

Sharpening our collaboration framework

*Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Advisory Group to the Executive Board
July 3, 2023*

1 Rationale / motivation

Finding answers together is the motto of our strategic plan. We work together with organizations all over the world to tackle and solve the global challenges we are facing within and related to our domain. Lately, more questions are being asked from (part of) society about our cooperation with the fossil industry in view of the role companies within this industry play in affecting climate change. There is a broader strong appeal (protests, occupation, fierce actions) to (knowledge) institutions to stop cooperating with the fossil industry. In recent months, in response to this, various dialogue sessions have taken place at Wageningen University & Research to explore whether and how cooperation with the fossil industry should take place. The Executive Board of WUR feels the need, desire and urgency to make transparent and stricter choices with regard to cooperation with partners that have a negative impact on climate change. At the same time, the Executive Board sees the dilemmas associated with these choices. The choices need to fit in the broader perspective on collaborations, starting from the perspective of our mission and strategic aim to contribute with knowledge and expertise to necessary global transitions through Finding Answers Together.

The Executive Board decided to sharpen our collaboration principles by adding decision criteria that assess the contribution of the cooperation partner – next to the individual project – to the necessary major global transitions as described in our Strategic Plan.

2 Assignment and deliverables

The Executive Board asks an advice in the form of an integrated framework for decision making -on content and approach- regarding collaboration with others, applicable to both Wageningen University and Wageningen Research. This framework should be an extension of our policy to judge collaboration on a case by case basis, and is to add an approach to weigh individual (positive) project/initiative results and impact on the main system transitions that are required in our domain (and as identified in our Strategic Plan), against the ambitions and commitment of the collaboration party to these system transitions.

A main systems transition is required to halt climate change. Given that this assignment is initiated by the questions regarding cooperating with the fossil industry, the framework will firstly be developed to apply to collaborations with companies that are part of the fossil industry. This industry has significant impact on the transitions required to halt climate change, and therefore we require an approach to judge the benefit and impact of an individual research project collaboration against the overall impact, ambitions and commitment to halting climate change of the party that we collaborate with. The exact definition scope for the fossil industry, companies within this industry, or type of projects included is to be part of the framework.

The application towards “the fossil industry” will serve as a pilot to develop a more general method and framework, which is to be further refined and extended later. While the primary focus for this assignment is research collaboration, it is to be applicable to other forms of collaboration.

3 Scope

The current WUR collaboration assessment procedure applies five principles to individual collaborations (projects/initiatives) within the regular process of deciding upon entering into a joint project (or other collaboration) by the individual scientist(s) involved or within teams or science groups. This assessment covers the following five principles: 1) alignment with WUR mission and goals, 2) Safety of our students, researchers and staff, 3) (scientific) integrity and academic freedom, 4) Endorsement of fundamental human rights 5) contribution to open flow of ideas and data.

The scope of the assignment is to add to these principles an assessment principle/framework that enables a test (and therefore possible rejection) for a proposed project by weighing it against the broader impact, ambitions and commitment of the collaboration partner on the necessary system transitions in our domain. This assessment is to be done through a "Collaboration Partner Transitions Test (CPTT)" (as a suggested terminology).

The Advisory Group is tasked to address a number of elements and perspectives:

- Description of the goals of the framework
- Operationalize framework and judging whether this is likely to result in a workable framework
- Decision-making criteria and decision-making process, including when a CPTT would be applied and ensuring that decisions are fact and science based and transparent both in terms of process and outcome
- Route to testing/further developing and implementation of the framework, including a time schedule
- Monitoring and review cycle to enable learning and future adaptation of the framework

Important to consider:

- How do we make such a framework concrete, transparent, fair and workable?
- How do we involve individual staff, organizational units and our students in further developing and enhancing this framework?
- How do we ensure we do not add administrative burden or a checkmark-culture?

In the development of the framework, we ask the Advisory Group to take into account/make use of:

- Existing tools and/or assessment criteria that may currently already be used within the organization
- (Best) Practices of other knowledge institutions/organizations.

If the Advisory Group determines that adjustments to the scope of the assignment are necessary to come to a workable framework, the Executive Board is open to discuss and consider adjusting the ToR.

4 Background information

Based on the "Let's Explore" sessions and discussions with various stakeholders, the following possible scenarios for a framework application toward the fossil industry have been identified (see also appendix 2). Viewed from the impact on climate change:

1. we reject all new collaborations with the fossil industry (and are we phasing out existing collaborations?)
2. we reject new cooperation with specific companies from the fossil industry (to specify in policy which companies then, and why/when, how do you assess that)
3. we reject in principle new cooperation with the fossil industry as a whole. However, if a project comes up that we think 'but that contributes so much to our mission', then you focus the conversation on it (what are the starting points, preconditions, etc.).
4. we never reject cooperation with the fossil industry at client level, but assess cooperation at project level, and provide more knowledge about and better supervision of compliance with the guidelines we already have and tighten them where necessary.

In effect the assignment for the Advisory Group is to create an actionable combination of the second and fourth scenario from the Let's Explore Sessions. The detailed notes from the third round of Let's Explore sessions is included in Appendix 2.

Additional background information:

- The existing guidelines on collaboration policy were pulled together in one document in March of this year: WUR principles of collaboration (Appendix 1)
- Corporate Climate Responsibility Monitoring as thought on framework decision making criteria (Appendix 3)
- Dossier End Fossil that was handed over to the Executive Board at the third Let's Explore session

5 Timeline and budget

Report back to the Executive Board a first assessment of the assignment, including relevant considerations or intermediate steps by July 15, 2023. Further time planning to be decided based on July 15 output.

6 Roles and responsibility

Advisory Group reports to Executive Board

Chair: Carolien Kroeze, Professor Environmental Systems Analysis

Members:

Vincent Blok, Professor in Philosophy of Technology and Responsible Innovation

Harry Bitter, Professor Biobased Chemistry and Technology

Niklas Hoehne, Special Professor Mitigation of Greenhouse Gasses

Harriette Bos, Senior Scientist Fossil free materials and Systems analysis

Geert Aarts, Researcher Marine Mammals

Katarina Smieskova, Master Student/Green Office

Hilde Bos, Corporate Strategy & Accounts

Linking pin with Executive Board: Rens Buchwaldt

7 Communication

This document to be communicated to intranet and internet by July 6. No further restrictions.

8 Follow-up procedure and/or implementation

Based on the advice provided by the Advisory Group, the Executive Board will decide on the working approach and application of the framework and policy regarding cooperation with the fossil industry as a "test case" for sharpening our collaboration framework. The next step is the further elaboration to enable broader application.

Appendix 1
Collaboration principles WUR

Appendix 2
Notes from Let's Explore Session 3

Appendix 3
Corporate Climate Responsibility Monitoring