ACIAR Project: Improving Groundwater Management to Enhance Agriculture and Farming Livelihoods in Pakistan

Lahore, 22 August 2017

Working notes on some reflections on working in large complex projects

The ACIAR Groundwater project is ambitious and large, and most of all, it is highly relevant and addressing key issues. It is also complex and seeks to integrate information from multiple disciplines and agencies. This is exciting and provides many opportunities. There are also some challenges. Some of these are noted below, and build on experiences gained in many countries and across technical disciplines and cultures. They are not prioritised, and they do not apply equally across all projects.

1. Understand what is needed from the project: what is the purpose of the project and what specific questions are being asked? How do the components of the project fit together, including the technical components as well as the administrative and logistical parts.

2. Coordination and communication within the project: are essential and need to be done well and follow established protocols and also be flexible to accommodate changing conditions and take advantage of these when identified. The coordination teams needs to be in contact with others involved and requires support from everyone involved. This is where communication is needed. Often a communication plan may be developed as a guide to what needs to be done, and how, but should also be adaptable and support creative and innovative approaches that can benefit the project.

3. Organisation and support for the components: many complex and large projects are sub-divided into parts that all need support and in cases training for experts to undertake their tasks. Managing this needs to be flexible and adaptable while also recognising that decisions need to be made in line with the project objectives and rules and procedures of the funders and partners. While a managerial hierarchy of responsibilities is general in place there is a lot of value to be gained from participatory approaches that support the decision making processes and those charged with the responsibilities for delivering the project. This does not mean that all opinions count equally on all things.

4. Capacity building and training: these are required in most projects in order to deliver specific tasks to the best level possible, and also to support individuals and enable them to improve and develop their career potential. The relative efforts and emphases will vary. One area I find generally needs attention is where technical experts are not familiar with administrative or managerial processes and efficiencies. This is different from having projects that seek to develop the capacity of others – I am referring to those involved in the project itself.

5. Documentation and record: absolutely essential for operational and reporting processes, and also for archiving data and other information. Modern IT systems by themselves do not

make this happen – it's the protocols and practices that make it successful or not. Plus adherence to these.

6. Publications: depending on the type of project it is incredibly important to share information and outcomes through publications, including but not only, in the peer reviewed and publicly available literature. This takes planning and at times a long lead time is needed. Having material published in peer reviewed journals can be incredibly slow, but has the potential to improve the publication and ensure it is readily accessible. Capacity building through data analysis and writing workshops may prove useful, as can talking with editors and publishers about their expectations and processes.

7. Reporting to the funder: absolutely in terms of the contract requirements and also for building and maintaining good relationships and addressing any issues that may arise at time. Most funders will have templates or clearly documented procedures that should be followed. Communication beyond the formal requirements can be very productive, but do not overdo it and cause annoyance.

8. Sort out how things will be done and clarify any differences: as soon as any differences in approaches etc are identified take steps to address these and clarify to keep everyone working together. This should of course be done with respect and by listening while also recognising any strictures from the funder or organisational rules.

9. Confirm the budget and timelines for payments: it's essential to know what funds are available and how these should be spent, recorded and acquitted. Record keeping is an essential part of this, as is familiarity with the procedures. Keep others informed about their budget situation and check you own.

10. Make sure that you have fun and enjoy your work, help others and work as a team in a respectful manner. A group of individuals does not make a team no matter how well trained they are. A complex project is more than the sum of its individual parts, especially where the information from multiple components needs to be integrated.

Prof Max Finlayson

Institute for Land, Water & Society, Charles Sturt University

Albury, Australia