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**Subject**
Impact Alliance Live at KWR,
Conference report

**Date**
9 july 2024

Conference report

# Impact Alliance Live at KWR

On Thursday 27 July 2024, the Dutch Impact Alliance network gathered for an in-person meeting at KWR. The Impact Alliance is a network of experts from various sectors dedicated to enhancing the societal impact of scientific research. Over 65 participants from universities, organizations, government agencies, and business travelled to the KWR office in Nieuwegein to discuss the theme of the day, “Strategies for Coordinating Stakeholder Contributions to Research.”

The meeting was opened by Stefania Munaretto (KWR) who welcomed participants and asked them to position themselves in the room on a spectrum from “full researcher” to “full professional”. As everyone got up from their seats and walked to the place they felt resonated most with their own role, it became clear that most participants were in the middle of the room. This shows the commitment of this network to bridging the gap between science and practice, and set the tone for the rest of the meeting.

Marielle van der Zouwen (KWR) then took the stage, welcoming the participants as CEO of KWR. She emphasized that KWR’s motto is “Bridging Science to Practice”. Elaborating on the collaborative research programme of the drinking water sector, she stressed the importance of stakeholder perspectives and initiatives such as the Impact Alliance.

Then, remaining with the topic of research in the water sector, was a panel discussion with three experts: Karin Lekkerkerker-Teunissen, research manager at Dunea (water utility), Rob Ververs, senior policy advisor at Waternet (utility), and Michelle Talsma, programme manager water systems at STOWA (knowledge centre for the water boards), and moderated by Arvid van Dam (KWR). After a brief introduction of their work and the importance of research in this, the experts reflected on their role as knowledge users and commissioners of research projects. They shared good (and bad!) experiences of working with researchers. For example, the experts noted their preference for long-term (as opposed to ad-hoc) collaborations with researchers. The discussion showed the enthusiasm of the experts for science-practice collaborations, and gave a perspective on stakeholder engagement in research that stressed the need for close communication and collaboration. After a round of questions from the audience, the panel discussion was closed with the presentation of the Journey of Progress game in the form of a gift to the panelists.

After a short break, the afternoon continued with two rounds of parallel sessions of workshops and discussions. The individual parallel sessions are summarized below.

In a final plenary session at the end of the day, all participants were asked to reflect on two questions using Mentimeter. The first question was: “What did you learn today?” and the second question was: “What will you do differently when working with stakeholders in Research?”

About half of the answers that appeared on the screen reflected that participants had gained new insights into stakeholder engagement, and that they had ideas on how to improve their own work with stakeholders. Some vowed, for example to “increase the frequency of communication”, “keep stakeholders updated even if there is little progress”, and to “pay more attention to stakeholders at the start of the process.”
A significant part of the answers also referred to the role of integration experts in bridging science to practice, and that the challenges that integrators face are common. Some participants wrote that they learned that “I can call myself an integration expert!” and that “our role needs to be recognized”, while others reflected on the fact that “we struggle with similar problems and we can learn from each other.”

All in all, the Impact Alliance meeting at KWR reiterated the crucial insight that interaction is key to successful involvement of stakeholders in research. Researchers, policymakers, strategists, and professionals are eager to get closer together. Yet, they don't always know how to find each other, are afraid to bother each other, or don't know how to approach one another. The structures in which they work often don't help either. Time pressure, work pressure, and other work stimuli can cause us to continue to focus on our own work and stay indoors, despite the desire to interact. And the work of integration experts that is required to enable interaction is often still underrepresented in project budgets. Still, the vibrant discussions at this meeting, and the enthusiasm of stakeholders and researchers alike that constitute the Impact Alliance community, shows that the crucial step in stakeholder engagement (interaction!) can be, and is being made.

## Summaries of the parallel sessions

**Maintaining institutional knowledge and best practices for effective knowledge exchange**
Geertje Pronk, KWR

This session explored practical methods for knowledge exchange in research organizations, using KWR’s program as an example. We discussed engaging stakeholders, efficient knowledge transfer, and overcoming constraints. The workshop included a case study and an open discussion on best practices for improving knowledge transfer and maintaining institutional knowledge.
Take-home messages:

- Exploratory research is a valuable methodology for organizations and research institutes.
- Knowledge transfer requires interaction and social learning
- Expanding understanding of “stakeholders” can improve transfer: include colleagues and board members as stakeholders.
- One approach to prioritizing signals is to start from stakeholder perspectives of the future (narrative futures), to identify the pathways to those futures and the related knowledge needs.

**Defining a transdisciplinary research agenda with non-academics – Which tools and approaches are needed to prioritise ideas?**
Joep van den Broeke and Lisa Andrews, KWR

In the Water in the Circular Economy (WiCE) program, drinking water companies and KWR collaborate with partners to find sustainable solutions for water, resources, and energy. The session aimed to reflect on methods to brainstorm ideas across the drinking water companies, KWR and other parties, as well as how to get these people and more to attend and co-create research questions.  ensure research questions reflect organizational needs, not personal interests. After a WiCE introduction, participants reflected individually, in groups, and in plenary. The goal was to gather ideas create guidance and best practices for balanced transdisciplinary research agenda setting.
Take-home messages:

- Meet stakeholders where they are, they don't always need to be all in one room or location – find ways of communicating with them and collecting their ideas in other ways (phone calls, surveys, online meetings, etc.) , they don't all need to be in the same room at once
- Be more explicit about the ideation questions, topics or themes, as this helps people to shape ideas on more specific topics
- Organize meetings differently, rethink how to host the meetings - "liberating structures" , ask current stakeholders to bring new stakeholders
- Talk about the problem first rather than solutions
- Get people to come prepared to the meetings to brainstorm based on the meeting goals

**Connecting science and practice in circular water management and water reuse**
Kirsty Holstead, WUR; Flavia Cosoveanu, HZ University of Applied Sciences; Sophie Melchers, Utrecht University; Gerald Jan Ellen, Deltares
(2 sessions)

This workshop explored the relationship between scientists and stakeholders in circular water management. Using the Aquaconnect research project as an example, we discussed the Dutch polder model's effectiveness in addressing climate change, potential collaborative models, and balancing scientific and practical needs. Participants from diverse backgrounds shared experiences and ideas to bridge communication gaps and improve collaboration.
Take-home messages:

- Stakeholders that we miss in water-related include citizens (including farmers) and EU legislators.
- The Polder model needs adaptation in order to facilitate transition: clear roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved.
- Bridging the gap in the science-practice interface requires communication and translation of scientific knowledge. Scientist, policy makers, and users, need to be involved early on in the process, understand each other and find the "words" together. Trust, inclusion and clear communication might help to bridge this gap.
- Researchers and end-users have different responsibilities. The responsibility of researchers is to keep end-users in the loop of knowledge creation, share updates and keep connection.
- Interactive and multiple workshops improve knowledge collection and sharing and keep stakeholders engaged. Researchers can act as agents of change behind the scenes, using their own network and skills.

**Human needs driven research**
Ineke Malsch, Malsch TechnoValuation

This session evaluated how to design research for beneficial societal impacts with disadvantaged communities, using Duurzaam Utrecht 2030 as an example. After introducing "Human Needs Driven Research," participants

shared experiences and brainstormed strategies to balance predefined impacts with emerging needs. The goal was to list strategies for engaging disadvantaged stakeholders and share good and bad practices.
Take-home messages:

- There is a need to shift from “research-driven interactions with humans” to “human-driven interactions with research”
- Make sure that you see the people behind the organization
- Get to know the network in which people are embedded.

**Integrating uncertainty in participatory modelling: A framework for local sustainability initiatives**
Henry Amorocho-Daza, IHE Delft
(2 sessions)

This workshop addressed the integration of uncertainty in participatory modelling for complex sustainability challenges. We discussed structuring "uncertainty" discussions across different modelling stages, identifying prominent types of uncertainty, and useful strategies for addressing them. Using the Nominal Group Technique, participants collectively explored a framework illustrating the implications of uncertainty throughout the participatory modelling cycle.
Take-home messages:

- Set clear expectations of what to expect from models and how to interpret their results (including uncertainty and the resulting bandwidth of results).
- Making sure there is trust between researchers and other stakeholders
- Include fact-finding from the start. Set a common ground before conceptualizing.
- There are different types of uncertainty. The circle model can help move forward in the process.

**Strategic Co-Makership: Developing flourishing collaborations with stakeholders outside the research circle**
Anne M. Hummelen and Arvid van Dam, KWR
In practice-oriented research, researchers and professionals collaborate closely. Reaching actors outside our inner circle, which KWR calls strategic co-makership, is crucial. This session focused on finding success stories, sharing experiences, and showcasing flourishing collaborations beyond the research circle. Participants were inspired to think about how to increase the visibility of practice-oriented research and develop tools for new and surprising collaborations.
Take-home messages:

- What does your stakeholder need? Go ask! Consider the content of the knowledge (measures, policy, etc.) and the form of the knowledge (serious game, water facts, the drinking water bill).
- Why is this such a dilemma for researchers? The culture and way of working in the research world do not match what stakeholders need. So: more attention to communication, branding, knowledge transfer of research (do something different!); more appreciation for other skills (e.g. networking) than traditional research skills is needed.
- Integrate knowledge (and knowledge checks) into processes as standard.

**Integration experts and expertise to facilitate inter- and transdisciplinary research collaboration**
Oscar van Vliet, Utrecht University and Stefania Munaretto, KWR
9 participants

This session explored the role of integration experts in collaborative research, emphasizing their leadership in synthesizing diverse knowledge and facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration. Participants shared experiences and discussed the importance of including integration experts in project proposals for cohesive execution and effective dissemination of research outcomes, as well as concrete actions to empower integrators. Participants expressed interest in working together on this.
Take-home messages:

- More complexity and wickedness, means there is more need for integration. Integrators are also necessary to recognize values that might be neglected.
- Impact and integration research does not get sufficient funding and recognition.
- A question remains whether integration should be its own field. Integration requires knowledge of the processes of the different research and professional fields.
- There are some overlaps between project management, project coordinator and integrator, but their responsibilities are different. Often project managers and coordinators are also integrator but not recognised as such. There is added value in having integrators next to project managers and coordinators.

**Stakeholder identification**
Stefan de Jong, EUR

Identifying stakeholders is crucial for coordinating their contributions in research. How can we find the right stakeholders for our project's mission? Can we distinguish different types of stakeholders, and how can they complement each other? In this parallel session, participants shared their perspectives and experiences on stakeholder identification in research.
Take-home messages:

- Prevent blind spots by getting out of your office. Make use of alumni networks, snowball effect, and take a stap back to reflect every now and then.
- Break through fixed patterns by involving other disciplines, and professional fields.
- Get in touch by asking questions, different stakeholders have different needs. Put yourself in a different persona's shoes.
- Get researchers to think about impact by approaching PhD students and promoting good examples.
- Stakeholders with conflicting interests can be identified and understood using the stakeholder Salience model (Mitchell et al., 1997) that talks about urgency, power, legitimacy as attributes of stakeholders.