



Enabling Collaboration and Synthesis

The Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA) aims to build the resilience of vulnerable populations in climate change hotspots by building new knowledge and capacities to support better informed policy and practice.

The program connects more than 450 researchers and practitioners from over 40 organizations. These CARIAA networks are organized into four consortia, whose members collaborate around their own common program of work. Beyond each of these four consortia, CARIAA creates spaces, processes, and opportunities for collaboration and synthesis between and across the four consortia.

When the goals of a research program encapsulate transdisciplinary and collaborative synthesis on a scale as large as CARIAA's, there is only one way to treat the unfolding process: to learn by experimentation. At this midpoint in the program, we share what we have learned so far about creating conditions for collaboration and synthesis activities to grow.

A climate change hotspot is “an area where a strong climate change signal is combined with a large concentration of vulnerable, poor, or marginalized people.”

(De Souza et al., 2015)

We can plant the seeds for collaboration, but we can't make them grow.

Recognizing the challenge of fostering collaborative synthesis activities in such a large network, and especially across the four sub-networks represented by the consortia, CARIAA drew on global experiences to design explicit plans to foster collaboration in the program.¹ This planning resulted in planting numerous seeds that took different forms: a variety of collaborative spaces that cut across all consortia, such as thematic working groups and country-level working groups for consortia working in the same geographical place; on-going learning processes, such as annual meetings and thematic webinars; and mechanisms, such as a shared intranet with meeting capabilities and the latest news being shared constantly, and a fund intended to provide resources for emerging common interests across consortia (Figure 1).

The seeds for collaboration within CARIAA were carefully selected and well resourced. We have learned, however, that in order to nurture and grow these collaborative efforts, it is important to recognize the difference between a donor's sphere of control (e.g. resources, incentives, mechanisms) and sphere of concern, which includes social capital and relationships (Figure 2).

CARIAA works in:

17 countries

3 climate change hotspots

CARIAA supports and connects:

4 transdisciplinary networks

18 core partners

40+ implementing partners

450+ researchers and practitioners



Seeds to promote collaboration and learning:

- Shared intranet
- Internal research funds for emergent collaboration
- Working groups
- Country tables
- Annual meetings
- Formative evaluations
- Thematic webinars

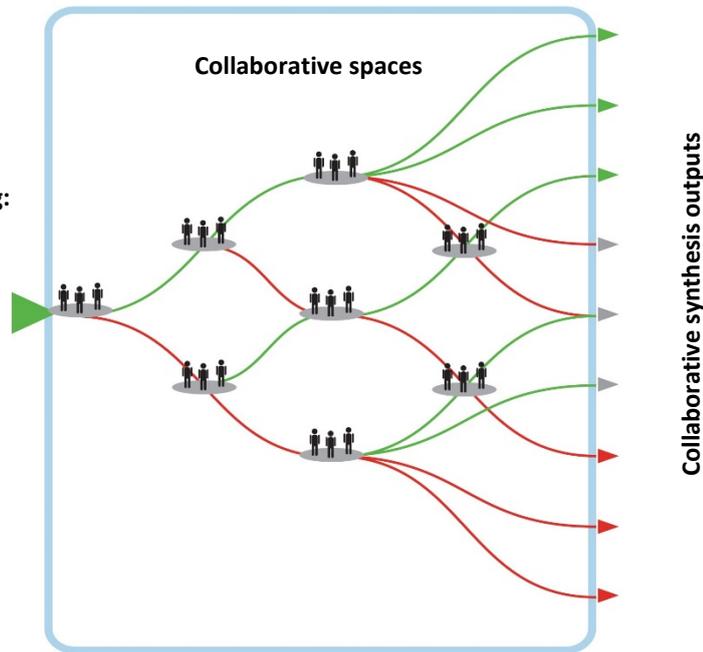
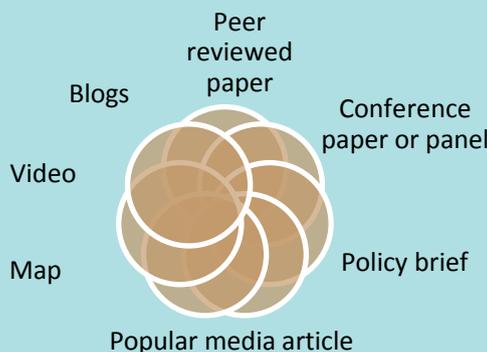


Figure 1: The seeds for collaborative synthesis planted in CARIIA (image adapted from Figure SPM.9 (B) from IPCC (2014))

What is synthesis?

Synthesis refers to processes whereby existing knowledge from a variety of sources is summarized and critically appraised. In a research program, the outcomes of this process can take a variety of forms. Initially, CARIIA was not directive in terms of the specific topics or forms of synthesis it required. This approach was important to allow for new ideas to emerge from the dynamic interactions between members of the network. However, the approach has also presented on-going challenges, particularly in terms of offering some direction for synthesis activities.



Examples of synthesis

Relationships, trust, and social capital are the soil in which collaboration grows

Facilitating connections and building trust requires dedicated face to face time for the individuals involved. However, given the centrality of social capital and trust to collaborative endeavours, even when face to face time is achieved, it may fail to foster collaboration and synthesis due to interpersonal differences.

CARIIA recognized the need for dedicated staff to oversee collaborative spaces — the seeds described before — but we over-estimated the extent to which dedicated communities of practice would emerge from these created spaces. Instead, what developed were information sharing networks that tended to exchange relevant information, such as calls for papers or new publications. Such spaces have so far been less effective in helping researchers in different countries, with different institutions, discover mutual interests.

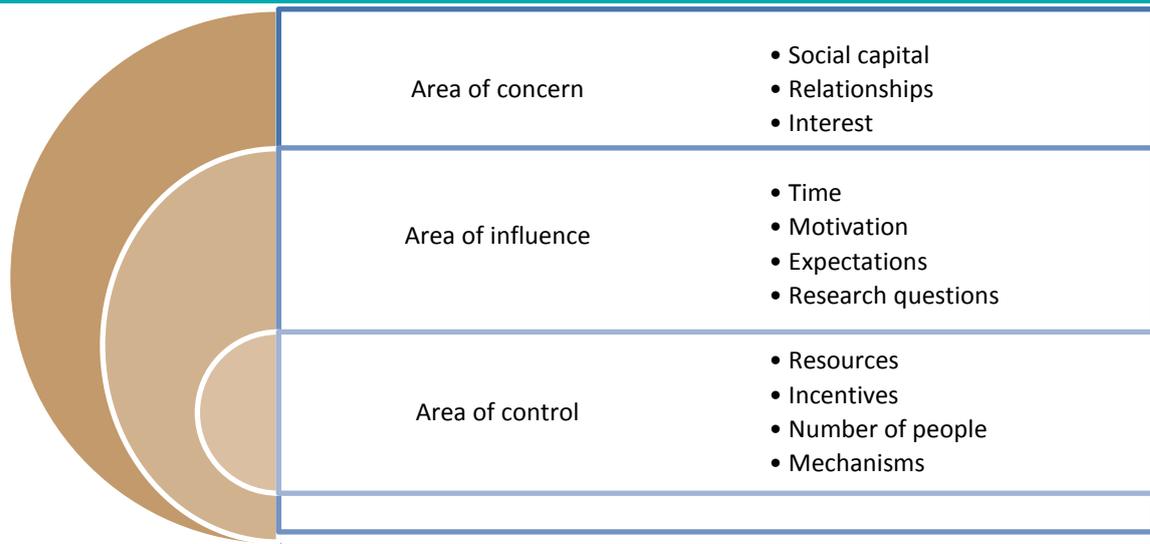


Figure 2: Areas of control, influence, and concern

While face to face meetings in global research programs like CARIIAA are costly, our experience has been that relationships, trust, and social capital are more likely to be built in these settings than via virtual tools. However, as resource constraints are a reality, we are experimenting with new approaches to facilitating community building with more cost efficient (and footprint friendly) virtual tools. These include hosting regular thematic research webinars where research findings are shared, as well as hosting facilitated internal conversations addressing specific topics, holding open dialogues (e.g. on social media), and providing additional programmatic support to emergent communities of practice to lessen administrative burdens.

Planting the seeds for collaborative synthesis is crucial, but for collaboration to grow from these seeds, active facilitation is necessary to enable connections to be made, relationships to develop, and shared interests to be identified. It is also necessary to recognize the limits in this regard — interpersonal relationships, more so than facilitation, will determine what grows from the collaborative seeds we plant.

Programmatic leadership on synthesis is an important source of energy that is needed to grow collaborative efforts

When CARIIAA started, it was understood that grantees would lead synthesis activities and be supported by program staff. We have learned that synthesis activities, and particularly the collaborative writing involved, bring large transaction costs and researchers have struggled with the time commitment required. Expecting researchers within CARIIAA to take leading roles for synthesis activities, even if such activities are financed (i.e. the seeds were planted), was ambitious because of time constraints for new, unplanned activities between researchers and collaborators who have only a fledgling relationship.

We learned that in many cases, cross-consortia collaboration and syntheses require greater programmatic leadership. The program management team has a unique vantage point in viewing the entire program, whereas members largely interact within their consortium, and are therefore not well-positioned to identify opportunities for synthesis. Programmatic leadership needs to take many forms, including the identification of strategic synergies between consortia, identifying strategic target audiences for synthesis, and in leading teams to write or create some of the synthesis pieces.



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ⁱ Including: Creech, 2008; Ensor and Harvey, 2015; Gonsalves, 2014; Holm et al., 2013; Lonsdale and Goldthorpe, 2012.

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This guide was written by Logan Cochrane & Georgina Cundill Kemp, with editorial assistance from Marie-Eve Landry & Rebecca Lee. All authors are based at the International Development Research Centre, Canada