

The Nuances of Consortium Management Decision-Making Processes and Recommendations for Maximising Capacity Strengthening

A key finding from the consortium management theme is that decision-making in consortia is not as straightforward as it may appear. Consortium leaders often have to make difficult choices between diverse management strategies and capacity goals. For example, leaders deliberate on whether to involve stronger or weaker partners, have collective or partner-specific goals, have a purely merit-based or quota-based fellowship award system, or employ a centralised or decentralised system for managing partners. In some cases, consortia attempt to balance out divergent strategies by adopting one and introducing mitigating measures such as recruiting fellows by merit but balancing out gender and regions, and mixing stronger and weaker partners. Other times, consortia trade-off one option for the other, such as opting for a centralised control of consortium finances to avoid reporting risks associated with decentralised systems; and selecting only stronger partners to ensure better performance. However, each strategy has capacity strengthening consequences. In this month's bulletin, we present some of the factors that influence strategy decisions. We also make recommendations that can contribute to reducing these tensions, enhancing decision-making processes and maximising capacity strengthening in consortia.

Key Influences of Consortium Management Strategy Choices

- **Funder expectations and emphases, reporting requirements and evaluation indicators** significantly influence consortia's management decisions such as which research capacity needs are prioritised and which strategies are traded off (e.g. focusing on training individual researchers).
- The extent to which strategies enhance or limit **consortia's performance and competitiveness** often influences the choices made (e.g. selection of stronger partners and stronger trainees only).
- Consortia members' **perceptions of what research capacity involves, how it is strengthened, and what types of capacities are deemed valuable** determine how strategy options are ranked. For instance, if primacy is given to individual-level research capacities, options that strengthen institutional-level capacities are often traded off.
- Strategies that are **easier, quicker, safer, and less-challenging to coordinate and implement** as well as those that are more likely to produce **tangible and quantifiable outputs** tend to be more attractive choices (e.g. training individual researchers vs addressing institutional gaps, central control of funds vs sub-awards).

Recommendations for Enhancing Consortia Decision-Making and Maximising Capacity Strengthening

Funders and consortia must:

- Establish a **holistic description of research capacity** and emphasise the **importance of the different types of capacities at the different levels** if sustainability is to be attained.
- **Redefine 'performance' in research capacity strengthening (RCS) programmes** (as opposed to performance in research programmes).
- Discuss and agree on a **broad range of expected outputs and outcomes, and their corresponding metrics** e.g. tangible and intangible, quantifiable and non-quantifiable, short-term and long-term, individual and institutional, technical and managerial, cognitive and behavioural.
- Programme **outcomes and evaluation indicators must allow for contextual diversity** as needs and capacity baselines of the different consortia and partners differ.
- Accept that **RCS is long-term and does not always fit the input-output structure**.
- Be willing to **embrace the inherent risks in RCS processes** e.g. engaging less capacitated partners.

DELTAS: Learning Research Programme

The Learning Research Programme (LRP), led by the Centre for Capacity Research, works 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. For more information about the LRP research activities and to access the LRP resources (annual reports, in-depth newsletters and all our publications), please visit our DELTAS research page at: www.lstmed.ac.uk/projects/deltas---learning-research-programme

For more information about the LRP please contact justin.pulford@lstmed.ac.uk



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Some of the LRP team at the DELTAS Africa AGM 2019

Equitable Career Pathways – This theme, framed within the context of a PhD project, is led by Millicent Liani titled: *“Examining barriers and enablers to gender equitable scientific career pathways in African research institutions”*. Millicent has employed a qualitative case study design, focussing on three DELTAS consortia, including: **IDeAL** (Initiative to Develop African Research Leaders); **MARCAD** (Malaria Research Capacity Development in West and Central Africa); and **SANTHE** (Sub-Saharan African Network for TB/HIV Research Excellence).

Research Training – Led by Abiola Aiyenigba, this is the only theme not framed within a PhD context. Research activities have included a mapping of health-related postgraduate training courses available in sub-Saharan Africa, an online survey of African researchers’ professional development needs, opportunities and barriers, and a qualitative case study exploring the extent, and process by which, researcher training in sub-Saharan Africa may be enhanced through consortia membership. Survey data were collected from across the DELTAS Africa network, whilst the case study focused on: **CARTA+** (Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa+); **MARCAD** (Malaria Research Capacity Development in West and Central Africa); and **Afrique One-ASPIRE** (African Science Partnership for Intervention Research Excellence).

Knowledge Translation – Also framed within the context of a PhD project led by Violet Murunga titled: *“Exploring the research uptake strategies being used by African researchers to promote evidence-informed decision making”*. Violet has also employed a qualitative case study design focusing on three DELTAS Africa consortia: **AMARI** (African Mental Health Research Initiative); **THRIVE-2b** (Training Health Researchers into Vocational Excellence in East Africa-2); and **WACCBIP** (West African Centre for Cell Biology of Infectious Pathogens).

Consortia Management – Framed within the context of a PhD project led by Nadia Tagoe and titled: *“Examining the process of establishing and managing health research capacity strengthening consortia”*. Nadia is based at KEMRI-Wellcome Trust, Kilifi, Kenya, under the IDeAL programme and has employed a qualitative research design. Nadia has obtained data from all DELTAS consortia, although has primarily focused on: **CARTA+** (Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa+); **THRIVE 2** (Training Health Researchers into Vocational Excellence in East Africa-2); and **DELGEME** (Developing Excellence in Leadership and Genetic Training for Malaria Elimination in Sub-Saharan Africa).



Millicent Liani



Abiola Aiyenigba



Violet Murunga



Nadia Tagoe