

## **Co-creating research projects - some personal experiences from Saami Council and Arctic researchers**

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Inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in co-creating research projects is often perceived as challenging both from the perspective of the researchers and the Indigenous Peoples and communities. Indigenous partners often note that the inclusion process tends to be an administrative check mark rather than establishing a long-term good working relationship between the research team and the Indigenous partner. However, the trend is slowly shifting towards an increasing awareness of the benefits of and willingness to adapt to processes and principles to include Indigenous peoples to correct existing power imbalances.

With the release of this short public note we hope to continue the only recently emerging discussion in this field based on personal experiences in Arctic research with setting up co-designed projects and project proposals. The objective is to bring these co-designed research projects to a higher and more equity-based level. Our aim is to collect throughout the next year comments, experiences and critical positions from both Indigenous and scientific partners. These inputs will feed into a profound position paper including recommendations to be published in one of the relevant Polar journals to trigger a debate that challenges existing shortcomings and highlights the full potential of fully-fledged stakeholder partnerships in Polar research.

Globally there are many different sets of guidelines and recommendations on how to include Indigenous Peoples, their communities and representing organisations in research projects. Common to all of them is the objective to increase the possibility for participants to show respect towards Indigenous Peoples regardless of topic in order to avoid harmful impacts on the communities. Furthermore, these aim to better understand the processes of including Indigenous Knowledge systems alongside science in knowledge production processes in order to achieve equity based and innovative epistemologies in research endeavours. For the purpose of this note and further discussions, we refer to the principles outlined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), including its principles of full and effective participation, full disclosure, free prior and informed consent, respect for and acknowledgement of Indigenous ontologies and life-worlds and colonial societal ruptures.

### **Co-designed research planning - the art of listening**

In 2019-20 the authors worked together in writing a Horizon 2020 proposal, a proposal yet to be funded despite excellent remarks on the co-created set-up of the proposal. Below we provide some reflections on our experiences to co-create a project proposal. In preparation of writing this project proposal the project leads reached out to Saami Council approximately nine months before the first stage deadline. From the Saami Council perspective this invitation

stood out for one reason alone: the research team took the time to listen and allowed for an internal process to tailor the project based on Sámi research needs and concerns. The Saami Council decided six months later, after meetings in person and online as well as after internal discussions within the Saami Council, to commit fully to the two-stage project design application process. These initial six months were needed to discuss joint and individual expectations, to get to know each other and build a relationship based on mutual trust – and importantly to explore different and similar ways of thinking about the content, to identify the societal red-flags within the call's given frame, and to take action in terms of research activities and development of communications and outreach materials.

For many of the scientific partners in the consortium, doing transdisciplinary research was new, notably the aspect of conducting research with a non-academic institution. Whilst transdisciplinary is just slowly emerging in natural sciences, it is also rare, albeit not new, in social sciences and the humanities. The strength of this conversation among non-academic and academic partners is that the societal dimensions (and in this case including the Indigenous dimensions) in the formulation of the research problem remain the centre of concern, even if the analysis requires extending out from the local level to more abstract macro-politico-economic global structures and processes. For those of us who were not experienced in translational research it was a steep learning curve and besides the above-mentioned early meetings, it required detailed conversations with the different work package participants to mobilise the role of the Saami Council in mainstreaming Indigenous perspectives in the research co-design.

Our project proposal was on co-creation of knowledge in industrial development processes in the Arctic. This required that Indigenous Knowledge be perceived as strong and as important a contribution to the knowledge produced as that from the scientific disciplines, and that this was acknowledged by all consortium members. The approach involves intense learning about what Indigenous Knowledge is, how it is transmitted from one person and one generation to the next, and how the dynamic nature of Indigenous Knowledge can be fruitful for identifying aspects of sustainable industrial operations, beyond what traditional scientific methods might uncover. Indigenous Knowledge can also be used to shape ideas around a new framework for the “Arctic” that is subject to pressure from industries while also addressing the Indigenous reservations and caution in the context of neo-colonialism. This latter aspect is fundamental for many of the natural and social science researchers coming from a variety of disciplines for whom the colonial perspective was not reflected upon earlier.

This intense communication process led to a new understanding on both sides, the Saami Council as well as the academic consortium partners were able to touch new grounds and thus, to develop a fully innovative proposal design. By using UNDRIP actively in the co-design process we can manage to free ourselves – Indigenous and scientific partners – from an approach based on a Western scientist framework only. We believe that this intense process, which required flexibility and patience on both ends, was strongly needed to create a project concept that is truly based on co-design in all aspects. Looking back there were several aspects that were crucial to build this trust-based relationship and to develop a project that is transdisciplinary in all its aspects:

*Open communication*

In the preparation phase, it is important to take ample time to communicate expectations, develop a common language and discuss possible barriers and ownership of data and results. All trans- and interdisciplinary partners worked on adapting the scientific languages to be understandable for each other in order to work on an equal basis.

#### *Seed money*

For a co-design approach it is fundamental to have sufficient seed money to work on a proposal. The project leaders had funding from the University of Groningen, which made it possible to meet in person, and the Saami Council received support from the Norwegian Research Council to help the Council with the technical proposal preparations.

#### *Call text*

The call text explicitly mentioned co-design and involvement of Indigenous right-holders as a prerequisite for the application. In general, this type of political pressure can serve consortia to force themselves to leave the beaten tracks of conventional research. In our experience this method demonstrates how political pressure can be the driver for a conversation between science and Indigenous peoples that can result in more robust Arctic communities, and at the same time create synergies that otherwise would not be established. When funders are clear about the expectation of involvement of Indigenous Peoples, it is one of the most effective measures to even out the power imbalance between Indigenous Peoples and researchers. The result can be more targeted and inclusive research questions can be raised what leads to more robust innovation and outcome.

#### *Out of the box thinking and the role of reviewers*

This is a crucial and important but also risky aspect. Evaluators might not always appreciate a research design and project set-up that is touching unpredictable grounds. This is also a discussion that funders must be involved in and aware of. A transdisciplinary and decolonialised research approach has to be lobbied constantly among funding agencies and evaluators in order to reform Arctic sciences.

#### *Researchers coming from the Community Based Participatory Research Approach (CBPR)*

It needs enough experience in the project team or among project leaders for CBPR and the whole consortium needs to develop this spirit and commitment. This might sometimes entail “pushing” partners who are not familiar with such concepts to explore this new path for designing their research. CBPR does not only comprise the timely engagement with Indigenous partners, but also the awareness of questions regarding data ownership, accessibility and possession of results etc. This is for mainstream science often completely new and sometimes “inconvenient”.

#### *Capacity building for researchers and the Saami Council*

The above-mentioned aspects demonstrate that capacity building in transdisciplinary and decolonized research is required among researchers at all career stages, but in particular among more senior researchers who are socialised in a top-down approach. Awareness creation among early career scholars is the key to changing Arctic science today and in future.

The Saami Council has also had clear benefits from the process of co-creating and co-designing a research project. The process challenged our distrust of researchers and outside researchers as we previously have experienced that research has not been grounded in

respectful relationships and has failed to incorporate culturally appropriate ethical standards. As a non-academic institution, participating in one of the largest EU programmes has built capacity in the organisation, such as acquiring in-house technical expertise and self-esteem to continue applying for, and partnering in research projects. Further, the co-creation process also allowed the community to think more actively about pressing questions where more knowledge is needed.

In conclusion, the key to successful results when co-creating research projects is allocating enough time in the first phase of the process. Time will allow both the Indigenous partner and researchers to establish a platform of mutual trust and understanding of each other's positions. Strong partnerships with strong academic results can then be built upon the philosophy of transparency, full disclosure, and societal change through knowledge creation.