

ASSAR

ADAPTATION AT SCALE
IN SEMI-ARID REGIONS
2014–2018

COLLABORATIVE
RESEARCH CONSORTIA ARE
COMPLEX, BUT HAVE
GREAT POTENTIAL

AN ASSAR CROSS-REGIONAL INSIGHT

Learning in Consortia



Large-scale collaborative consortia provide multiple opportunities for professional and personal growth of those involved. Interactions across disciplinary, geographical, cultural, and sectoral dimensions offer a rich learning environment; and consortia provide multiple opportunities for networking, capacity building, and broadening one’s understanding. However, working in consortia can be challenging, involving varied transaction costs given the diversity of partners involved, and their dispersed nature. Bridging the research-practitioner divide, for instance, requires overcoming certain barriers, such as differences in professional language and priorities. Yet continuous and iterative collaboration between researchers and practitioners is critical for research to be impactful and meaningful. Building relationships and trust is one of the most worthwhile investments one can make for the success of large-scale collaborative initiatives

ASSAR’s reflective approach

From the outset, in a variety of complementary ways (see Table 1), the ASSAR consortium took a reflective approach, in an effort to learn from the multiple activities that were being undertaken – from research to stakeholder influencing, from managing the workflow to writing collaboratively. The lessons that follow are a result of these reflection processes.

Table 1: Learning processes pursued by ASSAR

Learning process	Purpose
ASSAR annual meetings	Opportunities to reflect on what was working well, what needed to be continued, what should be discontinued, and what new things should be done.
CARIAA programme annual learning meetings	Opportunities to reflect on different aspects of our work, from Research-into-Use, to the process of content synthesis across one or more consortia. One outcome of these meetings was the contribution of ASSAR members to the production of a journal article on CARIAA’s insights on transdisciplinary collaboration.
Preparation of ASSAR annual progress reports	Opportunities to look back on our achievements, and the challenges encountered, and to discuss the potential risks that the consortium faced, and how those could be mitigated.
ASSAR mid-point survey (September 2016) and final survey (November 2018)	Opportunities to reflect on ASSAR member learning and highlights, as well as the benefits and challenges associated with being part of a consortium, halfway through, and at the end of the project.
Learning exchanges with other large consortia-based programmes	Opportunities to reflect on common lessons learned across different programmes (including the Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED), the Partners for Resilience alliance, and others). These interactions resulted in a series of guidelines, which were presented in a webinar in November 2018.

KEY INSIGHTS

LARGE-SCALE COLLABORATIVE CONSORTIA PROVIDE MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING AND BENEFITS TO THOSE INVOLVED

Large-scale collaborations bring together multiple partners from different geographies, disciplines, cultures and sectors (e.g., academic, state and non-state). The learning that occurs at the intersection of these multiple dimensions is inevitably significant. According to [the ASSAR survey](#) conducted halfway through the project's duration, the most valuable things learned by ASSAR members revolved around both research content and the process of working together. When learning something new, ASSAR team members referred not only to new knowledge (such as on adaptation, wellbeing, gender and climate science), but also new ways of thinking about and conducting one's research, the importance of Research-into-Use, as well as a broadened understanding of issues – including an enhanced realisation of their complexity. On process, ASSAR colleagues appreciated having learned about the consortium model, including how it works, the inherent challenges involved, and the importance of relationships and spending time together.

ASSAR members also showed an appreciation of the importance of the different types of expertise

encompassed by the consortium, referring to its cross-regional, multi-cultural aspect, the variety of disciplinary perspectives, the inclusion of practitioners alongside researchers, and the interactions among different levels of seniority and expertise. When asked about the most useful part of working in a consortium, responses revolved around the access to these diverse perspectives and approaches, networks, sets of expertise and skill, sources of information, funds and research sites – among others – that being part of a consortium affords. The experience of working across different regions and different fields, and the ability to generate knowledge and compare learning across these fields, was deemed invaluable. The many opportunities to strengthen capacities (such as through mentorship, ASSAR-organised [training courses and writeshops](#), ASSAR's [small opportunities grants](#) that enabled cross-regional exchanges and the pursuit of distinct individual projects, and participation in conferences) were also highly appreciated, by both junior and senior researchers, as well as practitioners.

The key aspects that participants of ASSAR's last annual meeting (June 2018) aimed to take to a new project mainly revolved around: research for impact (including thinking about target audiences, influencing, stakeholder involvement, communications); more holistic ways of thinking; new skills and approaches; an understanding of the challenges involved in working collaboratively across disciplines, dispersed partners, and varying skill sets and capacities; and insight into the ways of better navigating these collaborations. The relationships forged through the project (and which were the result of both formal and informal interactions, such as during annual meetings), were one of the most valued aspects of the experience, and many partners are building upon them in other collaborations.





WORKING IN CONSORTIA CAN BE CHALLENGING AND INVOLVES NUMEROUS TRANSACTION COSTS

The very same features of consortia that enable learning and add value (such as their disciplinary and geographical diversity) are often responsible for making collaborative work challenging and time-consuming. The number of institutions and individuals involved, dispersed nature of partners, and cultural diversity can lead to difficulties for coordination, communication, maintaining connection, understanding one another, and ultimately working together effectively, particularly in the case of new partnerships where relationships and trust have to be built from scratch. In ASSAR, the first year was particularly challenging, given that most partners had not worked together before.

Added to this was the challenge of building trust given the geographical isolation of the different partners, and the low frequency of face-to-face meetings that allow people to develop working and personal relationships. Setting up the different structures for the project

(including ASSAR's integrated research framework, which would enable comparability across study sites) was therefore an arduous process, as a common language and understanding of concepts, across disciplinary, research-practitioner, and geographical divides (including rural and urban), had to be developed.

More than half of the [ASSAR survey](#) respondents, when asked about the most difficult aspects of working in a consortium, referred to the transaction costs. These included the complexity of working together in practice given the multitude of partners and physical distance separating most (e.g., to organise online meetings, take decisions remotely, the logistics of setting up shared research). In addition, respondents referred to the dependence on others' contributions to make progress, and the time investment required for all the multiple activities enveloped in a consortium (including project management, administration, reporting, budgeting, communications), which overwhelmed team members most of the time. Politics were also a challenge, particularly those arising from power dynamics (arising for instance from the different disciplines, or lead versus sub-contracted partners), and competing interests and priorities (including tensions between research and impact, between students' interests and the project goals, and between institutional mandates and ASSAR's priority areas). Lastly, different ways and paces of working, differences in understanding and addressing issues, and a lack of collaborative spirit (which was at times due to personal relationships), were also found to complicate the collaborative endeavour at times.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS IS CRITICAL FOR IMPACT

ASSAR experience indicates that iterative and continuous interactions between researchers and practitioners is key for maximising research impact. But this integration across research and practice is challenging, and requires the removal of certain key barriers, and consolidation of certain key enablers. Barriers that we encountered included the use of different language and terminologies to define activities; differences in project mandates, expectations, impact timelines, and institutional priorities; and rigidity in terms of thinking about outputs

and impacts (such as research publications versus stakeholder engagement). Some of the key enablers that emerged included thinking about new ways of integrating knowledge across scales (defined by strategic collaborations and new ways of thinking); a research design that embeds Research-into-Use; and increasing collaborative engagements between researchers, practitioners and communities – both within and across organisations – which could potentially lead to more trust, respect, and recognition across distinct frames of knowledge production and dissemination.

In addition, we found that there are diverse approaches to research-practice collaboration and there is no ‘one’ silver bullet, or one-size-fits-all solution. All approaches require investments of time and resources. For example, collaborative and strategic alliances between research institutions and practitioner institutions (at all levels, from local to global) must be nurtured to mature over a long period of time.





FIVE WAYS TO MAXIMISE BENEFITS AND IMPACTS OF COLLABORATIVE WORK

Invest in relationship building

Large-scale collaborations of people and partners who have not worked together before require significant investments in relationship-building activities early on, to enable expectations to be cleared and trust to be developed, before (or at least alongside) the hard discussions on deliverables and budgets. Early meetings should also be aimed at developing a joint vision and framing of what is desired, and discuss how work will be undertaken, and challenges (including conflict and risk) dealt with.

Ensure budget to support emerging opportunities

The provision of small seed funds at opportune times (e.g., once relationships have been built and the focus of work is clear) can help to catalyse the production of collaborative, comparative outputs, strengthen capacities, and increase impact. Similarly, such funds can be used to take advantage of windows of opportunity for influencing policy or practice.

Enable collaborative research through training and leadership

Collaborative research can be enabled through a combination of training activities (more effective when these happen early in the project), face-to-face time to enable progress (maximising the opportunities when colleagues are already together), strong leadership, and commitment by the different colleagues involved.

Maintain connection through transparent and regular communication

The dispersed nature of a consortium partnership necessitates dedicating additional, specialised attention to ensuring transparency, keeping communication channels open, and maintaining the flow of information to keep partners engaged and motivated. This could be done through weekly newsletters (e.g., we adopted a weekly digest for ASSAR) to keep everyone updated about important documents, meetings, deadlines and opportunities, and to celebrate achievements across the team. This is particularly important for those involved more peripherally, and who have fewer opportunities for face-to-face interactions.

Invest in face-to-face time

Face-to-face time is critical to maintain momentum and ensure progress. Though expensive, this is probably the most worthwhile investment of funds, particularly to secure commitment and attention to the project when colleagues are only involved in it part time.

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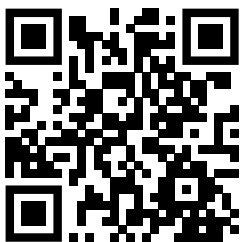
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