



Project management in research capacity building projects

A review of management experiences, challenges, and opportunities in ENRECA projects¹

Overview of findings and lessons learned

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Pre-project phase

Initial contact

- The majority of ENRECA partners knew each other before starting to develop the application and 38% of the projects were continuations of previous ENRECA projects.
- Twinning the right North and South partners is essential – matching objectives, ambitions and competencies is important.
- The individual match between project participants is also important since project success is often based on reciprocity, trust, mutual understanding and enthusiasm.
- The FFU initiative grant has been an important tool for establishing good partnerships.
- Both institutional and personal contacts play a role when initiating projects.
- The way projects are initiated – whether it is top-down or bottom-up initiated – is likely to affect the subsequent project implementation.

Selection of project objectives

- On average individual capacity building is considered most important, but approximately half of the project managers consider institutional and individual capacity building equally important.
- Project managers on average use more time on research management, but in most projects a substantial amount of time is also used on project management of other capacity building activities.
- It can be difficult to define project objectives – South partners' lack of research experience and North partners' lack of insight into the specific conditions makes it easy to become overambitious.
- It can be a challenge to align research and capacity development objectives with national and institutional policies and strategies, but RCB projects can be used as an opportunity for linking South institutions to government agencies.
- Partnerships have benefited from using an initiative grant period to conduct basic analysis and facilitate that South partners clarify their research policy.
- It can be difficult to ensure that the assumptions behind, and the implications of, the chosen project focus and intervention level are openly discussed.

¹ The review document is available on the website of the Danish Development Research Network (DDRN) at [http://ddrn.dk/papers and reports-research-overviews.html](http://ddrn.dk/papers_and_reports-research-overviews.html)

Choice of project design

- Most ENRECA projects have to some degree considered the expected management complexity in the partnership's choice of project design. Management complexity is considered more in relation to administrative procedures and project organisation than in relation to the choice of activities.
- North-South RCB projects are subject to many factors of uncertainties that are difficult to be foreseen, but some factors can be identified from other projects or researchers working in the same region.
- ENRECA projects have to a varied degree considered how project management complexity should be reflected in the project design.
- Multi- and interdisciplinary project designs constitute a special challenge and projects can benefit from planning activities to facilitate integration.
- It can be difficult to choose project partners, and it may take time to identify and select the right partners.
- Partners may have very different perceptions of the importance of stakeholder involvement.
- The project design should not be considered as static, but should be revised and adjusted as capacity evolves.
- If focus is on South partner's weaknesses rather than their strengths, RCB projects may fail to benefit from already existing South capabilities.

Choice of project management strategy

- 60% of the project managers found ENRECA projects to be more complex to manage than other university-based projects and 40% found it to be more complex than initially expected. 72% of the project managers have used more time on managing the project than expected when planning the project.
- Integration of projects administration with the existing South partner organisation can be a cost-efficient solution that limits transactions costs and supports South capacity building and project sustainability.
- An independent project administration can in some cases be the best solution and such administration can become a benchmark for good governance in weaker South institutions.
- With a strong independent (relatively to the South partner leadership) project organisation the partnership runs the risk of the project becoming a "project island".
- Having a Danish coordinator working for an extended period at the South institution can provide a range of benefits, e.g. learning about the South organisation and culture; getting to know partners better; support implementation etc. But also some disadvantages are identified, e.g. that South partners may have difficulties assuming the responsibility.
- Several project managers express that they have become overwhelmed by administrative tasks and it is recommended to establish from the beginning of the partnership clear agreements regards institutional support in both North and South.

Balancing the partnership

- Danish North-South partnerships are in general good at establishing symmetric relationships although the risk of asymmetric relations always exists.
- Project participants' behaviour can unconsciously and unintentionally create asymmetric relations, e.g. due to differences in organisational cultures and individual attitudes.
- ENRECA projects have used different modes of sharing responsibility: successively transference from a project office to the South institution; fifty-fifty sharing of responsibility throughout the project life cycle; South partner as main responsible from the initial phase; and a project office maintaining responsibility throughout the whole project.
- Which mode of sharing responsibility is chosen may depend on a range of issues, e.g. the personal attitude and ideology of the PRP; the mutual history and previous joint management experiences; the level of transparency, type of governance system and administrative experience at the South partner institution; personal relations and degree of trust between the involved partners; and the number of institutions involved in the partnership.
- Ensuring that both North and South partners contribute resources (financial and in kind) and making resource contributions explicit may contribute to create a genuine sense of ownership in both North and South.
- South institutions can have difficulties living up to initially agreed contributions, e.g. due to lack of funding, cumbersome administrative procedures, and change in leadership.

Incentives and ownership

- Project success depends on understanding the incentive structures influencing North and South partners.
- Project success depends on the match between individual participants' and project's objectives – ENRECA projects have been good at doing so.
- Involvement of South PhD students and Danish project participants has been very high in ENRECA projects, whereas the involvement of South project researchers has been more challenging.
- Involvement of Danish researchers can be supported by focusing on quality research and publication opportunities.
- Having to work within existing organisational structures in South is a challenge, e.g. due to limited opportunity to employ or topping up researchers' salaries.
- South researchers may lack incentives to participate in RCB projects for a range of institutional or personal reasons that can be difficult to make explicit during project preparation.
- The lack of ability to provide salaries has been a filter ensuring that only those genuinely interested participate in projects.
- It can be a challenge for North partners to understand how the often radically different living and working conditions of South partners impact on their project participation.
- It can be difficult for North project managers to obtain an understanding of the partner's organisational processes and how the South institution's management practices and organisational politics influence the South participants' involvement.

Project preparation phase

Project anchoring

Upwards anchoring

- It can be a challenge for researchers to align their projects with the perspective of the donor.
- ENRECA projects were relatively successful in upwards anchoring in Danish and South partner institutions.
- Experiences show that project success can depend on North and South project managers having a certain degree of political flair, organisational insight and support from influential South university leaders.
- Alignment with South university administrative procedures and norms can provide legitimacy and may prevent administrative or "political" problems during the implementation.
- The experiences with using steering committees for upwards anchoring have been mixed.

Outwards anchoring

- ENRECA projects have to some degree been successful in ensuring outwards anchoring to project stakeholders, other sector-level institutions and resource persons and institutions.
- Many ENRECA projects have had very positive experiences from the collaboration with SPS, but such collaboration is not necessarily easy. Project managers must consider that SPS has different success criteria from those of a typical RCB project.
- Projects have benefited from SPS facilitating: Insight into local conditions; contact to potential collaborators and resource persons; and more easy access to field data.
- Important factors for facilitating good ENRECA-SPS collaboration have included an early and ongoing dialogue to identify common interests and that ENRECA managers were well-prepared with a clear vision of how the project could support SPS objectives.
- The importance of outwards anchoring can be perceived differently by the different partners in a RCB projects.

Inwards anchoring

- ENRECA projects have been relatively successful in achieving inwards anchoring ensuring integration of the project team as a means of facilitating project implementation.
- The physical distance and the looser linkages of many participants to ENRECA project activities have constituted a challenge for inwards anchoring.
- Personal relations and regular visits to the South institution are important to facilitate mutual understanding and thus effective project implementation.
- Inwards anchoring involves careful consideration of incentive structures and mechanisms for creating ownership.

- Maintaining a focus on research quality and North-South research collaboration is an important aspect of inwards anchoring.

Project analysis

Cultural understanding

- Cultural differences can be a challenge to partnership collaboration and may impact project execution in several ways.
- Project managers emphasize the importance of understanding the culture in which projects are implemented. On the other hand, some project managers also warn not to over-interpret the cultural differences and their potential impact, as many of the same challenges can be experienced in both North and South institutions.

National and sectorial strategies and policy papers

- A large majority of ENRECA projects have included South's national strategies and policy papers in the project definition and this type of analysis is considered of some importance in project planning.
- Several ENRECA projects have obtained good support from the Danish embassy, SPS, and South ministries and agencies to identify relevant policy papers.
- North partners can be useful for their South partners as door openers to ministry and agency representatives.
- Half of the ENRECA projects have used sector-wide analysis in relation to project development and this analysis type is considered of some importance in project planning.
- Working along the lines of national strategies can contribute to ensure future relevance of South partner's research and teaching competencies.
- By mapping the national innovation system (NIS) a partnership may identify new research partners, research funding, and data and information sources.

Organisational analysis and needs assessment

- A majority of ENRECA projects have included an organisational analysis in the project preparation phase and the analysis is considered relatively important.
- Important aspects of an organizational analysis are: Perspectives on teaching and research; resources level and allocation; organisation of administration and management; financial administration; university governance structure; and incentives and behavioural patterns.
- A large majority of ENRECA projects have performed an analysis of challenges/problem to be addressed by the project and the analysis is considered very important.
- A qualitative and quantitative needs assessment provides partners with important information for project planning as well as a useful baseline for future monitoring.

Stakeholder and gender analysis

- Less than half (44%) of the ENRECA projects have conducted a stakeholder analysis, but the analysis is considered relatively important.
- Stakeholder analysis and management initiatives can provide important inputs for project design and planning.
- The mutual understanding of the stakeholder concept, as well as the benefits and disadvantages from involving stakeholders in project activities should be clarified with South partners.
- Few ENRECA projects (20%) have conducted a gender analysis, but the analysis is considered of some importance.

Risk analysis

- North-South research partnerships are typically implemented in settings with many unpredictable risks and uncertainties.
- Risk analysis was conducted by the majority of the ENRECA projects and it is considered relatively important to include in project preparation.
- The majority of the ENRECA projects have addressed risk management proactively, although not all have used explicit procedures.

Master project planning

Defining objectives and outputs

- ENRECA projects have been relatively good at establishing a shared understanding of project objectives and implementation throughout the project life cycle.
- It is a challenge to ensure that RCB projects do not become overly supply driven.
- Agreeing on objectives can be difficult due to different interests – individual and institutional – and project participants may try to redefine objectives during the course of implementation.
- Changes in South leadership can significantly impact a RCB project, e.g. due to new management priorities.
- ENRECA projects have often been too ambitious. Partnerships should evaluate carefully the realism of the objectives.

The resource frame

- ENRECA project managers have been creative and efficient in utilizing their projects to attract additional resources.
- Resources for ENRECA projects have come not only from Danida's grants, but from various other sources.
- The flexibility associated with the ENRECA programme is often mentioned as an important reason for the high input-output factor associated with these projects.

Planning the main processes

- The large majority (88%) of ENRECA projects has used basic planning tools, e.g. the LFA, milestone plans, work packages, or similar formats, and most (71%) are satisfied with their application.
- Application of participatory planning methodologies does not necessarily create ownership. Projects need to carry out the design and planning process together to ensure applicability, acceptance, involvement, and ownership.
- Projects have experienced that things often take much longer time than expected.
- Projects have benefited from starting up in small scale allowing the partnership to develop working relationships and testing participants' interest.

Defining roles and responsibilities

- A large majority (92%) of ENRECA projects have explicitly defined participants' roles and responsibilities.
- A clear division of roles and responsibilities is important to support effective implementation.
- Projects have benefited from discussing role expectations, as being project responsible, project manager or coordinator may mean different things to the different individuals involved in a partnership.
- In a cross-organisational collaboration where participants are working in unfamiliar structures defining roles and responsibilities are particularly important.
- Changing the initial distribution of roles and responsibilities between North and South institutions during the course of the project can be a challenge and needs to be adequately discussed and planned.

Defining the organisational structure

- The large majority (79%) of ENRECA projects has defined an organisational structure and find it to be working adequately.
- Well-functioning steering or management committees may provide upwards and outwards anchoring, improve information flow, and support inter- and intra-institutional collaboration.
- Merging administrative functions with other projects can provide several benefits, e.g. enhanced administration and improved service, access to new research opportunities, improved job security and support project sustainability. Aligning to the norms of a wider collaboration may, on the other hand, reduce the flexibility associated with the ENRECA model.
- The demand for administrative efficiency influences project decisions regarding the degree of integration with the South partner's existing organisation, e.g. the degree of North representation in South, and whether it is desirable to establish an independent project office.

Planning main budget

- Cost estimation can be difficult due to lack of context specific knowledge and highly uncertain due to the nature of the involved activities.
- Partners may use other projects, SPS, embassy staff, colleagues with country specific experience and task relevant knowledge to obtain cost estimates.
- Distribution of funds can be a sensitive issue in projects involving multiple partners.

Project start-up/inception phase

- 62% of the ENRECA projects have used between two and six months for project start-up.
- Establishing good communication practices among partnership participants is an important part of the start-up phase.
- Starting up the project slowly and using small-scale activities to initiate and practise the partnership collaboration can help identify strengths to utilize or weaknesses to address.

Detailed planning

- A large majority (78%) of the ENRECA projects have used sufficient time to further detail the master project plan during the start-up phase.
- Approximately half of the ENRECA projects have developed rules and regulations to an adequate degree. 29% found it unnecessary to do so.
- Approximately half of the ENRECA projects have not developed procedures for systematically dealing with deviations from their plans.
- Participants' detailed research planning can be supported by use of standard research protocols. When possible use the existing formats in South institutions to practise post-project planning.

Project co-ordination phase

Communication

- ENRECA project managers evaluate the internal communication between project partners to be highly sufficient to support efficient project implementation.
- A summary of the project document, internal newsletters, PhD students' monthly progress reports, a project notice board, and decision minutes from project meetings are examples of means used for information sharing in RCB projects.
- Half of the ENRECA projects found it unnecessary to developed procedures for exchange of project management information.
- Approximately one third of the ENRECA projects have used some kind of common platform (e.g. a project management file (PMF) for exchanging management information.
- A majority of projects have developed during project preparation stage a strategy for communication with stakeholders.
- Personal contacts, project newsletters, bulletins or up-dates, Email newsletters, and project websites have been the ENRECA projects' typical means of communicating with stakeholders.

Administration

- The majority (70%) of ENRECA projects have developed management regulations and norms to clarify mutual expectations and support transparency.
- It can be a challenge to implement administrative procedures, if this is not done from the beginning of the project execution.
- Developing management regulations can be a learning opportunity for partnership participants.
- Partners are relatively efficient in implementing agreed upon administrative requirements.
- Establishment of an independent project office is often chosen to ensure administrative transparency, independence from individual interests, and observation of donor-defined administrative requirements.
- Some projects have established independent financial management and bank accounts; other projects have integrated accounting, but maintain separate bank accounts; yet other projects have integrated financial management in the South institution's system.
- The majority (67%) of ENRECA projects have elaborated descriptions of financial procedures.

Ongoing leadership and management

- Very few ENRECA projects have applied formal project management.

- Approximately half of the ENRECA projects have included training in project management as an element in institutional capacity building.
- It can be a challenge to Danish project managers to identify the right balance between control and sharing responsibility.
- It can be a challenge to get participants to take initiatives in a culture where it is not allowed to make mistakes.
- Research activities are dynamic and uncertain project management need to be flexible..
- It can be difficult for project managers to ensure time to reflect on their own management role and long-term development of the projects.

Monitoring and control

- 75% of the ENRECA projects have developed an explicit monitoring plan. In 79% of the project, the partners had developed indicators together.
- 88% of the ENRECA projects monitor activities on a regular basis.
- Monitoring should relate to an institutional baseline study and include a few but fundamental performance indicators.
- Discussing performance indicators, monitoring plan and data collection as part of the project preparation or start-up can help partners focus on project objectives and adjust expectations.
- Using LFA matrix indicator monitoring is not sufficient for ongoing follow-up on activities.
- Some projects use a list of project activities for ongoing monitoring.
- It is a challenge to ensure that “softer” project outputs or effects such as, e.g. the work climate, the collaborative environment, participants’ expectations, perceived involvement, and engagement are also monitored.

Project evaluation phase

External evaluation

- 36% of the ENRECA projects were externally evaluated.
- Both bottom-up (50%) and top-down (75%) approaches were used in external evaluation.
- Both formative (50%) and summative (88%) evaluations were used in external evaluation.
- On average, ENRECA projects manage to a relatively high degree to take evaluation results into account in subsequent project planning and use results as a basis for a dialogue within the partnership.

Internal evaluation

- 70% of the ENRECA projects have had or have planned at least one internal evaluation during the last project phase.
- 26% of the projects had developed an explicit evaluation plan during the preparation phase.
- Only bottom-up approaches were planned or used in internal evaluation of ENRECA projects.
- Both formative (64%) and summative (43%) evaluations were planned or used in internal evaluation.
- In the majority of the cases where an internal evaluation was made, the partners had jointly developed the evaluation criteria and indicators.
- The majority of projects have had or have planned at least one annual internal evaluation – e.g. in connection with an annual project-wide workshop.
- Project management issues were addressed in the large majority of the internal project evaluations.
- Some ENRECA projects have enhanced transparency and accountability by publishing a report, which systematize the concerns raised by project participants in internal evaluations, as well as the actions taken by the project to address each concern.

Project closure phase

Closing the project

- ENRECA projects have been relatively good at jointly assessing project results and verifying stakeholders’ expectations.

- Participants in ENRECA projects have to some extent reflected on and documented project management learning from their projects.
- During the final stage of the project ENRECA projects have been relatively good at transferring new ideas and solutions developed during the project to the relevant stakeholders.
- ENRECA projects have benefited from a low-intensity and prolonged closure phase allowing activities to be completed and followed through.

Project sustainability

- All surveyed ENRECA projects have formulated a strategy for sustainability and a majority of the projects have done so from the first application.
- Inclusion of South partners in research networks is considered the most important strategy for sustainability by ENRECA project managers.
- High quality research output is by project managers considered the primary key to inclusion in the international research community and an important way to attract other projects as South partner becomes internationally know.
- ENRECA projects have developed field research infrastructure and related databases as a way to attract future funding for South partners.
- Enhancing South partners' institutional setting as a strategy for sustainability has received little attention in ENRECA partnerships.

Project management at the university, faculty, and department level

- Many Danish ENRECA partners have obtained adequate support by university institutes, departments and faculties
- Some projects have experience difficulties in terms of poor administrative systems and lack of project type knowledge among administrative staff.
- Some project managers have lacked organisational backing and request universities to develop relevant strategies and to enhance the general awareness and recognition of the special characteristics of the RCB projects.
- In general, project managers do not see a great need for developing project management competencies at department level.
- A platform for exchanging RCB project experiences is requested by project managers.
- The ENRECA projects are only to a limited degree evaluated by their departments in order to learn from their experiences.
- In general, project managers to some degree support each other by sharing their management experiences.

Donor relations

- The initiative grant has been an important tool to develop partnerships, even when proposals are not funded by Danida.
- Both Danida and DFC personnel are considered very service-minded.
- Some project managers are missing a professional research-orientated dialogue with Danida.
- Mechanisms for sharing project-level experiences are requested, e.g. introduction to new FFU grant applicants on the nature of development research and the special requirements associated with it. Also a better exchange of experiences between existing projects is needed, e.g. by sharing annual progress reports among projects.
- Danida's/DFC's application guidelines and administrative procedures are considered reasonable "to some degree". Maintaining flexibility, simplicity and avoiding creating a "consultant-approach" is stressed by project managers.
- Some uncertainty about project selection criteria exists. Project managers requested that FFU make more explicit the meaning of "institutional capacity building" in terms of what success criteria are used and how they are prioritized.
- The long time-frame and administrative flexibility associated with the ENRECA projects are considered crucial for achieving developmental impact.
- The enrolment of South PhD students at the Danish universities is a major incentive for participating Danish researchers, and project managers stressed that this option should be maintained in the future.