

Addressing power imbalances in co-production

Co-production is an increasingly popular approach to knowledge generation encouraged by donors and research funders. However, power dynamics between institutions in the Global North and South can, if not adequately managed, impede the effectiveness of co-production and pose risks for long-term sustainability.

Katharine Vincent, Suzanne Carter, Anna Steynor, Emma Visman and Katinka Lund Wågsæther

Climate services aim to facilitate the provision of weather and climate information in ways that enable these to be accessible and useful for decision making¹. This is best achieved through co-production, which is a method that brings users of climate information into the knowledge generation process, as opposed to viewing them solely as recipients of it. Donors and research funders in the Global North have embraced co-production of climate services as an opportunity to support their strategic goals of addressing knowledge gaps, building capacity and enabling technology transfer, because co-production promotes partnering of Northern and Southern institutions to generate information that aids climate-resilient development. Example initiatives where co-production of climate services is funded by the Global North and implemented in the Global South include Future Climate for Africa and Weather and Climate Information Services for Africa, as well as those under the Global Framework for Climate Services². However, there is currently limited evidence for the sustainability of co-produced climate services beyond the lifespan of funded projects.

Rather than the dominant scientific hegemony and one-way transfer of information from ‘producers’ to ‘users’, co-production recognizes that there are various ways of seeing the world, and applicable knowledge can only be constructed when this is embraced in the process³. Power imbalances in co-production processes can arise due to the different knowledge systems of producers and users, who vary in terms of ways of constructing and validating knowledge, ways of working and priorities, and incentives and rewards within their respective working environments. For example, different stakeholders may assign varying levels of importance to academic papers and ensuring emerging scientific understanding informs policy development⁴.

Additional dimensions of power imbalances come into play when

co-production involves partnerships between institutions in the Global North and South. Here we outline some of these potential ‘perils of partnership’, as well as the mechanisms through which unequal partnerships may arise, based on our experience in such programmes. We then propose some ways to expose, diffuse and manage these imbalances to create more equitable partnerships.

Perils of partnership

The paradigm in which applied research and development assistance is embedded reflects a global differential that can reinforce power asymmetry⁵. Co-production of climate services projects tends to arise out of the motivation to fill a gap in availability of climate information, and thus such projects are seen as addressing the supply side of information availability⁶. The nature of this knowledge gap is commonly defined by funders, typically from a Northern (and Northern scientific) perspective. However, critiques have suggested a need for Southern (scientific and user) priorities to define the nature of the knowledge gap that needs to be addressed⁷.

In addition to filling knowledge gaps, capacity building support and technology transfer from North to South is commonly stated as an explicit aim. Northern-based research funding agencies often mandate that a Northern institution (typically from their country of origin) acts as the ‘lead’ on applied research projects or the technical support partner in development assistance. The combination of Northern-led design and existing capacity differential reinforces the politics of knowledge⁸ whereby Northern partners design and lead scientific production efforts, while Southern partners are primarily engaged to support (or commence) in-country engagement and have their ‘capacity built’. This immediately positions Southern partners as effective ‘recipients’. Doing so runs counter to the ethos of co-production, which requires engagement of all parties on an equal basis.

Finally, positioning Southern institutions as secondary to their Northern

counterparts runs the risk of reinforcing an unequal dynamic that can then impede the effectiveness of co-production of the climate service within the project and, more importantly, pose a risk to longer-term sustainability. Co-producing climate services is often a resource-intensive endeavour relative to the traditional scientific mode of knowledge production⁹. Understanding other knowledge systems and collaborating to co-produce new knowledge takes time and money relative to producer-led science. It also requires willingness on the part of all participating individuals to learn new skills — for example, in listening and facilitation. An unequal partnership can impede commitment of Southern (scientific and user) partners to actively engage in the process, as the benefits they accrue are of secondary importance to their Northern counterparts. Without that commitment, there is a risk that none of the partners will derive optimum value from the co-production process, resulting in insufficient demand to raise resources to fund the process post-project¹⁰.

Designing co-production for equity

To expose, diffuse and then manage power imbalances and support effective co-production of climate services, the co-production process needs to be designed with equitable inclusion of all those involved from the very beginning. An effective and equitable design process increases the likelihood of sustainability through equal ownership and commitment on the part of the Southern partners who would be expected to spearhead the post-project continuation. This can be achieved by providing equitable decision-making control over funding to all partners, promoting equitable governance arrangements, and establishing expectations and incentives at the start of the proposal.

The modality of financial allocations within consortia can profoundly affect power relationships. Having a lead organization can enable a simple and transparent line of accountability between the consortium and the donor but, in so

doing, it can confer an immediate power imbalance within the consortium, which can inevitably produce an explicit or implicit hierarchical structure. Providing direct control of resources to all partners — even if those resources are held by a lead institution — confers a sense of equality that can set the stage for an equitable partnership¹¹.

The mechanism of funding disbursement can, of course, only contribute to equitable partnerships if the inherent design of the partnership is also conducive to equality¹². Since co-production is a fundamentally different way of defining and producing knowledge that challenges existing mandates and hierarchies, it can dismantle some of these inequalities. Partnerships require a range of scientific and non-scientific entities, all of whom will have different roles and time commitments to co-produce the climate service. This also means that many partnerships for co-producing climate services will bring together actors who have not previously collaborated and do not, as a result, necessarily have a trusted relationship in place.

Whether it is mandated by the funding agency or not, commitment on the part of all participants in the partnership to identify and address any potential causes of inequality can build an equitable partnership¹³. A prerequisite for this to happen comes through dedicating time to build common ground by unpacking expectations, allowing for mutual construction of priorities, ways of working and varied incentives for participation¹⁴. Attention to the ‘how’ of co-production, in addition to the ‘what’, is important — for example, designing legitimate procedures of recourse for any shortcomings or failures to comply¹⁵. Capitalizing on existing participatory tools and promoting adaptive management increase the likelihood of a successful co-production process¹⁶.

The time at which it is most critical to build common ground is at the start of a proposal, because unpacking different expectations, incentives and ways of working sets the tone for an equitable partnership and encourages sustainability

of co-produced climate services. Individual institutions need to be aware of how their norms and performance criteria can impede co-production, and be prepared to shield, nurture and empower activities that foster co-production¹⁷. Funders are increasingly making available resources for potential partnerships to come together and co-design proposals. As well as providing the opportunity to design an equitable partnership from the start, this also facilitates development of systems that explicitly and inclusively measure what success looks like for all partners, enabling identification of respective indicators or measures of success. Having measures of success contributes to ongoing debates about how to effectively evaluate co-produced climate services¹⁸.

Conclusion

Co-produced climate services have significant potential to reduce climate-related risk, but current experiences have tended to fall short of expectations. Key factors include inequitable North–South partnerships borne out of a paradigm of knowledge deficit and capacity development that runs the risk of entrenching existing inequalities. Co-production entails a transformation of this paradigm. Creating frameworks that enable the establishment of equitable partnerships requires a shift in perspectives on, and processes related to, the design, implementation and evaluation of success. Funders can shape programme design and criteria to support such partnerships, while Northern and Southern institutions can commit to equitable control over funds and design of equitable project governance structures, setting the right tone at the start of the partnership. These considerations are also applicable, more broadly, for co-production partnerships beyond those of climate services. □

Katharine Vincent ¹✉, Suzanne Carter ², Anna Steynor ³, Emma Visman ^{4,5} and Katinka Lund Wågsæther³

¹Kulima Integrated Development Solutions (Pty) Ltd., Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. ²SouthSouthNorth,

Cape Town, South Africa. ³Climate System Analysis Group, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa. ⁴UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Wallingford, UK. ⁵Department of Geography, King's College London, London, UK.

✉e-mail: katharine@kulima.com

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.