

# SWISS RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS – EXPERIENCES & LESSONS LEARNT

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## Historical background and context

In Rio de Janeiro in 1992, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), a larger audience was made aware of the strong imbalance between the number of scientists in industrialised countries and those in developing countries. At that time, the ratio was around 30:1, without even considering the differences in scientific infrastructure. Therefore, in conjunction with the timely concern to address environmental issues at a global level, the Swiss Government decided to contribute to reducing this imbalance and launched special partnership programme in 1994. It became part of the Swiss Priority Programme - Environment (SPP-E) and was called 'Module 7 Environment and Development'. Its basic idea and drive was to promote individual capacity building, mainly in the South, and to contribute to solving concrete environmental problems and issues through North-South research partnerships.

The three major goals of Module 7 were:

- I To build or develop greater independent viable research capacities in developing countries;
- II To investigate environmental problems or issues and to produce practical solutions;
- III To test new forms of research co-operation (collaborative research).

The financial support for this undertaking was assured through an innovative joint venture: the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) as the main source for public research funding agreed to cover the expenses of the Swiss scientists, while the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) accepted to finance the Southern partners, as well as some development related components. Module 7 was carried out over a period of about 6 to 7 years (1994-2000) and covered 14-18 single projects grouped around three topics: 'Natural Resources', 'Urban Environment' and 'Conflict Management'.

At the end of 1999, the whole SPP-E officially came to an end, and the research partnerships launched through Module 7 had to be directed towards an acceptable phasing out activity depending on their previous functions, lasting for a maximum of two years until 2001.

## Taking stock of experiences

In order to draw the necessary conclusions from all of the experiences gained by the 14 projects<sup>2</sup> supported throughout the 6-7 years of research partnerships, the SDC mandated a participatory external international evaluation in 1999<sup>3</sup>. The intention was to assess to what

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<sup>2</sup> Clustered in 3 Project Groups: 'PG 'CONTICI' with the aim to elaborate theoretical approaches and practical options in view of socio-ecologically and politically sustainable, and demographically adapted development; PG 'Urban Environment' with the aim to tackle questions in applied and educational research connected with the urban environment and the administration of cities; PG 'Natural Resources' aiming at sharing the common theme of water, soil and vegetation, research on gradients, research on natural resource use, and methods of effectively using natural resources.

<sup>3</sup> The complete evaluation report, as well as the compendium, are available at <http://www.kfpe.ch/projects/sppu/evaluation.html>.

extent the above mentioned goals had been achieved, and to understand what had contributed to their positive or negative fulfilment.

Three key questions were addressed:

- Did the programme strategy and concept make sense with regards to international needs for research capacity in the South?
- Did the programme mechanisms achieve an optimal balance between capacity building, scientific results, and costs?
- In which cases did project management produce the best outcomes (both in terms of research capacity and scientific results), and how did it work?

### **Methodology and approach**

With regard to the general underlying spirit of Module 7, the SDC invited representatives from the main stakeholders, and a KFPE representative, to join the evaluation steering group<sup>4</sup>. This was carried out as a learning and participatory exercise, moderated by an independent evaluation expert. In order to include assessment of all project partners, a questionnaire survey was carried out covering both partners in the North and in the South. Various focus group discussions were held, and three in depth studies concerning Kenya, Uganda and India were carried out. These included visits on the spot by evaluators, who interviewed relevant stakeholders.

### **Results of the analysis**

The participatory analysis concluded that

- The concept adopted of promoting research partnerships, in order to support capacity building, makes sense;
- Both science and development appear to have profited from collaborative research mostly carried out as action-research and in a trans-disciplinary way;
- However, a certain tendency to gradually pay more attention to development issues is visible. This is most probably due to researchers' emotional engagements in the context in which they were active;
- It appears that Southern scientists have considerably increased their research activities within their research unit, as well as their individual capacity, during the lifetime of Module 7, and that the level of research capacity reached can be considered as sustainable;
- Southern partners' results have increasingly been disseminated and recognised on an international scale, but nevertheless there is still strong inequity between North and South in terms of international visibility;
- The - implicitly expected - contribution to effective institutional capacity building is very limited, if indeed at all present. This is mainly due to the lack of a corresponding strategy and therefore, the mechanisms required;
- It appears that belonging to a strong organisation is a critical factor for more substantial research unit institutional capacity building;
- A long term commitment (of about 10 years) appears to be crucial, in order to achieve more substantial and sustainable improvements with regard to institutional capacity building;
- Most of the generated research activities fall into the category of applied-trans-disciplinary research; as such Module 7 appears to have mainly produced knowledge that is finely tuned to solving real world problems, without being bounded by disciplinary limits;

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<sup>4</sup> made up of representatives from the SNSF, the SDC, the Expert Group of both SPP-E and Module 7, and Swiss project members, as well as additional Swiss experts.

- The cost–benefit relation appears to be satisfactory; however, due to various reasons several of the Module 7 projects have not (yet) produced as many internationally visible scientific papers as one might expect;
- Southern partners appear to have had a lesser role in the projects than if it had been a completely balanced partnership on an equal footing. All project leaders happen to be Swiss scientists;
- Since project leaders play a key role, it is important that they remain highly committed to their task. However, they have received neither formal terms of reference nor specific training for playing their role; hence there are extreme differences in management styles among the various projects. It can be stipulated that a style of leadership that constantly tries to empower the Southern researchers is likely to speed up their process of capacity building.

### **Recommendations**

From the participatory evaluation exercise it can be recommended that

- ✓ The innovative venture between SDC and SNSF, aimed at supporting collaborative research projects, should continue;
- ✓ In order to improve the targeted capacity building focused on the Southern partners, the balance - particularly also with relation to managerial questions – should be improved;
- ✓ Application of the 11 principles for research partnerships developed by the KFPE<sup>5</sup> should be declared compulsory for future collaborative programs;
- ✓ Depending on the circumstances, it might be helpful to distinguish an exploratory, development and mature stage within the spectrum of partnerships to find the most appropriate way of functioning for better collaborative research operation;
- ✓ The research agendas of future projects should, particularly in the case of mature stage partnerships, be developed in the South instead of Switzerland. This was not the case for most of the Module 7 projects. The corresponding funds needed should be made available;
- ✓ A focus should be made on increasing the contribution towards institutional capacity building, however, this will require a long term commitment of at least 10 years;
- ✓ In order to guarantee a sustainable win-win-situation both for science and development expectations, more attention has to be paid to maintaining high scientific quality in the research, avoiding a gradual shift in favour of more development dominated activity during the lifetime of single projects;
- ✓ With regard to better management of the projects by their leaders in both the North and South, it is helpful to make operative definitions clearer, and also to improve leadership qualities and qualifications. This also includes generalisation and cooperation memos being signed by partner organisations, and contracts signed by the project leaders and other key scientists involved in the projects, in order to ensure commitment and continuity;
- ✓ In order to increase opportunities for operational research finding implementation, as well as to improve institutional capacity building, SDC, and its co-ordination offices in the field, should be more actively involved in the projects e.g. as a sounding board or for feedback to ensure transfer of new knowledge gained;
- ✓ An annual or bi-annual international award for outstanding North-South research partnerships could be created; which would aim at promoting research capacity building in developing countries. The award could be created in collaboration with a range of like-minded donor agencies from other countries. Since such an award would require a fair and transparent assessment of 'outstanding projects', the setting up of operational indicators for research capacity would be a valuable and very useful by-product.

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<sup>5</sup> Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries ([www.kfpe.unibe.ch](http://www.kfpe.unibe.ch))

### **Looking to the future**

After a long, difficult and very demanding competition, the final implementation of the new National Centre on Competence for Research North-South called 'Research Partnerships for Mitigating the Syndromes of Global Change' (NCCR North-South<sup>6</sup>) was launched in July 2001. This new instrument is again supported by joint financing from the SNSF and the SDC. It aims at producing scientific added value through intensive multidisciplinary collaboration among the 7 core Swiss institutions included, and their corresponding partners in the South and the East. Moreover, it aspires to be trans-disciplinary, by including important local stakeholders as real partners in the research activities.

The NCCR North-South – which is planned to function over a period of about 10 years - will allow to further improve the pragmatic approach of collaborative research in order to increase the desired and expected impact of such research partnerships.

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<sup>6</sup> [www.nccr-north-south.unibe.ch](http://www.nccr-north-south.unibe.ch)