



Funding & Governing Transdisciplinary Sustainability Research Programmes

Lessons from 5 years of ACCEZ

ACCEZ In Brief: Insights for Partner Organisations

Authored by Ollie Bream McIntosh, Design Impact Transition Platform

ACCEZ In Brief:

Insights for Partner Organisations

Who is this brief for?

This document summarises insights concerning the funding and governing of transdisciplinary sustainability research programmes for each of ACCEZ's constituent partners. The insights offered are grouped by the three sectors represented on the programme's board: the public sector, namely the Province of Zuid-Holland; the private sector, namely the employers' organisation VNO-NCW West; and the knowledge sector, namely Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR), Leiden University, TU Delft, and Wageningen University and Research (WUR). These insights are also intended to be of relevance to other similar organisations who are also partner to, or interested in becoming partner to, transdisciplinary sustainability research programmes like ACCEZ. As such, an overview of the programme itself is also included below.

What is the ACCEZ programme?

ACCEZ is a transdisciplinary research programme that aims to foster lasting transformations in the way knowledge is produced for sustainability transitions, by actively involving diverse stakeholder groups, pursuing action-oriented forms of research, and providing structural support for facilitation processes. In turn the programme aims to leverage this new, co-produced knowledge to inform transformations in key sectors of the economy in South Holland, such as horticulture and agriculture. It aligns with global and national sustainability priorities, as well as contributing to regional and national policy objectives to reach a fully circular economy by 2050.

How is the programme funded?

From 2018 to 2023, €5.7m was allocated to the programme by the Province of Zuid-Holland, which the programme's co-funding facility expanded to a total of €10.8m, though cash and in-kind contributions from the four partner universities and VNO-NCW West. In this sense the programme is an example of a triple-helix collaboration, involving the public, private, and knowledge sectors, although civil society organisations and citizens have also been included.

How are programme funds allocated to specific projects?

A core programme team is mandated to distribute these funds, along with assistance from its specialist in-house facilitators, to various projects. Each project brings together researchers, entrepreneurs, and other relevant stakeholders on a given theme, such as water usage, local biodiversity, or agricultural methods. Project proposals are developed collaboratively through personal networks and are subject to review and approval by a supervisory board, made up of representatives from each funding party.

What impact has ACCEZ pursued?

Acting on the growing recognition that accelerating sustainability transitions requires new approaches that few funders have the resources and capabilities to trial, ACCEZ has consistently aimed to use its mandate and its budget to move beyond the incrementalist and isolated forms of impact that are typically pursued in large-scale sustainability initiatives. Instead ACCEZ aims to challenge and alter the cultures, structures, and practices underlying existing systems of knowledge production, and thereby systems of economic production, in the province. Given the complexities and interdependencies of the systems being addressed, the programme chose to evolve its intended outcomes, success criteria, and strategies iteratively, through experimentation and learning, contravening common expectations for a programme's impact to be pre-defined and easily monitorable, through KPIs for example. The programme team also sought to adopt a less managerial and more co-creative set of processes for working with its grantees than is typical of large-scale funding programmes. Although relatively unfamiliar to the Province, this new way of working resonates with its intentions to work in more mission-oriented ways, and was ultimately provided with the space to be implemented, demonstrating the importance of the courage and trust of funders as pre-conditions for enabling innovative approaches to impact.

What impact has ACCEZ delivered so far?

The programme itself was found to have opened up new possibilities for change within the provincial government, challenging and altering approaches to planning and management, and strengthening relationships across research, industry, and policy domains. It was also found to have disseminated new ways of understanding and approaching problems among key stakeholder groups, such as farmers and financiers, using more reflexive, systemic, and proactive perspectives. ACCEZ's ambitions to create transformative and systemic impact have brought it into sharp contrast with existing cultures, practices, and structures. As such, its impact includes widely applicable

lessons generated from the tensions and struggles it encountered, which, although occasionally uncomfortable, have ultimately proved to be critically informative. ACCEZ has been recognised as a unique and important addition to the region's existing sustainability knowledge ecosystem.

Key Takeaways for the Public Sector:

For public sector bodies to pursue more systemic innovation, they often need to undergo internal changes, revisiting established practices and adopting new ones. For example, emerging best practice in sustainability transitions often points to the need for governments to work in closer partnership with other sectors, in turn requiring investment in the development of new institutional relationships and management capacities, even if these investments tend not to have the kind of impact that is immediately observable or that can be well captured in quantitative indicators. Funding collaborative programmes, such as ACCEZ, represents a viable way to pursue these changes.

Moreover, best practice in this domain often calls for an experimentalist strategy, whereby activities and targets evolve iteratively, rather than being determined from the outset, in turn requiring more reflexive and agile forms of planning and monitoring. Public bodies should therefore anticipate that the precise contributions of a given investment or initiative to their policy goals may not be fully known until after its completion, and that its true impact may only be discernible in more narrative, qualitative, and long-term assessment modalities. This requires new ways to report on these experimental initiatives.

It is also vital that the various insights uncovered throughout these new activities and reporting processes are not only solicited, but diligently codified and implemented into everyday decision-making, whether at the project or programme level, or within the programme's partner organisations, so that mistakes are not repeated and that practices continually improve. These learning processes can serve as a framework to align more innovative practices with current accountability practices, and make it easier for funders and overseers to assess their value.

Where public bodies do work in partnership with other sectors, efforts should also be made to ensure their contributions are proportionately recognised and valued. While the Province was the largest single contributor to the ACCEZ programme and made most of its contributions in cash, other parties contributed substantially in-kind, offering vital staff time to the programme priced through internal tariff structures. However, contributions from other parties in collaborative programmes like ACCEZ are inadvertently obscured in the Province's accounting

reports, which are concerned with expenditure and lack an appreciation of the resulting value creation. This seems to diminish the collective commitment and shared ownership that the co-funding contributions represented, and that were central to the programme's successes.

In light of the public sector's commitments to accelerate sustainability transitions, it seems unavoidable that the public sector will continue to shoulder these innovation costs. But being able to welcome, appreciate, and account for the contributions of other parties will strengthen the sense of collaborative effort. Tensions around the co-funding of transdisciplinary programmes are to be expected, but should be endured and resolved where possible, given the vital importance of these collaborative arrangements to support new forms of innovation.

Key Takeaways for the Private Sector:

Day-to-day pressures to maintain the profitability of operations in the private sector can privilege short-term goals over more long-term concerns. Climate change and ecological degeneration, for example, might pose little risk to many Dutch business owners in the short term, but in the long term are likely to cause them serious disruption. Advocacy organisations and intergovernmental initiatives are increasingly sensitising businesses and governments to the importance of longtermism in the face of sustainability challenges, but this requires new mental models.

Collaborative and participatory foresight exercises, whereby entrepreneurs come together to forecast the implications of certain scenarios on their businesses, can enable these new ways of thinking, clarifying the shared business case for farms to invest in climate adaptation, for instance, or for banks to lend favourably to those farms to help them do so. The long-term thinking they develop can in turn help motivate other parties to think similarly. Clarifying the social and environmental risks associated with business-as-usual can also accentuate and mobilise the underlying social and environmental values of private sector actors. Acting on this new clarity, though, requires significant courage and moral leadership from entrepreneurs.

Provided they are sufficiently motivated to engage in sustainability transitions, private sector actors stand to benefit substantially from the insights of sustainability science. Investing independently or collectively in effective relationships with researchers can enable firms to leverage cutting-edge expertise, targeted to their precise needs, as well as to support a greater flow of information between sites of theory and practice, improving the ability of those experts to learn and respond to those needs over time. However, there are significant distinctions between business and academia in terms of their respective

vocabularies, incentive structures, and working cultures. These differences need to be mutually understood to enable effective relationships, and examples of successful collaborations can help to deepen this understanding.

Key Takeaways for the Knowledge Sector:

In many universities, including those that participated in the ACCEZ programme, several factors of institutional design constrain the abilities of researchers to engage in transdisciplinary research.

Transdisciplinary research is rooted in collaboration. But effective collaborative relationships with external stakeholders take time to establish and nurture, and researchers often have limited time in their busy schedules to allocate to these processes. Typically, a researcher's time is allocated in accordance with their institution's definition of good performance and academic excellence. But these definitions, and the systems of rewards and recognition that motivate researchers to emulate them, tend to focus on the quantifiable results of a single individual, most notably in the form of journal publications. An individual's contributions to collective successes, on the other hand, can be harder to trace and communicate, and in the absence of effective ways to account for their collaborative efforts, researchers are effectively incentivised to work more independently. New ways to account for these efforts should therefore be integrated into performance evaluation.

Similarly, rewards and recognition systems are also typically predicated on the quantity, and quantifiable influence, of the academic publications a researcher produces. But transdisciplinary programmes emerge to meet specific, real-world needs, for which academic publications can have limited value or impact. Non-traditional research outputs that are tailored to specific project needs should therefore be recognised in performance reviews, alongside more traditional outputs.

Moreover, transdisciplinary research often blurs the line between science and action, requiring researchers to adopt new roles in the field, such as that of moderator or designer. Institutional support for professional development should therefore be extended to building these various sensibilities and capacities demanded of transdisciplinary researchers, as they are typically left out of researcher training programmes.

Some universities have partially adapted their institutional design choices to better foster the conditions for transdisciplinary research. EUR, for instance, has introduced narrative accounts of impact into its rewards and recognition systems, for example, complementing the traditional metrics by which performance has been

traditionally assessed. Whilst a welcome change, one additional criterion of success in the annual review cycle will not fundamentally displace its underlying values. A broader cultural shift appears to be required, in which the roles and responsibilities of researchers, and academic institutions at large, is systematically reappraised with a view to better enabling more engaged, collaborative, and socially robust forms of knowledge production.

How can ACCEZ support its partner organisations to adopt these recommendations?

The ACCEZ programme represents a valuable forum of experimentation and innovation for its partner organisations, enabling them to trial and incubate new ways of working in the context of the programme, before considering their application elsewhere. Partner organisations could also work more closely with the programme team to co-develop new ways of working, such as new ways of conceptualising, monitoring, and communicating the programme impact's so that each party's respective needs and expectations in this regard are better accounted for.

How were these insights synthesised?

From December 2022 to September 2023, a team of researchers from the Design Impact Transition (DIT) Platform at Erasmus University Rotterdam (one of the universities participating in the ACCEZ partnership) were invited to work closely with the programme team and a range of project participants through interviews and workshops, and to analyse internal documents, to better understand how programmes of this nature should be funded and governed in order to maximise their transformative potential.

Where can I find more information?

To read DIT's full report on the ACCEZ programme, or to connect directly with the ACCEZ programme team, please get in touch with Judith Schueler on judith.schueler@accez.nl. To discuss in more detail the process and outcomes of the research contributing to the report, please get in touch with Ollie Bream McIntosh from the authorship team on olliebm@eur.nl.

DESIGN
IMPACT
TRANSITION
PLATFORM

Design Impact Transition (DIT) platform

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Burgemeester Oudlaan 50

3062PA Rotterdam

dit@eur.nl