

Pathway to impact: Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio

Shahriar Wahid , **Susan Cuddy** , **Mobin-ud-Din Ahmad** , **Mohammed Mainuddin** 
and **Auro Almeida** 

*CSIRO Environment, Canberra, Australia
Email: shahriar.wahid@csiro.au*

Abstract: The South Asian River basins are sources of constant fear and hope. They are the lifeline for water, food and energy security, yet they are responsible for death and destruction due to floods, droughts, and landslides. The governments are reforming the water sector. Historically, international development partners supported policy reforms in many countries. They deployed a narrow reductionist approach to improve management rapidly and often overlooked socio-political structure and value systems. This paper assesses how Australian research collaboration was deployed to generate essential knowledge for reform in several basins and identify practical lessons to inform future programming.

The research collaboration was initiated by Australia's national science agency CSIRO and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP) project worked with 29 institutes from 5 South Asian countries. The key focus of the project was to (1) generate evidence to adopt integrated water resources management, (2) build in-country technical and institutional capacity, and (3) create an enabling collaborative environment within and between basin stakeholders responsible for a policy and practice change. Here, we provide commentary on relevant observations and lessons from the project.

Commitment to a trusted, equal and broad partnership. Water challenges are complex and intertwined with multifaceted development problems. We engaged with different change actors ranging from researchers to government officials to media in all countries. Openness to embracing various ideas and acknowledging different organisational cultures helped us build a shared vision with clear objectives and impact pathways. This approach enabled us to build trust, identify more thoughtful perspectives and rationally blend a solid foundation of methods, tools, and techniques.

Codesign and co-implement project activities. SDIP adopted a codesign and co-implement approach whereby the partners were given the flexibility to test new approaches to developmental challenges and move quickly in response to new opportunities and changes in the context. This flexibility provided opportunities to reach 'non-traditional' areas of engagement (e.g., from capacity building to direct policy advice to government, diplomacy, and increasingly into identifying business development opportunities), which would not have been possible under a typical contractual model.

Flexible delivery. The project was delivered as a portfolio targeting broad change goals. The portfolio approach gave the flexibility to try new things and change things when needed. The geographical coverage and the research space are complex and crowded. The team engaged with wide-ranging stakeholders, from farmers to policymakers, sometimes with conflicting interests. Flexible project design helped to maintain political support, cater to leadership change and seek support from people who have 'walked the journey'.

The project team was honest about their successes and failures while working on the reform. They believed that failures were a valuable opportunity to learn and improve. Their approach had a significant impact on the region. The government of Pakistan has adopted a tool created by CSIRO to allocate water in the Indus River. The government of Nepal has included participatory basin planning in its national water policy, which is a big step forward. Partners from Bangladesh have become trusted advisors to their government in managing groundwater. Additionally, the previous government of Afghanistan had begun a program to develop a 'National Water Information System' with the help of multiple donors.

REFERENCES

Wahid, Shahriar; Cuddy, Susan; Ahmad, Mobin-ud-Din; Mainuddin, Mohammed; Almeida, Auro; Brandon, Clare; Jade, Laura. Stories of change - Scientists working together for a stronger water future in South Asia. CSIRO; 2022. <http://hdl.handle.net/102.100.100/446777?index=1>

Keywords: *Research collaboration, integrated water resources management, South Asia river basins*