



# WHAT FUNDERS CAN DO TO STRENGTHEN TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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# **What funders can do to strengthen Transdisciplinary Research for Sustainable Development in Africa**

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## Summary

This policy brief provides research funders with practical guidance on good funding practices for transdisciplinary research (TDR) in Global North–South collaborations. It is based on a dialog between German and African actors as well as expert interviews. Funders are guided by the UN Sustainable Development Goals when investing in solution-oriented research for sustainable development in Africa. Complex sustainability challenges can be addressed by a transdisciplinary research approach which integrates knowledge from research and practice. Setting the funding conditions right is crucial to enable the creation of evidence-based, actionable knowledge through research–practice collaboration. To maximize the impact of transdisciplinary research, current funding frameworks must be adapted to the specific needs of such collaborative research.

### Funders are recommended to:

1. Foster collaboration between funders – particularly research and international cooperation funders – to allow for effective, long-term commitment to knowledge creation and implementation.
2. Embed TDR quality in project selection by formulating specific criteria and involving reviewers equipped to assess these criteria.
3. Ensure equitable budget allocation – particularly considering the costs of African researchers and practice partners for participatory research activities.
4. Support inclusive proposal development by providing seed grants for global North–South and research–practice collaboration during this early research phase.
5. Invest in joint learning on TDR by allocating a fixed budget percentage to related activities.
6. Enable adaptive management to allow for adjustments responding to evolving stakeholder needs along project implementation.

## Transdisciplinary research for sustainable development in Africa

Transdisciplinary research is crucial to finding suitable solutions for today's sustainable development challenges. By integrating knowledge from both research and practice, transdisciplinary research generates evidence-based, actionable knowledge. The research approach is often required by German funders for local research in Africa and other Global South regions earmarked to contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Research for Sustainability Strategy (FONA) of the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR) identifies transdisciplinarity as one of its ten key principles. Other mission-oriented funders from Germany also emphasize the need for research-practice collaboration, participatory processes and mutual learning to enhance sustainable development.

A transdisciplinary research process differs from classical research as it pulls practice partners such as government agencies, civil society, and the private sector into defining the research problem and co-creating new knowledge. Conventional research funding conditions do not accommodate intensive research-practice collaboration. This often leads to research consortia struggling to implement a rigorous transdisciplinary research approach, which entails researchers-practice collaboration during the problem definition, the research implementation and the application of new knowledge.

### Text box 1: What is meant ?

**Transdisciplinary research** refers to *“joint learning between researchers from different disciplines and non-scientific partners throughout the research process in order to increase the relevance, practicality and effectiveness of the social and scientific solutions developed in research projects”* (BMBF 2023, p. 10).

The **institutionalisation of transdisciplinary research** aims to ensure that the research approach is systematically embedded in the scientific system, alongside (inter)disciplinary research.

The implementation of transdisciplinarity is inherently complex and, even more so in a Global North-South collaborative setting. Beyond the challenges of research-practice collaborations, structural gaps between science systems must be addressed. At the same time, a transdisciplinary research approach has the potential to mitigate malpractices in Global North-South research collaboration. First, the focus on context reduces the risk of conducting “helicopter research” whereby local knowledge is ignored. Second, the expectation to co-create and apply new knowledge can counter “research fatigue” amongst local communities tired of lengthy surveys without visible results.

Over the last decade research funders have experimented with measures to adapt the

funding conditions to the needs of research–practice collaboration in Africa. These experiences tell us what funders can do to design programmes fit for transdisciplinary research and to institutionalize transdisciplinary research in the science system.

## **A dialogue on good practices in funding transdisciplinary research**

The International Centre for Sustainable Development (IZNE) at the Hochschule Bonn–Rhein–Sieg, Germany, organised a dialog between research funding agencies, researchers and practitioners on good practices in funding transdisciplinary research for sustainable development in Africa. Three workshops were organised between June 2024 and May 2025 to elucidate good practices along the funding cycle. The workshop series was informed by expert interviews and a review drawing lessons from specific research programmes funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR), Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity (BMLEH) and Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) on sustainable land management and agricultural development in Africa (Aarnoudse et al. 2024).

### **What are good practices?**

Good funding practices are innovative approaches to the funding process which address the needs of transdisciplinary research. These practices are viable when they consider funders’ legal and administrative constraints and align with their mandate and available budget. Funders can implement new practices along the funding cycle – from programme preparation, proposal elaboration to selection procedures – to strengthen effective transdisciplinary research.

During programme preparation funders can make strategic decision on whom to co-operate with. While co-funding between (inter)national agencies remains rare, matching funds for research and implementation aiming at the same SDGs can maximize outcomes.

Funders can actively shape participatory processes during the problem definition phase by adjusting procedures. The introduction of a six to twelve-months seed grant for proposal writing is such a change-maker. In addition, defining selection criteria to assess specific aspects of the research–practice collaboration allows the most suitable research consortia to be selected. For example, notions of social inclusion and gender-sensitivity may be considered inherent to transdisciplinarity but are not automatically given. During project selection funders need to take a clear stance on this to ensure that co-creation processes are practised in a socially inclusive and gender-sensitive way.

Another important aspect that funders need to reconsider is *what* is being funded. Here it is reckoned that research consortia including German and African partners often suffer from unequal funding conditions. One way to respond to this is by allocating dedicated funds to participatory activities, which are often underfunded. Additionally, making funds avail-

able for joint learning on transdisciplinarity is needed as long as transdisciplinary research methods are not widely taught in academics.

Finally, flexibility during project implementation is vital. Adaptive management approaches allow the transdisciplinary research process to evolve with stakeholder needs.

While funders have made progress regarding the enabling conditions for transdisciplinary research, there is still a lack of coherent institutionalized funding procedures. Even within funding agencies the conditions for transdisciplinary research programmes may differ significantly. The recommendations propose a new normal for funding transdisciplinary research programmes.

#### **Text box 2: Good practices identified based on concrete examples**

- The BMFTR funded NamTip Project (2017–2025) included a twelve-months seed grant to develop the project proposal. The funds were used for a one-week writing retreat in Germany and engagement with local stakeholders in Namibia.
- Over time, the BMLEH has refined its expectations for a transdisciplinary approach within its international research funding programme on global food security. In its 2024 call-for-proposals, it has spelled out the requirement to engage with specific target groups, such as political decision-makers, consumers and producers, and to incorporate their local knowledge early on and throughout the research process.
- The Lira 2030 Africa programme (2016–2021) implemented by the International Science Council included a mandatory training period on transdisciplinary research methods for research-practice consortia.

## Recommendations to funders

### 1. Foster collaboration between funders

Encourage collaboration and learning between research funders and non-research funders to align TDR's dual focus on knowledge creation and implementation. Combine research and sustainable development or international cooperation funds to accommodate long-term adaptive processes.

### 2. Embed TDR quality in project selection

Explicitly include core TDR principles in calls-for-proposals and formulate specific selection criteria (like stakeholder integration, context-specificity, gender-sensitivity and social inclusion). Involve reviewers with TDR and/or practice expertise to assess transdisciplinary process rigor alongside disciplinary research methods.

### 3. Ensure equitable budget allocation

Allocate sufficient funds for African researchers and practice partners, including fair compensation for stakeholder engagement. Budgets must explicitly cover participatory activities and honour practice partners' contributions.

### 4. Support inclusive proposal development

Fund seed grants for collaboration between African and German researchers and practice partners to co-design research questions and priorities. Enable early engagement of both community-level and institutional stakeholders.

### 5. Invest in joint learning on TDR

Allocate a fixed part of project funds to workshops, mentorship, or toolkits to equip researchers and practitioners – especially those new to TDR – with skills for collaborative, adaptive work.

### 6. Enable adaptive management

Allow for adjustments along project implementation (e.g. shifting methods or partners) to reflect evolving stakeholder needs. Share best practices among funders on managing such dynamics.

## Key message

Effective research-practice collaboration in a Global North-South context asks for adapted research funding conditions. The highlighted good funding practices equip funders to assure high-quality transdisciplinary research projects in Africa.

## Sources and further reading

Aarnoudse, E.; Beuchelt, T.; Fischer, B.; Jaenicke, H.; Terlau, W. (2024): Good practices in funding transdisciplinary and participatory research for sustainable development in Africa: Learning lessons from German public funding programmes on sustainable land management and agricultural development in Africa (IZNE Working Paper No. 24/2). DOI: [10.18418/978-3-96043-119-0](https://doi.org/10.18418/978-3-96043-119-0)

BMBF (2023): Partizipationsstrategie Forschung. Available online at: <https://www.bmbf.de/Shared-Docs/Downloads/de/2023/partizipationsstrategie.html>.

### Video:

Funding conditions of transdisciplinary research for sustainable development in Africa. Joint production of IDOS, FARA, H-BRS. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rL5HTEvPj0>

### Blog post:

Good practices in transdisciplinary research funding for sustainable development in Africa: Insights from ITD Conference. Available online at: <https://sustainable-landmanagement-africa.net/media/blog/blog-10-insights-from-the-itd-conference-2024/>

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