



Final Report

Evaluation of the onboarding process for new programmes and partners within the FA5 programme 'Connecting the Dots – Higher Education and Science for a Healthier World'

7th of May 2026

Collaborative leverage towards inclusive development



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List of Acronyms

AHRI	Armauer Hansen Research Institute (Ethiopia)
AMS	Antimicrobial stewardship
BPKIHS	B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences (Nepal)
CERRHUD	Centre de Recherche en Reproduction Humaine et en Démographie (Benin)
CROO	Contracts and Reporting Research & Development (ITM)
DGD	Directorate-general for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (Belgium)
EPHI	Ethiopian Public Health Institute
EQ	Evaluation Question
FA	Framework Agreement
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
ICO	International Cooperation Office (ITM)
ITM	Institute of Tropical Medicine
IUC	Institutional University Cooperation
KII	Key Informant Interview
LRM	Laboratoire de Référence des Mycobactéries (Benin)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHRC	Nepal Health Research Council
NTD	Neglected Tropical Disease
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OH	One Health
RBC	Rwanda Biomedical Center
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
UR-CHUK	University of Rwanda - Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Kigali
VBD	Vector-borne Disease
VLIR-UOS	Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) - Department for University Development Cooperation (UOS)

Executive summary

Purpose and Scope

This evaluation assessed how and to what extent the onboarding of new country programmes and partners under the FA5 programme (2022–2026) contributed to programme performance.

Onboarding is understood as the process of integrating new partners into programme structures and processes, including scientific collaboration, management systems, and administrative and financial reporting. Given its central role in enabling programme delivery, effective onboarding is critical to achieving intended outcomes in research and capacity strengthening.

The evaluation draws on six partner onboarding experiences across four countries (Benin, Ethiopia, Nepal, and Rwanda), combining evidence from case studies, interviews, a survey, and a stakeholder workshop to co-create robust findings and actionable recommendations.

The evaluation highlights a critical opportunity to strengthen programme performance by improving onboarding processes and organisational coordination, and by positioning onboarding as a core strategic function. This includes leveraging partner capacities more systematically and fostering stronger cross-country learning and collaboration, ultimately supporting more efficient, coherent, and impactful programme delivery.

Key Findings

The evaluation finds that new partnerships under the FA5 programme are widely perceived as valuable, with many delivering results that meet or exceed expectations in terms of research quality and capacity strengthening. These achievements are supported by long-standing relationships and strong alignment with partners' strategic priorities. At the same time, the onboarding process is often constrained by organisational and administrative challenges, particularly related to the absence of structured onboarding guidance. Financial reporting and compliance requirements – particularly those linked to DGD rules – are widely perceived as complex and demanding. Combined with limited clarity on timelines and expectations, this has often led to delays and inefficiencies, especially during the early phases of implementation, constraining overall programme efficiency.

The absence of formal onboarding process guidelines leads to inconsistent experiences across partners. There is no shared definition or standardised framework guiding onboarding, resulting in processes that are largely shaped by context and individual initiative. While this flexibility allows adaptation to different environments, it also means that onboarding depends heavily on personal relationships and informal problem-solving. This creates vulnerabilities, including uneven levels of support, limited institutional memory, and increased exposure to disruptions caused by staff turnover.

The findings further reveal a gap between strong strategic clarity and weaker operational clarity. Partners generally have a clear and shared understanding of programme objectives and scientific goals, largely due to their active involvement in programme design. However, this clarity does not consistently extend to operational aspects such as roles, responsibilities, reporting requirements, and administrative processes.

Furthermore, the potential role of country partners in leading national-level coordination and expanding partnership networks is not fully leveraged, limiting opportunities to scale impact beyond individual collaborations.

The evaluation also shows that organisational coordination within ITM plays a critical role in shaping the onboarding process. Scientific, management, and administrative functions often operate in parallel rather than through integrated planning and communication. This internal fragmentation is reflected in partners' experiences, who face overlapping demands, unclear timelines, and sometimes inconsistent guidance. Strengthening coordination across these functions would significantly improve clarity, reduce inefficiencies, and enhance the overall onboarding experience.

Despite the challenges identified, most partnerships are perceived as successful by key stakeholders. This success is largely driven by the commitment and initiative of researchers and promoters, who frequently step in to resolve administrative or coordination issues. While this dedication is a key strength, it also highlights a structural weakness: the current onboarding practices have key limitations and expose programmes to risks if key individuals are unavailable or leave. Strengthening institutional processes – however without adding any undue bureaucratic burden – is therefore essential to ensure continuity, sustainability, and scalability.

Strategic Recommendations

1. Adopt a “whole-of-ITM” onboarding approach

A more integrated approach is needed to ensure that scientific, management, and administrative functions operate in a coordinated way. Currently, fragmented processes create confusion and inefficiencies for partners and ITM staff. Strengthening coordination within ITM – particularly between promoters, ICO, and CROO – would improve planning and communication. This should be supported by integrated tools and shared timelines, providing partners with a single, coherent onboarding framework that clarifies expectations and streamlines implementation from the outset.

2. Implement a “know-your-partner” approach

Effective onboarding requires an early and structured understanding of partner institutions, including their capacities, structures, and potential risks. Light institutional assessments would help anticipate bottlenecks and identify key decision-makers. This should be complemented by dedicated focal points on both sides and early organisational dialogue, already starting during proposal development.

3. Develop formal onboarding guidelines

The lack of shared definitions and guidance leads to inconsistent onboarding experiences. Clear, practical fit-for-purpose guidelines should define processes, roles, and responsibilities across scientific, management, and administrative dimensions.

4. Strengthen feedback and learning systems

Stronger systems are needed to capture and act on partner feedback. Regular, targeted mechanisms should be established, particularly on administrative and coordination challenges. Feedback should be systematically linked to decision-making, with clear responsibilities and timelines for follow-up. Embedding these processes within onboarding and programme governance would support continuous learning and improvement.

5. Simplify and strengthen administrative and financial systems

Administrative and financial requirements should be streamlined to reduce complexity while maintaining compliance with donor rules. Improving the usability of financial tools and transparency of budgets would support better planning and monitoring. These measures should be complemented by targeted training, ongoing coaching, and annual refresher sessions on administrative and financial

procedures provided by CROO or other administrative staff, particularly during the early stages of implementation, ensuring that administrative systems enable rather than constrain programme delivery.

I Introduction

I.1 Evaluation context and contents of the report

This report concludes the ‘Evaluation of the onboarding process for new programmes and partners within the FA5 programme’ commissioned by ITM. The evaluation team understood “onboarding” as the integration of new partners into programme structures and processes, first and foremost in relation to the current FA5 programme, but within broader perspectives. These perspectives involve the next iteration of the Framework Agreement programme – FA6, under design at the time of writing – but also other (current or prospective) partnerships and interventions.

Should one key assumption summarise the rationale of this assignment, that would be that an effective onboarding is instrumental to the delivery of programme activities and their intended impact. In fact, misaligned expectations among partners, unclear roles and processes, challenges on requirements and timelines can – and did – affect the implementation of capacity building and scientific activities, that lie at the core of the ITM-partner collaboration. This is the reason why this evaluation features a distinctive strategic and forward-looking value for both the ITM and its (current and prospective) partners. Lessons learned in this assignment will indeed serve overarching purposes of impact optimisation, including through organisational processes that facilitate an effective and timely delivery of research and capacity building activities.

The following sub-sections of this introduction outline the evaluation objective, scope and questions (I.1), and our methodology and data collection process (I.2); section 2 presents our findings and thematic analysis, centred around the six Evaluation Questions (EQ); section 3 offers general conclusions and final recommendations.

I.2 Evaluation objective, questions and scope

The objective of this evaluation, as drawn from its Terms of Reference, was to assess the extent to which and how the onboarding process of new programs within FA5 (2022 - 2026) “has contributed to the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and coherence of the program outcomes. The evaluation will identify key challenges, document best practices, and provide strategic recommendations for optimizing future onboarding efforts.”

Four main OECD evaluation criteria were employed in the methodological design: efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and coherence. These criteria informed six Evaluation Questions (EQ), related to the topics summarised below:

- EQ1 Key challenges during onboarding
- EQ2 Defined onboarding processes in FA5
- EQ3 Clarity of roles, expectations, responsibilities in FA5 during onboarding
- EQ4 Integration of new partnerships in FA5 governance structure
- EQ5 Lessons for future onboarding
- EQ6 Onboarding contribution towards programme outcomes

These questions served as the basis for our data collection targeting ITM staff and partners, with a special focus on six selected partners:

Table 1: Overview of partners

Name of the partner	Country
Centre de Recherche en Reproduction Humaine et en Démographie (CERRHUD)	Benin
Jimma University	Ethiopia
Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC)	Nepal
B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences (BPKIHS)	
Rwanda Biomedical Center (RBC)	Rwanda
University of Rwanda - Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Kigali (UR-CHUK)	

1.3 Methodology and data collection

The six EQ were finetuned and deepened in their analytical focus. This resulted in a detailed Evaluation Framework (attached as Annex 1) at the end of inception consultations and preliminary analyses (December 2025), upon which the evaluators developed interview guides for Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), as well as survey questions.

ITM and partner staff were interviewed to gather their experiences on their FA5 partnership, particularly on scientific, management and administrative matters since the start of their collaboration. After the initial consultations in the inception phase, case studies targeted the onboarding journey for each of the six partners in 4 countries presented above: the evaluation engaged both partner staff and ITM promoters or co-promoters (January 2026) through KIIs and one FGD. This resulted in four (country-level) *onboarding stories* presented below (section 2.1), with complementary recommendations attached in Annex 3.

An online survey was conducted between February and March 2026, after a preliminary analysis of data gathered in inception consultations and the case studies. This arrangement was designed to test emerging findings and recommendations *incrementally*, i.e. on data gathered from previous phases, and to gauge other areas of potential interest to extending or deepening the analysis, particularly during the sense-making workshop with key stakeholders and in the final report. Survey results are integrated in the thematic analysis (section 2.2 below), and the overall report is attached as Annex 2.

Finally, a sense-making workshop on 1st of April 2026 offered the occasion to present the initial integrate analysis of key findings and to offer preliminary recommendations to a group of key stakeholders, who provided feedback and engaged in joint reflection for further and final analysis, as presented with this report.

All these sources of data (stakeholder consultations, case studies, survey and the sense-making workshop) were incrementally triangulated in cross-cutting, thematic analysis based on the six EQ. Section 2.2 in this report constitutes the final iteration of this analytical process, upon which the overall conclusions and final recommendations are grounded (section 3).

2 Findings and analysis

This section collects and analyses the findings from the country case studies, the survey and the sense-making workshop. Section 2.1 starts by attaching the four *onboarding stories*, showing observed strengths and challenges in each country. Section 2.2 is the backbone of the Final Report: data and views from the inception and data collection phases are combined to answering each of the six EQ.

In the interest of readability, insights and figures from the survey are integrated in the analysis but not in a specific section on survey results. The more detailed Survey Report can be found in Annex 2. Likewise, the evaluation team attached “complementary recommendations”, specific to each onboarding story, that are grouped together under Annex 3.

2.1 Onboarding stories

2.1.1 Benin

Programme objectives: The FA5 programme in Benin targets improved service delivery and evidence-based policy making through education, research, knowledge operationalisation and network support.

Partners: ITM’s key partners in FA5 are the *Laboratoire de Référence des Mycobactéries* (LRM) and the *Centre de Recherche en Reproduction Humaine et en Démographie* (CERRHUD). The latter was selected among the new FA5 partners to provide input on the programme’s onboarding processes. CERRHUD is a research centre on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) and Demography. It has an NGO status and has led research projects through national and international funding.

Timeline of FA5 partnership: CERRHUD and ITM have cooperated on several projects since mid-1990s, and several CERRHUD researchers were trained at the ITM. The FA5 partnership was triggered by personal contacts among researchers. First discussions started during FA4 and materialised in a cooperation agreement on FA5, signed in 2022.

Table 2: Key strengths and challenges in the onboarding process Benin

Strengths	Challenges
Previous knowledge of ITM (at institutional or personal level), facilitating trust and contacts (scientific and administrative)	Delays and uncertainty caused by gaps between contractual changes agreed verbally and formalised in writing (<i>i.e. late formalisation of agreed changes</i>)
Partner’s clear vision and strategy ahead of FA5 collaboration, effectively communicated internally (to researchers and managers) and externally to ITM	Limited time available for programme design and proposal preparation
Strategic added value of FA5 strongly perceived by partner leadership	Timelines and deadlines on administrative and financial reporting , to be communicated more clearly (<i>this remains a challenge notwithstanding the overall smooth collaboration between CERRHUD and ITM, including on management and administration</i>)

Strengths	Challenges
Dedicated team to be onboarded appointed upfront by the partner to interact with ITM counterparts	Need for better focus to consolidate learning and promote further progress on scientific activities
Smooth collaboration, communication and effective support by ITM on financial requirements and reporting (<i>yet challenges remain on timelines and deadlines</i>)	
Scientific collaboration and positive interaction with ITM promotor	

2.1.2. Ethiopia

Programme objectives FA5: FA5 country programme in Ethiopia focuses on increased knowledge on the occurrence of zoonotic NTDs, drivers of their transmission and socio-ecological context through the implementation of the multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary One Health (OH) approach.

Partners: University of Gondar (UoG, North of Ethiopia); Bahir Dar University, Dessie University (both in the North of Ethiopia); Arba Minch University (South of Ethiopia); national research institutions (EPHI & AHRI); Jimma University (focus of the evaluation).

Timeline of partnership: The collaboration with Jimma university within FA5 is built on previously existing ties of research staff (VLIR-UOS IUC program UGent – Jimma university, doctoral research of ITM co-promotor). The partnership was built through joint development of concept notes leading to a full proposal, aligned with country and institutional priorities. The collaboration with Jimma University specifically focuses on NTDs within a zoonotic perspective, with emphasis on training/networking/research. This is complemented by an additional focus on capacity building for outbreak research and emerging viral infection.

Table 3: Key strengths and challenges in the onboarding process Ethiopia

Strengths	Challenges
Collaboration gained traction over time, supported by a small, committed team and long-standing institutional relationships across several projects and joint proposals.	High scientific staff turnover affected continuity, especially as several staff involved during onboarding left early in the programme.
The collaboration fits within Jimma University's strategic vision, particularly its focus on societal impact, particularly around priority One Health challenges.	The onboarding process took longer than expected, affecting efficient implementation in the first 2 years. Additionally, initial expectations regarding administrative requirements and time burden for management were unrealistic and not well communicated, contributing to delays. More detailed planning at the start and follow-up, would have supported more efficient implementation.
The partnership between Jimma University and AHRI, embedded in a	Limited English proficiency of the staff member responsible for administration created bottlenecks and

Strengths	Challenges
One Health approach, generated new insights and proved inspiring for all partners. Strong connections with national institutions (EPHI and AHRI) enhanced credibility and policy relevance.	conflict. <i>(Due to language constraints the dedicated finance staff member was not allowed to travel for practical training).</i> Attempts by head promotor Partner institution to change administrative support were unsuccessful. A satisfactory solution for both parties has not been found yet.
Collaborative development of the Theory of Change clarified objectives, principles, and lessons learned.	ITM's financial reporting system – linked to DGD requirements – are highly stringent, offering less flexibility than comparable programmes (e.g. VLIR-UOS). Jimma University operates under its own rules and regulations, which created friction. Insufficient mutual understanding of each other's administrative constraints hindered efficiency.
The partnership contributed to improved administrative capacity, opportunities for staff development, and enhanced research collaboration, reinforcing Jimma University's credibility as an international research partner.	Budget monitoring required closer supervision, but staff limitations and insufficient interdepartmental cooperation (particularly within finance) constrained support. ITM Finance department mainly intervened reactively (in response to questions) or at the end of reporting cycles. There was no systematic quarterly financial overview, and ITM's IT systems are not efficient for financial reporting and monitoring, creating inefficiencies and contributing to a lack of trust.
The absence of overly detailed activity planning at the outset allowed adaptive implementation and responsiveness to emerging needs and flexibility. But this comes at a cost as it also led to inefficiencies in implementation (see challenges).	At the outset, indicators and targets were unclear or overly generic. Some targets were unrealistic given the available budget, and some indicators (e.g. joint indicators such as number of publications) were not fully applicable.

2.1.3. Nepal

Programme objectives: The FA5 programme in Nepal strengthens scientific capacities on Vector-borne diseases (VBDs) in alignment with the National VBD Programme, through research, training and partnerships with policy makers and non-government actors.

Partners: The *Nepal Health Research Council* (NHRC) was originally founded under the Ministry of Health but has been functioning as an autonomous body since 1991. Its primary responsibility is to promote and coordinate research on health and health-related problems of national priorities in Nepal. *B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences* (BPKIHS) is a health sciences university, established in 1993, hosting a Tropical and Infectious Diseases Centre.

Timeline of FA5 partnership: Nepal was not a partner country in FA4 (2017-2021). However, both partners in Nepal had previous knowledge of ITM at both institutional and personal levels: the BPKIHS-ITM capacity building cooperation dates back to 1999, and the BPKIHS was also partner in FA3. Personal contacts among researchers resulted from PhD programmes starting in 2005. Unlike the

BPKIHS, the NHRC did not have previous experience with the FA programme but cooperated with the ITM on other projects, and personal contacts among researchers were significant. Both partners signed cooperation agreements in 2022, formalising their FA5 partnership with ITM.

Table 4: Key strengths and challenges in the onboarding process Nepal

Strengths	Challenges
Previous knowledge of ITM (at institutional or personal level), facilitating trust and contacts (scientific and administrative)	Lack of explicit onboarding guidelines and processes (particularly against tight timelines for programme design and start up), however compensated by positive relations among promoters
Scientific quality achieved through FA5, exceeding expectations	Burdensome requirements on financial management and reporting , calling for better communication and alignment between ITM and country partners
Partners' strategic vision on research needs and knowledge gaps <i>ahead of FA5 collaboration</i>	Lack of preliminary institutional assessments of partners (hierarchy, decision making, administrative needs and capacities, transition in leadership), and of effective ITM-partner dialogue on organisational cooperation
Partners' involvement in the programme design and implementation	Staff turnover : challenge for continuity and sustainability ("brain drain" at partner level, loss of institutional memory of operational challenges at ITM)
Scientific collaboration and interaction with ITM scientific promotor	Harmonisation between scientific and management functions at ITM (coordinated planning and communication on requirements and timelines)
Appreciation of country's leading role on climate change and partners' added value on the topic in FA5	

2.1.4. Rwanda

Programme objectives FA5: The long-term programme objective aims for sustainable control or elimination of infectious diseases in Rwanda through equitable, high-quality diagnostics and strengthened scientific capacity, while the medium-term change focuses on enabling Rwandan scientists to lead improved diagnosis, treatment, and molecular surveillance supported by functional centres of excellence.

Partners: There are 2 institutional partners in Rwanda: the Rwanda Biomedical Center (RBC) and the University of Rwanda (UR) / Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Kigali (CHUK). The RBC houses several reference laboratories, including the NRL-TB and the Malaria & Other Parasitic Diseases Division. The collaboration with UR/CHUK focuses on increased awareness of the AMS (Antimicrobial stewardship) principles by health professionals at all levels of care to optimize antibiotic use and improve clinical outcomes.

Timeline of partnership: The collaboration with RBC within FA5 is built on previously existing ties of research staff (e.g. PhDs, TB project). The partnership was built through joint development of concept notes and theory of change leading to a comprehensive programme aligned with country and institutional priorities.

Table 5: Key strengths and challenges in the onboarding process Rwanda

Strengths	Challenges
Pre-existing professional relationships between research staff facilitated the onboarding process.	Onboarding of UR/CHUK took longer than expected due to staff turnover and change in leadership at UR.
Overall smooth onboarding process, RBC and UR/CHUK are institutional partners with strong organisational and administrative capacity.	Neglected tropical diseases component was not implemented because of staff changes. The budget was redirected to other themes and to the organization of the kick-off meeting.
CROO and finance department were responsive. Partners knew where to seek administrative support.	Programme activities in Rwanda were suspended mid-programme following a decision of the Rwandan Government to suspend international cooperation with Belgium. Only student-related activities could continue.
Direct, face-to-face collaboration between admin and finance focal points helped clarify procedural requirements.	DGD administrative and financial reporting requirements are complex and not intuitive for researchers without prior experience.
Kick-off meeting, although not initially planned (and budgeted for), proved highly valuable for aligning objectives, roles, and expectations.	Initially, partner institutions' budgets were not organized by thematic component, which complicated financial monitoring and reporting.
Co-creation of the conceptual framework and Theory of Change (ToC) strengthened ownership and engagement. ToC was a new model for most participants, but the process was well supported methodologically.	Research staff had limited visibility on remaining budgets; existing financial tools are not user-friendly according to users.
Early involvement of institutional leadership facilitated later approval processes.	Initial lack of clarity on the programme's capacity development focus led to differing expectations and a slower start of the implementation phase.

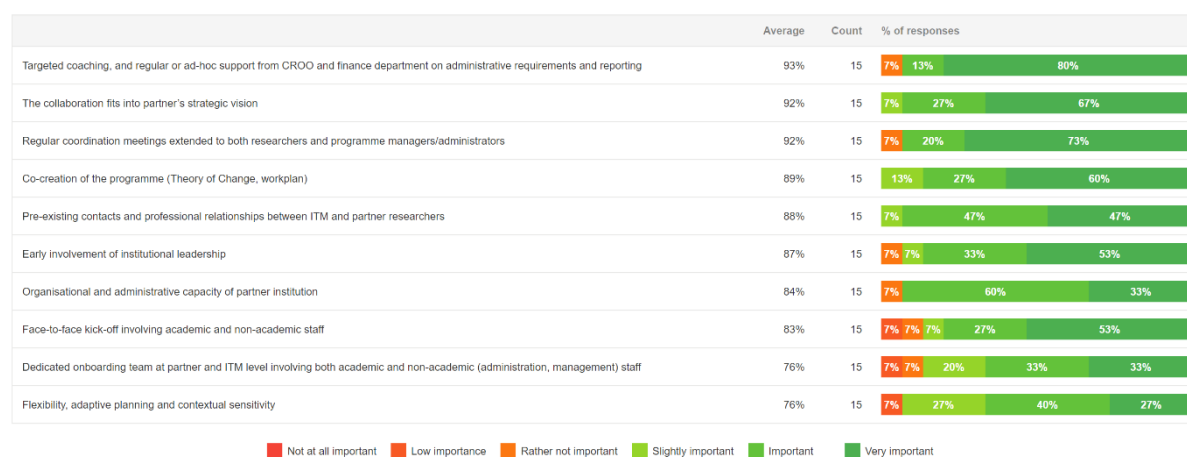
2.2. Analysis of findings

This section integrates all the data gathered from different sources (stakeholder consultations, case studies, survey, sense-making workshop) in answering each of the six EQ. The process of data analysis and triangulation was conducted incrementally throughout the assignment, as new data were collected and integrated. This process and resulting insights constituted the analytical backbone of this evaluation, upon which the overall conclusions and final recommendations are grounded (next section 3).

EQ1: *What challenges have emerged during the onboarding of new country programs and partner institutions under FA5?*

Stakeholder views – as gathered in consultations, country case studies, the online survey and the workshop – indicate that ITM and new partner institutions share a very positive appreciation of their *scientific collaboration* in FA5, while *financial management and administration* appear as the main challenges. Previous personal contacts among ITM and partner researchers are key factors that facilitate institutional collaboration in FA5. This is true in both technical and management dimensions: the development of country proposals and Theories of Change (ToC) is generally perceived as smooth and effective, and this positive cooperation on technical content fosters an environment of trust and confidence to also address management and administrative hurdles. This is strongly confirmed by survey findings, where pre-existing professional relationships (88% importance) and alignment with partners' strategic vision (92%) were among the highest-rated facilitating factors.

Figure 1: How important where the following factors in facilitating the onboarding process?

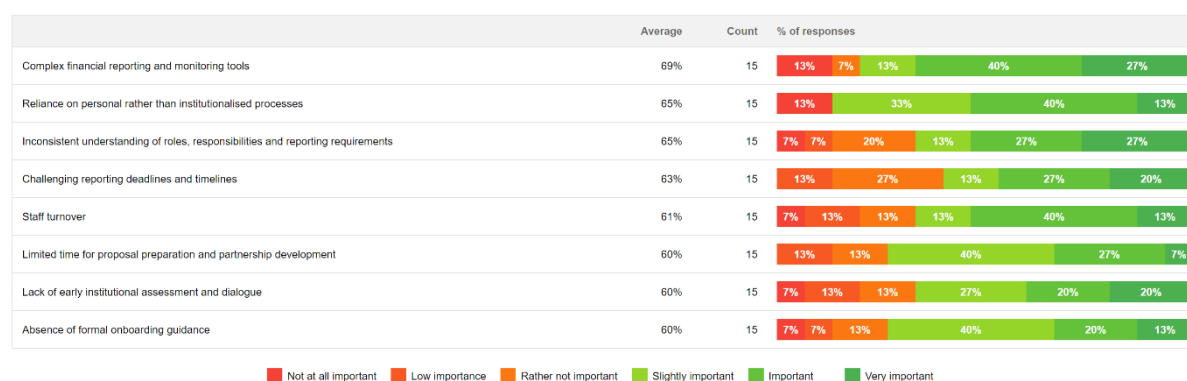


N 15

Targeted coaching and support from CROO/finance was the highest-rated facilitating factor (93%). DGD rules, particularly on financial management, reporting and eligible expenses, are sometimes new to new partner institutions, who find it difficult to navigate through the requirements and timelines. ITM does provide training on administrative and financial reporting, but more and better structured guidance is needed, both in ad-hoc format (e.g. on-site training) and on a more regular basis (one-on-one coaching).

Next to the facilitating factors, several limiting factors were first identified during the interviews, then tested in the survey. Overall, the findings suggest that administrative complexity, clarity of roles and processes, and time constraints are perceived as key challenges in the onboarding process, although there is less consensus on their relative importance compared to the enabling factors discussed earlier.

Figure 2: How important were the following factors in hindering the onboarding process?



N 15

The challenge receiving the highest importance score related to complex financial reporting and monitoring tools, with an average importance of 69%. While 27% of respondents rated this as very important and 40% as important, a smaller share considered it less important, indicating some variation in experiences across respondents.

Two other challenges received similar importance scores: reliance on personal rather than institutionalised processes (65%) and inconsistent understanding of roles, responsibilities, and reporting requirements (65%). In both cases, around 40% of respondents rated these as important, highlighting concerns about clarity of processes and institutionalisation of procedures within the onboarding phase. Challenging reporting deadlines and timelines were also identified as a notable constraint, with an average importance of 63%. However, responses were more mixed, with a substantial proportion of respondents indicating lower importance.

Other factors, including staff turnover (61%), limited time for proposal preparation and partnership development (60%), lack of early institutional assessment and dialogue (60%), and absence of formal onboarding guidance (60%), received slightly lower but still moderate importance scores.

EQ2: To what extent was there a defined onboarding process in place, and how was this process perceived by those involved?

Throughout the consultations, country case studies, the survey and the workshop, the evaluation documented the lack of agreed definitions and formal guidelines on onboarding. While informants positively appreciate case-by-case flexibility, contextual awareness and sensitivity to specific circumstances, particularly in the relation between country and ITM promoters, the lack of formal onboarding guidelines is seen as a weakness, including by ITM promoters. The integration of new partners in FA5 follows a rather “improvised” logic that, while enhancing the role of promoters, makes the process too reliant on personal contacts, as opposed to more institutionalised (yet still flexible) processes. This includes cases where country or ITM scientific promoters must step in to resolve management hurdles. Moreover, in some cases, ITM promoters themselves are rather new in their role and would appreciate having more guidance on requirements and expectations related to onboarding and, more in general, to what is required from partners, including for regular reporting to the DGD. Lacking such clarity, promoters must step in reactively to help resolve management and administration issues that they also need to familiarise with first. Formal onboarding guidelines will help identify typical challenges that new partners may face, thereby facilitating institutional memory and

collaboration to anticipate or tackle them, to the benefit of both ITM and country promoters, managers and administrators.

The onboarding process appears to rely significantly on personal relationships and individual initiative rather than on institutionalised procedures (*as reflected in survey findings, where reliance on personal processes was rated as an important challenge at 65%*). This means that key functions, such as clarifying roles, resolving administrative issues, or ensuring timely reporting, often depend on the availability, experience, and capacity of specific individuals rather than on standardised systems and guidance.

In contexts where individual capacity is limited, this reliance creates bottlenecks. For example, the Ethiopia case study illustrates how capacity constraints, such as language barriers within administrative staff, can significantly hinder implementation when no institutional backup mechanisms or alternative support structures are in place. The conclusion to be drawn from this example is that personal commitment and initiatives are certainly positive and commendable, but they need to be complemented by stronger, standardised, and institutionalised onboarding mechanisms; while ensuring such mechanisms are 'fit for purpose' and remain flexible where needed.

The lack of clearly defined onboarding processes is also symptomatic of what is perceived as a relative lack of coordination among three functions at the ITM: scientific, management and administration. Research activities, management and M&E, and administrative reporting to the DGD seem to follow parallel timelines that are not always effectively integrated nor properly communicated, either internally at the ITM or externally to partners. When cooperation is needed, for instance on regular financial reporting or on external evaluations, then time efforts and deadlines may overlap, often at short notice and without clear and shared understanding of needs and timelines. This means that, first, scientific promoters, ICO and CROO would benefit from more integrated planning and communication of their respective activities; second, they could support partners more effectively across the scientific, management and administrative dimensions. Here again, more effective onboarding starts with an improved organisational setup.

EQ3: How well were roles, expectations, and responsibilities communicated and understood during the onboarding process?

FA5 *programme rationale and objectives* were very clear since the beginning of the FA5 partnership thanks to the partners' active role in the programme design and proposal preparation. The collaboration in the design of programmes outcomes and Theories of Change is perceived very positively, and this gave a solid understanding and appreciation of what FA5 is about and brings. In fact, during our interviews, partners seemed to approach the collaboration with the ITM with prior, thorough understanding of their knowledge and capacity gaps and of the benefits they expected from FA5 to meet those. These expectations were fully met, and some cases exceeded, in FA5 country programmes.

However, lacking formal onboarding guidelines, organisational roles, responsibilities and reporting requirements were communicated and understood in different ways and case by case, which creates a mismatch between scientific achievements and functional programme management. While some partners appointed dedicated teams to be trained by ITM counterparts as part of their onboarding (as mentioned under EQ1), other cases show delays, misunderstanding and occasional tensions, particularly on financial reporting. As noted above, in some cases scientific promoters had to step in and helped resolve administrative hurdles, which is not an efficient – nor valued – use of their time as researchers.

This is also reflected in survey findings, in which inconsistent understanding of roles, responsibilities, and expectations was identified as a key challenge (Figure 2). While the overall programme rationale and objectives were generally well understood, this clarity did not consistently extend to operational and administrative aspects of implementation. In practice, this led to differing interpretations of expectations among partners, particularly regarding administrative requirements, reporting obligations, and the programme's capacity development focus.

The country cases further illustrate how gaps in clarity and communication translated into implementation challenges. Particularly in Rwanda and Ethiopia, insufficient clarity at the outset resulted in delays in early programme phases.

- ✓ In Rwanda, this was reflected in a lack of clarity on certain programme components, which slowed down initial implementation.
- ✓ In Ethiopia, expectations regarding administrative workload and time requirements were not adequately communicated, leading to a mismatch between anticipated and actual demands.
- ✓ In Benin, these challenges were present, yet they were strongly mitigated by the early appointment of a dedicated partner team to be trained and coached by ITM.

Overall, these findings point to a gap between strategic clarity and operational clarity, underscoring the need for more explicit communication, dialogue, and shared understanding of the onboarding process and its underlying requirements, already when preparing the onboarding and at the onset of ITM-partner collaboration.

While the scientific value of FA5 is generally undisputed, organisational roles, expectations, and responsibilities should be better communicated. In line with EQ1 and EQ2, findings from consultations, country studies, the survey and the workshop converged on the following needs:

- (i) More integrated coordination within ITM on scientific, management and administrative activities, needs and timelines.
- (ii) Preliminary institutional assessments of new partners, to identify upfront key decision-making roles and processes, capacities and needs and potential hurdles.
- (iii) More timely and effective organisational dialogue between ITM and country partners, namely on key needs, requirements and timelines.

Both ITM and country partners stand to benefit from such improved organisational practices. In fact, it will help them (i) understand needs, requirements and timelines in a timely and more effective manner; (ii) allocate specific resources to given tasks; and (iii) map, anticipate and tackle potential hurdles or gaps that could negatively affect the timely delivery of programme activities.

EQ4: How effectively have the new partnerships been integrated into the broader FA5 program structures and processes?

Country programmes and stakeholders are focussed on their respective outcomes and activities. Cross-country or cross-programme collaboration are generically viewed in terms of international data sharing and policy dialogue, more than specifically linked to FA5. This is related to FA5 set up. Three FA5 Global Programmes enable researchers and partner institutions to participate in international research projects and promote network opportunities; with partners appreciating opportunities for successful research and publications as well as peer-to-peer networking. However, the twelve Country Programmes operate rather independently, without structured processes for inter-partner, cross-country learning and cooperation, or South-South dialogue. This type of cooperation, then, tends to

remain on a rather personal level, which seems a missed opportunity to scale up activities, share critical knowledge and increase programmatic outcomes and impact.

In general, FA5 partnerships examined in this evaluation are based on an understanding of the added value that the ITM and each country partner offer to each other *bilaterally*. ITM brings the quality of research and scientific capacity building that helps fill country partners' knowledge and capacity gaps, while those partners bring contextual knowledge and insights, contacts and synergies at national and sub-national level.¹ Despite some challenges on financial reporting and administration (see above), this partnership is perceived as fully meeting – and in some cases *exceeding* – expectations on technical achievements.

However, the role of country partners could be better leveraged, at both international and national level. Internationally, their knowledge and expertise could be better valued in more structured and institutionalised opportunities for South-South dialogue for learning and better impact. At the national level, the role of the 'principal country partner' could be strengthened. In agreement with ITM and in line with DGD subcontracting rules, they could take the lead in managing the collaboration with other stakeholders, at national and subnational level, including contracting agreements and dedicated budget lines for agreed interventions or consultancies.

The insights resulting from this evaluation are in alignment with the understanding that multisectoral and interdisciplinary problems demand multisectoral and interdisciplinary partnerships at local, regional and global level. Knowledge sharing is critical in these matters, and country partners' added value could be nurtured and promoted when it comes to contextual insights and expertise. These points could be improved in the design of the next FA iteration or in other ITM programmes.

The role of country partners: a complementary element

Overall, the conclusions and recommendations outlined above are specifically related to onboarding processes. However the following conclusion emerged, with validity well-beyond the onboarding focus of this evaluation: ***the role of ITM's country partners should be strengthened***. This relates to programme strategy, design, budget provisions and governance setup that extend beyond onboarding. Furthermore, strengthened roles for partners may also inform and shape new partnership arrangements that onboarding guidelines and processes should showcase and leverage.

The discussions held on this element focused on strengthening the role of principal country partners in the following areas:

- (i) *In-country partnership development by identifying and managing other country-based partners, stakeholders, or consultants*. This may include granting partners some form of contracting authority and dedicated budget provisions, in line with DGD regulation governing the ITM-partner collaboration.
- (ii) *Knowledge sharing and policy dialogue*, e.g. by promoting cross-country learning and lessons sharing within FA programmes or other venues.

A final related point worth mentioning is the need to strengthen actionable feedback loops on programmatic learning and improvement processes. The practice of collecting actionable feedback

¹ In the words of one of our informants, country partners "bring the tropics to the Institute of Tropical Medicine" (January 2026).

could be improved in more targeted, one-on-one sessions, particularly on administrative matters and financial reporting. This does not necessarily entail more work and time efforts: in line with EQ1 and EQ2 findings above, strengthened organisational collaboration would see ITM-partners counterparts pairing on given areas (research, management, administration). Regular or ad-hoc interactions in this pairing model seem to offer a natural venue to collect feedback in the form of problem statements and recommendations, that will be used for programmatic learning and improvement. This is also reflected in the survey findings, where reinforcing feedback loops for learning and programme improvement was rated as highly relevant.

Discussing and formulating problem statements and recommendations, however, is only the first step of organisational improvements. The data gathered in these statements will need to be leveraged in clear decision-making processes outlining who receive those statements at FA level (ITM and/or partners) and what they will do about them. In other words, once feedback is collected, an organisational process will need to explain how the feedback will be translated in concrete action for programmatic improvement. Here again, strengthened organisational processes are the backbone of effective action.

EQ5: What lessons can be drawn to improve future onboarding processes at ITM for new programs and partners?

A key lesson to be drawn from this evaluation is that effective onboarding starts before onboarding, and particularly in functional organisational setups. For the ITM specifically, our informants indicated the **need for improved coordination** – internally at ITM – **between scientific, management and administrative functions**, for both internal and external purposes.

For example, scientific promoters, ICO and CROO stand all to benefit from more integrated planning and improved awareness of each other's needs, timelines, and priorities. This will facilitate the smooth design and delivery of key activities within and across these three units, and it will help minimise overlapping deadlines and excessive workload. It will also improve the onboarding of new partners through a "whole-of-ITM approach" that integrate, simplifies and streamlines an agreed set of relevant information on research, management and M&E, administration and reporting. Rather than partners navigating fragmented inputs from different units, this approach would provide a more coherent and streamlined onboarding experience, reducing confusion and duplication of efforts.

A second lesson is that scientific cooperation is the backbone of ITM partnerships, but impactful scientific cooperation requires looking beyond science and research when dealing with new partners. Preliminary institutional assessment of partners should be conducted in parallel to the design of technical proposals, Theories of Change and workplans. These assessments would pave the way for a more effective onboarding of new partners, namely by: (i) identifying key decision makers early on at partner level, not only for scientific interaction but also for management and administration; (ii) pairing them with relevant ITM counterparts from the start, and possibly even before formal kick-off. In other words, preliminary institutional assessments constitute a building block for improved organisational dialogue and advance planning, that would facilitate smoother start-up and more effective delivery of planned activities. This would positively affect programmatic impact and a more efficient utilisation of key resources, particularly scientific promoters' time that would focus more on research cooperation, and less on management and administration. Also, considering the limited duration of each programme, a quick and effective startup contributes to the programme's outcomes an impact to their local embedding and sustainability.

For ITM and country partners, the benefits of the proposed improved internal coordination at ITM materialise through having early information on key requirements and timelines, critical decision-making persons and processes, potential hurdles or capacity constraints, possible delays caused by leadership transition, etc. This information can help advance planning, mitigate risks, minimise delays, and execute actions (e.g. training, IT support, engagement with the new leadership, or other) that will enable the timely and smooth delivery of programmatic activities. In other words, institutional assessments should be seen as an organisational added value, and a two-way street mechanism for quality assurance and impact optimisation.

Besides preliminary assessments and organisational dialogue, two complementing elements are worth adding, related to what partners and the ITM can respectively do to improve their collaboration.

- ✓ On the partner side, the evaluation documented a positive case where a new country partner (CERRHUD, Benin) appointed a dedicated team upfront to be trained on management and financial reporting, with the full backing of high management. This proved of great help to integrate the new partner in FA5 setups and facilitated their interaction with the ITM on financial reporting and administration. This case should be showcased and communicated as a positive model for future onboarding.
- ✓ On ITM side, our consultations indicate some space for ITM to reduce the administrative burden imposed on partners, while still abiding by DGD rules. In other words, some of current requirements on financial reporting may be simplified at the level of ITM, signalling the opportunity to do so in FA6 or other (ongoing or prospective) programmes.
- a) On DGD rules, our informants perceive some room of manoeuvre for the ITM to reduce the administrative burden and reporting requirements requested to partners. The partners interviewed in this study have different onboarding experiences but, even in successful cases, they all see this burden and these requirements as challenging and not always adapted to their country's context. If the ITM can indeed reduce the administrative burden while still respecting DGD rules, then this opportunity should not be missed. CROO could take the lead in mapping simplification options, if useful with external legal advice, then produce revised reporting guidelines. These guidelines should be, where needed doublechecked with DGD, shared first with ITM scientific promoters and ICO, then jointly communicated to new partners as part of the “whole-of-ITM approach” outlined above, on onboarding and beyond.

EQ6: To what extent has the onboarding process enabled the new partners to contribute to, or progress toward, their intended program outcomes?

As identified under the previous EQ 1 to 3, new FA5 partnership are generally successful thanks to the shared appreciation of the programme's positive value for scientific capacity development. Previous experiences in other programmes, or in earlier FA iterations, was identified as an important contributing factor in facilitating trust and a successful onboarding process: this includes institutional collaboration but – and even more importantly – personal knowledge and contacts among researchers. On the one hand, several country promoters had very often been PhD students at ITM before FA5; on the other hand, ITM researchers had also been involved in research activities at country partner institutions. The latter element is also reflected in the role of ITM promoters, perceived as critical in ITM-partner collaboration, including on non-scientific reporting. In some cases, scientific promoters at country level were instrumental in resolving hurdles, misunderstanding, and occasional tensions on financial reporting.

The positive role and commitment of researchers in successful FA5 partnerships generate of course critical added value. However, they also reflect the relative weakness of FA5 organisational setup, that tend to make researchers' role on extra-research activities rather structural. It is important to add that country studies reveal variations in the way new partners are integrated in FA5 management and administration. As explained above, Benin offers the most positive example, while challenges were most severe in Ethiopia, with delays in early implementation and capacity gaps, particularly in administrative and financial management, that affected the efficiency of the process. In Rwanda and Nepal, the case studies did document challenges (see previous Onboarding stories), but overall, the onboarding experience was supported by stronger institutional structures. These variations should be seen as different ways in which the common underlying factor of the relative weakness of FA5 set up has played out with given partners, and in different contexts and circumstances.

Critical conclusion for this evaluation: successful onboarding requires unified, structured, institutionalised onboarding processes and guidelines, that are not available in FA5 organisational setup.

As documented above, in some cases, ITM and partners found ways to overcome FA5 organisational shortcomings and in some cases ITM-partner arrangements were less successful. The conclusion for the way ahead, in FA6 or other similar programmes, is not only to learn from both successes and challenges in overcoming organisational weaknesses, but also to learn from these weaknesses as such.

The “*whole-of-ITM approach*,” outlined above, offers an overall understanding to pave the way to improved programmatic and organisational processes, within ITM and between ITM and its (earlier and new) partners. It starts from integrated planning and better coordination between ITM scientific, management and administration functions, followed by preliminary institutional assessment of new partners, and strengthened ITM-partner organisational dialogue.

This dialogue rests on the common interest of underpinning joint activities and programmatic impact with appropriate management structures. Also, this dialogue should include ad-hoc training and regular support on DGD rules and requirements, as applied in ITM programmes. These rules may in fact be new to some partners, who need practical, on-the-job support from the ITM throughout the reporting process. This support is a smart time investment: it aims at preventing hurdles, misunderstanding and potential tensions on requirements, deadlines and timelines, that often demand more significant time and energy to resolve at later stage.

It is in this context that better defined, more solidly implemented onboarding will best perform an enabling role for new partnerships that are geared towards programmatic outcomes and impact optimisation. Onboarding is as effective as its underlying organisational structures allow it to be.

The following section builds upon this principle and all the findings documented above. These are converted into actionable recommendations for smoother, more effective and more efficient interventions by enhancing the critical added value of impact-driven partnerships.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

This section builds on findings and analysis from the previews section. It concludes the report with high-level remarks and practical recommendations to strengthen onboarding processes in future FA iterations and other (current or prospective) programmes. The thematic analysis of the previous section is summarised under **three general conclusions**, upon which **five key recommendations** are grounded.

Conclusion 1: Onboarding is as effective as its underlying organisational and partnership structures allow it to be. The evaluation documented the need to strengthen those structures at ITM, partner, and ITM-partner levels. Improved internal coordination is needed at the ITM; partners could also facilitate their own onboarding by appointing resource persons for management and administration training; while organisational dialogue between ITM and its partners be strengthened. The attention to organisational dimensions, including M&E and reporting, is instrumental to optimising the quality and impact of research and capacity building activities.

Recommendation 1 (to ITM): Develop a “whole-of-ITM approach” prior and integrated to partner onboarding.

- 1.1 Develop a “whole-of-ITM approach” to strengthen the coordination and joint planning of management, administration and scientific activities. ICO, CROO and promoters/co-promoters are the leading actors to implement this recommendation.
- 1.2 Consider producing integrated ‘ICO-CROO-science’ planning documents with key actions and timelines. These documents should provide agile, fit for the purpose of partnership steering and orientation, and (as required) tailored to each programme. They should be shared internally at ITM and externally with country partners to promote alignment on expectations and awareness of priorities.
- 1.3 Highlight the added value and integrated roles of management, administration and research functions towards effective programme delivery, quality and timely outputs, and intended positive impact.

Recommendation 2: Build a “know-your-partner” approach to facilitate and reinforce ITM-partner cooperation.

- 2.1 Develop a “know-your-partner” approach aimed at timely *organisational* knowledge and dialogue among ITM and new partners, in parallel to the *technical* design of new programmes.
- 2.2 To ITM: Conduct ‘*smart*’ and *agile* institutional assessments of – and with – new partners to identify and understand (i) hierarchies and decision-making processes, (ii) potential hindering factors on the timely and quality delivery of programme activities, (iii) the need for mitigating measures as to be able to anticipate and resolve those hindering factors in a timely and effective manner. Enhance in-house knowledge and experience (e.g. “country ambassadors”) and address these topics with new partners as part of proposal development.
- 2.3 To partners: Appoint a dedicated team to interact upfront with ITM on programme administration, management and reporting. These resource persons will help ITM conduct targeted institutional assessments during proposal preparation, will familiarise with ITM management and administration staff, and will be the contact point for dialogue and training on programme management, monitoring and reporting.

- 2.4 *To ITM and partners:* Engage early on and on a regular basis in organisational dialogue on administration and management processes. After first contacts established during proposal development, conduct training sessions ahead and as part of kick-off of programme activities. *Further training arrangements are addressed in Recommendation 5.3.*

Recommendation 3: Strengthen programmatic learning with improved processes to gather actionable feedback from (current and new) partners and communicate these processes as part of onboarding.

- 3.1 Promote a culture and processes of targeted feedback gathering on management, administrative and scientific activities. This should come as part of the “whole-of-ITM” and the “know-your-partner” approaches, applied throughout regular, autonomous yet integrated collaboration on management, administration and research.
- 3.2 Develop processes and timelines for feedback processing and response within programme governance and decision-making structures.
- 3.3 Integrate and communicate these processes and timelines as part of onboarding.

Conclusion 2: The lack of shared definitions and agreed processes related to onboarding is perceived as an institutional weakness. Personal initiatives and commitment, particularly by researchers and scientific promoters, help mitigate this weakness. On the one hand, these initiatives and commitment are strengths and key facilitating factors in the delivery of programmatic activities; on the other hand, an excessive reliance on personal factors poses significant risks in terms of excessive workloads, and dependence on individual capacities, personal circumstances, or staff turnover. More institutionalised and team centred forms of collaboration need to complement the strength of personal contacts and commitment. They need to be developed prior to onboarding, then integrated in onboarding guidelines and processes.

Recommendation 4 (to ITM): Develop proportional, fit-for-purpose, shared definitions and guidelines on onboarding

- 4.1 Develop shared definitions of “onboarding” as part of the “whole-of-ITM” approach (cf. recommendation 1).
- 4.2 Issue onboarding guidelines offering a clear overview of key roles and responsibilities on scientific, management, and administration dimensions, both during the onboarding phase and within the larger programme setup. Such onboarding guidelines should bring added value to the partnership by combining (i) shared, standardised understanding, expectations and processes, and (ii) flexibility and responsiveness to different partners’ contexts and circumstances.
- 4.4 Organise an in-person kick-off meeting at the start of ITM–partner collaboration, bringing together all key actors (ICO, CROO, researchers, and their counterparts in partner institutions) to align expectations, build a shared understanding of the onboarding process, and establish a strong foundation for effective scientific, managerial, and administrative collaboration.

Conclusion 3: The evaluation documented financial and administrative reporting as a key challenge during onboarding. This makes regular and ad-hoc training on reporting requirements and processes a distinctive and central need, that FA and other programmes should consider in the interest of quality and timely delivery of mission-critical activities. Also, there are not only demands for simplified financial and administrative requirements, but also *the opportunity to do so at ITM level*, that would reduce complexity and constraints while still abiding by DGD rules. The revision of financial and reporting tools and processes should be part of a paradigm shift: away from purely accountability obligations and administrative compliance, towards improved programme monitoring and management (e.g. with real-time data on used vs budgeted resources).

Recommendation 5 (to ITM – CROO): Reshape financial/narrative reporting requirements so that they add value to partners/ITM while abiding by DGD rules, and provide (new) partners with targeted training and coaching on those requirements and timelines

5.1 Focus simplification/reshaping efforts not only on accountability and administrative compliance towards (simplified) DGD rules, but also on added value to partners' own monitoring, management and administration, and on sound programme management, planning and M&E.

5.2 Allow the following questions to inform simplification/reshaping efforts:

- Are the reporting requests to partners proportional and fit for purpose to meet DGD requirements?
- Do they add value to programme monitoring and management (e.g. actual vs budgeted use of resources, progress indicators, etc.) and to partners' own monitoring, management and administration needs and requirements?
- Where and how could they be scaled back or made less complex and demanding? *Note that this effort is about reviewing and optimising the internal control systems to apply a proportionality and effectiveness principle to administrative and reporting requirements.*

5.3 Reserve budget provisions for on-site training, both at the start of the programme and on a regular basis, to refresh knowledge and possibly to train new personnel in case of staff turnover. Beside ad-hoc training, engage partner staff in regular dialogue and coaching, and request feedback on challenges and possible improvements (in line with Recommendation 3).

4. Annexes

4.1. Evaluation framework

Attached separately

4.2. Survey Report

Attached separately

4.3. Onboarding stories: Complementary recommendations

4.3.2. Benin

1. Valorise and build upon CERRHUD's positive onboarding experience

Document and share CERRHUD's positive onboarding experience, particularly underlining (i) upfront appointment of a dedicated team to be trained, including on finance and administration; (ii) organic links between onboarding, and FA5 more in general, and long-term strategies and visions; (iii) buy-in and engagement with CERRHUD's leadership; (iv) effective communication and support between CERRHUD and ITM on financial matters, facilitated by the point (i) above.

2. Improve communication on reporting timelines

2.1 Communicate reporting requirements and timelines more clearly from the start and as part of the (administrative) onboarding process.

2.2 Consider attaching reporting schedules (e.g. GANTT charts) to partner agreements, including key deadlines and intermediate steps. Reduce reporting frequencies and burdens to the highest possible extent while abiding by DGD rules and timelines.

2.3 Schedule a dedicated session before or during programme kick-off to ensure shared understanding and agreement on reporting plans, needs and expectations.

3. Improve harmonisation of ITM scientific, management and administrative functions

This recommendation extends beyond onboarding, but it also aims to make onboarding more effective and streamlined across research, management and administration.

3.1 Strengthen the communication and joint understanding of timelines and priorities of ITM scientific activities (ITM promoters), programme management and M&E (ICO) and administrative reporting and requirements (CROO).

3.2 Promote strategic and integrated planning among different ITM units in a time-effective manner and ahead of programme kick-off.

4. Broader recommendations for impactful programming: strengthened synergies, learning

Beyond onboarding, a need was documented for better thematic and high-level synergies (i) between different ITM programmes, (ii) between the ITM and (national and international) partners, and (iii) between national partners.

4.1 Develop a partnership development strategy as part of programme design (in FA6 or elsewhere), outlining tools and processes for partner mapping and engagement in the formulation and implementation of interventions.

4.2 Support the leading role of national partners in identifying and developing in-country synergies with appropriate contractual and budget provisions (e.g. subcontract agreements and budgets for workshops and joint activities with new partners).

4.3.3. *Ethiopia*

1. Develop formal onboarding guidelines

Formal onboarding guidelines should be developed and applied systematically to onboarding of new partner institutions so that expectations regarding roles, administrative procedures, financial requirements, and timelines are clear to all parties from the outset. These guidelines should be user-friendly and shared and discussed before implementation starts and used as a reference during the initial phase of collaboration to avoid misunderstandings and delays.

2. Assign a dedicated focal point to provide early, hands-on support

This support should be involved from the onboarding phase and early planning stages to guide the development of detailed activity plans and realistic budgets, ensure alignment with DGD rules, and support the organisation of key processes such as stakeholder meetings. Early and consistent support to promoters and partner institutions with limited experience in managing complex capacity-strengthening programmes, would significantly reduce implementation challenges, and save substantial time and resources.

3. Identify opportunities for synergy in the conceptual design of new partnerships

The conceptual design phase of new partnerships should place stronger emphasis on identifying and leveraging synergies with other ongoing activities, at ITM or partner institute.

4. Improve budget structure

Budgets should be developed with more detailed and clearly defined budget lines. Overly broad and open budget categories limited effective financial follow-up and created challenges during implementation. A more structured budget would support realistic planning, facilitate monitoring, and enable earlier identification of potential issues. Additionally, creating an environment of mutual trust when it comes to budget usage, would strengthen collaboration and ensure smoother implementation of shared objectives.

5. Strengthen M&E framework

The M&E framework should be strengthened by defining more specific, realistic, and context-appropriate indicators, with explicit links to the available budget.

4.3.4. *Nepal*

1. Develop formal onboarding guidelines

Provide clear definitions of “onboarding” in FA on both scientific and management dimensions, and produce short guidelines on requirements, processes and ITM support, particularly on contract and financial management and reporting.

2. Strengthen communication and support on administrative requirements, processes, and financial management

- 2.1 Assess options for simplified reporting tools and reduced/more targeted reporting frequency, in line with DGD regulations but removing any unnecessary requirement.
- 2.2 Communicate reporting timelines in clear and timely manners during and after onboarding, with GANTT charts outlining key (internal and external) deadlines and intermediate steps.
- 2.3 Reinforce ITM support to partners in ad-hoc and regular formats (on-site training, continuous coaching).

3. Conduct preliminary institutional assessments of country partners, followed by ITM-partner dialogue on organisational cooperation

- 3.1 Develop a clear understanding of hierarchies, roles and decision making at partner level, in parallel to technical programme design, to: (i) facilitate the timely integration of contractual and reporting requirements during and after the programme's start up; (ii) sustain effective and actionable exchanges on needs, processes and timelines throughout the programme.
- 3.2 Promote and sustain ITM-partner dialogue on organisational cooperation at scientific, management and administrative levels, pairing key resource persons and decision makers from each institution.

4. Reinforce programmatic learning and improvement processes

- 4.1 Strengthen feedback and learning mechanisms for actionable organisational improvement, away from generic requests for feedback in general meetings to targeted, one-on-one sessions addressing management and administration staff on contract, finance, administrative matters. As per Recommendation 3.2, ITM management/administrative staff should monitor and report on key challenges, needs and opportunities for improvement, together with their country partner counterparts. Short problem statements and recommendations should then be shared periodically with programmatic decision makers as outlined in Recommendation 4.2.
- 4.2 Clarify ownership, processes and timelines of programmatic and organisational improvements at ITM and partner level *as part of the onboarding process*: who receives the problem statements and recommendations on organisational improvements? What will they do about these (e.g. assess compatibility of proposed changes against DGD regulations, evaluate time efforts and buy-in for suggested change, map consultation and training needs, etc.)? What is a realistic timeframe for organisational strengthening processes against other (scientific, management, administrative) needs, deadlines and priorities?

5. Improve harmonisation of ITM scientific, management and administrative functions

This recommendation extends beyond onboarding, but it also aims to make onboarding more effective and streamlined across research, management and administration.

- 5.1 Strengthen the communication and joint understanding of timelines and priorities of ITM scientific activities (ITM promoters), programme management and M&E (ICO) and administrative reporting and requirements (CROO).
- 5.2 Promote strategic and integrated planning among different ITM units in a time-effective manner and ahead of programme kick-off.

6. Broader recommendations on programme setup and governance for improved impact

Multisectoral and interdisciplinary problems demand multisectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation at local, regional and global level. An extended partnership base is critical in meeting programmatic outcomes that are identified in the design phase or mapped as emerging threats and opportunities during implementation. Different actors will bring strategic added value based on identified expertise and need assessments, where this expertise is valued.

6.1 Extend country partnership arrangements in the design and delivery of country programmes and outcomes.

6.2 Explore the possibilities to strengthening partners' role in triggering, promoting and sustaining country-based partnerships and consultancy collaborations in line with DGD regulations (e.g. subcontracting agreements).

6.3 Dedicate budget and resources for continuous technology transfers in laboratory environments but also on Artificial Intelligence for research, teaching and capacity building.

4.3.5. Rwanda

1. Plan and budget for early kick-off meetings

Include a dedicated budget for a kick-off meeting at the start of the programme (e.g. FA6). The kick-off meeting should explicitly focus on clarifying objectives, roles, administrative requirements, and the capacity development nature of the programme. This will be even more important for thematic outcomes under FA6, so that all implicated actors can meet face to face at the start of the programme.

2. Make financial monitoring tools more user-friendly

Provide promoters and co-promoters with more user-friendly financial tracking tools, enabling them to easily consult the remaining budget. Complement this with early, hands-on support sessions on financial reporting at both ITM and partner institutions.

3. Invest in dedicated human resources

Programme success depends heavily on dedicated, paid staff, including PhD students or equivalent roles responsible for implementation. Where possible, allocate budget for doctoral or long-term junior researcher positions.

4. Engage institutional leadership from the start

Early engagement of institutional management strengthens ownership, improves internal communication, and reduces delays in contract approval.