



Funding & Governing Transdisciplinary Sustainability Research Programmes

Lessons from 5 years of ACCEZ

ACCEZ In Brief: Insights for Funders

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Insights for Funders

Who is this brief for?

This document summarises insights for parties interested in or engaged in the funding and co-funding of transdisciplinary action-research programmes. These insights bear relevance to the entire funding cycle, from the development and assessment of proposals, to the evaluation of projects and programmes, and are intended to apply to a range of funders, from public sector agencies and intergovernmental coalitions that work in highly standardised ways but are committed to improving their efficacy, such as HORIZON, the NWO, and Provincial Governments, to private philanthropists and family foundations, which may often have more flexibility to adopt innovative approaches.

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, and in turn to leverage this knowledge to facilitate transformations in key sectors of the economy in South Holland. 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, approximately €10m has been granted to the programme in cash and through in-kind contributions by a coalition of funders comprising the Provincial Government of South Holland, four universities in the province, and an employer's association. 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 incrementalist and isolated forms of impact, and to instead 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. 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 public-sector funding programmes. The Provincial Government, which oversees the programme team separately from the board as its principal contributor, has occasionally resisted these deviations from its more risk-averse procedures and its preferences for quantifiable returns, given that they obscure the programme's true value. Ultimately, though, the province has permitted them, demonstrating the importance of courage and trust 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 problems among key stakeholder groups, such as farmers and financiers, using more reflexive, systemic, and proactive perspectives. More generally, ACCEZ's ambitions to create transformative and systemic impact have brought it into sharp contrast with existing cultures, practices, and structures, and so as the only programme of its kind in South Holland, its impact includes generalisable lessons generated from the tensions and struggles it encountered, which, although occasionally uncomfortable, have ultimately proved to be critically informative. Some of these are summarised below.

Key Takeaway: adapt accountability practices to accommodate emergent strategy.

Many emerging best practices in the planning and execution of systems-oriented interventions diverge from pre-determined courses of action and instead evolve actions and targets iteratively through experimentation.

Funders working with these approaches should anticipate some incompatibilities with the systems of monitoring that are traditionally used to hold grantees accountable to their intentions and commitments.

How can transdisciplinary research programmes maintain a commitment to emergent design, whilst maintaining a critical level of compatibility with the traditional means and cultures of accountability, through which funders seek to regulate the risk of programmes and projects excessively diverting from their mandated purposes?

Alternative means to assess the progress an initiative is making could draw on more frequent monitoring dialogues between grantors and grantees, which provide dedicated time and space to elucidating and interrogating how and why adaptations to strategy and tactics are being made. It may also prove useful to allow flexibility in the way that the higher-order goals of an initiative are translated into more immediate outputs and outcomes, emphasising that the initiative's legitimacy is rooted in its adaptive pursuit of the former, not the prescribed route stipulated by the latter.

Attention should be paid, however, to ensure that open-ended planning doesn't lead to those higher-order goals being substantially compromised in the name of adaptivity, as this may undermine the trustworthiness and communicability of the grantees' work.

Key takeaway: balance the risks and merits of engaged and distant approaches.

Granting public funds to non-governmental parties often implies strict protocols for maximising impartiality, and the same can be true in the private philanthropy sector as well. But these formalities can often demand that funders maintain a critical distance from applicants, constraining the development of the kinds of close relationships that, while subject to biasing or even nepotistic effects, can also lend themselves to more integrated and co-creative project development processes, to more targeted and therefore more readily fundable project proposals, and ultimately to more productive partnerships across the rest of a project's life cycle.

Where a funder's expectations for innovative and collaborative practice are high, they may therefore commit to adopting a more involved and interactive stance vis a vis their would-be grantees, actively advising, supporting, and steering them along the journey from project conception to proposal submission.

But in these instances, how should the respective merits and risks of the approach of the engaged, co-creative funder and that of the distant, impartial funder, be balanced to best facilitate transformative impact? And how

can more engaged funders seek legitimacy amid expectations for rigorous safeguarding against undue proximity and influence?

Funders may seek to mediate the risk of bias by recruiting external advisory panels to help inform the decisions to award funding, or self-imposing formal obligations to publicly declare how the risks of bias has been otherwise accounted for, such as through quotas for number of project proposals supported and considered, to ensure a minimum level of competitiveness.

Where requirements for critical distance are more strict, the engagement and support itself could be offered externally by a third party for example, with a clear cleavage between those offering the support and those making the decisions to allocate funds.

Key takeaway: invest in relationships and learning, top-down and bottom-up.

Transdisciplinary programmes rely on effective relationships between stakeholders, Funders should invest in building relationships as soon as possible, given the time they take to emerge and mature. Funding a pre-project phase could accommodate this lag time and enable broader participation in project design processes.

Moreover, closing the loop of innovation, by eliciting, cataloguing, and internalising the lessons learnt throughout an innovative programme is crucial to ensure avoidable mistakes are not made in future, and that practices are continually improved. Moreover, for the sector as a whole to benefit from this knowledge, these findings should be synthesised and communicated accessibly to relevant audiences. This applies to both the grantors and the grantees.

Often, however, both parties are absorbed in day-to-day operations, and lack the time and resources to invest sufficiently in formal learning processes. As such, funders working in innovative environments should ensure that both their staff and the staff of the programmes and projects receiving their funds are supported adequately, before, during, and after a project to consider how practices, for themselves and others in similar situations, might need to evolve in response to their experience. This support may include expertly facilitated reflective space, help to write up and publish findings, and training programmes that foster new sensitivities and capacities.

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, please download it [here](#). 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. To connect directly with the ACCEZ programme team, please get in touch with Judith Schueler on judith.schueler@accez.nl.

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