

SESSION 4 OVERVIEW

Re-thinking partnerships and capacity building to support transformational impacts of R&D

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ABSTRACT



To build capacity for addressing complex development challenges, organisations engaged in Agricultural Research for Development (AgR4D) continue to make substantial investments in governance networks. The final goal (SDG17) of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, for example, is dedicated to building collaborative networks, and advocates for 'multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals'. This presentation will not attempt to consider the success, or otherwise, of the effectiveness of present approaches to deliver these outcomes. Rather it will look to the capacities needed to create effective partnerships and networks to deliver change in AgR4D, with *a particular focus on the role of the individual as an actor who can develop the relationships needed to operate more effectively across organisation, institutional and system boundaries*. Lasting transformational change results from the aggregation of smaller transactional activities driven by network members who explore and then exploit new ways of working.

For many of us, the professional that we expected to be when we started our careers is not the professional that we developed into, nor, in fact, that professional we needed to be. To the early career professionals here today, your challenge is not to learn how to fit into the system. Your task is to disrupt that system and continue to improve it and make it better. That is the starting point for this talk today.

I shall draw on some different approaches to knowledge and knowledge management, which come from the work originally by Gregory Bateson on the ecology of the mind, and his partner Margaret Mead and their daughters: the late Mary Bateson, and Nora Bateson who is working now in the field called 'warm data', which is like a meta-analysis of process. For those of us trained in genetics, particularly quantitative genetics, it's a little bit like pattern recognition in large data sets. Quoting Nora Bateson:

Unlike "cold data," which refers to objective, quantifiable information, warm data captures the contextual, relational, and systemic elements that are often overlooked in traditional data analysis.

This paper aims to remind everyone that we are easily trapped in our own mindsets, and captive to our assumptions.

We all work with models: they are not reality

Many of us know Maslow's hierarchy of needs and have used it in our organisations. However, Maslow never had a hierarchy, and his original work did not report a linear relationship between the needs he identified – a cause and effect – from one to the next. Bridgman *et al.* (2019) report on the use of Maslow's theories since 1943 and this is an example of how we too often promote models as reality. In Maslow's hierarchy we have a model that is still used to design systems and organisations in a somewhat determinate way. That is, we apply the model, without necessarily understanding both its uses and its limits, or even what it is attempting to represent.

By returning to first principles, Maslow's hierarchy can be seen as a set of 'lenses' that could be used as a diagnostic tool in any situation to see what was working and what was not working.

With many of our models, the model becomes what we look for. However, just as a map is not the territory, models are guides and not reality. We have become very skilled at turning tools into prescriptions.

Models are guides for use in diagnostics and so on; and the lesson is that for a lot of what we do, *we always should be sceptical of received wisdom*. There is greater benefit in returning to first principles.

First principles thinking is an essential tool in understanding the complex problems that we face in research for development and in finding the creative possibilities we need. Returning to first principles enables us to see beyond conventional or received wisdom to understand a wider range of possibilities. If we understand the principles of the models we use as tools, we can decide if they work in our situation. Often, they don't and too often we try to force the context into what the model 'tells' us to expect.

First principles aim to break ideas into basic, undeniable truths. The benefits are several:

- avoiding assumptions, cognitive biases and inherited opinions.
- dissecting core ideas to focus on the essence of an argument or position.
- clarifying complex situations and building understanding so that we construct knowledge from the ground up, not from second-hand information.

Problems with partnerships: the place for capacity building

In preparing this paper, I quickly screened many research projects run with, and by, and in partnership with ACIAR and then looked at some other research entities such as universities and major foundations from all parts of the world. My key observation is that we tend to over-prescribe 'solutions', and underestimate execution barriers.

I wonder what would happen if we thought more in terms of projects contributing to system improvements rather than discrete solutions (see Armson 2011). We will need to leave that topic for another day.

In much of our project planning and operations, linkages to the big picture become detached. We regularly produce project plans in which we expect partnerships to deliver 'shared' goals, 'mutual' benefits and 'collaborative' effort.

But these partnerships under-perform for a few reasons:

1. Misaligned Objectives: Differences in goals and expectations can lead to conflicts and inefficiencies.
2. Cultural Differences: Diverse organisational cultures and practices can hinder collaboration.
3. Communication Barriers: Poor communication can result in misunderstandings and delays.
4. Resource Imbalances: Disparities in resources and capabilities can create power imbalances and dependency issues.
5. Trust Issues: Lack of trust can undermine cooperation and lead to conflicts.

This is evident in other papers in these proceedings where an often-asked question is: What happens when a developing country's objectives and a donor's objectives are different?

How much deliberate effort, discussion and accommodation goes into identifying what is 'shared', 'mutual' and 'collaborative'? Do we just assume these? I would suggest more effort is needed.

Taking a first principles approach draws us into another discussion. Are we getting the best outcomes as we try to agree goals? Can projects deliver in multiple contexts, simultaneously? Can we include objectives that are specific to one, or several, partners and not others, and live with that? Do we more explicitly acknowledge the barriers to performance and reflecting as process goals in projects? Or, as risks to manage? Can we more explicitly reflect that there are different expectations to be accommodated? What are the trade-offs for all participating groups and institutions?

Asking questions like these provides a richer path to address cultural differences, communication barriers, resource imbalances, and trust issues.

Transcontextual: not just transdisciplinary

Nora Bateson (2023) has introduced the concept of transcontextualisation into our thinking on complex issues. Capacity development is an area that would benefit from transcontextual consideration.

I note that ACIAR has made a recent decision to re-locate capacity development back into its research division. This is welcome. Capacity building should be a key outcome of research for development and will benefit from a more explicit recognition and evaluation in project deliverables and outcomes. This provides an opportunity to consider the research project in another context (capacity) simultaneously with other contexts (for example, productivity improvement).

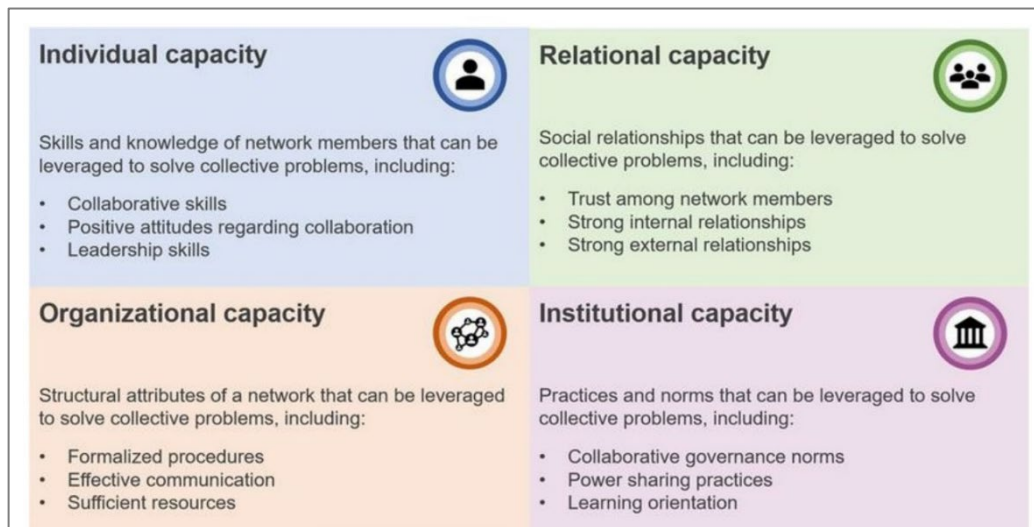


Figure 1. Contexts of collaborative governance capacity (adapted from Foster-Fishman *et al.* 2001). The sections are not discrete; they interact and overlap.

The work of Foster-Fishman *et al.* (2001) shows that capacity building operates in four contexts (or levels) at any one time (Figure 1). The individual, relationship, organisation and institutional contexts are not discrete, although we often consider them in isolation. Not only do they interact and always overlap; any time we operate in one context we are impacting at all other levels.

Whilst a full discussion of each of these contexts is not possible today, we can ask what weak signals (warm data) we receive in each. My quick scan of research for development papers, reports and evaluation could be summed up thus:

Participants often reflect that the major benefit to them from partnership activities was *learning new ways to work*.

These new ways of working, however, are rarely reported, nor identified for inclusion in future work. They are captured as casual observations, not as the outcomes that they clearly are. At best we comment on the *capacity building of individuals*, only. Perhaps this is because we assume that capacity building is something that sits outside the project, not a legitimate or valued inclusion.

One key opportunity we have for improving the research for development system is to incorporate the four contexts of capacity building into our core research programs. We passively acknowledge the need for capacity development, albeit almost always in a single context – the individual.

Another observation (warm data) I have made is that reports are more frequently indicating that we know that we need to be doing more to train individuals to understand how to work in these new systems. At the same time, the reports resign themselves to accept that there will never be enough resources to invest on capacity development. We do need to be more proactive in this situation.

A collaborative governance framework, reflecting the contexts in Figure 1, with ethical and fair representation of all involved and sensitive to the perspectives of contributors and intended users, would have the objectives of:

1. enabling faster adoption of changes in practices, and adoption of new or improved processes and products.
2. enhancing the credibility and acceptance of research findings among all stakeholders.
3. encouraging researchers to adopt good practices that contribute to both.

Transformation, myths and leadership

Bridgman and Cummings (2021) have an interesting chapter titled: Heroic Leaders and the Glorification of Change. There is a vast mythology about change (transformation) and innovation. Everyone thinks change and innovation are hard, perhaps because we let the issue of scale cloud our understanding at first principles level.

Take innovation, for example: innovation at its heart is about putting an idea into action (Dodgson *et al.* 2005). The first principle here is easy: innovation = idea + action. Nothing to be feared; except we tend to say that because large-scale innovation can be difficult to manage (Dodgson *et al.* 2008) then all innovation is difficult. But assumptions take hold, and we fear innovation, effectively ignoring the fact that we innovate every day.

This has impacts in the leadership and management domain too. For large-scale innovation or change it is often posited that ‘we need transformational leadership’. But does this reflect how the leadership of change works in practice?

A model of change used by Clear (2018) tracks the impact of a 1% improvement made each day over a year, to achieve a net 37 times improvement (Figure 2). It’s a model: we know it doesn’t work in practice. It is useful, however, in providing a lens on how much change (including the transformational type) is an aggregation of marginal gains. Work by various authors (see, for example, Snowden 2016, Ladkin 2020, and Haslam *et al.* 2020) suggests that leadership is transactional – it occurs in the space between a leader and a follower – and happens ‘one nudge at a time’.

Leadership is an improvisational practice of influencing others in a manner that enhances their contribution to the realisation of group goals. It is a process of influence. It takes place in groups in a particular context at a particular time. The group focus in the definition is not widespread in the leadership literature, yet it appears pivotal to effective leading, and relevant to research teams.

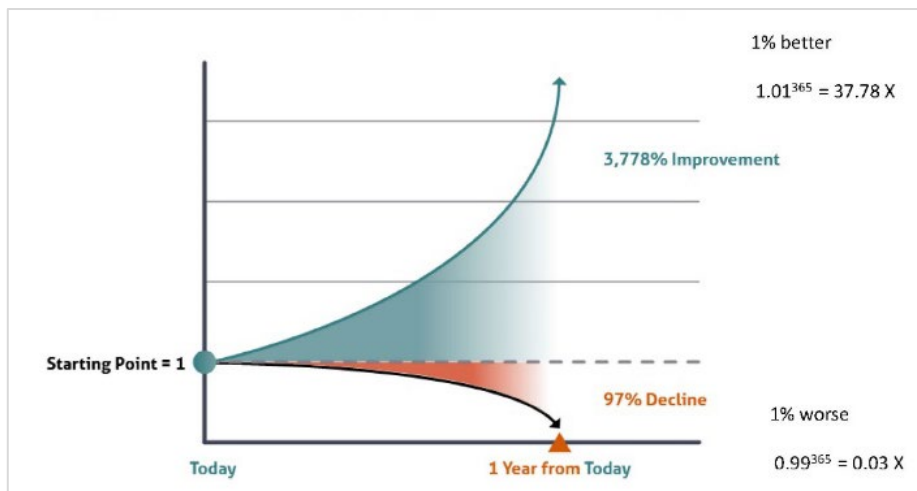


Figure 2. Progress = The Aggregation of Marginal Gains (see Clear 2018).

Haslam *et al.* (2020) contend that the identity that we find in our membership of groups (families, tribes, clubs, teams, projects, programs, organisations, corporations, etc.) is foundational to effective leadership, and emphasise again that leadership is a process of influencing others in a manner that enhances their contribution to the realisation of group goals.

They propose four rules of effective leadership:

1. leaders need to be seen as one of us – use ‘we’ and ‘us’, not ‘I’ or ‘me’.
2. leaders need to be in-group champions – they must be seen to act in the collective interest.
3. leaders need to be skilled entrepreneurs of identity – their skill lies in representing their ideas as the embodiment of who/where we are and what/where we want to be.
4. leaders need to be embedders of identity – not only telling us who we are but also shaping a world in which our sense of who we are can be made to matter.

This resonates with me for many reasons, but particularly because I have witnessed many situations where organisations and businesses have failed because leaders are out of step with the values and desires of group members. Effective leaders can articulate the aspirations and purposes of groups members and describe a reality that makes sense, inspires action and creates followers. Haslam *et al.* (2020) call this a sharing of social identity. Effective leaders ‘succeed by standing for the group rather than standing apart from it’. They are ‘one of us’.

Following this line of thinking, each of the four capacity contexts identified in Figure 1 needs a champion in the team (it can be the same person) if effective change is to be achieved. This certainly warrants more empirical examination in research for development.

Ask better questions; set better goals; get better outcomes

We can ask better questions if we are to set better goals in our projects:

- Rather than asking ‘What type of leadership do we want? (Transformational leadership? Adaptive leadership? Agile leadership? Values-based leadership?)’, ask ‘What do we want our leadership to do?’.
- Rather than wondering ‘Why aren’t there more women in senior management?’, ask ‘Why is gender so important to leadership?’.
- Rather than saying ‘We will teach you project management’, challenge participants to ‘Demonstrate to us how you will use the project management skills you have learned so far, in your next step’.

At the individual level, reflective practices need developing to better analyse past experiences to learn and improve. For a researcher in agricultural development, this might mean evaluating a project’s outcomes: what worked, what didn’t, and how future efforts could be refined. It’s like looking in a mirror and asking, ‘What did I learn here?’. This process boosts self-awareness and helps refine methodologies. This leads to adaptive changes.

Significant change, however, requires a different path. Using a *reflexive practice* approach provides a tool that doesn’t stop at analysing actions and results; it also examines the researcher’s own values, assumptions and biases. It requires better, or at least different, questions.

Reflexivity asks questions like: ‘How did my perspective shape my decisions? Did my worldview influence how I approached this community or interpreted the data?’. It’s about understanding the lens you bring to your work, and questioning how it impacts both process and outcomes.

We can ask ‘Why is the addition of reflexive practice more effective than reflection on its own?’.

Reflection focuses on learning from experience, but reflexivity invites you to interrogate the beliefs and contexts underlying your work. For a researcher, this means considering not just project success, but also how

personal and cultural biases may have influenced their understanding of the community, the framing of research questions, or even the design of interventions.

For instance, imagine a researcher implementing a sustainable agriculture project.

- Reflection might highlight that a particular training session didn't resonate with farmers.
- Reflexivity goes further. It would lead the researcher to ask whether the training materials reflected the farmers' lived realities or if the project prioritised technical solutions over local knowledge systems.
- Reflexive practice reveals blind spots and creates space for more inclusive, contextually sensitive approaches.

In research for development, reflexivity transforms the practice from a technical exercise to a collaborative, context-aware process. It challenges assumptions, deepens engagement with stakeholders, and ensures that the researcher's work aligns more closely with the realities of those it seeks to serve.

Reflexivity doesn't just refine methods: it reshapes the way we understand and enact development.

Wicked problems: system improvements or situation solutions?

As with Maslow's hierarchy, in the contemporary world we use the term 'wicked problems' freely. The paper that introduced the concept (Rittel and Webber 1973) is very narrow in its application. At first principles level, a wicked problem is one where the problem we are dealing with is not going to be solved by the projects that we are running. The problem space continues to evolve as we work in the solution space. Project outcomes can contribute to system improvements, but rarely solve a problem (see Armson 2011 for a useful discussion).

Hampus Eriksson addresses this in this conference proceedings (Eriksson 2025), when he says, 'First we do research and then we try to apply it somewhere'. Reality dictates that most of the problems we are dealing with are not going to be solved by the projects that we are running. Often by the time we start to get information from our projects, the problem space has shifted, and our planning assumptions need adjustment.

If we are to address the major global issues, we need to make progress in the solution space faster than the problem space evolves.

- When I started in my career in agriculture over 50 years ago, population growth was the key driver in the food security domain. It appears that in the second half of this century we will be approaching net zero population. That has shifted the problem.
- Ageing populations may be the major problem now, except in sub-Saharan Africa. In Europe, for example, ageing populations raise concerns about where the workforce needed to support domestic economies will come from. So, the shift there has been into fields like population flows and migration, and away from food production and supply.
- That, however, does not mean we have 'solved' the world food problem. More problems have emerged and taken centre stage, notably in food quality and nutrition. More recently, as we see elsewhere in these proceedings, the problems have also shifted to equity and diversity. We may just be keeping ahead of the curve in these domains, although that is not clear (and it can be disrupted – as we experienced with COVID-19).
- And in climate change the problem space is probably still racing ahead of the solution space.

We need to think about different ways that we can do all of these; and that, again, requires new and different questions. Big topics for another day.

Re-thinking partnerships

Rather than being prescriptive, I suggest we take a reflexive approach to our practice, and:

- always consider the information in 'first principles' senses, as opposed to thinking 'Oh, that is something I can adapt and use', without considering whether it is necessarily right for what we want.

- understand that models are *tools* rather than prescriptions, and that:
 - we can ask better questions.
 - we need to be open to emergent data and under-reported signals and outcomes.
 - we must fine-tune our capacity to observe.
- recognise that we are all leaders, and we can embrace the situation we are in, and we can change it. We need to consider how we can disrupt ourselves as leaders. What can I do differently?

Change occurs one transaction at a time.

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An agronomist and geneticist by training, Shaun Coffey has developed broad interests across science and technology through key leadership roles, including as Foundation Chief of the CSIRO Division of Livestock Industries (2002–2006) and Chief Executive Officer of Industrial Research Ltd, the New Zealand Crown entity, during 2006–2013. Mr Coffey serves on the Board of the Future Fuels Cooperative Research Centre, and as a Director of the Board of the Grains Research and Development Corporation. He is the Chief Executive Officer of The Crawford Fund, as well as the Fund's Director of Capacity Building.