned to be collaborative and to support synthesis within and across the four consortia. Each of the consortia approached multi-partner collaboration in different ways, both organisationally and in the partners involved. For one consortium, a key partner group were decision-makers, who were fundamental in providing direction for a more “demand-driven” research approach. For another consortium, having NGO partners enabled strong community linkages and the integration of experience of putting knowledge into practice. Across the programme, transdisciplinary meant more than integrating diverse academic disciplines, but also partners beyond academia, from community members to practitioners and policymakers.

Within the CARIIA programme, synthesis is viewed as a process whereby knowledge from a variety of sources is summarised and critically appraised, and was envisioned as including a broad array of activities and research outputs. Synthesis outputs include academic papers, policy briefs, blogs, videos, maps, conference panels, and media articles. In defining synthesis in this fashion, CARIIA focused on the process of collaborative synthesis and its potential, more than its specific format. CARIIA might be considered a “consortium of consortia” as there are four consortia within it. In the design, an initial emphasis was placed upon collaborative synthesis within the consortia, while cross-consortia collaboration opportunities were fostered as the four consortia developed linkages with one another.

Synthesis efforts are ongoing both within consortia and across consortia. In this article the focus is on programmatic experiences of attempting to facilitate cross-consortia collaboration and synthesis rather than experience internal to individual consortia. The programme has experimented with fostering a number of collaborative spaces. By design, significant investments were made to ensure the mechanisms and processes required to facilitate collaboration existed. This included a shared knowledge management platform and annual face-to-face learning review meetings. The programme also established processes for ongoing linkages across the four consortia, such as thematic working groups, governance and knowledge management working groups, geographic working groups (in instances where more than one consortium works in the same country), and a host of smaller sub-groups coalescing around emergent ideas. Additional internal calls for proposals were regularly launched as a means to identify and support emergent cross-consortia collaborations, with 13 such applications having been funded by December 2016 (not all of which were synthesis-focused, but all required cross-consortia collaboration). Two examples of unplanned, collaborative synthesis projects that have been internally funded include:

- (1) *A collaborative research project that brings together findings related to gendered vulnerabilities in climate change adaptation.* Although there was a gender and equity working group that had been functional for more than a year, this specific idea and its membership were first developed after a face-to-face meeting of cross-consortia partners. After meeting in person, the working

group was utilised to seek additional participation and the shared knowledge management platform used as a research, writing, and communication tool. The expected output is a cross-consortia, multi-country comparative study of gendered vulnerabilities, based on 25 case studies, and the individual case studies may be developed into a journal special issue or an edited volume.

- (2) *Cross-consortia research contributing to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) special report on a 1.5 degree world.* This idea was proposed by a CARIIA programme advisory member at a face-to-face annual learning review meeting, and taken up by lead researchers from all consortia. Each of the four consortia developed synthesis papers from their respective research groups, after which a synthesis of those four products is planned to be published.

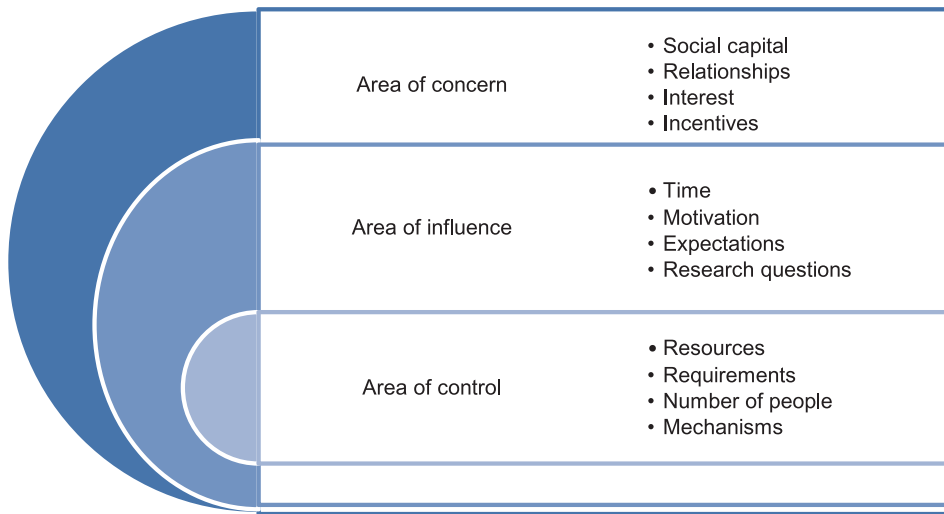
In both of these examples, the synthesis idea was developed after having face-to-face discussions, with the incentive and opportunity of additional available funding, after which the online collaborative tools were utilised. These examples emphasise the importance of researchers not just being connected to one another, for example through an intranet, but knowing one another. In our experience, being added to a working group did not create the connections wherein members gained opportunities to know one another. In these two cases, face-to-face meetings were key enabling factors, but these are not the only means to facilitate cross-consortia connections. Collaborations also emerged virtually, such as following capacity building and research dissemination webinars. Importantly, in all of these instances, the participating individuals knew one another, shared mutual interests, and a sufficient level of trust had been established that enabled the development of a new idea and a funding proposal.

### Emerging lessons from the CARIIA experience

By December 2016, the halfway point in the programme lifecycle, an innovative set of cross-consortia collaborations had emerged, and in many regards the design has successfully supported collaborative work. At the same time, challenges hindering collaboration and synthesis activities have been systematically identified. This section reviews each challenge, and how the programme has responded to strengthen the enabling environment for collaboration and synthesis. These revolve around four issues: (1) responsive funding, (2) the use and facilitation of collaborative spaces, (3) programmatic leadership, and (4) being strategic.

Resourcing the collaborative spaces and tools as well as having unallocated funds available to support emergent ideas are crucial, but having them does not mean that collaboration will occur. In grappling with what a funder or programme manager can do to support collaboration and synthesis, a greater appreciation of the areas where programme managers have control, influence, and concern has been developed (see [Figure 1](#)). In analysing activities, we utilise three categories that we define as those within the: (1) “area of control”, which are components the programme management team had (i.e. design), or continues to have (i.e. ongoing decision-making) direct control; (2) the “area of influence”, areas wherein influence can be exerted but the programme management team is not alone in determining the outcomes of the activities; and (3) the “area of concern” that comprises activities the programme team has a limited ability to control or influence. The bullet points in [Figure 1](#) outline a non-exhaustive list of examples of what these different spheres of control meant for the CARIIA programme.

Many donor-funded partnerships allocate funding at the outset, and once the agreements are in place, the projects are unable to take advantage of emergent ideas, windows of opportunities, or unexpected collaborations. CARIIA invested heavily in the programme’s area of control, which included the provision of responsive additional funding resources to support emerging ideas and initiating cross-consortia working groups. Additional funding was set aside within the programme that would be provided on an ongoing, application-based basis. This aspect was not initially included in the programme design, but developed in response to emergent opportunities and needs. This



**Figure 1.** Spheres of control in multi-partner collaborations.

responsive funding mechanism, in the form of additional, internal applications, was integrated as a means to enable, facilitate, and support emergent ideas and opportunities. New ideas were assessed collaboratively by a steering committee with representation from all consortia, and had to involve members from more than one consortium as well as contribute to the programme objectives to obtain approval. Funded proposals were not limited to additional research activities, they also included cross-consortia efforts to improve coordination and collaborative engagement, such as with national government agencies or international bodies. Other funding was granted that was part of a process to better enable programme objectives to be met, such as cross-consortia training and capacity building conducting gender analyses and on writing stories of change.

It was hoped that these emergent and responsive investments would spill over into the programme's area of influence by sparking motivation, managing expectations and fostering the identification of shared research questions. However, the focus was initially less on how the programme could facilitate opportunities for trust building, relationships and inspiration, which are all areas of concern for the programme, but which fall outside of the programme's sphere of control. For example, the thematic working groups brought together individuals with common interests but could have been purposefully facilitated to support the transition from linking individuals and sharing information to building relationships through, for example, face-to-face meetings. As a result, not all of the initially envisioned collaborative spaces were active.

The CARIIAA experience of collaborative spaces resonates with arguments that proactive and engaged facilitation should be included as a primary component within these collaborative spaces in order to meaningfully connect individuals in ways that build trust and relationships (FAO 2012; Palmer et al. 2016; Pittman, Tiessen, and Montana 2016). Targeted activities also could have been geared toward supporting the identification of common interests, and building trust and social capital, all foundational to collaboration (Ensor and Harvey 2015; Gonsalves 2014). However, in recognising that the programme could have offered greater facilitation in these areas, CARIIAA staff also recognise that this would not have been a guarantee of success. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common concern or a passion, and who improve their practice through regular interaction and shared learning (Wenger 1998). Common interest and passion cannot be engineered by even the most astute programme manager or facilitator, rather the development of such communities of practice, as fundamental to collaboration and synthesis, is an emergent outcome of social interaction among people who consider themselves equals and who respect

one another's contributions (Cundill, Roux, and Parker 2015). Thus, while ideal design is crucial, we should also be realistic in our expectations of these collaborative spaces.

Experience from IDRC's early work with networks, in the 1990s and early 2000s, suggests that programmes can play a key role in creating opportunities for trust and social capital to develop (Tuozzo and Tussie 2006). What was required was experimentation about how best to do that, which is a process IDRC continues to learn about. For example, while face-to-face meetings in global research programmes like CARIIA are costly, the experience has been that relationships, trust, and social capital are more likely to be built in these settings than via virtual tools. However, as resource constraints are a reality, CARIIA continues to experiment with new approaches to facilitating community building with more cost efficient (and footprint friendly) virtual tools. These include hosting regular thematic research webinars where research findings are shared, as well as hosting facilitated internal conversations addressing specific topics, holding open dialogues (e.g. on social media), and providing additional programmatic support to emergent communities of practice to lessen administrative burdens.

The third major lesson learnt revolved around leadership. At the start of CARIIA, there was an expectation that consortia would play the leading role in synthesis activities at a programmatic level by collaborating across consortia. Given the significant challenges that consortia have faced in achieving synthesis even within their own individual consortia, this expectation of consortia-lead programmatic synthesis is increasingly recognised as having been overly optimistic. In addition to being busy developing their own collaborations and activities within each consortium, there were limited opportunities for members from different consortia to meaningfully engage with each other. CARIIA management (IDRC staff) were the only ones which had a regular view of activities across all four consortia, and thus this was viewed as a potential opportunity to explore.

As a work in progress, CARIIA is now experimenting with programme-staff leadership in a variety of different spheres of synthesis. For example, the programme is utilising its experience, networks, and prominent role to lead the identification of key ideas of cross-consortia interest that partners will be motivated to contribute to. CARIIA management officers are working to create new ways to share information, and have added new resources and people to facilitate this. This includes thought leadership, and connecting researchers with the insights that come with donor involvement in international decision-making. This form of leadership is time consuming, but it is key to enable cross-consortia synthesis activities. As part of this, the CARIIA programme has experimented with adding staff who have sought to strengthen and lead synthesis activities, with positive results and reception by consortia members. Additional support, and active leading of activities, is particularly important because partners may appreciate the importance of an idea but have fully allocated their available time to existing tasks and are therefore unable to have a lead role in new, unplanned activities. This addresses a previously unforeseen challenge: key researchers are not only prevented from collaborating by limited financial resources, but also by limited time. In recognising the need for greater programmatic leadership, this is not to say that programme staff should lead all collaborative synthesis activities, but it should be one additional means through which collaborative synthesis can be achieved.

Another area of programmatic leadership is leveraging the network of its members – for CARIIA this includes high profile advisory members – to seek input on what research is required and where it will have an important impact, in what venues, and when. The programme continues to learn about how best to integrate these advisors to support CARIIA objectives. One example is to have included these advisors within annual face-to-face meetings, who participate in discussions and visioning, and in that process have contributed to the identification of key opportunities and the cultivating of new collaborations.

The fourth major lesson learnt is that in promoting collaboration and synthesis, being strategic is very important. At times, collaboration and synthesis were proposed as activities without situating the ideas within the programme objectives. There are multiple scales at which synthesis can occur (international, programme, theme, consortium, country, project) and these may serve any number



of purposes. Having synthesis activities support the programmatic objectives – supporting better informed policy and practice – provides direction as to what syntheses should be prioritised, which audiences should be targeted, for identifying key windows of opportunity, and prioritising which synthesis could result in significant positive impact. Being strategic also enhances individual motivation to invest the large amount of time and energy into collaborative activities.

It is clear that some individuals are hesitant to engage in synthesis activities, viewing it as an academic endeavour with little added value, or are concerned about intellectual property. There is also the risk that additional funding can be viewed as a vehicle to obtain funding for personal interests that are beyond the scope of the programme and do not directly contribute to its outcomes. Being strategic, and clearly communicating that vision, ensures that individuals involved are aware of why the topic and audience have been selected and the intended purpose. Critically reflecting about potential collaborative synthesis, rather than pursuing it as a good in and of itself, has supported the programmatic goals of CARIIA and the motivation of individuals within the programme. This is an important process that all consortia and the programme are engaging with as activities and plans are revised and updated. This article has not addressed the effectiveness of the processes for producing new knowledge nor the impact of the research results. These are questions of central interest to CARIIA, and will be addressed within the midterm and final project evaluations.

## Concluding thoughts

CARIIA is an ongoing project. The experiences to date suggest that these lessons support collaborative processes as well as research output. This article has focused on the “how” of enabling collaborative synthesis, rather than making a case for such efforts or assessing the impact of the impacts of the outputs. At just over half way through the programme, CARIIA had actively engaged more than 450 researchers and practitioners, generated 166 peer-reviewed outputs, and has held 213 stakeholder engagement events across Africa and Asia.

Research intended to support development must aim to cross boundaries and create new knowledge to promote growth, reduce poverty, and drive large-scale positive change. Decades of partnerships and collaborations in many organisations have fostered learning about how new approaches to research can address complex global challenges. The experimentation and learning is an ongoing process, of which the CARIIA project is one example. This article has highlighted the new challenges that have emerged as IDRC and its partners develop multi-partner collaborations in new ways. It presented an overview of that history, and the lessons contributing to the design of the CARIIA programme. Writing at the mid-way point in the programme, it has been possible to share the challenges that have emerged, and the adaptive and responsive programming that continues to unfold as the outcomes of CARIIA are pursued.

Collaboration, and collaborative synthesis in particular, carries a high level of transaction costs. At the outset, many CARIIA members (even within each consortium) did not know one another, lived in different countries, came from different academic and cultural backgrounds, and spoke different languages. Individuals and institutions that had not worked together in the past were required to become familiar with one another so that common interests could be identified and trust established. Within that process, time had to be allocated for aligning ideas, perspectives and objectives, and arriving at a shared vision. This meant that diverse epistemological and discipline-specific methodologies had to be explored, understood, and integrated, which is one of the most time-consuming and daunting tasks of collaborative research.

While the programme was designed with collaboration and synthesis as an expected outcome, the call for proposals and the management of the programme were not directive in terms of what research questions consortia ought to answer nor the specific topics of synthesis required. It did, however, bring consortia together to align work around common thematic areas of work, namely: climate science, economic analyses, gender and equity, migration and scenarios. In this regard, the programme worked with consortia membership to navigate interests and direction with overall

programme alignment and objectives. Alternative approaches could have been followed. A more directive approach that specified research questions may have enabled stronger cross-consortia alignment, but would have also been restrictive and potentially reduced researcher ownership of the ideas. On the other end of the spectrum, the programme could have left researchers to go in their own directions without requiring linkages or consideration of thematic alignment. This approach could have enabled interesting individual research investigations but would have made collaborative synthesis much more challenging as the works would not have shared common threads.

The challenges of funding are just the tip of the iceberg. In order to move from connecting to collaborating, it is necessary to strengthen the way in which collaborative spaces are facilitated, and enliven spaces wherein individuals are better able to interact, know one another, identify mutual interest and then develop collaborative projects. This includes better utilising existing tools and spaces as well as experimenting with new means that enable members from different segments of the programme to interact and connect. A key lesson is that the programme management team, which has the opportunity to look across all four consortia, needs to take a greater leadership role in providing thought leadership, in leveraging its network, and in providing resources to lead collaborative syntheses. Last, keeping focused on outcomes, and therefore approaching collaboration more strategically, is an important means to ensure the vision is maintained over time. The in-process learning and resulting adaptive management shared in this article are important contributions to improving programmes of this type, and can inform other similar programmes.

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