

# How international development consortia innovate and adapt:

Case studies from UK Aid Connect



## About the Learning from Consortia programme

The Learning from Consortia programme brings together 13 consortia formed by diverse organisations to facilitate collective learning and support consortia to deliver their outcomes. The programme aims to learn from their experiences and insights to draw out good practice in consortium working, as well as helping organisations and donors understand how they can best support consortia.

## About Bond

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We unite and support a diverse network of over 450 civil society organisations and allies to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice. We also deliver a range of services to help organisations be more effective and improve the quality and impact of their work.

## About The Partnering Initiative

An internationally-recognised pioneer of the field, TPI is a global NGO dedicated to unleashing the power of partnership for a sustainable future. TPI combines cutting-edge partnering theory, policy interventions and direct action globally to support and build the capacity of organisations, partnerships and platforms to deliver effective, value-creating collaboration.

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The ACCESS case study was developed with the assistance of Lesley Hoggart and Peter Keogh of The Open University. The Inclusion Works case study was developed with the assistance of Simon Brown of Sightsavers.

We would also like to acknowledge the 13 UK Aid Connect consortia who are involved in this programme: Approaches in Complex and Challenging Environments for Sustainable Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (ACCESS); Advancing SRHR through the Promotion of Innovation and Resilience (ASPIRE)\*; Aswat Horra (Free Voices); Civil Society Collective; Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID); The Development Alternative; Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development (ECID); Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network (FoRBLN); Inclusion Works; Innovation to Inclusion (i2i); The Partnership to End Child Exploitation (PACE)\*\*; Protecting Rights, Openness and Transparency Enhancing Civic Transformation (PROTECT); Smart Peace.

\*The ASPIRE consortium is registered with the FCDO as 'Building resiliency and gender equality of the most marginalised communities through multi-sector approaches to delivering quality sexual and reproductive health and rights'

\*\*The PACE consortium is registered with the FCDO as 'Effective approaches to ending the worst forms of child labour in fragile contexts (EAPAC)'

The Learning from Consortia programme is led by Bond, The Partnering Initiative, and an academic advisory board, and is funded by UK aid.

Find out more about the programme by visiting: [www.bond.org.uk/resources-support/learning-from-consortia](http://www.bond.org.uk/resources-support/learning-from-consortia)

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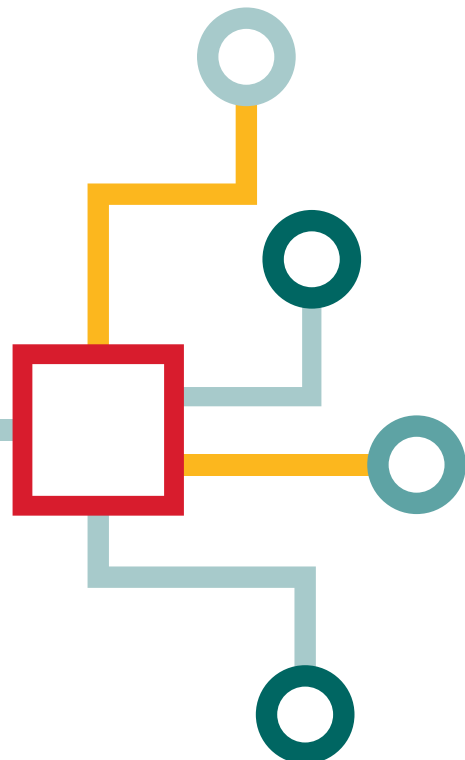
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# Introduction

Development challenges are complex with multiple interconnected components that often cannot be solved by any single development actor. Collaborations involving diverse actors have the potential to generate new ideas, innovative solutions, and greater impact through pooled ideas, skills, and resources.

UK Aid Connect is supporting consortia comprised of diverse organisations to create innovative solutions to complex development challenges that deliver real change to marginalised people's lives. These consortia often operate in dynamic contexts characterised by political instability, conflict, or natural disasters, and more recently have had to respond to funding challenges and Covid-19. Therefore, in addition to innovating, they must also be able to adapt to changing circumstances to ensure progress, maintain relevance, and deliver impact.

This document explores how consortia are innovating and provides examples of how they have adapted in response to recent changing circumstances through case studies of two UK Aid Connect consortia – ACCESS and Inclusion Works.



# ACCESS - Approaches in Complex and Challenging Environments for Sustainable Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

**ACCESS**  
CONSORTIUM

Approaches in  
complex & challenging  
environments for  
sustainable SRHR



## A set of partners uniquely positioned to enable innovation

The ACCESS consortium is uniquely positioned to co-create innovative solutions that support and engage marginalised and underserved populations to claim and access comprehensive evidence-based sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The consortium focuses on complex and challenging environments in Lebanon, Mozambique, Nepal, and Uganda.

ACCESS is led by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and includes Frontline AIDS, Internews, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, The Open University (OU), and the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC). Together these partners combine expertise in delivering sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services, working with and for the most marginalised and underserved, leveraging the humanitarian-development continuum, generating research evidence, enhancing capacity development and learning at scale, and facilitating community-led feedback and information loops.

The consortium is focused on delivering four key outputs, each of which includes collaboration across multiple partners to leverage different areas of expertise. The four key output areas are:

- 1. Resilience:** Improving community SRHR response and recovery preparedness in times of destabilising events.
- 2. Quality Services:** Improving the availability, accessibility, and responsiveness of quality SRH services.
- 3. Agency & Equity:** Increasing marginalised populations' awareness of their SRHR and increasing agency to demand and access SRH information and services.
- 4. Influence:** Influencing and impacting policy and practice through evidence generated from the project.

## Innovation as a way of working

For ACCESS, innovation is conceptualised as a way of working. It is referred to as a social process of enabling people to engender and test new ideas and approaches beyond their usual programme of work. Emphasis is on trying new things, even when there is limited evidence of what works already.



*ACCESS is about innovation. So, it's about developing new ways of working as much as new interventions. It's also about trying things where we may not have a lot of research-based evidence to support what we do, or we may have different kinds of evidence - like evidence from communities.*

Peter Keogh, The Open University



The ACCESS approach aims to be participatory, co-creative, community-led, and decolonising. For example, their approach to knowledge exchange includes facilitated dialogue between diverse stakeholders to enable them to articulate, communicate and share knowledge on SRH challenges or issues, leading to the generation of new, co-created understandings. What is innovative about this approach is an understanding that generally certain forms of knowledge tend to take priority (e.g. technical, evidentiary, academic) and are often used to devalue, translate, or filter other forms of knowledge (e.g. experiential, affective, communitarian). ACCESS is committed to working based on the understanding that a range of useful and transformative knowledge exists, which are somewhat in tension. It is also not just about co-produced outputs, but about creating long-term networks based on emerging shared understandings and insights.

## Pivoting to virtual co-creation in response to Covid-19

As part of the ACCESS consortium, the OU has developed a knowledge-exchange based model for co-creation that is being increasingly adopted across the consortium. This included three stages: 1) co-creation and collation of knowledge, 2) co-designing learning, and 3) co-production. The model assumed substantial face-to-face contact, which became impossible due to Covid-19.

To progress with their resilience workstream, which increased in relevance with Covid-19, the partners pivoted to a virtual co-creation approach.

WRC, The OU, IPPF and their in-country partner in Nepal, the Family Planning Association of Nepal (FPAN) leveraged their combined expertise to virtually co-create the previously planned pandemic preparedness module, which now also included content specific to Covid-19. The partners held a series of four virtual workshops via Zoom, which were jointly planned by WRC and the OU. To accommodate the distance approach and draw out local expertise and knowledge of the pandemic in Nepal, FPAN was asked to take questions away to discuss in small groups between workshops, which led to richer discussion in the online groups. While the virtual approach had a number of challenges, it also resulted in unexpected benefits.

In addition to time differences and connectivity issues, the partners found that virtual encounters do not allow for the intensive co-working and affective bonding normally associated with face-to-face work, which can impact ability to build strong long-term networks. Partners found the requirement to work in a co-creative manner challenging because it necessitates disrupting taken-for-granted ways of relating and working and 'surfaces' some implicit power dynamics that underpin these relationships. However, the local partner FPAN also reported, in a post-activity feedback session, that their voices and input were prioritised through the process. They thought this may lead to better outcomes. The assumption was that increased local empowerment and ownership facilitated increased confidence of local partners with respect to the curriculum, which in turn would improve their ability to facilitate future workshops.



*Not being able to go in person makes you let go a little bit. It forces you to think that you don't have to go everywhere to make sure something happens. Your in-country partners are perfectly capable, and in most places better placed to actually do the work. So, you've got something to contribute, but it's just one part of the whole, and it's not necessarily the most important part either.*

Lesley Hoggart, The Open University



The adapted approach to co-creation in response to Covid-19 has thereby augmented a decolonisation approach currently being discussed and developed by ACCESS. It has certainly challenged assumptions that the international non-governmental organisation (INGO) needs to be onsite to lead the work. Based on the learning from their experience, ACCESS is developing methods and approaches specifically for distance working and looking at how to further push the boundaries of co-creation, particularly with in-country communities. In addition, FPAN plans to continue with online working post-Covid-19 as travel often makes arranging meetings challenging.

## Partner selection and strong collaboration as enablers of innovation and adaptation

ACCESS is able to innovate and adapt due in part to initial selection of partners with diverse skills and experience in very specific areas, as well as strong collaboration that was developed from the outset. The consortium co-creation phase included consortium-wide workshops during which all partners worked together to define the outputs and ways of working, which have become known as 'the ACCESS approach'. This was achieved through strong positive leadership from IPPF. In addition, all output focus areas are worked on in collaboration between multiple partners, as opposed to demarcating different packages of work attributed to each individual partner.

Lesley Hoggart from the OU sums it up best in the following quote:

“

*Each output has its own team working on it comprised of at least two of the consortium partners, usually more like three or four of the consortium partners. So, we bring in different expertise on everything that we do.*

*And we work in a very collaborative way. That's one of the things about ACCESS, it's quite unlike other projects that I've worked on in that it's not neatly demarcated into different packages of work that each individual partner is doing.*

*We're all working together, which has got its challenges, but it really does seem to be so far that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. We've got a lot of different experiences and skills that work together very well.*

Lesley Hoggart, The Open University

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# Inclusion Works



ADD International | BBC Media Action | Benetech | BRAC | Development Initiatives  
Humanity & Inclusion | Inclusion International | The Institute of Development Studies  
International Disability Alliance | Leonard Cheshire | Light for the World | Sense International  
Sightsavers | Social Development Direct | Standard Chartered | Sustainable Hospitality Alliance

## Innovation in disability inclusion through partner diversity

Inclusion Works brings together 11 diverse partners to create and test innovative approaches to improve the long-term economic empowerment and inclusion of people with disabilities. The partners include disability inclusion NGOs, data, technology and media experts, academia and the private sector, as well as southern-based organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs).

Together, these partners aim to evidence how labour market systems can be more inclusive of people with disabilities in formal employment, which includes not only formal sector employment, but also self-employment in the informal sector. The consortium works in Bangladesh, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda.

Inclusion Works' theory of change includes initiatives with four main target groups:

- 1. Women and men with disabilities:** Increasing active participation in employment and income generation opportunities.
- 2. National and local OPDs and other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):** Increasing structures and capacity to engage and support people with disabilities and the private sector in developing inclusive practice.
- 3. Individual employers (private, public, and third sector):** Increasing inclusive practice that aligns to UNCRPD Article 27, which recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others.
- 4. Governments:** Influencing governments to increasingly ensure implementation of UNCRDP compliant employment legislation/policy and facilitate incentives for inclusive employment.

1. Inclusive Futures is the umbrella programme above Inclusion Works. It is comprised of UK Aid funded organisations working together in consortia based on a long term commitment to ensure opportunities for people with disabilities and a future that's disability inclusive.



## Innovation as new approaches and models

When Inclusion Works started, the consortium partners had a commitment to work together to create and test innovative approaches, but they did not know what these might be at the outset. Innovations emerged as they progressed, such as when they conducted assessments that gave them insight into the labour market system, which challenged existing assumptions.

Through the labour market assessments, they learned that rather than being resistant to inclusion of people with disabilities, employers predominantly want to be inclusive, but fail for various reasons. In essence, employers lack 'disability confidence'. They also learned that internalisation of stigma and lack of employment readiness and confidence are stopping disabled people from applying for opportunities, and not necessarily a need for higher levels of education.

These were fundamental pivoting moments for Inclusion Works, which led to new approaches and models. For example, they pivoted from a more adversarial approach with employers to a more advocacy-based collaborative approach, as well as expanding beyond formal sector employment and broadening to include a value chain approach. They also developed an innovation around mentoring where disabled people are mentored by HR practitioners, which improves understanding and confidence of both potential employees and employers. The mentoring approach was initially piloted in Nigeria with the Chartered Institute of Personnel Management. It was a great success in that half the initial cohort either got the job they wanted or the internship that would lead to the job. The Chartered Institute of Personnel Management are now working to bring it to an enormous scale in Nigeria and it is also being replicated in Kenya and Uganda.



*That [mentoring] was an innovation. And it's not technically complicated. It's purely a people-to-people kind of realisation, that actually it's about people coming together.*

Simon Brown, Sightsavers



## Prioritising activities and leveraging technology platforms in response to changing circumstances

Both Covid-19 and funding changes resulted in Inclusion Works adapting their programme and prioritising target groups in their theory of change. With Covid-19 in particular, it did not make sense to attempt to work with governments, even virtually, as their focus was on pandemic response. Priority was therefore placed on people with disabilities, OPDs and CSOs, and employers. Although employers were trying to stabilise their businesses and protect existing employees, and had stopped recruiting, Inclusion Works found they were interested in capacity building of people who were now at home. Employers still wanted to invest in confidence around disability so that when they restarted recruitment, they would have a better chance of being inclusive.

Inclusion Works leveraged technology platforms to deliver virtual capacity building programmes to hundreds of managers, reaching a scale beyond what they ever expected or planned for their classroom-based activities. While some downsides to virtual training were noted, particularly with respect to quality of interactions, the benefits were found to far outweigh the downsides. Inclusion Works has since had virtual interactions around disability with thousands of people in companies, which has led to more employers wanting to receive CVs from disabled persons and more people wanting to be mentors.



*It [virtual training] was a realisation to ourselves that one, we can do it, you don't actually have to be in front of a person to be able to train them, and that actually, we can use technology to get to a scale we would never get if we were trying to do that in a classroom... We've far outreached what we would think in terms of training company staff and probably the depth of support we can give to job seekers.*

Simon Brown, Sightsavers



## Several conditions and processes foster innovation and adaptation

For Inclusion Works, innovation and adaptation are enabled through a diversity of partners, as well as by developing a deeper understanding of the context and being open to challenging existing assumptions. The consortium has also established processes that foster innovation and adaptation. Based on a strong commitment to learning, they have implemented formal structured learning reviews every six months, which include consortium partners, job seekers, employers, and other stakeholders. The aim of the learning reviews is to reflect on what happened in the previous six months and identify what needs to change based on that learning. It is a collaborative approach where all stakeholders together ask themselves and each other “What are we learning?” and “What do we need to adapt?” The process therefore encourages a sense of collaboration and creates a space for innovation and adaptation to emerge.

Inclusion Works was also able to adapt quickly to recent changing circumstances because of a high degree of trust that has been established within the consortium. This was due in part to pre-existing relationships between a number of the consortium partners. It was also due to strong communication and early collaborative development of a set of values and principles that include operating with trust and mutual respect, ensuring inclusivity and meaningful participation, and managing the programme with adaptability and flexibility.

Inclusion Works’ ability to innovate and adapt is best summed up by Sightsavers in the following two quotes:

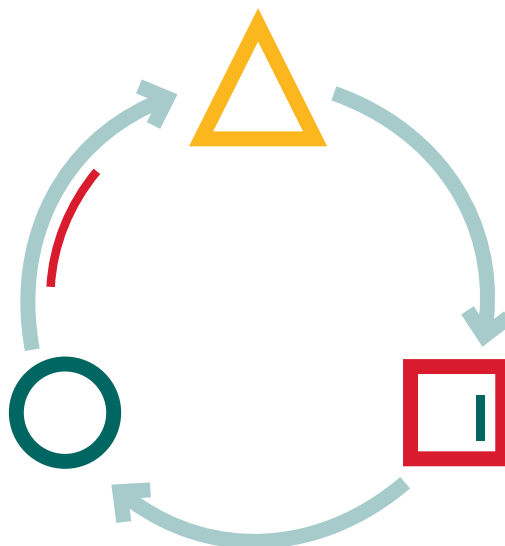
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*The programme is committed to learning. Every six months there’s a process of learning and looking at where do we adapt. That influences some of the innovations because we’re able to challenge ourselves on our assumptions, and also on some of the solutions. So, that’s also playing an important role.*

...

*With that group [of partners] already together, you already start to build some trust, some relationships that allow you to move forward. That was really important in terms of rapidly adapting and reprioritising work... as a consortium you’ve got to invest time in building trust.*

Simon Brown, Sightsavers ”



# What can we learn from these consortia about innovation and adaptation?

As ACCESS and Inclusion Works demonstrate, the varied skills, expertise, and resources brought by diverse partners within a consortium can enable innovation, and there may be different approaches to innovation and varying degrees across consortia. But partner diversity alone does not enable innovation, or adaptation. As the two case studies demonstrate, various conditions and processes can help foster innovation and adaptation. The examples from ACCESS and Inclusion Works point to the following guidance:

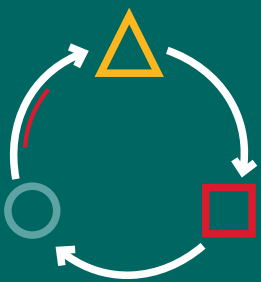
- ▶ Establish a culture of collaboration from the outset (e.g. use the consortium co-creation phase to develop a strong ethos of collaboration and establish collaborative ways of working).
- ▶ Invest time early on in communication, getting to know each other, and building trust.
- ▶ Continually build on understanding about the context the consortium is operating in to identify opportunities for improvements and new ideas.
- ▶ Develop a culture of learning and openness to challenge existing assumptions, approaches, and solutions.
- ▶ Consider regular structured learning reviews with diverse stakeholders that include reflection on what needs to change as a result of what has been learned.
- ▶ Ensure strong positive consortium leadership to nurture relationship development and foster greater collaboration across diverse partners.
- ▶ Acknowledge that new ways of working may take time for some partners to adjust to, which may require understanding and patience.
- ▶ Encourage flexibility to allow innovation approaches to evolve throughout the consortium lifecycle.

“

*The answer to innovation is collaboration. Innovation comes through people working together, of understanding the context and changing context, or a better and deeper understanding of what's out there, and how together you react to changes in conditions. And that leads to the innovation, it's not just something that you 'do'.*

Simon Brown, Sightsavers

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[www.bond.org.uk/resources-support/learning-from-consortia](http://www.bond.org.uk/resources-support/learning-from-consortia)