

Building a collaborative platform for climate change: an action research approach

As climate change has risen on the development agenda, so has the demand for research to understand the effects it will have on society and what can be done by governments, businesses, communities and households to deal with its impacts. The rapid increase in development assistance funding for climate change has brought with it opportunities to scale up work on development and poverty reduction. But there is also a danger that adaptation interventions will not be based on sound research, or that research will not be relevant or accessible to the developing countries it is meant to serve.

Coordinating research between the UK and Bangladesh

Bangladesh, which is already feeling impacts from climate change and investing substantial domestic and international funding in adaptation, faces these opportunities and dangers right now. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, development research institutes are responding to the global attention on climate change in their programmes and staff expertise. Research on adaptation in developing countries is being commissioned by development assistance agencies, research programmes, and donors, but none of these efforts is coordinated or systematically focused on the priority problems of specific developing countries.

In mid-2009, members of the United Kingdom Collaborative on Development Sciences (UKCDS) commissioned a one-year project to develop a pilot platform to coordinate research efforts on climate change adaptation, with particular attention to land, water, food, health and nutrition, in Bangladesh. Its aim was to learn how best to marshal the efforts of diverse

research actors towards the major development challenge and opportunity that climate change represents.

A country-led participatory process

The project was implemented by a small team of UK and Bangladesh-based researchers put together by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). The project presented the team with an initial design challenge: its originators and the major intended users of its outputs were UK-based research organisations, but its focus was on the development needs of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has its own vibrant research community with numerous universities and research institutes and many talented scientists, some of whom are well-known international authorities on climate change adaptation. It had recently completed a process to develop a Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, which lays out the national actions required to address climate change, including priorities for research. It was also in the process of establishing a national climate change trust fund, capitalised by the Government at an initial level of US\$100 million. It was apparent

that Bangladesh was fully capable of leading its own response to climate change, and that international development actors could be most helpful by providing support. Simply joining up the diverse UK-based research initiatives and increasing investment in them could not in itself have much value unless it was placed within a larger Bangladesh-led initiative to coordinate and scale up national adaptation research efforts. Assessing the local demand for such an initiative thus became the first task of the project.

Initial discussions with a few key informants in Bangladesh confirmed the value in learning how scientists, policy makers and international development agencies working on different aspects of climate change adaptation could more effectively collaborate to enhance the contribution of research to addressing Bangladesh's adaptation challenges. The team felt that a project whose aim was to increase collaboration must necessarily be implemented in a participatory manner. The tools of participatory action research and participatory planning became both the methodology of the study and the means to begin achieving its aims.

Participatory action research (PAR) differs from other forms of research in that it seeks not only

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to understand a situation but also to stimulate positive change through the way the research is carried out. The research team act as facilitators, guiding a process of reflective analysis and action by the people who are affected by the situation – its stakeholders. Participatory planning is an approach that engages stakeholders in a linked process of problem identification, information collection, analysis, negotiation and formulation of plans. Many of the techniques used in PAR and participatory planning involve bringing stakeholders together in meetings, workshops and other ways. The decision to use participatory methods set the team a logistical challenge: how to involve a geographically dispersed set of stakeholders in a cost-effective way.

The first step in the process was to begin understanding the context, through desk research and a series of interviews with an initial set of around 40 climate change research actors in Bangladesh and the UK. This led to the realisation that improved collaboration and coordination among researchers alone would not increase the contribution of research to Bangladesh's ability to adapt to climate change: there were also major obstacles posed by the lack of a guiding research framework to orient research towards national priorities, poor communication of research results, and limited institutional capacity to both undertake and use research. From this initial understanding, the team developed a conceptual framework (Figure 1) to guide the process of research and planning.

Over a period of about nine months, the project engaged a widening group of stakeholders in an iterative process of problem identification, analysis, planning and action. The framework identified as key stakeholders the end users of research as well as researchers themselves. While it was not possible for a project with limited scope and timeframe to engage with end users such as households, small businesses and farmers, it was possible to involve institutions that work with those groups, including NGOs and government agencies such as the Department of Agricultural Extension. It also involved climate change policy-makers within the Government of

Bangladesh and agencies in the UK that make decisions regarding climate change research funding and development assistance to Bangladesh.

By the end of the project, nearly 200 individuals had participated in one or more activity. Videoconferencing was used to bring together both a wide spectrum of stakeholders and more targeted groups. Exchange visits involving small delegations from the UK to Bangladesh and vice versa presented opportunities to hold national-level seminars and interact with donors and political decision-makers. A final high-level conference in Dhaka, with a follow-up visit from a delegation of UKCDS members, pulled all the pieces together into a set of recommendations and plans to follow up on specific opportunities.

What the participatory approach achieved

The methods of participation used by the project were effective in bringing about change, in institutions, attitudes, knowledge and relationships, and through the creation of new opportunities.

Discussions on limited institutional capacity and opportunities for researchers within most of the country's universities at an early videoconference workshop stimulated one participant to follow up with a suggestion to establish a university consortium on climate change research. The project provided a platform to air the idea, which was well received, and to develop it further. Substantive discussions on setting up the University Consortium on Climate Research are now underway. This has the potential to significantly enhance the role of Bangladesh's universities in climate change research management.

The project was able to broker discussions between research actors that rarely have an opportunity to interact. The Bangladesh delegation that visited the UK included researchers, government policy-makers and NGO development practitioners working on adaptation. Normally, they operate in very different worlds,

but during the visit they became a team and were able to explore ways to work together more effectively and to overcome some of the barriers and biases that have impeded past collaboration.

The project created spaces for research actors from Bangladesh and the UK to share information and perspectives and explore opportunities for collaboration, and the reactions of participants demonstrated how rarely such balanced North-South dialogue actually occurs and how useful it can be to scientists.

The project created non-political spaces for scientists and decision-makers from the two countries to explore ways to overcome barriers and do things better. A meeting was arranged between the delegation from Bangladesh and senior officials from the UK Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC), at which the representatives from DECC and from the Bangladesh Ministry of Environment and Forests agreed to consider a Memorandum of Understanding between their agencies. This memorandum would facilitate technology transfer and information exchange, and support capacity building.

One significant achievement of the iterative process was an increasingly clear commitment from decision-makers in the government to systematically invest in research, and parallel actions from UK-based development research programmes to facilitate engagement in Bangladesh's climate change research effort through improved dissemination of information on funding opportunities and guidance on preparation of proposals. These expressions of financial support provide one of the critical building blocks for a collaborative research platform.

The enthusiasm and proposals generated by the participatory process attracted new potential sources of technical support for a collaborative research platform. For example, the staff of the Climate and Development Knowledge Network, which was recently established by DFID, and of the Regional Climate Adaptation Knowledge Platform for Asia, managed by UNEP and the Stockholm

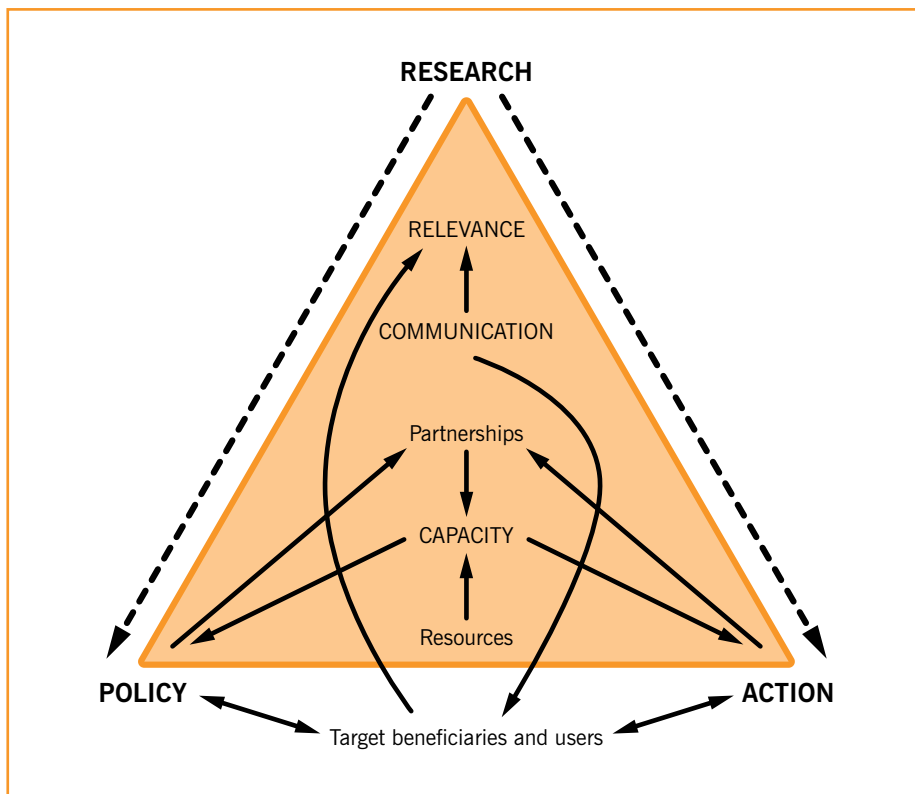


Figure 1: Project conceptual framework

Environmental Institute, participated in project activities and followed up with detailed discussions with the project team on ways they could support implementation of recommendations coming out of the process.

Learning from the process

As a pilot, the project was expected to generate not only concrete outputs, but also learning on how to develop a collaborative research platform involving a wide range of research actors. How suitable was the participatory action research approach to this task?

There were technical challenges in involving a steadily expanding number of geographically dispersed stakeholders in an iterative participatory methodology. Videoconferencing turned out to be a very effective tool. Although the technology does not always act seamlessly and time differences can make scheduling difficult, it was an excellent and cost-effective way to bring people together in productive dialogue. Over the course of five videoconferences, the team learned that groups of no more than 10 or 12 people per side work best, as with larger groups it becomes difficult to manage the time allocated to each side. Telephone hook-ups, which were used occasionally when participants were not physically able to be at a conference venue, worked surprisingly well.

There were also cultural challenges to a participatory approach. Science is an elitist profession, and Bangladeshi culture reinforces that tendency. There were unconscious biases towards powerful senior male leaders, reducing the space available for the contributions of younger stakeholders, women, and those representing less politically powerful institutions. It is the role of the facilitator in a participatory process to assure that all voices can be heard equally. One approach that helped was to include in the delegation that came to the UK two young academics and a woman from an action-research NGO, in addition to delegates from the government and senior scientists. The less formal nature of discussions during the visit, and the opportunities to engage with peers in UK institutions, opened up spaces for stakeholders who have much to contribute but in normal situations have limited opportunities to do so.

The process relied heavily on workshops, seminars and conferences for group discussion and analysis. These were generally informative and productive, and helped to evolve the final set of project recommendations. They also helped to build a core constituency of project supporters among those who were involved in multiple activities. However, the process may have been approaching 'workshop overload' by the end of the project, as enthusiasm appeared to have waned by the final conference. At that point, consensus on the desired outcomes of

the process was already generally achieved, and as a result there was a sense of repetition in things that were said. This is a reminder that participation alone does not sustain a participatory action research process: there is also a need for action to test the approaches that have been developed and trigger the next stage of analysis and planning.

Although workshops and seminars can certainly be useful in moving towards agreement and common understandings, interactions involving smaller groups of people – ranging from formal meetings to social encounters to one-on-one interviews – may be more effective in achieving a deep understanding of situations and developing plans and proposals. Many of the major achievements of the project emerged from these interactions, and the project team invested a good deal of effort in building relationships with stakeholders and creating these opportunities. This indicates that effective participatory processes are more than a series of structured 'events', but involve a range of forms of dialogue, both formal and informal, over a long enough time frame to foster relationships of trust.

Replicability

UKCDS framed this project as a pilot, with potential replicability in other developing countries or for research topics other than climate change. They also saw it as providing

a model for UKCDS members' future initiatives. Development processes can never be packaged, and the outcomes of this project were determined by the unique context in which it was set. However, there are pieces of the experience that could be useful in similar endeavours.

Conceptual framework The conceptual framework (Figure 1) was based on a broadly applicable understanding of the role of research in development policy and practice. It stood up throughout the project as a robust tool for situation analysis and stakeholder identification, and as an effective means of communicating complex relationships and concepts. It could be adopted in other initiatives to develop more evidence-based approaches to policymaking and to more effectively put research into use.

Participatory methods The methods derived from PAR and participatory planning, adapted to the needs of this project, worked effectively in arriving at an understanding of the barriers

to research collaboration and of the measures required to address them. These methods require time and patience, but the end result is that the recommendations have been accepted and even acted on by stakeholders by the time they are formally presented. Similar methods could be employed in other national or international processes. For example, they could be adapted to the national diagnostics that will develop country engagement strategies for the Climate and Development Knowledge Network.

Country-driven process Although the project originated in response to an opportunity identified by UK-based research programmes, the process was driven by the priorities and interests of Bangladeshi research stakeholders. Of course, it is commonplace in development interventions to aim for 'country-led' processes, but achieving them can be problematic when the driving force for the intervention comes from elsewhere. The project team used simple methods to

make the process country-driven. It started with interviews with Bangladeshi key informants to establish the context, moving on to interviews with UK informants to validate and expand that understanding rather than working the other way around. It assumed that a framework for research collaboration had to work effectively 'at home' before it could usefully be expanded to include actors and initiatives from outside. Many of the discussions and resulting recommendations and proposals therefore dealt only with the Bangladeshi context, without reference to collaboration with UK or other international actors. It also focused a good deal on increasing equity in existing North-South research partnerships, and most of the recommendations that were directed at external agencies addressed that fundamental issue.

■ **TIGHE GEOGHEGAN, PROJECT COORDINATOR**

Tighe Geoghegan is a consultant at Green Park Consultants GPC Ltd.

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UKCDS is a collaboration of 13 UK research funders and policy-makers from across government and science disciplines working together to provide a more coordinated approach to development sciences research and to maximise the impact of UK research funding on international development outcomes. It also works with international partners to strengthen the research and innovation capacity of poorer countries.

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CONTACT: Andrée Carter
a.carter@ukcds.org.uk
Gibbs Building
215 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 7611 7330
Fax: +44 (0)20 7611 8416
Website: www.ukcds.org.uk

CONTACT: Saleemul Huq
saleemul.huq@iied.org
3 Endsleigh Street
London WC1H 0DD, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 7388 2117
Fax: +44 (0)20 7388 2826
Website: www.iied.org

