

Management Response of FA5 Network Evaluation

This evaluation was commissioned by ITM to FocusUP to assess the five networks in the FA5 DGD programme (2022 – 2026): EcoHub (climate change, urbanization and health), AMR network, the Malaria Molecular Surveillance network (MMS) and the Urban Maternal health network (Urban Birth Collective). The evaluation focused on the learning dimension of the networks: how the networks were structured and coordinated, which mechanisms contributed to their success or vulnerability, which engagement formats generated the most collaboration, and which practices and conditions appear transferable to future and existing networks.

The evaluation combined desk research with semi-structured interviews. Given the limited and in some cases, recent nature of some of the networks, findings were analysed and aggregated on the level of the five networks. The evaluation was designed to be forward-looking, feeding directly into the design of the network dimension of FA6.

1.1 Conclusions

Overall, the evaluation finds that the FA5 academic networks generated clear added value for research collaboration, capacity strengthening and South-South exchange, despite operating within a light and largely informal framework. The strongest networks were not built from scratch but grew organically out of long-standing bilateral partnerships and alumni ties, which created the trust needed for collaboration to scale quickly.

Clarity of purpose emerged as a decisive success factor: networks with concrete, output-oriented goals (joint publications, protocols, shared databases) produced tangible results relatively quickly, while broader or more exploratory networks generated softer but still valuable outcomes such as awareness-raising and future opportunity-mapping. Network success also depended heavily on a small number of committed coordinators, which is both a strength and a structural vulnerability, since continuity is not currently embedded institutionally.

The evaluation points to the benefits of "light" formalisation (focal points, brief terms of reference, co-ordination models) and of a gradual shift from centralised, ITM-led coordination towards South-South co-leadership, particularly through empowered early-career researchers. Combining face-to-face symposia, South-South exchange visits and low-barrier digital tools such as WhatsApp, proved most effective for sustaining collaboration. Structural resourcing constraints such as no earmarked budgets, no dedicated coordination time and/or weak, largely informal cross-network learning were identified as the most significant areas for improvement heading into FA6.

RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING SUPPORTING FA6 IN STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING, GOVERNANCE, AND COLLABORATION STRUCTURES

Recommendation 1: We recommend that ITM strengthens the structural, financial and governance foundations of the networks going into FA6.

- 1.1. For FA6, ITM should consider a network approach as an organising principle for the programme, in addition to or in combination with country programmes, treating networks as an integral component of the programme rather than an add-on.
- 1.2 The budget for network operations should be increased, with dedicated, earmarked network budgets rather than pooled country-project funds.

Accepted

ITM's FA6 programme ("The Health We Share", 2027–2031) is explicitly structured around five thematic outcomes, each built on pathfinder diseases or health challenges implemented through multi-country groups rather than isolated country programmes. This on its own means that cross-country learning is designed into the architecture itself and that a network logic therefore already underpins FA6's programme design. Funding is now aggregated per thematic outcome rather than allocated per country, meaning budgets for cross-country collaboration are no longer fragmented. Coordination and joint activities across the countries within an outcome can be planned and resourced from a thematic budget line from the outset therefore increasing the budget for the networked approach.

- 1.3 ITM should appoint dedicated network coordinators or focal persons, ideally with at least two co-leads per network (one from ITM, one from a partner institution), supported by a light management manual clarifying roles, decision-making and succession.

Accepted

FA6 is explicitly built on dedicated thematic and cluster level coordinators. ITM will translate this into concrete coordination arrangements: designated thematic (outcome) coordinators will

						work in complementarity with joint ITM/partner-institution co-leads for each pathfinder cluster.
Action Plan						
#	Actions planned	Deadline	Responsible Office/Unit/Department	Responsible Person/Rol e	Imple ment ation stage	Actions (to be) taken
1	Define how the network approach will be positioned within the FA6 programme architecture	2026	International Cooperation Office	Wouter Boesman Helena Liekens	Finali sed	Discuss with partner institutions during FA6 design consultations (JPM 2025, FA6 drafting workshops, ..)
2	Create earmarked network budget lines in the FA6 financial framework	2026	International Cooperation Office / Finance	Wouter Boesman Helena Liekens	Unde rway	Dedicated budget for network 'cluster' and outcome level activities Dedicated budget for cluster and thematic exchange
3	Appoint dedicated network coordinators/co-coordinators	Start of FA6	International Cooperation Office	Wouter Boesman Helena Liekens	Comp leted	- Identify ITM and Southern co-coordinators per thematic network 'cluster' - Allocate explicit staff time for thematic coordination
Recommendation 2: We recommend that ITM consolidates the engagement formats and communication practices that proved most effective under FA5.						
2.1 Prioritize face-to-face symposiums, for example by attaching 1–2 day network symposia to existing ITM colloquiums, as the most valued format for building trust and harmonising technical approaches.				Recommendation accepted FA6 provides several structural mechanisms that directly support the engagement formats and communication practices the evaluation found most effective. On		

2.2 Focus on joint trainings and capacity-development activities, ideally using participants' own country data, and support South-South exchange visits between partner institutions. 2.3 Empower early-career researchers and PhD students as the operational engine of the networks, through peer-to-peer exchange, problem-solving and co-authorship.				face-to-face engagement, FA6 introduces the Open and Global Campus (OC5) as a shared learning ecosystem explicitly designed for peer exchange and leadership development. ITM will build on this, together with the thematic side events already planned around the Joint Partnership Meetings (JPM) (starting in Addis Ababa, November 2026). By systematically attaching thematic-outcome exchange meetings to these institute-wide gatherings combined with systematic exchange meetings per thematic, thereby preserving the trust-building value of face-to-face contact without adding a disproportionate organisational burden. On joint trainings and South-South exchange, this recommendation is closely aligned with FA6's own design logic as mentioned hereabove, which is explicitly built to connect partner experiences across countries rather than treat them as isolated expertise. A balance will have to be found between the capacity strengthening within and for institutions in the partnership and the more specific focus on network-leadership that is recommended – the focus of the programme is to build capacities for scientific leadership, grounded in realities of the partner countries.		
2.4 Clarify the relationship between existing ITM Alumni platforms and network-specific branding or dedicated websites/information systems, weighing visibility benefits against investment costs.						
Action Plan						
#	Actions planned	Deadline	Responsible Office/Unit/Department	Responsible Person/Rol e	Imple ment ation stage	Actions (to be) taken
	Set up thematic exchanges	May 2027	ICO	Wouter Boesman Helena Liekens	In prepa ration	- Organize yearly thematic exchanges for the different thematic clusters in FA6 (JPM, ..) - Clarify this as a point of action or responsibility for

						the cluster coordinators and outcome coordinators
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Recommendation 3: We recommend that ITM introduces a light, systematic mechanism for cross-network learning.

3.1 Establish a light 'network-of-networks' forum, convening representatives from all networks on a regular (e.g. annual) basis to present approaches, challenges and successes, and to enable systematic cross-network learning.

Partially accepted

The underlying need identified by the evaluation is already addressed by design of the next programme: the network of network approach (thematic cluster) is embedded in the FA6 structure, which is structured around and within the FA5 networks that continue into FA6 as thematic clusters, with structured coordination roles, designated budget enabling the cluster to meet and coordinate regularly, and the joint partner meeting as a recurring moment to convene. This means that regular between-cluster exchange is already structurally embedded in FA6 and is fertile ground to exchange on these matters.

Action Plan

#	Actions planned	Deadline	Responsible Office/Unit/Department	Responsible Person/Role	Implementation stage	Actions (to be) taken
1	Include the 'network of network' approach in the exchange moments between the outcome coordinators, cluster coordinators and the international cooperation office	December 2027	ICO	Wouter Boesman Helena Liekens	Not started	Identify the discussion points per governance level in FA6

Signature: _____

Name and position: _Prof Dr Özge Tunçalp, Executive Director__

Date: 15 July 2026_____