

Building up regional competence centres

Disparities in power and knowledge are a challenge in North–South partnerships. To counter this, ESAPP fostered the development of its Southern partners, promoting competence and ownership beyond the programme. Focusing on two local institutions in Madagascar, Savaivo and DERAD, ESAPP worked to develop human capacity and strengthen their institutional set-up, while providing space for them to proactively navigate the research programme.

Sustainable development challenge

Sustainable development is a normative and integrative concept that entitles all members of the human society to a just share of resources and an equal voice in shaping a sustainable future. For research cooperation, this implies working in equity-oriented partnerships. But while partnerships are standard practice, they vary greatly in the application of principles such as equity, ownership, and transparency, and often fail to adequately integrate knowledge, perceptions, and values of all partners and stakeholders.

This challenge is most acutely felt in North–South partnerships, as Northern institutions usually initiate, fund, and define research contents. Disparities in power and knowledge are a serious hurdle for mutual interaction and exchange between partners on an equal basis. Thus, a key challenge is to design approaches that enhance joint knowledge generation in accordance with human and institutional capacity development. Such approaches can improve the basis for a gradual transfer of decision-making power to partners in the South, and a better integration of their voices and agency in joint programme management in accordance with the 11 principles laid out by the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE) (Stöckli et al. 2014).

ESAPP's response

In order to bridge the divide in power and knowledge between North and South, ESAPP committed itself to fostering the development of its Southern partner institutions, and to securing their competence and ownership in sustainable development beyond the programme. The main target was to enable these institutions to become: (1) centres of competence for sustainability research; (2) active agents in knowledge production and policy formulation; and (3) collaborative networks with the ability to formulate alternative pathways for sustainable development at a regional level in Eastern Africa.

For this endeavour, ESAPP was able to build on decades of research collaboration between Switzerland and the respective countries (e.g. Madagascar). The programme implemented an adaptive set-up that provided space to organize human and institutional development in combination with a gradual integration of Southern partners in programme management activities. This strengthened capacity in both South and North, and expanded research that had started out as disciplinary endeavours into integrative transdisciplinary cooperation. It allowed ESAPP to train and establish local institutions in Southern partner countries as competent actors and knowledge brokers for sustainable development beyond the programme's lifetime.



Main messages

- Actors in the global South need a stronger voice and role in advocating their own visions for sustainable development.
- ESAPP's experience shows that institutional and human capacity development is the main driver of greater equity and a reduced North–South and South–South divide within research partnerships, in accordance with KFPE's 11 principles.
- Capacity development also supports the establishment of more stable research institutions, non-governmental organizations, and networks in the South. Stability and reach of ESAPP partners and networks are important indicators of successful or promising North–South and South–South interaction.
- Stability increases opportunities for local institutions to act as implementers and service providers for governments, national and international research institutions, and donor agencies.



To collect information needed to inventory the resource base, DERAD team members conduct semi-structured interviews with resource users. (Photo: Sarah-Lan Mathez-Stiefel)



The project story

In the 1980s, CDE was engaged in two mandates funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Madagascar: *Terre-Tany*, a project that supported natural resource management in rural areas, and *BEMA*, a project on the ecological balance of slash-and-burn agriculture on the eastern escarpment of Madagascar, implemented jointly with the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH Zurich). Two local institutions were born of these mandates: Savaivo and DERAD (Diagnostic environnemental et recherches appliquées pour le développement en milieu rural). Both are specialized in studying and implementing sustainable management of natural resources.

When ESAPP was started in 1999, collaboration with Savaivo and DERAD was resumed and brought to an entirely new level: ESAPP invested significantly in the development of human capacity in both institutions and strengthened their institutional set-up. At the same time, it provided space for the institutions to assume a proactive role in navigating the research programme.

Specific scientific training was provided in the application of ESAPP’s concepts, tools, and methodologies designed to foster transdisciplinary knowledge generation and local sustainable development strategies. For example, Savaivo staff were trained to moderate workshops on Learning for Sustainability (L4S), a tool that fosters joint capacity building between representatives of local communities and local development agencies or NGOs (see Highlight 24). Savaivo and DERAD were also trained in managing and analysing a variety of ESAPP data using geographic information systems (GIS) or statistical packages.

Key staff of Savaivo and DERAD played an important role in ESAPP’s programme milestones such as the annual “Capitalization Workshops” (see Highlight 20), where project partners from throughout the region came together to exchange conceptual foundations, research results, and new tools, and to plan further programme activities in a participatory manner. In addition, major emphasis was put on individual and thematic exchange between all partner countries. DERAD and Savaivo staff participated in research and planning in other countries, especially in the scaling-up of innovations gained in action research projects, and in the establishment of ESAPP thematic focal points and reference sites. Thus, both institutions were able to broaden their network within Madagascar as well as in the whole ESAPP region.

Top: Capacity development at individual and institutional levels enabled DERAD to position itself in the consultancy and research support market. The photo shows the DERAD team during CDE-taught training in applying the Sustainable Development Appraisal (SDA) tool. SDA guides participatory assessment of development-relevant baseline data in a given area, as well as evaluation of the local setting from different actors’ perspectives with regard to sustainable resource management and sustainable development. (Photo: Markus Giger)

Bottom: Here, Savaivo team members are conducting a Learning for Sustainability (L4S) workshop on conflict management in the rural municipality of Mandialaza bordering the Anjozorobe-Angavo protected area. L4S workshops bring together community members, resource users, and technical personnel from governmental rural advisory services or NGOs. Mutual learning is used as a springboard for finding consensus and jointly drafting development plans later on. (Photo: Nicolas Rakotondramaka)



Innovation and relevance

ESAPP's research approach was innovative because it combined knowledge production for informed decision-making with the improvement of science–society interaction and fostering of institutional development in the programme region. It not only organized transdisciplinary research according to principles of democratized knowledge generation, social learning, and institutional development, but also pursued equity as a structural goal within partnerships themselves.

There are two structural features of ESAPP that were highly instrumental in achieving the individual and institutional capacity development described above: First, ESAPP ran for more than 15 years, making it significantly longer than comparable research partnership frameworks. This consistency spawned partnerships beyond the usual short-termed project logic, enabling partners to jointly shape capacity development strategies, a regional network, and future programme orientation. Second, ESAPP only relied on a logical-framework approach for individual priority action projects, but not for other interactions with partner institutions. This mode of operation enabled network partners to react flexibly to stakeholder demands and encouraged them to participate in the constant redefinition of development priorities in specific contexts.

In this way, decision-making power was gradually transferred, and institutions such as Savaivo and DERAD eventually became proactive leading partners within the programme, enabling them to grow into local centres of excellence in sustainable land management and sustainable regional development. They are now able to act as strong partners for governments, research institutions, and development agencies in identifying pathways towards sustainability. Thus, the idea of North–South knowledge transfer slowly gave way to the idea of co-production of knowledge by equal partners, a highly relevant process in terms of building governing capacity among domestic institutions in the South.



Top: Savaivo, a consultancy and research institution, gradually increased its portfolio and positioned itself in the national market, especially by offering analytical competence and effective approaches for community mobilization. Work with local communities often involves long travel. Here, a member of the Savaivo team and a colleague from a partner organization are on their way to a community mobilization event in a remote part of Madagascar. (Photo by Rodolphe Randriamanana)

Bottom: Representatives of a local community take part in a participatory impact analysis of a former reforestation project in Madagascar. ESAPP did research in close collaboration and interaction with local people and institutions in their respective environment. Close interaction with civil society in the local surroundings is indispensable in research for sustainable development. Joint generation and implementation of knowledge helps to balance knowledge and power disparities and to secure coherence in local to global development approaches. Human and institutional capacity development within ESAPP reached far beyond the partnership network into the public sphere. (Photo: Ernst Gabathuler)



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Highlight profile

This highlight is based on the achievements of 10 ESAPP priority action projects.

Implemented during:
2002–2014

Total funds contributed by ESAPP:
CHF 212,000

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

In collaboration with:
Partner organizations in all ESAPP countries

Main beneficiaries:
Savaivo, Antananarivo, Madagascar; DERAD (Diagnostic environnemental et recherches appliquées pour le développement en milieu rural), Antananarivo, Madagascar; ESAPP network in Kenya (CETRAD and partners); ESAPP network in Ethiopia (Regional Coordination Office and partners); and ESAPP partners in Eritrea

This highlight

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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").