

Institutionalizing joint programme management

Today's development agendas and priority settings are often dominated by Western science, mainstream institutions, and elites. In contrast, ESAPP provided space for counterbalancing unequally distributed decision-making power and knowledge. ESAPP partners met at annual workshops, devising tools and procedures for joint programme management. This allowed the partners to find common ground and build capacity and ownership, sparking innovation for sustainable development.

Sustainable development challenge

Research for sustainable development differs significantly from conventional research, as its objectives and procedures are not predefined but are framed and revised jointly by partners throughout the research process. Research has to build stakeholders' perspectives into its design while maintaining its long-term sustainability orientation. Conventional North-driven programme management, funding, and evaluation systems do not support the inclusive, reflexive, and iterative techniques necessary for this process, nor do they address the experimental nature of producing knowledge in a context of demanding partner interactions.

Managerial tools are needed that continuously enable integration of partners' claims and new research results, fostering equal roles in setting the programme's direction and adapting institutional structures and procedures accordingly. Corresponding monitoring and evaluation tools should help partners benchmark the research process between short-term needs and long-term sustainability, and provide accountability to donors, research partners, and stakeholders alike.

ESAPP's response

ESAPP opted for an active adaptive management approach (MA 2005, p. 599; Ott 2015) that embraces partners' claims, perceptions, and agency during programme planning, coordination, and review. It invested in partner institutions' capacity; in turn, these institutions supported local ESAPP activities. Modes and places of partner interaction were strategically enhanced to provide space to address power and knowledge disparities. This gave partners from the global South an increasing role in determining the programme's research objectives, managerial tools, and institutional structure.

As a major tool for joint programme management, partners gradually established and applied an innovative monitoring and evaluation system that combined standard formats (such as templates, criteria, logical frameworks, and statistics) and standard procedures (such as advisory group meetings, project-cycle steps, and external evaluations) with reflexive elements. Such a reflexive and recursive monitoring and evaluation system is best suited to the experimental nature of research for sustainable development. In order to overcome geographic distance and foster communication, combined with joint self-evaluation and strategic reorientation, annual one-week workshops were held in countries in the South, beginning in 2006. These so-called "Capitalization Workshops" immediately became a cornerstone of joint programme management and capacity development.



Main messages

- Research for sustainable development must find new and adaptive ways to resolve conflicting priorities of different stakeholders and build on commonalities, address power disparities, and counterbalance mainstream scientific and institutional dominance.
- Corresponding standards and evaluation criteria must incorporate the voices and agency of all partners from diverse countries and institutions in both South and North.
- ESAPP's adaptive management approach fostered equity in the programme and increased human and institutional capacity in partner countries, particularly in the South.
- ESAPP's monitoring and evaluation system innovatively combined lean formal management tools with institutionalized, partner-driven reflection, self-evaluation, and implementation of lessons learned. It was accountable to funding agencies and partners in both South and North.



ESAPP partners attending a Capitalization Workshop in Nanyuki, Kenya, discuss ways of exchanging spatial and statistical data within the ESAPP network and beyond. (Photo: Albrecht Ehrensperger)



The project story

ESAPP's research network was heterogeneous, with partners from six countries in the South and from Switzerland that varied widely in institutional strengths and rationales. Equity-oriented management in such a complex programme requires investment in communication, team building, and developing a sense of ownership. The annual Capitalization Workshops that began in 2006 as a way to exchange innovative ideas and capitalize on experiences drew on ties ESAPP partners had already developed through years of research cooperation. The workshops soon became a vital way to further integrate partners from the South in programme reviews and planning. ESAPP partners met every year in a different country for an intense exchange, field excursion, and team-building exercise. Participants shared data and methods, applied and further developed ESAPP managerial tools, and integrated the recommendations of regular external programme evaluations.

The 2009 workshop in Ethiopia was a milestone in consolidating ESAPP's partnership-oriented research approach. Twenty participants gathered for a week in Ambo Town, around 150 kilometres from Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Abeba, to look back on a decade of research cooperation and prepare for ESAPP's final years. The main themes addressed were institutional and strategic challenges faced by the research programme and the systematic mapping of competences, experiences, data, and scientific outputs of partner institutions for a final programme synthesis. In addition, participants reviewed research results and identified thematic and spatial focus areas within the fields of sustainable land management and sustainable regional development.

Acknowledging that the ecological, cultural, political, socio-economic, and historical setting strongly determines development challenges and solutions, ESAPP had formulated core foci of research in individual countries and subregions early on, and had later expanded them into national thematic networks. In the Ambo workshop, this process was further extended by creating thematic partnerships as institutional structures for cross-national exchange. This established a sound basis for further consolidation of thematically focused regional research sites, and for collaboration among ESAPP partner institutions in the South beyond ESAPP's lifespan.

Top: Coffee ceremony in Ambo, Ethiopia. Cultural diversity within Eastern Africa is enormous. The ESAPP Capitalization Workshops provided a space not only for conceptual and technical reflections, but also for partners to explore cultural linkages and their implications for transnational communication and exchange of experiences. (Photo: Albrecht Ehrensperger)

Bottom: ESAPP partners visit the Mandraka watershed on the eastern escarpment of Madagascar, where local partners implemented several ESAPP projects on sustainable watershed management. Such exchange visits during ESAPP's Capitalization Workshops offered opportunities to compare notes and reflect on possible synergies between different ESAPP project areas. (Photo: Albrecht Ehrensperger)



Innovation and relevance

Putting into practice research for sustainable development follows no blueprint. Adaptive programme management is necessary to foster partner equity and inclusion while safeguarding sustainability orientation and programme accountability. To this end, ESAPP regularly brought partners together for communication, training, team building, as well as for review and adaptation of the programme. In those meetings, common understanding, human and institutional capacity, and a sense of programme ownership grew, and collaborative events triggered innovation. The Capitalization Workshops engaged regional partners in jointly organizing the research process. The 2009 Ambo workshop was a highlight, as participants from the South helped to progress ESAPP's thematic and spatial research foci and launched innovative South–South exchange and learning in the form of research partnerships between countries with comparable socioecological conditions and development challenges. More than 200 action research projects – initially proposed in local contexts, and approved when consistent with ESAPP research goals at the national and regional levels – were strategically evaluated, clustered, and put in sequence. Thereby, ESAPP partners ensured thematic consistency, spatial concentration, and legitimacy within the research fields of sustainable land management and sustainable regional development.

The workshops have thus been a major element in implementing ESAPP's vision to foster sustainable development according to the 11 principles and 7 questions formulated by the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (Stöckli et al. 2014; Wiesmann et al. 2014). In sum, ESAPP's Capitalization Workshops can serve as a model for fostering equal research partnerships, sharing experiences, and scaling up research results to promote regional development in a way that strengthens ownership and demand in the global South while ensuring coherence in sustainability efforts from the local to the global level.



Top: ESAPP partners talk with villagers in southern Tanzania about emerging conflicts between farmers and recently resettled pastoralists (see Highlight 12). Competing claims on natural resources are a widespread problem in the ESAPP region, and lessons learned in one place can help in designing new strategies in another. (Photo: Albrecht Ehrensperger)

Bottom: Participants of the ESAPP Capitalization Workshop in Ambo, Ethiopia, developed the conceptual guidelines for the final stage of the programme, based on a systematic review of research and implementation results. (Photo: Hans Hurni)



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Highlight profile

This highlight is based on the achievements of 8 ESAPP priority action projects.

Implemented during:

2006–2013

Total funds contributed by ESAPP:

CHF 377,000

Implemented by:

Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, Switzerland

In collaboration with:

Various partner institutions in the countries in which the workshops were conducted (Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Madagascar)

Main beneficiaries:

ESAPP management, partner institutions, and individuals of the ESAPP network

References and further reading

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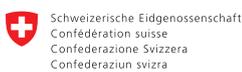
What is ESAPP?

The Eastern and Southern Africa Partnership Programme (ESAPP) is a research implementation programme funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), coordinated by the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) of the University of Bern, Switzerland, and implemented jointly by CDE and a network of partner institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa. Launched in 1999 and completed in 2015, ESAPP implemented over 300 priority action projects in the programme region, which included Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Madagascar.

What are ESAPP Highlights?

ESAPP Highlights are a series of 24 project descriptions providing insights into ESAPP's research and implementation partnerships. Each Highlight describes a succession of demand-driven priority action projects addressing local and regional sustainability issues. The 24 Highlights are collected in a publication that includes additional background information on ESAPP (see citation above). The individual Highlights and the entire publication are also available for download on CDE's website: www.cde.unibe.ch (keyword search: "ESAPP").

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