



POLICY BRIEF

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Research–Implementation Organisations and Their Role for Sustainable Development

Over the past decade, higher education institutions (HEIs) have become important actors in the transformation towards sustainable development (SD). Aspects of SD have been integrated into the existing mandates of HEIs – education, research and operations. Some HEIs have additionally evolved to be part of the development-assistance industry. While still anchored in academia and research, they have units or departments that are dedicated to offering development assistance and project implementation-type services.

With both research and implementation conducted at the same institution, the question arises: What can such “hybrid” institutions teach us about creating synergies between research and practice?

So far, this operational model has been under-described and under-acknowledged by research and development funders. This Policy Brief therefore presents the main outcomes and conclusions of a research series on hybrid institutions. Based on insights generated with a group of African and Swiss hybrid institutions and their main funders, the Brief highlights the opportunity of bridging the gap between research and implementation at hybrid institutions and proposes a definition and way forward to better leverage this SD actor. Going forward, this Brief proposes the name Research–Implementation Organisations (RIOs) for institutions that are aligned with the here presented definition.

Definitions & References

‘Development cooperation’, ‘development’ and ‘sustainable development’ are used interchangeably in this Policy Brief, given today’s strong alignment of development cooperation with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Hybrid institutions as used in this brief, refer to higher-education institutions that, besides their teaching and research mandates, are conduct development assistance type activities and services.

Funders interviewed Fondation Botnar, EDCTP, IFAD, SDC, USAID

For institutions interviewed see
¹Saric, J. et al. Synergising Research and Service Activities at Swiss Research Institutions to Accelerate Sustainable Development. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 9626.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13179626>

²Saric, J., et al. 2022. Research–implementation organisations and their role for sustainable development. *Sustainable Development*, 1–16.

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Editorial

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Photos source

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RESEARCH SERIES DEFINING RIOS AND THEIR POSITIONING

Mapping Swiss hybrid institutions¹

Eighteen research institutions in Switzerland with hybrid character were characterized and their representatives were interviewed. Having research and implementation activities at the same institution was perceived to have benefits on four levels: i) individual (i.e. high employability outside academia); (ii) project (i.e. higher quality); (iii) entity (i.e. flexibility regarding funders and resources); and (iv) SD (i.e. more impactful work). However, a lack of career paths and positions for individuals who wish to pursue academic research alongside services was identified as a threat (Box 1). The Universities of Applied Sciences account for the largest share of hybrid positions in Switzerland; increasing their currently limited funding for research and international activities represents an opportunity.



Hybrid institutions across Africa²

Twenty-two institutions from 13 African countries with hybrid character were characterized, and their representatives were interviewed. The main strengths of those institutions *vis-à-vis* implementation projects and wider SD were the quality of implementation, local relevance of the research and efficient uptake of research evidence into policy and practice. A weakness was the challenge of operating such a bi-sectoral model, while maintaining high-level performance in both areas (Box 1). Yet, the examined research-implementation institutions draw from and combine the competences of research, education and implementation and have a distinctive role to play in the attainment of SD, especially when operating by an optimised support system and within strong research ecosystems.


















Funders' views on hybrid institutions

The representatives of five different development and/or research funders were interviewed regarding their perception and positioning of hybrid institutions and the type of project they would assign to those institutions. Overall, a low recognition of this type of institutional model was observed and no preference of a hybrid institution *versus* a partnership or consortium was expressed. Nevertheless, a few “go-to” institutions were named by some funders for certain countries or thematic areas that happen to be hybrid institutions and that would be deployed because of their dual capacity, their effectiveness and efficiency in projects activities, and their connections with international expert networks. However, generally, hybrid institutions were seen as small-scale implementation actors with a perceived lack of capacity for implementation.



Box 1 SWOT outcomes for African and Swiss hybrid institutions

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Research positively impacts project implementation and sustainability outcomes  High job satisfaction by researcher-implementers  Offer broad and tangible teaching and training to educate multi-skilled SD professionals  Research is often arranged around program implementation in the same setting (and <i>vice versa</i>), benefiting from knowing the setting and offering some continuity and comprehension to the country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Research negatively affects implementation activities when poorly planned and aligned  Difficult to achieve balance and high-level performance in research and implementation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Research and teaching activities suffer  Increased complexity of institutional, personal and funding cycle management  Resource-intensive model  Lack of clear identity and definition  Lack of recognition
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Excellent and broad career and job opportunities  Model is liked by governments and international donors, seen as problem-solver and talent-pool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Competition for funding from hybrid and research institutions and specialized implementation agencies  Loss of independence and ownership  Lack of hybrid career path and jobs in academia

HYBRID PROJECTS

The biggest benefit of hybrid projects named by the representatives of research institutions was the positive impact of the research to implementation, e.g., enhanced quality of implementation products and added methodological rigour, relevance to setting and cost-effectiveness. There was a common understanding among the representatives of hybrid institutions, that for reaping those benefits, a hybrid project needed: (i) a coherent and comprehensive research component; and (ii) sufficient time and/or multiple phases, e.g., 5–10 years and more, to fully benefit from the research–implementation iterations (Box 2). The latter aspect was also emphasised by the funders.

From the funders' perspective, the type of project that would experience added value when carried out by hybrid institutions showed to be overall difficult to define and was suggested to depend on the country, domain, sensitivity/security and preference of local teams. Some specifications were nevertheless made in that hybrid organisations are ideal partners for any projects with a research component or projects that (i) take place within a complex domain; (ii) have a strong community outreach component; (iii) demand high levels of trust; and (iv) take place within a specialist/niche area. However, for very large, multi-component and multi-objective programmes, and for implementation only programmes, hybrid organisations may not be the first choice. Also in fragile contexts and regions with high corruption other institutions, i.e. UN Agencies, would be generally the preferred partners.



BOX 2 KILMWA

Kunzila Integrated Landscape Management and WASH (KILMWA) is a five year (2020–2024) multi-sectoral project designed with the aim of contributing to a more prosperous and healthy population in Kunzila Watershed, Ethiopia. One of the project's eight components is dedicated to research, aiming to establish a scientific monitoring system and to generate scientific evidence on the processes, outputs and impacts of the ILM and WASH intervention for upscaling. The project is implemented by a consortium led by the Water & Land Resource Center of Addis Ababa University (WLRC-AAU) and funded by the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Ethiopia.

Types of projects best done by hybrid institutions

(1) HIGH COMPLEXITY: Projects that come with a high technical complexity and specialist knowledge

Reasoning: Coordination and transaction cost between partners with very different levels of expertise (i.e. researcher and implementer) are high – an institution that does both is in that case preferable

Example: Information and communication technology applications for rural development or agriculture or digital finance, e.g., to issue loans and credits to small scale farmers or rural enterprises, or rural health insurance (Box 3)

(2) COMMUNITY OUTREACH: Projects with a strong community outreach/involvement aspect

Reasoning: Standing of local academics and researchers in the local communities, leading to higher buy-in/compliance, especially in African settings

Example: Community participatory health promotion (Box 3)

(3) TRUST: Projects that demand a high level of trust by the beneficiary population

Reasoning: Medical/clinical/research expert that has seen through the piloting of a sensitive intervention may be most trusted to conclude the implementation phase

Example: Newly introduced biomedical interventions

(4) SPECIALISATION: Projects that take place within a niche domain

Reasoning: Hybrid institution is the main authority in this niche domain and project cannot (sufficiently) be covered by any other actor(s)

Example: Centre de Recherche en Reproduction Humaine et en Démographie (CERRHUD), Benin; International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE), Kenya

BOX 3 HPSS

The Health Promotion and System Strengthening (HPSS) Project was established in 2011 by SDC and is implemented by Swiss TPH to improve access to, quality and utilisation of health services in Tanzania within an effective and well-governed health system. In partnership with the Government of Tanzania (GoT), HPSS has been developing innovative, evidence-based solutions accompanied by operational research and systematic monitoring and evaluation, and has been supporting their integration into national institutions, systems and policies. HPSS follows a health system strengthening approach aiming at improvements in the four areas of (i) Health Insurance; (ii) Medicines Management; (iii) Health Technology Management; and (iv) Health Promotion. In the past decade, the project supported the GoT to establish a viable health insurance scheme especially for the rural population and informal sector, the “improved Community Health Fund” (iCHF). The introduction of the “Jazia Prime Vendor” system enhanced availability of medicines through a complementary medicine supply mechanism. The GoT was further supported in developing an IT system for medical equipment management (“MEIMIS”), and in empowering communities to plan and implement health promotion activities.



WAY FORWARD

Why is action needed?

The predominant view of the representatives of the hybrid institutions in Africa and Switzerland was that this operational model bears major benefits to SD by positively impacting the quality of development interventions and enabling a tighter coupling of innovation and implementation. Most funders, in contrast, had no awareness or preference of this model. Yet, those funders that found some of their main partners match the description of a hybrid institution, were often consciously drawing from their dual skills.

“Having the research and implementation branches makes them very attractive because they can directly translate the research result or the scientific knowledge into development in their programmes”. “They are very efficient with very small amount of money.” SDC representative

Moreover, some funders stressed that their strategic orientation increasingly aims at tightening the innovation–implementation loop and that hybrid institutions are indeed already an important actor, even if not explicitly defined, based on their understanding of both worlds.

How to facilitate action?

To introduce a common language and to more accurately describe those institutions that are structurally set up to combine the competences of the three areas of research, education and implementation for SD gains, a name and definition are formally proposed (Box 4).

BOX 4 Research-Implementation Organisations (RIOs)

Definition: Organisations with mandates for (i) research; (ii) education and teaching; and (iii) consultancy, project implementation/development assistance services that have:

1. a track record of international publishing and a governance framework that includes regulations on good research practice and integrity;
2. the ability to offer degrees (including host or co-host PhD programmes) and continuing education and training courses;
3. institutionalisation of their implementation activities (i.e. supporting structures and procedures; ability to act as lead institution; institutional contracting); and
4. established work practices across mandates to create synergies.

What actions should be taken?

Institutions and funders are encouraged to **use and work with the RIO label** and definition to enhance the standing of those institutions, their operations and significance for SD globally.

For current or aspiring RIOs

- ✚ Utilize the Policy Brief to communicate your organisational profile and added value for SD more clearly internally and externally, that being:
 - Evidence-based, high-quality and cost-effective implementation;
 - National programme and policy memory;
 - Teaching and training centre of SD workforce; and
 - Host of mixed-type research careers and jobs.
- ✚ Consult References 1&2 to learn about the structure and operations of other hybrid institutions to enhance internal processes and expand your networking.
- ✚ Lead the discussion on formalizing and hosting non-conventional/mixed academic and research career pathways within the RIO network; while academia/research has been facing an exodus of early- and mid-career scientists in recent years, mixed research–implementation positions seem to be perceived as highly satisfying and sought-after, opening an opportunity for RIOs.

For funders

- ✚ Consciously include RIOs when mapping national actors
- ✚ Consider RIOs for projects that (i) come with high thematic complexity (e.g. digital finance); (ii) have a strong community outreach component (e.g. community-based sanitation); (iii) demand high levels of trust (e.g. new medical intervention); and (iv) take place within a specialist/niche area that cannot be filled by other national/regional actors (e.g. reproductive health)
- ✚ Offer long term schemes and instruments that provide sufficient time and resources to
 - cover the whole innovation–implementation cycle (evidence generation–evaluation–implementation–evaluation–policy); and
 - fill institutional capacity gaps in research, administration or project management.