



Enabling synthesis – Lessons from the first three years of CARIAA

The Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia ([CARIAA](#)) aims to build the resilience of vulnerable populations in climate change hotspots by building new knowledge and capacities to support better informed policy and practice. The program connects more than 450 researchers and practitioners from over 40 organizations.

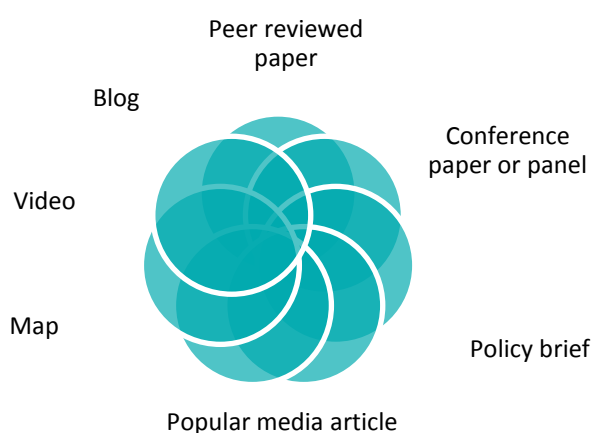
Why do we care about synthesis in CARIAA?

Generating syntheses that highlight new frontiers at the climate-policy nexus are cornerstone to CARIAA's focus on climate change hotspots. Synthesis can be a means through which the complex challenges at play in these climate change hotspots can be approached in transdisciplinary and collaborative ways. New audiences can be reached with synthesis products, including contributing to international decision making (e.g. the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties) and agendas (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals). Syntheses can also be a means of validation, triangulation and amplification of research results. Through these activities and products, syntheses help strengthen the impact of the research, specifically by supporting better-informed policy and practice.

What is synthesis?

Synthesis refers to processes whereby existing knowledge from a variety of sources is summarized and critically appraised. Synthesis opportunities might emerge around a common theme of interest across research networks (e.g. vulnerability to climate change impacts) or in response to a demand for information (e.g. supporting a government to generate integrated climate policies). In a research program like CARIAA, the outcomes of this process can take a variety of forms (Figure 1).

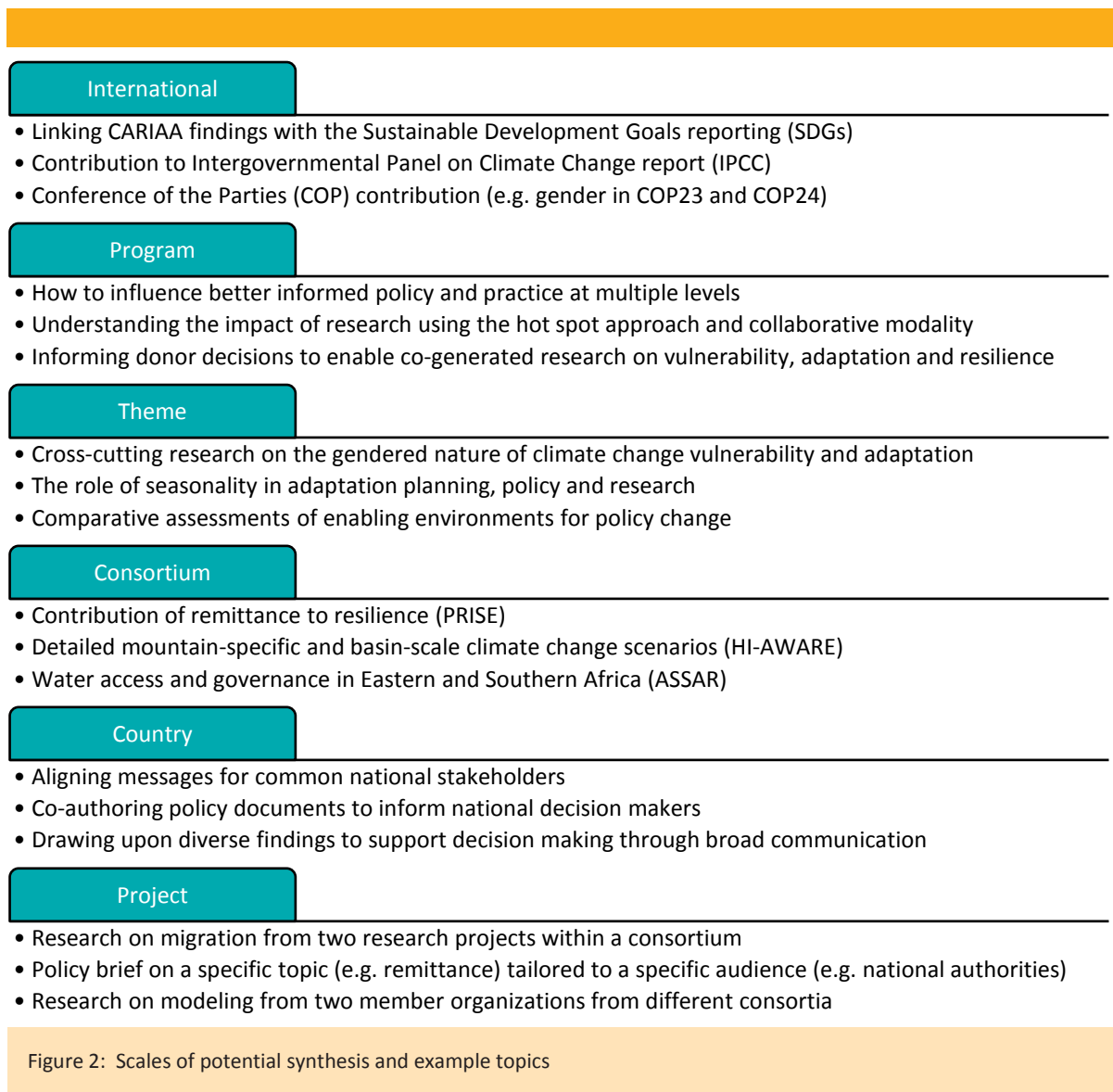
CARIAA is not directive in terms of the specific topics or forms of synthesis it would like to see. This approach allows new ideas to emerge from the dynamic interactions between members of the network.



We're learning that there are a variety of scales at which synthesis needs to take place

As the program has developed, the vision of potential areas and topics for synthesis has expanded (Figure 2). We have learned that knowing what to synthesize, with who, when, for who, and to serve what purpose(s) is not a straight forward decision making process. There are far more opportunities than time and resources allow for, and researchers have limitations on how many new, unplanned activities can be added, even when resourced.

Figure 1: Examples of synthesis



We're learning about how to enable teams to work collaboratively on synthesis

CARIIA has invested a significant amount of resources and time into creating collaborative spaces. Our Knowledge Management Platform, which is an intranet, supports email groups, working groups, sharing of documents, simultaneous co-editing, posting news items, sharing new publications, hosting video conferences, a shared calendar, and a range of other options. CARIIA also has an Annual Learning Review that brings people together from across all four consortia each year to discuss areas for collaboration and of mutual interest. These processes and tools supporting collaboration are widely used by CARIIA members (at rates much higher than other networks and consortia of similar size and type).

We have learned however that while these are important tools for collaboration, they are often just the first step toward collaborative synthesis activities. Ensuring that participants have a shared vision and mutual understanding of the objectives via clear and consistent communication is a fundamental component to enabling collaborative synthesis to proceed. The ASSAR consortium has developed a guideline for collaborative writing, which can be used as a basis for establishing a shared understanding of expectations and processes.



CARIAA's top seven tips for enabling collaborative synthesis

1. Reflect on where, when and why synthesis is needed, and how it contributes to the broader research and programmatic goals.
2. Consider the intended audience, the language used and most appropriate format. Effective influencing requires that target audiences are well understood, outputs align with their required level of detail and format, and communicated to them via the most appropriate medium.
3. Ensure the required resources for collaboration are in place, that participants share a common vision and that the objectives are supported by everyone involved.
4. Have transparent means of communication that are inclusive of all participants.
5. Build collective ownership by encouraging broad participation at all stages.
6. Aim for a series of 'small wins' to encourage on-going participation, as opposed to one 'big win' that might take a long time to reach.
7. Integrate the specific synthesis idea within the broader Research into Use plans. Draw upon the experience and support of Research into Use Coordinators and Communications team members.

CARIAA is funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). The program aims to build the resilience of vulnerable populations and their livelihoods in three climate change hot spots in Africa and Asia.

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