

Evaluating the Quality of Global Research Partnerships



ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION


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This report is the result of a highly participatory process conducted in 2024 with experts from funding institutions, academia and NGOs from both the Global South and North.

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Evaluating the Quality of Global Research Partnerships

For John. Your melody will continue forever.

SDGs: The international UN Sustainable Development Goals

With this report, the Swiss Academy of Sciences contributes to the SDGs 10, 16 and 17:
'Reduce inequality within and among countries', 'Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development' and 'Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development'.

THE SDGS ARE TO BE ACHIEVED AROUND THE WORLD, AND BY ALL UN MEMBER STATES, BY 2030. THIS MEANS THAT ALL STATES ARE CALLED UPON EQUALLY TO PLAY THEIR PART IN FINDING SHARED SOLUTIONS TO THE WORLD'S URGENT CHALLENGES. SWITZERLAND IS ALSO REQUIRED TO IMPLEMENT THE GOALS ON A NATIONAL BASIS. IN ADDITION, INCENTIVES ARE TO BE CREATED TO ENCOURAGE NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTORS TO MAKE AN INCREASINGLY ACTIVE CONTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

- > sustainabledevelopment.un.org
- > eda.admin.ch/agenda2030/en/home.html



Content

Abstract	4
1 Introduction	5
2 What to evaluate	7
Relevant evaluation topics at the level of the partnership in the project team	8
Relevant evaluation topics at the level of the project	9
Relevant evaluation topics at both levels (partnership and project)	11
Purpose of the evaluation matrix – a source of information and inspiration	12
Brief description of each criterion.....	15
3 How to evaluate the quality of research partnerships	18
Weighted importance	18
Timing of evaluation.....	18
Basic requirements of partnership quality	18
Scoring to identify the high-quality partnerships.....	18
Evaluation setting.....	18
Form of elaboration	19
Evaluation tool	19
The reviewers.....	19
4 Further recommendations for the Swiss research funding landscape	21

Abstract

This report provides recommendations for funding institutions to evaluate the quality of global research partnerships. These recommendations are applicable in the stage of project selection, proposal submission, and interviews (ex-ante), as well as for mid-term reviews and final project evaluations (ex-post). The report makes recommendations on *what* to evaluate and how to evaluate the quality of global research partnerships. The recommendations on what to evaluate include eleven possible evaluation topics and thirty possible evaluation criteria. An evaluation matrix provides an overview and source of information and inspiration on the topics and criteria. From the evaluation matrix, funding institutions can carefully select those topics and criteria that are applicable and relevant to their funding programmes. The matrix also shows, which evaluation criteria the authors suggest as ‘must-haves’ for equitable partnerships. The recommendations on *how* to evaluate the quality of partnerships provide funding institutions with suggestions on how to organise an evaluation. These suggestions should be carefully adapted to a specific funding programme.

Disclaimer: In this report, we use the term ‘global’ for describing international, transboundary research collaborations. In the context of this report, the collaborations often take place between one or more countries from the Global North and one or more countries from the Global South. However, we feel that the binary differentiation between only Global North and South is incomplete, thus, we prefer to use the term ‘global’.

1 Introduction

We believe that project results, outcomes and impacts of global research collaborations are more targeted, effective, and sustainable if the project partnership is of high quality. Equity, mutual respect, and mutual interest to learn from each other enhance the quality of collaboration among partners, hence, the projects' results, outcomes, and impact. High-quality collaboration means – among other things – to allow different perspectives and knowledge to be truly included, deploy and use the full potential and contributions of all involved actors, and use their agency and networks to create impact such as capacity building or transformation towards sustainable development. High-quality collaboration is key for excellence of research (project implementation and results) and relevance of research (outcomes and impact). On the contrary, inequitable, imbalanced collaborations waste potential and resources by ignoring, overrunning, or overlooking relevant knowledge, expertise, and perspectives. Through low-quality collaboration, research results can be incomplete or not relevant enough, and the project can be less effective and sustainable. Moreover, the experience of inequity has a discouraging impact on the involved partners to fully commit to a project and exerting their full potential and agency to drive a project towards success.

For funding institutions, it can be demanding to assess the quality of a research project collaboration. This report presents recommendations for funding institutions for meaningfully evaluating the quality of global research partnerships. These recommendations are applicable in the stage of project proposal submission and interviews (ex-ante), as well as for mid-term reviews and final project evaluations (ex-post). On the one hand, the report formulates recommendations on *what* to evaluate, and which criteria seem to be most important (section 2). On the other hand, the report provides suggestions on *how* to evaluate (section 3). All these recommendations on the what and how to evaluate serve as a collection of inputs, from which funding institutions can carefully select those that are applicable to their funding programmes.

This report is the product of a highly participatory process with experts from funding institutions, academia, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), both from the Global South as well as North. The recommendations presented here have been assembled from various sources. For details on the methodology and sources, kindly consult the box on the next page.



The project team of the r4d project 'Managing telecoupled landscapes' visits one of the case study villages in Myanmar during their annual meeting in 2019. Source: Win Myint

In light blue and dark blue boxes throughout the document, this report presents examples of promising as well as unfavourable collaborations. These examples are based on true stories, however, for reasons of anonymity,

they have been slightly modified (e.g., modified country names). Moreover, for reasons of simplicity, the examples have been reduced to two partners only.

Methodology of the project

The project applied and consulted the following methods and sources:

- Desk-based review of literature and funding instruments from inside and outside of Switzerland.
- Consultation of the project's special advisors and sounding board* from the Global South and North in January 2024, representing academia and NGOs. The experts discussed their experiences and recommendations concerning the evaluation of partnership quality.
- Workshop in January 2024 with representatives from various and diverse Swiss funding institutions. The representatives discussed negative and positive experiences and shared recommendations concerning the evaluation of partnership quality. They discussed how to evaluate partnership quality and what to evaluate, including how to differentiate between 'must-have' criteria and additional criteria for assessing the quality of global collaborations.
- Focus group workshop (virtual) in April 2024 with project and programme coordinators from research institutions from Global South and North from different Research for Development (R4D) projects, Solution-Oriented Research for Development (SOR4D) projects, and the concluded NCCR North-South. Eight coordinators from Global South and North, two women and six men, discussed on how to evaluate partnership quality and what to evaluate, including how to differentiate between 'must-have' criteria and additional criteria for assessing the quality of North-South collaborations.
- Focus group workshop (on-site) in April 2024 with 8 representatives of three Swiss funding institutions: Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and the swissuniversities Development and Cooperation Network (SUDAC). The content was similar to the focus group workshop with the programme and project coordinators.
- In addition, insights from two other KFPE-funded projects carried out with Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), which ran in parallel, served as a source of information for this report: 1) Key Features of Sustainable North-South Funding Instruments – Towards an equitable landscape for global research partnerships;¹ 2) Insights from the Global South for the Revision of the KFPE Principles.²
- In November and December 2024, the project's special advisors reviewed the report.
- In December 2024, an interactive session was held with representatives of Swiss funding institutions and board members of the KFPE. They shared their feedback on presented insights.
- In December 2024, Dr. Smita Premchander, an experienced reviewer of global research projects, and Dr. Fabian Käser, head of the Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE), extensively reviewed the report before it was completed.

* For an overview of contributors, kindly see imprint.

1 kfpe.scnat.ch/de/about_kfpe/current_projects/evaluation_of_swiss_funding_instruments

2 kfpe.scnat.ch/de/about_kfpe/current_projects/global_south_perspectives_on_the_kfpe_guide

2 What to evaluate

The following recommendations on the *what* to evaluate serve as a collection of inputs, from which funding institutions can carefully select those that are applicable to their funding programmes.

This report presents eleven topics that can be relevant to assess the quality of a research partnership. In this chapter, we first describe these topics. Figure 1 provides an overview of the topics and which level they address – whether the topics are directly linked to the partnership per se within the project team or linked to the project implementation, or both. Second, we present a list of concrete criteria, which help to assess each topic. It is important to state that one criterion can serve to assess several topics simultaneously. For example, doing a systematic context analysis (criterion 11.M) is necessary to develop and conduct a needs-based and impact-oriented research

(topics E and F), as well as to be able to adopt a conflict-sensitive research approach (topic H) and produce meaningful knowledge products for the right target audience (topic J). Table 1 provides an overview of all evaluation topics and criteria that we can recommend, and indicates which criteria serve to assess which evaluation topic. Further, the table also presents which criteria we suggest using as ‘must-have’ criteria for all projects and which criteria we consider as additionally ‘recommended’. For the latter, funders can either keep them as additional evaluation criteria or convert them to ‘must-have’ criteria, depending on the funding scheme, project size, geographical context, research topics, and other relevant circumstances. Some of the ‘must-have’ criteria might even be eligibility criteria for project submission such as collaboration with local partners (criterion 01.M).

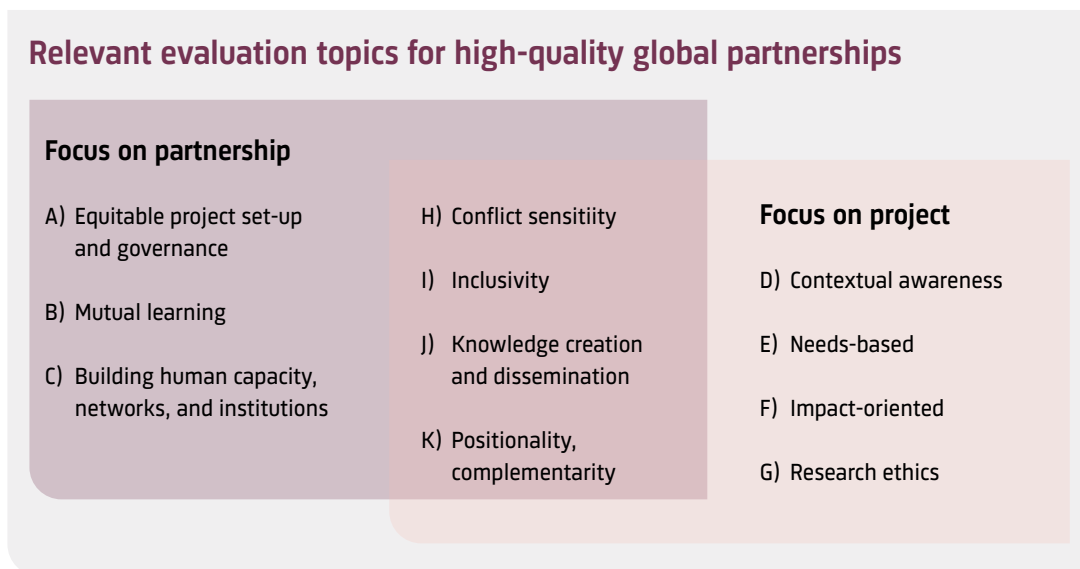


Figure 1: High-quality partnership – What topics to evaluate

Relevant evaluation topics at the level of the partnership in the project team

There are several evaluation topics, which are directly linked to the partnership within the project team. These are visualised in Figure 1 and described in more detail below.

A) Equitable project set-up and governance: An equitable project set-up and governance implies equitable – and not necessarily equal³ – distribution of roles and responsibilities, decision-making competences, students, budgets, risks, safety measures, etc. A numeric definition of the term ‘equitable’ is not meaningful, as equity is highly qualitative as well as context- and project-specific. Rather, we recommend that the project partners explicitly address the distribution question and discuss jointly and transparently what that means in their project with regard to, for example, roles and responsibilities, tasks and workload, decision-making competences, data ownership, number of students, as well as budget and sharing of other (academic and non-academic) merits and risks. For one partnership/project, equity might mean that all partners take on the same amount of workload, or that each project partner is responsible for one specific work package. From there, the project jointly allocates the necessary budgets, which might differ in numeric terms. For another partnership/project, equity might mean that all partners receive the same budget sum (in absolute terms) and from there the project tasks are allocated. What matters most is that all partners feel treated fairly and equitably, and that all are equitably and transparently included from joint agenda setting and project design to project closure. Table 1 suggests several criteria, which can help to evaluate the equity in the project governance.

B) Mutual learning: Mutual learning is a prerequisite for a good partnership and contributes to mutual respect and understanding, as well as project excellence and relevance. Mutual learning makes projects thrive because all partners can bring in their and benefit from each other’s competences. Each partner has its own expertise, strengths and weaknesses, competences and capacities, networks and experiences etc. If partners are open and willing to learn from each other and can consciously complement each other, collaboration is especially fruitful. At best, the partners reflect on and discuss this complementarity actively and repetitively. For example, at the onset of a project (if not yet done beforehand), the partners can hold a team retreat specifically for mutual learning. In a first step, they – per institution or/and per person –

reflect on their own positionality, competences, networks, motivation etc. In a second step, the partners identify how they can best complement each other and what they can learn from each other. In a third step, they can plan how they intend to enable this learning. Enabling learning can be, for example, by holding bimonthly reflection sessions, joining each other to relevant networking events and conferences, better distributing tasks according to competences, holding debriefing meetings after fieldwork etc.). It can also be an option to include repetitive, joint self-evaluation of achievements (with or without an own mutual learning monitoring and evaluation system). All these spaces and activities for mutual learning require time and maybe other resources. Therefore, it helps to allocate time and financial resources for mutual learning already at project submission stage. Table 1 suggests several concrete criteria, which contribute to mutual learning.

Example 1 of unfavourable collaboration – Accountability

Keywords: joint elaboration of the project design and methodology, equitable distribution of thematic responsibilities

Due to time pressure for submitting the pre-proposal, the Swiss partner defines the conceptual framework and methodology himself, without having the opportunity to consult with the Ghanaian partner. The Swiss professor assigns the responsibilities for the outlined work packages himself, based on his longstanding experience in transboundary collaboration. Work package A deals with the social networks of water governance in Ghana, while work package B investigates social learning within these social networks. The Swiss partner is responsible for work package A, the Ghanaian partner for work package B. The Ghanaian partner has never conducted research on social learning before, but agrees to do so. The funder approves the project and they get started. During the first year, the partners meet almost every 3 months to discuss progress in developing the concepts and methods. While the Swiss partner manages to make good progress in work package A, the Ghanaian partner seems to make little progress in work package B for various reasons (limited time availability, limited access to literature, and some other reasons not fully understood by the Swiss partner). In the end, the Swiss partner develops the concept and methods for the social learning work package as well, as this is a prerequisite for starting the fieldwork the following month. This procedure is repeated again and again. The Swiss partner is confused and frustrated, the Ghanaian partner is silent. There is no open communication on this issue.

³ While equality (and equal) implies that all partners are treated the exact same way, equity (and equitable) means that all partners are provided with what they need to succeed to reach an equal or comparable outcome.

C) Building human capacity, networks, and institutions: Contributing to the development of human capacity of all partners, building of institutions and networks is fundamental for the partnership quality. This topic is about providing opportunities to all partners, so that they can build up their staff, organisation, and networks from the short- to the long-term. This implies providing training for the staff (incl. supporting staff), making it possible for them to engage in networking, offer time to invest in follow-up project acquisitions etc. It can also include providing opportunities to all partners to reasonably co-invest in the physical infrastructure of their organisation. Further, it is important that all partners share their networks with each other and use them respectfully. Access to the project's overheads, or core funds to all partners, is critical for building human capacities and networks of partnering organisations. This underscores the importance of providing overheads and core funds for all partners. Table 1 suggests several concrete evaluation criteria, which contribute to these relevant development efforts for staff and organisations.

Example 1 of promising collaboration – PhD students

Keywords: Equitable prospects for degrees, human capacity development and institution building, equitable project set-up and governance

In a research project between Switzerland and the Lao PDR, the partners decide that both countries should receive the same amount of money to support PhD students. As a result, the Swiss partner has one PhD student and the Lao partner has two. In another research project between Switzerland and Tanzania, the partners decide that both countries should have the same number of PhD students. As a result, both partners have two. In both projects, the partners and their students jointly decide whether the students from the Global South will be enrolled at their home university or at a Swiss university. Upon completion of the PhD, all individuals can continue as post-doctoral researchers within (or outside) their home institution, as project coordinators, lecturers, and possibly as principal investigators for small research projects. All individuals have similar career opportunities, and the partner organisations have similar opportunities to further strengthen their institution.

On the contrary, an unfavourable situation would be if the Swiss partner claims all the PhD positions, while the Lao or Tanzanian partner only provides research assistants, with no prospect of academic degrees. As a consequence, career development and institution building is limited for the Lao and Tanzanian partner.

Relevant evaluation topics at the level of the project

There are also several evaluation topics, which are linked to the project, rather than the partnership per se. These topics address issues such as research focus and how a project is embedded and implemented. It is important to evaluate these topics as they have a strong impact on the partnership quality.

D) Contextual awareness: Basically, contextual awareness implies that all partners know and are aware of the context including its culture, traditions, politics, laws, environmental conditions etc., in which the research project takes place. This even includes knowing and being aware of past, potential, and existing conflicts and tensions, even if they are invisible such as structural inequalities and discrimination or corruption, relevant political debates, powerful actors, the status of social infrastructure and the economy etc. But it also includes knowing and being aware of climatic and environmental conditions, natural resources – or even simply being aware of road conditions to access the case study areas. Moreover, it is useful to be aware of the role of academia in the respective partner countries. Projects can only thrive and contribute to high-quality partnerships if they build on and respond to the prevailing context(s).

E) Needs-based: Ideally, research responds to existing needs. Such needs can be, for example, disciplinary knowledge gaps (e.g., the need of the discipline psychology for knowing more about the relationship between sleep, stress, and mental health), global needs for transformation (e.g., combatting climate change), or knowledge needs from a specific geographical area (e.g. sustainable water catchment methods in the Ethiopian highlands). A research project ideally addresses the needs of the researched context. For high-quality global research partnerships, this orientation on needs is relevant. If the research agenda is not responding to needs of the researched context, for example, if it is only driven by curiosity of one single partner, without contextual considerations and without responding to needs, this might cause reputational harm to the other partner(s). Especially in transdisciplinary research, where other stakeholders participate in research, the reputation and credibility of the partner(s) might suffer, potentially leading to refusal of stakeholders for collaboration and waste of resources. For an example, kindly see Example 2 of unfavourable collaboration – Joint agenda setting.

Example 2 of unfavourable collaboration – Joint agenda setting

Keywords: joint agenda setting, needs-based research

A group of researchers from Switzerland develops the research agenda for a transdisciplinary project to be carried out in Cambodia. The Cambodian partner comes on board once the pre-proposal has been approved by the funding institution, i.e. once the research agenda has already been defined. The Cambodian partner facilitates data collection, for example by organising workshops with government officials. Researchers from Cambodia and Switzerland conduct the workshops together. The topic of the research is of little or no relevance to the respondents, nor does it relate to any locally-led initiatives. Nevertheless, the government officials patiently attend the workshops out of courtesy. However, the Cambodian partner suffers a loss of reputation and credibility because the research was apparently not needs-based. As a consequence, the next time the Cambodian partner asks these government departments to participate in research, they will not reply or argue that they are too busy.

F) Impact-oriented: Not all research projects necessarily strive for direct impact, such as probably various basic research projects. For development-oriented research, however, having an impact is relevant. While having a positive impact can be beneficial for all project partners in a global collaboration, we see that this is especially important for partners from the Global South. It is again a question of reputation and credibility for the partners embedded in the researched context. Therefore, for global research partnerships striving for impact it is important to be needs-based and to have budget and resources available for co-design, dialogue, and outreach, such as policy advocacy, engagement with society, pilot actions, and creative ways of sharing results and recommendations. Further, sharing networks is relevant for having an impact, as well as scalability of project findings. For an example, kindly see Example 2 of promising collaboration – Research-based pilot actions. Table 1 suggests many criteria, which can help to evaluate the prospect of impact of a project.

Example 2 of promising collaboration – Research-based pilot actions

Keywords: Impact-oriented, needs-based, knowledge creation and dissemination for non-academic audience

In a six-year development-oriented research project between Switzerland and Guatemala, taking place in rural Guatemala, the first four years are devoted to research, while the fifth and sixth years are devoted to pilot actions. The project budget is designed accordingly. Based on the research and through co-design with the local communities, and with the approval of the regional government authorities, the project facilitates pilot actions for sustainable economic development. Villages form their own 'sustainable economic development groups', define goals, actions, and formal procedures. Actions include the establishment of self-organised village-led micro-finance systems; agricultural, leadership, and financial training; knowledge products and regular Facebook posts in local languages; and study tours. The research project accompanies the village groups, provides the seed money for the micro-finance systems, facilitates and monitors the pilot actions, and assists with networking, access to expert knowledge and other knowledge exchange. After the project ends, the village groups continue to operate successfully. The village groups, government authorities, and other stakeholders have enjoyed their participation in this six-year research project. As a result, the Guatemalan partner benefits from a positive reputation and trust. A year later, the Guatemalan partner can run a follow-up research project with the same stakeholders, and they are motivated to participate again. Research permits are easily obtained and respondents are willing to share their knowledge and data from the outset.

G) Research ethics towards research participants: In this report, we refer to research ethics as the values and principles that govern the responsible conduct of research towards research participants. Researchers must ensure integrity, transparency, and respect for all human stakeholders as well as other living beings involved in research. Accordingly, research with any living beings needs profound ethical reflections. How procedures and standards look like are discipline- as well as context-specific. For example, in medicine, such standards can differ from the standards in human geography. However, it is important that profound ethical reflections do take place. Each project should have a convincing attitude and plan, how research ethics are included and implemented in the project. There is no one-fits-all solution. For example, the usefulness of ethics commissions and ethical clearance for fieldwork is contested. Some scholars and practition-

ers criticise that such commissions lack the contextual knowledge and are too risk-averse to take meaningful decisions. As a consequence, they sometimes render impossible relevant research. Others highlight that the risk of, for example, harmful research extractivism, physical and/or psychologically endangering researchers, data mismanagement, or re-traumatizing respondents can be considerably reduced with such commissions in place. In this example, ultimately, it all comes down to the composition and expertise of these ethics commissions. Accordingly, we refrain from suggesting a one-fits-all solution. Rather, we suggest that – where no useful solution exists yet – funders reflect on this carefully and consult contextual, ethical, and other expert knowledge. Nevertheless, it is important that all research partnerships go through these profound ethical reflections. In Table 1, we provide some criteria, which can help to evaluate how well projects are doing in terms of research ethics.

Relevant evaluation topics at both levels (partnership and project)

H) Conflict sensitivity: Some research projects take place in areas where armed fighting prevails. Here, a conflict-sensitive research and project management approach is essential.⁴ But even if a research project is not taking place in a context of armed fighting, a conflict-sensitive research approach is advisable. Conflict sensitivity applies, for example, if researchers are sent for potentially dangerous or traumatizing data collection endeavours. There are many forms of invisible violence, stemming from structural or cultural violence, spanning from racism and sexism to discrimination of ethnic groups, political repression etc. Even if the research is on a politically non-sensitive topic (e.g., production of organic fertilizer), it might be carried out in a context where there is invisible structural or cultural violence (e.g., repression of the academic sector or organised crime). To ‘do no harm’ to anyone – not to the own researchers and project staff, the project, the organisations of all partners, nor the respondents – it is strongly recommended to adopt a conflict-sensitive research approach. Thus, in terms of achieving a high-quality partnership, we must make sure that all partners are safe during as well as after the project. Table 1 suggests several concrete criteria to evaluate the conflict sensitivity of the project. Depending on the context and research topic,

these criteria would need to be a ‘must-have’ criteria instead of ‘recommended’.

Example 3 of unfavourable collaboration – Do no harm

Keywords: do no harm, conflict sensitivity, knowledge creation and dissemination

A researcher from Switzerland returns home after collecting data on large-scale land acquisitions in Pakistan. She publishes a blog post for the scientific land governance research community, sharing her findings on the corruption associated with these land acquisitions. While she is safe in Switzerland, her Pakistani research colleagues start receiving threatening phone calls. The Pakistani researchers fear for their lives and the lives of their family members.

I) Inclusivity: Diversity and inclusivity is an evaluation topic, which funders and reviewers can either wish to assess as part of partnership quality or as a separate evaluation dimension (outside of partnership quality). For sustainable development, justice, equal opportunities, and the notion of leaving no one behind, it is relevant to work inclusively of gender, youth, minorities, age, social strata, indigenous groups, people with disability, or vulnerable groups of any kind. Within partnership quality, we recommend looking at how a project team is set-up (partnership level) as well as how a project is conducted (project level). Table 1 suggests several concrete criteria to evaluate inclusivity on both levels.

J) Knowledge creation and dissemination: All partners should be involved in and benefit equitably from knowledge creation and dissemination (academic papers, conferences, blog posts, schoolbooks etc.). For example, staff from all partners should have the chance to author and co-author knowledge products, so that they receive the recognition they deserve. It is also important to accept different ways of publishing so that each partner can publish in the journals or platforms, where they can have an impact and receive recognition (e.g. a government-led journal in a Global South country, which can reach all government department staff). Ideally, the project creates and disseminates the knowledge in line with the needs of the researched context, is approved by researched stakeholders, so that it can lead to a positive impact for sustainable development and strengthened reputation and credibility of all partners.

⁴ Useful sources for a conflict-sensitive research approach are: How to guide to conflict sensitivity (2012) https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/144549/CSC_HowToGuide_CS_WEB.pdf

A Conflict Sensitive Approach to Field Research (2017); <https://kfpe.scnat.ch/de/id/ScERi?embed=mzS92>

Guidelines to Conflict Sensitive Research (2020). <https://kfpe.scnat.ch/de/id/L4TY?embed=mzS92>

Example 3 of promising collaboration – Positionality

Keywords: Positionality and complementarity, mutual learning, safety and security

The partners in a Swiss-Bolivian research project adopt a culture of mutual learning. To this end, they regularly reflect on their positionality (both at organisational and individual staff level). At the beginning of the project, they use the opportunity of the one-week project kick-off meeting to dedicate half a day to mutual learning. First separately, then together, they reflect on their respective worldviews, position in society, research competencies, strengths and weaknesses, and opportunities. They learn how to complement and learn from each other in a meaningful way. They continue this reflection and learning exchange at each annual project meeting. Additionally, before starting the fieldwork, they also reflect on the personal risk profiles of the researchers, so that both partners become aware of the individual risks of all researchers regarding racism, sexism, violence etc. As a result, the partners are better informed to fulfil their duty of care. In addition to the direct benefits for the success of the project, these exchanges also contribute greatly to building trust between the partners and strengthening the team spirit, which is relevant for the quality of the partnership.

K) Positionality and complementarity: Reflecting on and being aware of our own position, privileges, weaknesses and strengths can be useful for a good partnership. Through this, we get to understand better how we work, how we can contribute to a project, how we might be perceived by others, and what impact we might have on a project, partnership, or a context (e.g., when doing data collection) and how we complement each other. This can even serve as a starting point for mutual learning and a respectful interaction. Table 1 suggests several concrete criteria, how this could be implemented and assessed.

Purpose of the evaluation matrix – a source of information and inspiration

The evaluation matrix (Table 1) provides an overview of all evaluation topics and criteria that we can recommend, and indicates which criteria serve to assess which evaluation topic. Further, the table also presents which criteria we suggest using as ‘must-have’ criteria for all projects and which criteria we consider as additionally ‘recommended’. For the latter, funders can either keep them as additional evaluation criteria or convert them to ‘must-have’ criteria, depending on the funding scheme, project size, geographical context, research topics, or other relevant circumstances. Some of the ‘must-have’ criteria might even be eligibility criteria for project submission such as collaboration with local partners (criterion 01.M).

Funding institutions and reviewers can use the evaluation matrix as a source of information and inspiration. For example, if they wish to evaluate whether the project set-up and governance is equitable, they can search in the matrix for possible evaluation criteria. Then, they can choose those criteria which are applicable to and meaningful for their funding programme (and complement/adapt these criteria).

Phase	Criteria	Type	Relevant topics of evaluation, with focus on partnership			Relevant topics of evaluation, with focus on project			Relevant topics of evaluation, with focus on both project and partnership			
			A) Equitable project set-up and governance	B) Mutual learning	C) Building human capacity, networks, and institutions	D) Contextual awareness	E) Needs-based	F) Impact-oriented	G) Research ethics towards participants	H) Conflict sensitivity	I) Inclusivity	J) Knowledge creation and dissemination
Communication and impact of research	17.M	Fair and joint agreement on authorship rules	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓
	18.M	Knowledge creation and dissemination for an academic audience using standards from Global South and North	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	19.R	Integrating budget for outreach, innovation, pilot actions etc.			✓		✓	✓			✓	
	20.R	Knowledge creation and dissemination for a non-academic audience using standards of Global South and North	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	21.R	Replicability and scalability						✓			✓	
Meta-level continuous project management	22.M	Adaptive project management approach	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	23.M	Networking activities for all project staff, sharing networks of all partners	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓
	24.M	Procedures for safety and security of all staff and data	✓			✓				✓	✓	✓
	25.M	Continuous self-reflection on partnership quality	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	26.R	Stakeholder engagement plan, if possible, diversity-sensitive		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	27.R	Trainings for all project staff	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓
	28.R	Context- and equity-sensitive risk management	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	
	29.R	Conflict-sensitive programme/ project management (CSPM)		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	
	30.R	Crisis and incident management procedures	✓			✓				✓	✓	✓

Table 1: Evaluation matrix – Topics and criteria for evaluating partnership quality: The columns show the suggested evaluation topics. The rows present the suggested evaluation criteria. For each criterion, we indicate whether it could be a ‘must-have’ criteria for all projects or whether it can be used as a ‘recommended’ criterion, which can either be used to detect high-quality partnerships or can be used as additional must-have criteria. Some criteria might also be used as eligibility criteria for project submission. Further, the ticks (✓) indicate to which evaluation topic the criterion can contribute. Kindly note that this matrix is probably not exhaustive, meaning that it can be adjusted to suit the context of each funding programme.

Brief description of each criterion

Table 1 provides the overview of all criteria and how they can serve to assess the suggested evaluation topics for high-quality global partnerships. Here, we present a brief description of each criterion.

Partnership and project governance

- 01.M Collaboration with local partners:** The project collaborates with partners from the context, where the project takes place. Usually, this is even part of the eligibility criteria.
- 02.M Equitable distribution of leading positions and decision-making competences:** At project leadership level, all partners are holding leading positions and decision-making competences. The exact distribution might depend on the needs, competences, and aspirations of each partner. Accordingly, also the profits and risks are distributed equitably.
- 03.M Equitable distribution of budget:** All partners have adequate and equitable shares of the budget. The decision-making competences over the funds are equitably distributed and jointly, transparently agreed on.
- 04.M Equitable distribution of overhead funds/core funding:** All partners have equitable access to overhead or core funds, which they can invest in sustainably securing their organisation and staff.
- 05.M Equitable distribution of thematic responsibilities:** For the research and related activities, all willing partners have the possibility to lead a thematic work package, for which they can strengthen their expertise. The exact distribution might depend on the needs, competences, and aspirations of each partner. Further, if meaningful, partners can assist each other in co-leading a thematic work package, which is beneficial for mutual learning and back-stopping purposes.
- 06.M Equitable distribution of prospects for degrees:** If the project foresees the engagement of students (e.g., master, PhD), all partners receive the chance to have an equitable share of students (thus, graduated staff in the future). For example, it should not be the case that only one partner has all / most students and the other partners only provide assistants.
- 07.M Diversity-sensitive recruitment of staff and filling of positions:** Within the project and within each partner organisation, the recruitment of staff and the filling of positions (with existing and new staff) is diversity-sensitive. This includes the diversity of gender, youth, minorities, age, social strata, indigenous groups, people with disability, or vulnerable groups.
- 08.M Equitable ownership and accessibility of data and knowledge:** The project partners develop a joint, equitable agreement on the ownership of and access to data, which is collected/developed through the project. Moreover, the partners ensure that access to knowledge (e.g., academic literature) is as equal as possible among all partners.
- 09.R Reflection on positionality and complementarity:** Each partner reflects on its position, privileges, competences, strengths, weaknesses etc. Together, the partners reflect on how they can meaningfully complement each other so that the partnership can thrive.
- 10.R Mentoring within the project, if possible, incl. transboundary mentoring:** Junior staff and students can benefit from being accompanied by a senior member for mentoring and coaching purposes (beyond supervision). Ideally, there is also transboundary mentoring, meaning that the tandems are intercultural and inter-organisational. However, the boundaries of the mentoring should be clearly defined so that there is no destructive interference in, for example, organisational or cultural norms of partners.

Research project design and implementation

- 11.M Context analysis:** The project conducts a meaningful context analysis. It uses, for example, a context analysis framework,⁵ stakeholder analysis, actor map, or other tool(s). For a pre-proposal, this might be a brief context analysis. However, for project approval, the research project should demonstrate a convincing plan how a profound context analysis (and context monitoring) will be conducted.
- 12.M Joint agenda setting of partners:** All partners of the core team explore and define the research agenda together. This is crucial for high-quality partnerships.

5 <https://kfpe.scnat.ch/de/id/F5bUp?embed=vvqjR>

13.M Joint elaboration of the project design and methodology: The partners jointly define research goals, methodology, workplans, internal and external communication etc.

14.R Conflict analysis: The project analyses the past, present, and/or potential conflicts. It includes different types of violence, not only armed violence, such as structural and cultural forms of violence (e.g., discrimination, racism, sexism). The analysis can be done using a conflict analysis tool such as actor map, intervention analysis, conflict timeline, or other tool(s). In violence-prone contexts, the project also reflects on its potential impact on the conflict and context.

15.R Joint agenda setting with stakeholders: The project consults local and/or other relevant stakeholders before or during developing a new project (or new project phase). This is especially relevant for research, which strives for being needs-based and impact-oriented.

16.R Approval by an ethics commission: For some research projects, it is advisable to request an approval by an ethics commission. For example, before doing data collection in an unfamiliar context, or with traumatised stakeholders, with animals, or in conflict-affected regions, the project (or its staff) applies for ethical clearance. The application is reviewed by thematic experts as well as experts who know the researched context very well, incl. from the Global South. Moreover, the project will ensure compliance with the laws of each country participating in the research project.

Communication and impact of research

17.M Fair and joint agreement on authorship rules: The partners and their staff jointly develop an agreement on who qualifies for authorship (and who not), when it comes to publication of different knowledge products. For example, can only the persons be co-authors, who are part of the writing team? Or does data collection or project coordination also qualify for co-authorship? Based on this agreement, budget and workplans (maybe incl. trainings) might need to be adapted.

18.M Knowledge creation and dissemination for an academic audience using standards from Global South and North: Research projects produce scientific knowledge. These findings should be published and/or pre-

sented in academic journals and platforms. Each partner can co-decide, which contents will be published via which journals and platforms. For example, a scholar from a Global South country might wish to additionally publish in a national journal in her/his own language, besides publishing in a Western journal. Vice versa, a scholar from the Global North might be motivated to serve as co-author in the national journal. Partners should not forget to include budget for such knowledge dissemination, for example, fees for 'open access' publications in academic journals. Funding institutions can support this equality aspect by recognising the value of publishing in non-Western academic journals.

19.R Integrating budget for outreach, innovation, pilot actions etc.: The project plans and allocates budget to communicate findings beyond academic papers, plans and allocates budget for innovative and/or creative actions, pilots etc. If suitable, these actions are locally led, needs-based, and impact-oriented, enabling also reciprocal dialogue rather than unidirectional presentation of findings.

20.R Knowledge creation and dissemination for a non-academic audience using standards from Global South and North, based on end users' needs and capabilities: The project plans (and allocates budget) for non-academic knowledge products (e.g., short video, social media posts, story map, schoolbook, exhibition, policy brief etc.) – whatever is most useful and suitable in the respective countries. These are tailored to the needs, language, and capabilities of the end users from the Global South and North.

21.R Replicability and scalability: It is an advantage if the probability is high that project findings, actions, recommendations etc. can be reproduced or even scaled up in the same project, context or country, for example, from grassroots level to regional or national level. It is further valuable if project findings, actions, recommendations etc. can be scaled out to other projects, places, or contexts. This criterion is indirectly connected to high-quality partnership, as it contributes to credibility and reputation gain, thus, institution and network building if replicability and scalability are given.

Meta-level continuous project management

22.M Adaptive project management approach: The project highlights the importance of adaptive manage-

ment and includes the needed flexibility in the plans and budgets.

- 23.M Networking activities for all project staff, sharing networks of all partners:** The project plans (and allocates budget) for networking activities, such as attending conferences and workshops, shadowing or proactively joining meetings with other stakeholders, or informal gatherings. Ideally, all staff from all levels can benefit from such networking activities. Further, the partners introduce one another to their respective networks, strengthening trans-boundary relationships.
- 24.M Procedures for safety and security of all staff and data:** The project plans (and allocates budget) for safety and security policy, procedures, and measures. The concrete measures are project- and context-specific, but should include physical as well as mental health. They can include, for example, a preparatory training/coaching prior to departure to fieldwork in an unfamiliar context, documenting emergency contacts, doing safety check-ins, having a concept on data safety and security, being informed about road safety, gender-based violence, and armed conflicts, having procedures of communication and support in case of an incident, and much more. The project partners should develop these measures jointly, so that they address the needs and capacities of all partners.
- 25.M Continuous self-reflection on partnership quality:** It is not enough to describe a good plan for equitable collaboration only at project submission stage. The quality of the collaboration and potential improvements in the collaboration should be reflected regularly. Therefore, the project partners have a convincing plan available to regularly reflect on and learn from the joint collaboration experience. This self-reflection assesses if the research project and collaboration are still on track with regard to equity or if there is need for adaptation in how the team collaborates and pursues its approaches to equity.
- 26.R Stakeholder engagement plan, if possible, diversity-sensitive:** The project, which aims to be needs-based and strives for impact, has a stakeholder engagement plan. This plan should be adaptive and inclusive (e.g., of gender, youth, minorities, age, social strata, indigenous groups, people with disability, or vulnerable groups). The stakeholder engagement plan can span from project design stage to communication and implementation stage.
- 27.R Trainings for all project staff:** The project plans (and allocates budget) for continuing education for all staff (e.g., including administration) from all partners, especially also from the Global South. This can be, for example, training for a specific research method, academic writing and publication procedures, finances, leadership, gender equality, or conflict sensitivity. Such training can be directly beneficial for the research project implementation, but also for the career development of all staff.
- 28.R Context- and equity-sensitive risk management:** Research project usually have a risk management strategy or plan. Such a plan should also include risks stemming from the conflict analysis and conflict-sensitive project management approach, covering safety and security of all staff and research participants, as well as risks stemming from unequitable partnership etc.
- 29.R Conflict-sensitive programme/project management (CSPM):** Adopt a ‘do no harm’ approach. This implies doing a conflict analysis and intervention analysis/simulation prior to project submission and at the beginning of the project, iterative context and conflict monitoring, adaptive risk management, if necessary, adapting project activities and project management etc.⁶
- 30.R Crisis and incident management procedures:** If the project takes place in a fragile surrounding or war-affected country/region, the project has crisis management procedures in place or will develop these before the project starts. If the project takes place where violence can happen at any time, the project prepares for professionally dealing with incidents (e.g., kidnapping, robbery and burglary, sexual violence).

⁶ Some funders and NGOs such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Helvetas, and HEKS have adopted a conflict-sensitive programme management approach, which can also be applied for research projects. Several rely on the ‘3-steps-model of conflict sensitive program management’ developed by KOFF, swisspeace, and Helvetas Swiss intercooperation (KOFF, 2012).

3 How to evaluate the quality of research partnerships

Weighted importance

How should funders weigh the partnership quality compared to other dimensions such as scientific excellence?

For global research collaborations, partnership quality is a basic condition (see section 1). Thus, we argue that partnership quality should be a formal part of evaluation and weighed equally important as other dimensions, such as scientific excellence or impact for sustainability.

Timing of evaluation

When should the evaluation happen?

Building on the argument that partnership quality should be as equally important as other dimensions, partnership quality should already be evaluated at submission stage. This allows to identify and reject research projects with low-quality partnerships. If the project submission follows a two-step process, we recommend that the pre-proposal covers the most basic requirements of partnership quality (see below), while the full proposal requests a more detailed elaboration of the envisioned collaboration. Moreover, for multi-year projects, which undergo a mid-term review or review per phase, it is recommended to also integrate the partnership quality as a mandatory dimension of the review. Further, if desired, funders can again review the partnership quality in the final project report to draw lessons learnt for future calls. Moreover, researchers should be encouraged to regularly self-reflect about their collaboration (an internal self-evaluation during project implementation; refers to criterion 25.M, continuous self-reflection on partnership quality).

Basic requirements of partnership quality

How to define an adequate evaluation threshold for pass/reject?

When evaluating the quality of a research partnership, it is recommended using a threshold, implying that certain criteria must be fulfilled to approve (or prolong) a research project. Although some criteria may be flexible and can depend on the discipline, geographical context, duration and volume of the programme etc., others should hold true for all kinds of research projects. The latter category would include, for example, a demonstration of active and equitable engagement with local partners (criterion 01.M), joint agenda setting with all partners for

the project proposal (criterion 12.M), equitable distribution of decision-making competences (criterion 02.M), or agreeing on fair authorship rules (criterion 17.M). In Table 1, we provided a suggestion and overview of such ‘must-have’ criteria to define the threshold, which decides over ‘pass’ or ‘reject’. If the evaluation shows that the minimum ‘must-have’ criteria are not met, a project should be rejected (or stopped). However, we strongly recommend that each funding programme needs to define these ‘must-have’ criteria and the threshold themselves – and transparently communicate about it (e.g., in the call for proposals). These ‘must-have’ criteria can also serve as eligibility criteria for project submission.

Example 4 of promising collaboration – Case studies

Keywords: Mutual learning, joint agenda setting, human capacity development and institution building

The partners in a Swiss-Nepalese research project jointly decide to conduct case studies in both countries (as opposed to only in Nepal, as is often the case in North-South research projects). Researchers from both partners take part in the fieldwork. When the Nepalese team participates in the fieldwork in Switzerland, the Swiss researchers help with logistics, translation, explaining the local context, etc. Vice versa, the Nepalese researchers assist the Swiss team when they jointly conduct the fieldwork in Nepal. This equal collaboration leads to several positive outcomes, all related to mutual learning. First, both partners’ understanding of the other’s context increases considerably. This improves the quality of the research findings and even helps the partners to better understand each other’s behaviour. Secondly, both partners can equally increase their knowledge and expertise and expand their networks (compared to only the Swiss partner, who would normally visit Nepal, but not vice versa). This in turn is beneficial for career development and institution building. Thirdly, the research results might be even more insightful with a comparative study.



Joint efforts and fun are a good basis for fruitful collaboration. Source: Win Myint

Scoring to identify the high-quality partnerships

How to differentiate between low and high scores in partnership quality?

In addition to the threshold, the additional ‘recommended’ criteria can serve for rating and scoring. Funder and reviewers can, for example, rate how well the ‘recommended’ criteria are met, and/or how many of them are met. Based on this rating procedure, the projects receive scores. High scores will stand for high-quality partnerships. Accordingly, research projects with a higher score in partnership quality could be favoured over research projects with lower scores.

Evaluation setting

Is it better to evaluate a written proposal or an interview situation?

A written document such as a project proposal (or a mid-term review for multiple-year projects) is a necessary basis for describing key elements of the envisioned partnership. On the one hand, elaborating this written document can serve as a joint process among the partners to designing their partnership and formally consolidating it. On the other hand, reviewers can efficiently evaluate well-structured written documents. Accordingly, donors and reviewers should continue to evaluate the research

partnership via a written document such as a project proposal. However, we would also like to highlight the importance of oral evaluations of partnerships, especially for bigger projects. Interview situations can provide the examiners the possibility to observe, for example, prevailing communication patterns, levels of mutual respect, or actual decision-making power. Moreover, such situations also allow the examiners to ask specific questions, for example, related to the distribution of roles and responsibilities, budget transparency and decision-making power, strategy of human capacity development, and sharing of networks.

Form of elaboration

Should the applicants describe the partnership quality in a specific section (written document)/specific agenda point (interview), or should the applicants incorporate partnership quality as a transversal theme?

There are advantages and disadvantages for both options. Having a specific section addressing the questions of partnership quality can bring an added value due to the following reasons: Firstly, it forces the applicants to explicitly address these questions before the project starts. They need to jointly discuss and design how they want to set up their partnership. This can serve as an opportunity to negotiate, for example, decision-making competences, lead-

ership of work packages, mutual learning opportunities, frequency of communication, or reserving funds for attending trainings or conferences. Secondly, having such a written section can further serve the partners like a memorandum of understanding for their partnership. Thirdly, reviewers will be able to efficiently spot the requested information in the proposal when evaluating the project application. On the other hand, addressing partnership quality as a transversal theme throughout the project proposal has advantages, too. Here, the main advantage is that the partnership quality is not addressed as an additional component but transversally encasing all activities of a (proposed) project. Thus, mainly those partners will succeed in transversally promoting a high partnership quality, who fully understand the principle of equality in partnerships. Reviewers will be able to identify these by reading the proposals. Yet, some of our respondents suggest using a mixed approach, through which reviewers evaluate a specific section/agenda point on partnership quality while also screening the entire proposal/interview for spotting how well the project builds on the mentality of equality and fairness.

Evaluation tool

With which tool should funders and reviewers evaluate the partnerships?

Our study showed that each funder has its own evaluation tool, which serves the specific needs of the funding programme. There is no reason for developing a one-tool-fits-all solution, as the Swiss funders and funding programmes are quite diverse, often even complementary. Accordingly, we recommend that funders continue to use their tailored tools, while complementing and revising their tool from time to time. Our evaluation matrix (Table 1) and regular exchanges with other funders and the KFPE can be useful for this matter.

The reviewers

What kind of expertise and background should the external reviewers have?

The type of needed expertise of the reviewers depends on various elements, such as the funding programme, the discipline, or geographical context. However, speaking in general terms for research projects with global partnerships, we recommend that reviewers cover at least the following fields of expertise: a) Thematic and/or methodological expertise, b) context expertise, c) expertise on intercultural collaboration and equity. Further expertise might be needed depending on the project call/funding programme and geographical context, such as conflict sensitivity, inclusivity and gender, transdisciplinarity etc. In terms of background, we recommend that the reviewers are from across the globe, including Global South, as they bring in different perspectives and experiences. If the research is conducted in a specific world region or country (e.g., in Vietnam), at least one reviewer should be originating from and be very familiar with this specific context (one Vietnamese or as a minimum South-east Asian reviewer).

4 Further recommendations for the Swiss research funding landscape

From the many discussions with programme and project coordinators, sounding board, and special advisors from the Global South, we would like to share some widespread stumbling blocks in the current research funding landscape and connect them to recommendations.

Firstly, the current definition of eligibility criteria for being a principal investigator (PI) of research projects pose a considerable challenge to high quality partnerships. According to these eligibility criteria, only few leaders from the Global North and even fewer leaders from the Global South qualify as PIs. Consequently, on the one hand, these PIs are often overloaded with tasks, which they cannot deliver on time or with satisfying quality. On the other hand, these few leaders centralise power, making it difficult for promising scholars to raise and share the responsibility. Thus, for securing long-term human capacity development and institution building in all hemispheres, it would be important to adapt the eligibility criteria of PIs in research projects.

Secondly, it is a challenge for research organisations to mobilise sufficient overhead or core funding. Such funding is relevant to build strong research organisations with, for example, continuous training for the staff, acquisition activities for follow-up projects, publication of additional findings, or simply legal purchase of software. Research organisations from all hemispheres are negatively affected if project funding does not contribute to overhead funding. In the Global South, however, the situation is especially challenging, as there is even less access to overhead and core funding, leading to unequal opportunities between Global North and South for securing the future of organisations and staff.

Thirdly, risk aversion is important for reducing the risks of physical and psychological harm, misuse of funds, or prevent reputational damage. However, an exaggerated risk avoidance can also render impossible relevant research in the Global South. For example, too rigid regulations for financial transfers such as strictly prohibiting transfers to private bank accounts might exclude smaller or repressed or repressed organisations in the Global South (such as local NGOs, start-ups, or independent research organisations). Or, very protective regulations preventing exposure to any kinds of physical risks, even if the probability of occurrence is low, might exclude entire countries from collaborations (for example Myanmar or other countries with ongoing armed conflicts). Thus,

while it is crucial to ensure adequate risk management and conflict-sensitive programme management, an exaggerated risk avoidance can be hindering for high-quality global research partnerships. We therefore recommend a well-balanced and context-specific risk assessment that also takes into account risks and impacts associated with refraining from specific collaborations.

Moreover, we recommend that funders continue to exchange regularly on how to evaluate the quality of global research partnerships to learn from each other and exchange good-practice approaches.

To complete, we further recommend that the revision of the KFPE's Guide for Transboundary Research Partnerships will also be connected to the evaluation of the partnership quality. Ideally, the future guide will serve as an important source of evaluation topics and criteria for funders.

SCNAT – network of knowledge for the benefit of society

The **Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT)** works at regional, national and international level for the future of science and society. It strengthens the awareness for the sciences as a central pillar of cultural and economic development. The breadth of its support makes it a representative partner for politics. The SCNAT links the sciences, provides expertise, promotes the dialogue between science and society, identifies and evaluates scientific developments and lays the foundation for the next generation of natural scientists. It is part of the association of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences.

The **Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE)** is the information hub for global research partnerships in Switzerland. It promotes efficient, effective, and equitable research cooperation with low- and middle-income countries. By doing so, the KFPE contributes to sustainable development and to solving local and global problems. From June 2025, the KFPE is called Swiss Alliance for Global Research Partnerships (GRP-Alliance).

