

Consortia Management

Strengthening health research capacity more effectively through consortia: the role and place of management

Target Audience

- Research capacity strengthening (RCS) policymakers, and programme funders/designers (institutional, national, regional/global levels)
- RCS practitioners (implementers of research capacity strengthening programmes)
- RCS researchers
- Beneficiaries of RCS programmes

The DELTAS Africa Learning Research Programme

The Developing Excellence in Leadership, Training and Science (DELTAS) initiative aimed to improve health in Africa through research driven by the most urgent regional challenges. The Learning Research Programme led by the Centre for Capacity Research at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, worked alongside the DELTAS Africa consortia to produce research-based learning about how to train and develop world-class researchers, foster their careers and collaborations and promote research uptake. Activities were distributed across four themes: Equitable career pathways; Training and development; Research Uptake; and Consortia management.

Nadia Tagoe led the consortia management theme examining how the management processes and practices used by low- and middle-income country-led health research capacity strengthening (HRCS) consortia feature in and contribute to the realization of broader research capacity outcomes. The study focused on consortia in the DELTAS Africa HRCS initiative. A qualitative approach was used to identify the management processes and factors that influenced the various approaches used by ten DELTAS consortia. This was followed by a multiple case study design involving three selected consortia which examine in more depth the decision-making considerations of these consortia, factors that influenced their choice of management strategies, and how those strategies enabled or hindered capacity strengthening.

Key Messages

- Huge investments in HRCS consortia has heightened the need for ascertaining if and how their management feature in and contribute to the realization of research capacity outcomes.
- Decision-making in consortium management can be highly complex as leaders constantly encounter tensions between very compelling strategy options each with its own capacity development consequences.
- Management strategies adopted by consortia are often driven by the pursuit of consortium performance as defined by evaluation indicators, although these strategies do not always align with capacity strengthening principles.
- A holistic perception of what research capacity entails, an awareness of capacity strengthening principles, and ensuring these permeate programme design, implementation and evaluation will enable the achievement of more relevant and sustainable capacity outcomes.
- Consortium management processes and experiences are capacity strengthening mechanisms in their own right as they strengthen often less-considered but essential research capacities.

Background

Strengthening health research capacity has been recognised as one of the most effective ways of advancing health and development. Hence, global efforts to strengthen health research capacity in low- and middle-income countries have intensified, increasingly through consortia. Reports on HRCS consortia have primarily focused on programme outputs and outcomes. Implementation processes and their implications for consortia goals have rarely been studied in depth. Exploring how consortium processes influence capacity strengthening will enhance policy and practice and help optimize returns on HRCS investments made.

After three decades of HRCS investments, there is still little consensus on the best ways of designing and evaluating these programmes¹. There is weak evidence on what works and how these are assessed as well as how and why reported outcomes are achieved. Major HRCS programme funders have expressed the need for evidence on evaluation frameworks and metrics. Empirical evidence is particularly essential for informing complex interventions such as those for HRCS.

The use of consortia is a leading approach to HRCS in low- and middle-income countries but there have been very little empirical investigation into how their function and practices affect their outcomes. The current literature on HRCS consortia focus on activities and outputs and not on processes and are mostly non-empirical. Thus, consortia have little empirical and conceptual basis for practice.

Summary of findings

■ The reality and management of tensions in consortium management

Decision-making in consortia is complex as it involves navigating tensions between compelling strategy options including:

- **Individual partner or collective interests** such as when determining which goals to focus on considering the diverse partner needs and interests.
- **Efficiency or effectiveness** such as emphasizing on programme delivery and consortium performance or on more effective capacity strengthening; e.g., when selecting partners (whether to prioritise those who would perform or those who had bigger capacity needs), and when selecting partner management systems (whether to adopt a centralised or decentralised system).
- **Excellence or equity** such as whether to use a merit- or quota-based system when allocating resources to partners through fellowship awards.
- **Shared power or exercising greater control** such as determining the level of control to concede to partners in consortium governance and management of consortium funds.

In managing these tensions, consortia sometimes maintained a balance between different options to produce a workable strategy. Other times, some options were traded off for others. Consortia's strategy choices determined the extents to which different aspects of research capacities were strengthened.

■ Key drivers of consortia decisions

Perception of research capacity and consortia performance were the most influential drivers of consortia management decisions. Stakeholders' interpretation of what research capacity entails affected the choice of management strategies. More significantly, funder expectations and evaluation indicators greatly influenced consortia decision as they both defined consortia performance and informed stakeholders' interpretation of research capacity. Thus, consortia often prioritised delivery of stated outputs and programme performance.

■ Consortium management strategies are not always fit for purpose

Research capacity relies on multiple levels (individual, institutional and environmental) and dimensions (e.g., leadership, strategy, systems, culture, skills, infrastructure)^{2,3}. Research capacity strengthening (RCS) is

¹ Bowsher, G., A. Papamichail, N. El Achi, A. Ekzayez, B. Roberts, R. Sullivan and P. Patel (2019). "A narrative review of health research capacity strengthening in low and middle-income countries: lessons for conflict-affected areas." *Globalization and health* **15**(1): 23.

² Cooke J. A (2005) Framework to evaluate research capacity building in health care. *BMC Fam Pract.*;6:44-44. doi:10.1186/1471-2296-6-44.

³ Zicker F (2002). Research capacity strengthening: strategy (2002-2005). *WHO Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR)*, Geneva.

emergent, systemic, long-term, inside-out process that relies on self-organizing. Management strategies either enable or undermine RCS depending on their alignment with the above-mentioned capacity development principles identified in the literature^{4,5}. When strategies emphasize technical over strategic capacities, short-term over long-term outputs, quantifiable over unquantifiable, and serving consortium needs over institutional needs (e.g., using parallel management systems), relevant and sustainable RCS is often undermined.

■ Role of consortium management in research capacity strengthening

Consortium management processes are capacity strengthening mechanisms in their own right and contribute to enhanced individual and institutional research capacity, particularly the strategic and managerial research capacity dimensions which provide the required grounding for the relevant use of technical skills and infrastructure. Capacity changes occurred through hands-on consortium management experience, higher levels of responsibilities (self-management), partner interaction, and contextualizing learning for local use.

Recommendations

1. Establish a consensus on what **holistic research capacity** and its development entails among stakeholders including funders, consortia and partner institutions.
2. Clarify the **capacity strengthening aim** of initiatives and ensure it permeates programme design, management, and reporting requirements.
3. Recognise the reality of **tensions in consortium management**, the resulting compromises and trade-offs that are often made, and the capacity implications of these decisions.
4. Embrace the **risks associated with RCS and its management** to optimize capacity strengthening, and back such commitments with clear guidelines to give implementers the latitude to make appropriate management decisions even when it appears 'risky'.
5. Redefine **RCS performance and excellence** and how these are measured to promote the prioritization of capacity strengthening in management decisions. Ensure that evaluation tools and indicators are RCS-specific and includes the full range of research capacity changes (quantifiable and unquantifiable, tangible and intangible, technical and managerial, strategic and operational, programme-oriented and institution-oriented, short- and long-term) at the different levels (individual, institutional, and environmental).
6. Promote increased **institutional leadership and ownership** of RCS programmes and closer alignment of consortia activities with institutional goals to ensure more relevant and sustainable capacity outcomes.
7. Recognise that **consortium management is a capacity strengthening mechanism**, and that management processes and practices require deliberate planning, adequate resources, time, training, and tracking.
8. Appreciate that **there is a science to capacity strengthening** which should inform programme design and implementation. Advance the generation and use of empirical evidence on HRCS practice to drive more effective and sustainable research capacity strengthening.

Conclusion

A holistic perception of research capacity highlights a wide range of opportunities for its strengthening. Consortium management processes and practices provide a key mechanism for developing the often less considered but essential research capacity dimensions that are required if relevant and sustainable capacity outcomes are to be achieved.

⁴Baser H, Morgan P. Capacity, Change and Performance: Study Report (ECDPM Discussion Paper 59B). 2008.

⁵Ubels J, Acquaye-Baddoo N, Fowler A. *Capacity Development in Practice*. Earthscan; 2010.

Researcher Profile: Nadia Tagoe



Nadia's current research activities focus on strengthening research capacity in low- and middle-income countries, especially in Africa. She has a background in international development and programme management and has extensive experience in managing capacity strengthening programmes and developing university research systems. Her broad research interests are in the areas of research systems and capacity development for global health. The work presented in this brief was drawn from Nadia's PhD research, which she successfully completed in 2021 (Open University, UK). She was a PhD Fellow of the Initiative to Develop African Research Leaders (IDeAL) hosted at the KEMRI Wellcome Trust Research Programme. Nadia also holds a Master of Science degree in Management and Implementation of Development Projects from University of Manchester, UK; and a Bachelor of Science in Building Technology from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.

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My research focused on ascertaining the relationship between the management processes and practices used by consortia and their research capacity strengthening outcomes

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About the Centre for Capacity Research

The Centre for Capacity Research specialises in the science of research capacity strengthening – a process of individual and institutional development leading to higher levels of skills and greater ability to perform useful research. The centre is a global leader in advancing evidence-informed capacity strengthening practice in low- and middle-income countries, through:

- Conducting high quality, implementation focused capacity strengthening research
- Fostering a global community of capacity strengthening scientists with equitable low- and middle-income country participation
- Sharing learning and advocating for evidence-informed capacity strengthening practice

The Centre for Capacity Research retains a broad interest in capacity strengthening initiatives of all types within a low- and middle-income country contexts, including a speciality in laboratory strengthening.

Our research themes have been developed to span the range of capacity strengthening activities we undertake:

Theory - to advance theoretical and conceptual understanding of capacity strengthening

Process - to support capacity strengthening implementation through embedded 'learning' research, enhancing programme success and highlighting 'good practice' for current and future capacity strengthening initiatives

Measurement and Impact - to develop and apply frameworks and tools appropriate for tracking progress and measuring the outcome and impact of capacity strengthening interventions

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