

# Royal Society-FCDO Africa Capacity Building Initiative (ACBI): Funder practices supportive of research capacity strengthening project implementation

International development donors and governments support a wide range of research capacity strengthening initiatives in low- and middle-income countries on the basis that greater research capacity leads to socio-economic growth through evidence-informed policy and practice, improvements in human capital and pro-poor products/technologies.

However, the process of research capacity strengthening remains poorly defined, with limited practice guidance or defined evaluation frameworks<sup>1</sup>. The lack of clear guidance, or even a common understanding, on what constitutes good research capacity strengthening practice, can make it difficult for research capacity strengthening practitioners to make informed or uniform decisions about which activities to undertake or how best to undertake them. More knowledge on the influence of funder practices is important for filling this evidence gap. In this brief case study, we highlight three examples of funder practice that were considered helpful to project implementation in a consortia-based research capacity strengthening programme. These examples are drawn from the Africa Capacity Building Initiative (ACBI), a 10-year research capacity strengthening programme funded by the UK Foreign Development and Commonwealth Office (FCDO) and the Royal Society.

## 1. Adaptable, responsive management grounded in 'near real time' learning

Many instances of adaptive management were evident over the 10-year course of the ACBI programme. These included such things as revising the narrative review template all 10 consortia were required to complete each year (discussed more below), changing payment profiles and introducing flexible budget virement rules, extending PhD studentships and making provision for paid maternity leave, and adopting more inclusive practices to ensure a wider range of research support staff benefit from ACBI resources.

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"The flexibility of the Royal Society as programme manager was very much appreciated. They were open to our comments and suggestions."

(ACBI consortium project coordinator)

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These actions were taken at various stages following programme inception and were informed via feedback from structured learning processes. For example, the changes made to the narrative report template followed an annual performance review carried out by the primary funder (FCDO). The ACBI programme also included an innovative embedded learning component in which the Centre for Capacity Research at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine were contracted to produce research-informed learning to improve the ACBI programme within its lifespan and beyond. Findings from this learning programme, which focused on specific themes prioritised by ACBI stakeholders, were fed back to Royal Society via presentations at management meetings and via formal scheduled written reports.

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1. Dean L, Gregorius S, Bates I & Pulford J. Advancing the science of health research capacity strengthening in low- and middle-income countries: A scoping review of the published literature, 2000-2016. *BMJ Open*. 2017; 7:e018718

Positive outcomes from this adaptive, learning-informed management approach have been reported in previous publications ([Strengthening capacity for natural sciences research: A qualitative assessment to identify good practices, capacity gaps and investment priorities in African research institutions | PLOS ONE](#)) and case studies ([Case Study - Challenges and benefits for PhD students.pdf \(Istmed.ac.uk\)](#) [Case Study - Research laboratory capacity.pdf \(Istmed.ac.uk\)](#)). Central to achieving these positive outcomes was: A) a management team willing to learn and adapt; B) flexibility on the part of funders to allow learning-informed adaptations to be implemented; and C) structured processes to ensure learning is rapidly and reliably produced, reported and applied for programmatic benefit.

## 2. Promoting and constantly reinforcing inclusive practice

A potential danger in a consortia-based research capacity strengthening programme is that it may inadvertently increase inequities in partner institutions by privileging access to resources and networks if consortia members benefit whilst non-member peers and colleagues do not. Recognising this, ACBI funders and programme managers proactively encouraged inclusive access to consortia resources. This encouragement was evident from the outset in the scheme guidance which stated that training provided through consortia should benefit a ‘wider range of researchers and technical staff’, and through routine reporting stipulations. For example, in annual narrative reports each consortium were asked to provide annual training attendance figures disaggregated by consortia membership status (ie, member vs non-member).

These more formal methods of promoting inclusive practice were reinforced by ACBI programme management when interacting with consortium leaders and project coordinators. This was considered especially influential as, in some instances, making ACBI-funded training or resources available to a wider audience had cost implications. The reassurance provided by ACBI programme managers and the repeated messaging in favour of inclusive practice, therefore, fostered an environment in which consortium leaders actively sought opportunities to engage wider participation. As one project coordinator noted:

“At first, we [consortium leadership] would have debates about whether we should invite non-consortia members to our training events if this would incur additional cost; however, through repeated interactions with ACBI programme managers it became clear that they were supportive of this. Economies of scale almost always meant that any additional costs were minimal, especially given the added value attained through broader participation.” (ACBI consortium project coordinator)



**Images:** Members of an ACBI partner institution being taught how to use the Monowave 400R Microwave + Cora 5001 Raman Spectrophotometer, purchased with ACBI funds, in preparation for sharing access with other universities and industry.

Inclusive practice extended to equipment access as well, with many consortia establishing formal protocols to ensure any equipment funded by ACBI could be accessed by a range of relevant stakeholders. For example: “It’s [a high-tech piece of laboratory equipment purchased by ACBI] specified as ‘regional equipment’ meaning that even though it is housed at our university we allocate time [to use the equipment] to other universities and industry.” (ACBI consortium Africa-based PI)

## 3. Supportive sustainability planning from project outset to conclusion

The ACBI programme adopted several measures to ensure research capacity strengthening gains facilitated by each ACBI consortium could be sustained beyond the lifetime of the programme. The first of these was the length of the ACBI awards themselves which were initially 5 years, with 12- and 18-months’ no-cost extensions due to COVID-19. Prior to the main award, some of the consortia had also won a 12-month Networking Grant to establish their working relationships.

This gave each consortium sufficient time to develop and implement their respective capacity strengthening programmes. The value of an extended award was demonstrated throughout the lifespan of the programme, evidenced in terms of the often-stellar outcomes reported in the years leading up to the programme closure in June 2022 as well as the many instances in which additional time was essential to overcoming often unexpected challenges (including, but not limited to, the many challenges experienced because of the global Covid-19 pandemic). Sustainability planning was also structured into ACBI management, with each consortium required to develop an 'equipment sustainability plan' for equipment items purchased through ACBI funds.

This plan covered equipment operation, maintenance and administration and included key sustainability elements such as whether laboratory technicians had received the necessary training to operate the equipment, whether the expertise necessary to maintain the equipment was available in-country and how the respective institutions were planning to support maintenance costs post-project.

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“Management of laboratory equipment is extremely important. We have learned from the UK to make sure equipment is well maintained and that we must plan for replacement recognising each item has a limited lifespan.”

(ACBI consortium Africa-based PI)

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### A summary of funder practices found supportive of research capacity strengthening project implementation:

- Adaptive, responsive management is essential to supporting optimum research capacity strengthening outcomes in what is a dynamic, highly variable and evidence-poor context. However, adaptive management requires supportive funders and structured processes to ensure the learning necessary for informed adaptation is rapidly and reliably produced, reported and applied for programmatic benefit.
- Promoting inclusive access to consortia-funded training and resources expands the pool of beneficiaries, reduces inequalities, and may represent added value on the programme investment. Funder support for inclusive practice can be signalled formally through programme guidance and reporting requirements and continuously reinforced through funder-recipient interactions.
- Sustainability planning should be factored in from programme design onwards via diverse, complementary, and proactive mechanisms. Successful sustainability mechanisms incorporated in the ACBI programme included: the long timeframe of each award; application of a detailed sustainability planning process, underpinned by a planning document providing clear guidance; and a flexible management approach that encouraged and supported partner institutions to plan for the continued operation and maintenance of ACBI-funded equipment in the period immediately post-project completion.

The Royal Society-FCDO Africa Capacity Building Initiative (ACBI) is a pilot programme funded by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in collaboration with the Royal Society to increase the research capacity of universities and research institutes in sub-Saharan Africa.

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