Designing and implementing complex consortium-based projects

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ASSAR
Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions
Wicked Problems

- Every problem is unique
- There is no clear problem definition
- Are multi-causal multi-scalar & interconnected
- Multiple stakeholders with conflicting agendas
- Every solution ramifications throughout the system
- Can take a long time to evaluate solutions
- Solutions are not right/wrong, but better/worse
- Every wicked problem is connected to others
- Straddle organizational & disciplinary boundaries

Based upon Rittel and Webber (1973)
ASSAR aims to improve understanding of:
• Vulnerability & wellbeing
• Adaptive capacity & responses

What are the barriers and enablers for effective, widespread and sustained adaptation to climate change in semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia?

** comparative research **
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project features</th>
<th>ASSAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>Range of science and social science disciplines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>16 institutional partners</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt;200 members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizations involved</td>
<td>From <strong>academics</strong> at national level, to global humanitarian NGOs, to <strong>practitioners</strong> at community level</td>
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<td>Geographical scope</td>
<td>Research in 7 countries (2 continents)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Partners from 10 countries (4 continents)</td>
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<td>Goals &amp; criteria of success</td>
<td>Research (50%), capacity (20%) and research uptake (30%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>4.5 years (2014-2018)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>CAD 13.5 million</td>
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Objectives and methods

• To explore ASSAR members’ learning and their experiences of working in a consortium, halfway through the project’s duration
• To reflect on issues to be taken into account when designing and implementing large-scale collaborations

Methods
• Inductive approach
• Survey – combination of open-ended questions & Likert scale
• Open coding
Concept note & proposal development

- Vision, goals, etc.
- Choice of partners
- Clearing expectations
- Budget allocation
- Modality of collaboration

- “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.”

- “Matching consortium expectations with institutional expectations (aspirations) and being able to do justice to both.”

- “Sometimes the competing priorities of the individual members pull in different directions that makes agreeing on a way forward difficult.”

- “Each unit trying to push for implementation of views and suggestions.”
Inception phase

- Confirm vision, impact, expectations
- Build trust & ownership
- Addressing power issues
- Working modalities

- “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.”

- “Sometimes, the tendency of disciplinary bias and dominance of certain research lens/approach than 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 nature of contracts & fund availability).”

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

- “Delays in delivery from key researchers on manuscripts and differing ideas of productivity.”
Implementation phase (incl. wrap-up)

• Managing consortia priorities & demands
• Accommodating different ambitions
• Supporting innovation
• Valuing people, maintaining connection & motivation

• “Not being able to make things happen because of others. Having way too much on my plate (so much time on organising and meeting etc.) and not being able to focus on strategic aspects and important deliverables such as writing papers.”

• “Working with ASSAR is good, but with my position as research uptake responsible person, when the research findings are delayed our work is going to be highly affected.”

• ”I think It could be "how to align my research questions with ASSAR research questions" so that I do what I am passionate for while answering ASSAR questions.”

• “Coming to consensus on methods (we actually still haven't done that!). I feel the consortia model doesn't allow for methodological innovation. We tend to fall back on the lowest common denominator - e.g. household surveys.”

• “Keeping everyone on board and engaged and signed up to the direction of travel that ASSAR is pursuing; the length of time it takes to move forward can sometimes be problematic.”
Concept note & proposal development

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Incentives

Learning & adaptive management

Leadership
Reflections

• Role of motivators/ enablers (trust, relationships, learning) in helping to overcome transaction costs
• Importance of being clear on expectations and what being part of a consortium really means
• Dealing with different tensions (research vs. research into use; research vs. project management; institutional vs. project requirements; student aspirations vs. project requirements)
• Practical “tips”: full-time people, face-to-face time, choice of partners... but much more is needed
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ASSAR
Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions
ASSAR at Adaptation Futures: Where to find us

Visit us in the Expo Hall:
IDRC/CARIAA stand (booths 5 & 6)

Look out for this quick guide for a summary of ASSAR presentations at Adaptation Futures

Visit our website:
www.assar.uct.ac.za