



ESTABLISHING EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS IN PRACTICE:

HOW LIGHT STRENGTHENED SHARED LEADERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND RESEARCH MANAGEMENT

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THE CHALLENGE

International research collaborations are critical for understanding and addressing the drivers of poor health, but they are not always shaped by equitable partnership. In some cases, institutions and researchers from higher-income countries have benefited disproportionately from research conducted in lower-income settings, using it primarily to advance their own academic priorities and careers. Building genuine partnerships, where all partners have equal voice and influence in shaping research agendas, decisions, and benefits, is therefore a critical priority.

Delivering a large, multi-million, cross-country health research partnership is highly complex. It requires delivering on ambitious research goals within fixed, and often tight timeframes, establishing effective, inclusive and fair collaboration across institutions, disciplines, and contexts. This requires embedding perspectives from partners in the countries where research is conducted to redress power asymmetries and redistribute roles and responsibilities in a more equitable and balanced manner¹.

These challenges are compounded by the growing complexity of research management itself. Large multi-partner research projects now require specialised administrative, financial, and managerial systems, alongside robust research governance, ethical compliance, institutional policies, and human resource capacity. Strengthening these systems is therefore critical, not only for efficient delivery, but also for more balanced and sustainable collaboration.



ECAG members, Dr Mohammed Yassin & Ms Phumeza Tisile at LIGHT Annual Consortium Meeting in Copenhagen 2025

LEAVING NO-ONE BEHIND: TRANSFORMING GENDERED PATHWAYS TO HEALTH FOR TB

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WHAT LIGHT DID

LIGHT embedded shared management and administrative practices, alongside targeted capacity-strengthening activities, to support a more equitable and balanced partnership. In doing so, it demonstrated that research partnerships can generate benefits beyond the scientific impact of research by strengthening collaboration, ongoing dialogue, and shared ownership in ways that can outlive the lifespan of a single grant and be replicated in other organisations and projects.

1. SHARED AND ROTATING LEADERSHIP

LIGHT introduced rotating chairs and note-takers across consortium meetings, including the Management Team, Research Team, and Working Groups. Short handover meetings between outgoing and incoming chairs were built into the process so that agendas could be jointly prepared and meetings could be chaired with continuity and confidence. For example, the LIGHT CEO, Research Director, and all research leads from LIGHT's partner organisations took turns in chairing the monthly LIGHT Management Team meeting. This enabled a wider range of colleagues, including Early-Career Researchers, administrative and management staff, to gain experience in moderating and take on visible leadership and coordination roles.

2. STRENGTHENING AFRICA'S RESEARCH CAPACITY AND SUPPORTING THE NEXT GENERATION OF RESEARCHERS

Africa currently accounts for only 2% of the global research output, reflecting the continent's limited research visibility and knowledge production compared to Western countries². In response, LIGHT invested in personal and professional development of early-career researchers, helping to strengthen both individual capacity and the wider research environment. This included:

- a. **Employing several Early-Career Researchers (ECRs)** from African partner institutions to lead research.
- b. **Offering continuous professional development opportunities**, including participation in conferences, courses, workshops, training, learning events, and exchange visits at LSTM and other organisations, both within and beyond the LIGHT Consortium.
- c. **Providing structured supervisory support**, enabling ECRs to benefit from mentorship and guidance throughout their research journey.
- d. **Giving ECRs a platform to talk about their research and chair meetings**, helping them improve their presentation, leadership, and management skills.

3. STRENGTHENING RESEARCH MANAGEMENT CAPACITY

Capacity strengthening was central to LIGHT's approach throughout its lifetime. Across the programme, LIGHT facilitated access to training and learning opportunities for consortium members, external stakeholders, and partner institutions, helping to strengthen both individual skills and wider institutional capacity.

Importantly, LIGHT addressed a gap in training provision, which is often focused primarily on research staff, by investing in professional services and support staff. This reflected a growing recognition that effective research delivery depends not only on scientific leadership, but also on strong administrative, managerial, and financial systems. Principal Investigators (PIs) reported to spend more than 40% of their time on administrative tasks that could be performed more efficiently by dedicated support staff^{3,4}.



The traditional model, in which senior academics are expected to lead intellectually while also managing the operational demands of research projects, is proving untenable; and the need for professional management across the research lifecycle has become more pressing than ever.

In recognition of this evolving landscape, and in response to partners' requests, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM) and the LIGHT Programme developed a three-day Research Administration and Management Programme (RAMP). This initiative, targeted at research administrators, managers, and financial officers, was informed by a structured needs-assessment and grounded in the [SARIMA Professional Competency Framework](#)⁵. RAMP covered three core modules: **Administration**, including diary and travel management, filing, and minute-taking; **Project Management**, including risk management, safeguarding, monitoring and evaluation, and the use of tools such as logframes and Gantt charts; and **Financial Management**, including budgeting, forecasting, and reporting.

4. GOVERNANCE THROUGH DEDICATED WORKING GROUPS

At the start of LIGHT, two dedicated working groups were established: the **Research Uptake Working Group** (RUWG) and the **Programme Management Working Group** (PMWG). Each group operated under agreed Terms of Reference (ToR), developed collaboratively with members.

These working groups served as a platform for colleagues within the consortium whose primary roles were in research uptake, or in programme management, administration and finance. They created structured spaces for coordination, shared learning, decision-making, and accountability across the consortium.

The **RUWG** was responsible for supporting the uptake of LIGHT's research findings into actionable policies and practices for maximum impact through effective stakeholder engagement, strategic communication, strengthening capacity and continuous monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). Decisions relating to national-level research uptake activities were made by institutional or in-country research uptake teams. These decisions and activities were usually shared with the wider RUWG through action plans, communications and social media plans, monthly meetings, and follow-up exchanges outside meetings where needed. This enabled feedback, coordination, and shared learning across the consortium. Decisions relating to consortium-wide research uptake activities were discussed collectively during monthly RUWG meetings.

The **PMWG** was responsible for supporting and monitoring the operational implementation of the LIGHT programme - including risk assessment and management, safeguarding, accurate and transparent reporting, capacity assessment and strengthening for research management and administration, and oversight of consortium's compliance with FCDO's Supplier Code of Conduct. Decisions relating to programme management were discussed and agreed collectively during meetings, providing a clear and transparent mechanism for oversight and coordination.

Both groups included representatives from each consortium partner, and adopted LIGHT's rotating chair and note-taker approach to distribute responsibilities more equitably and widen participation in leadership and coordination. To improve attendance, both working groups agreed fixed monthly meeting dates, scheduled to avoid overlap for members involved in both groups and timed to work across all consortium time zones. Meetings were structured around agendas with standing items and any other business.



5. EXTERNAL CONSORTIUM ADVISORY GROUP (ECAG)

The LIGHT External Consortium Advisory Group (ECAG) was established at the inception of the programme to provide independent technical oversight and strategic guidance. Its role was to ensure that LIGHT’s research and wider outputs remained aligned with national policy priorities and global guidelines; and was well positioned to inform evidence-informed decision-making and development outcomes. Such advisory and “linkage and exchange” mechanisms are widely recognised as critical for bridging the gap between research and policy⁶.

The ECAG comprised eight members, with balanced representation across gender (four women and four men) and geographic context (four from high-income countries and four from low- and middle-income countries), reflecting a deliberate commitment to equity and inclusivity in governance structures. Diverse and inclusive stakeholder representation has been shown to strengthen the legitimacy, relevance, and uptake of research⁷. Membership included representatives from major international organisations (the World Bank, the Global Fund, and FCDO), two independent technical advisors, two tuberculosis (TB) advocates, and one academic representative, ensuring a diversity of perspectives spanning policy, practice, technical expertise and lived experience.

The ECAG played a critical role in shaping LIGHT’s strategic direction and implementation by providing ongoing, structured advice to the Management Team. This included reviewing research proposals and protocols to provide feedback before ethics submission. This mentorship approach helped strengthen methodological rigour, relevance, and researchers’ capacity⁸. The group also advised on research uptake strategies, including identifying appropriate dissemination channels, policy engagement opportunities, and strategic partnerships, in line with knowledge brokering approaches that facilitate the translation of evidence into policy and practice⁹. In addition, ECAG members contributed to the validation of research outputs, enhancing their credibility and policy salience. Their rotating participation in annual consortium meetings enabled continuous dialogue between researchers, advisors, and stakeholders, reinforcing sustained engagement and mutual learning⁷.



ECAG member & LIGHT RU manager at PV exhibition in Nigeria



LIGHT IMPACT

CONCEPTUAL AND INSTRUMENTAL IMPACT



LIGHT Consortium reflecting on LIGHT Impact at Consortium meeting, November 2025

LIGHT helped redefine what equitable partnership looks like in practice across the consortium. Its rotating leadership model encouraged a more inclusive and participatory approach to consortium management, reinforcing the idea that leadership, coordination, and decision-making can be shared across institutions and roles.

“I felt that the rotating chair for the meetings at LIGHT was a unique and truly empowering approach especially for those less senior. It gave partners an opportunity to lead and to feel really valued. Having been on other consortia before, this was a great experience for me.”

Dr Augustine Choko, LIGHT Principal Investigator & Senior Lecturer at MLW

This equitable partnership approach led to tangible changes in how the consortium was managed and how decisions were made. Rotating chairing, note-taking and structured handovers transformed how LIGHT operates as a consortium. This was demonstrated in shared leadership and responsibility across partners, creating a more balanced distribution of tasks. It also enabled partners to engage equitably in agenda-setting and shape discussions in ways that reflected their own contextual realities and country priorities.

“LIGHT deliberately chose to rotate the chairing of the monthly Consortium Management Team meetings among partners. This simple procedural measure had immense value for me personally and for the Respiratory Society of Kenya... Through this approach, I felt respected, valued, and fully integrated into the consortium’s decision-making processes. It demonstrated that genuine and equitable research partnerships between institutions can indeed be built.”

Prof Jeremiah Chakaya, LIGHT Principal Investigator & Director at ReSoK, Kenya

“LIGHT’s approach to steering management meetings was unique and provided an opportunity to all of us, project leaders, to plan and lead a meeting. This deepened the collaborative spirit of the project.”

Prof Bruce Kirenga, LIGHT Principal Investigator & Director at MLI, Uganda



CONCEPTUAL AND INSTRUMENTAL IMPACT

The consistent application of this approach over six years of LIGHT led to changes in day-to-day practices, behaviours, and ways of working across the administration and management of a large consortium. It strengthened facilitation, leadership, and consensus-building skills among partners, and some individuals went on to adopt these practices in their own organisations and projects, suggesting influence beyond LIGHT itself.

“The approach of rotating chairs and note-takers facilitated diffusion of power among team members. I had a chance to do both and this experience reinforced my skills in moderating and leading discussions. I will definitely aim to replicate this approach in future research projects that I may be involved in.”

Mr Gracious Ali, Research Uptake Manager, AFIDEP, Malawi

“Personally, chairing meetings in the rotating model strengthened my facilitation and consensus-building skills, but more importantly it embedded equity into the governance of the LIGHT programme itself. This is an approach I am actively adopting in new large, multi-country research collaborations.”

Prof Peter MacPherson, Research Team Lead, University of Glasgow, UK

The working groups also improved the flow of information by providing regular updates to the Management Team, supporting stronger coordination and transparency across the programme.

“Working within a small group of like-minded individuals in the PMWG fostered greater transparency, made discussions more open and constructive, and supported a more equitable sharing of roles, responsibilities, and decision-making.”

Ms Joy Gilroy, Project Admin & Comms Officer, LSTM, UK

The External Consortium Advisory Group (ECAG) enhanced researchers’ awareness of policy processes, stakeholder needs and priorities, and the value of co-production and meaningful engagement. Their advice strengthened researchers’ understanding of how research can be positioned to influence policy and practice, contributing to changes in attitudes towards policy engagement and evidence use. ECAG also informed the refinement of research protocols, research uptake strategies, and programme implementation decisions, thereby influencing consortium practices and behaviours.

“As a member of the LIGHT ECAG, I had the opportunity to actively engage in and contribute to the planning, implementation, capacity building, policy design, and dissemination of the consortium’s research. Being paired with an early-career researcher allowed me to share both personal and professional experience, strengthening the methodological rigor, interpretation, and relevance of their research protocols and findings...”

Dr Mohammed Yassin, ECAG Member - Senior Advisor, Tuberculosis, Global Fund, Geneva

“It was such a valuable experience to be engaged with the early-career researchers through the LIGHT ECAG. They came impressively prepared to present on their research plans and their interim and advanced research products. The researchers combined rigorous data analysis with novel partnership approaches to understand the policy and research landscape. They were supported by diverse senior and mid-career academics and partners...”

Ms Diana Weil, ECAG Member - Former Lead for Strategy, WHO Global TB Programme



CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

LIGHT strengthened skills, confidence, and expertise at multiple levels across the consortium. Shared leadership practices created opportunities for members to take on new roles and responsibilities, helping to build confidence and leadership capacity among a wide range of staff, including early-career researchers, those working at the research-policy interface, programme managers and administrators.



RAMP Uganda 2024

“My experience with LIGHT was great. I enhanced my capacity in Research Project Management, learned working in a consortium environment where multi partners from different countries with different backgrounds are involved. I appreciate the growth and the spirit of inclusivity that is now part of me.”

Mr Chrispine Okoth, Finance & Administration Manager, ReSoK, Kenya

“The LIGHT Consortium established several working groups such as the Programme Management Working Group and the Research Uptake one. This created specialised spaces for professional development and peer to peer mentorship.”

Dr Winters Muttamba, Project Manager, MLI, Uganda

LIGHT also strengthened the research capacity of early-career researchers to enhance their scientific writing, research methods, leadership skills alongside structured mentorship. These efforts were reflected in a marked shift in authorship of research outputs over the six years of the programme. While principal investigators most often appeared as first authors in Years 1 and 2, by the end of Year 6, nine of the fifteen papers accepted for publication or submitted to journals were led by early career researchers.

“Being part of the LIGHT Consortium has been a defining part of my career journey. It strengthened my confidence as a researcher and helped me become a more thoughtful and engaged leader. Collaborating with colleagues from different parts of the world broadened my perspective. Being exposed to global conversations and knowledge-sharing platforms deepened my sense of purpose and contribution as a health systems researcher.”

Dr Chukwuebuka Ugwu, Early-Career Researcher, ZRC, Nigeria

“Being part of the LIGHT Consortium has been an important part of my development as a researcher. The mentorship and collaborative environment have helped me strengthen my skills in study design, data analysis, and communicating research findings tailored to different audiences. Beyond academic outputs, the consortium created opportunities to engage with policymakers at national and international levels. This helped ensure that our research contributes not only to scientific knowledge but also to research outputs that informed discussions and shaped policy to strengthen TB programmes in the high-burden settings where we worked, and beyond.”

Dr Mphatso Phiri, Early-Career Researcher, MLW, Malawi



INSTRUMENTAL IMPACT



“Being part of the LIGHT Consortium has been a major turning point in my growth as an early-career researcher. The mentorship and hands-on support strengthened my ability to apply innovative approaches such as participatory research, and the findings from this research work have translated into real-world impact through feedback sessions with facilities and counties that generated action points now driving improvements in practice. LIGHT has also significantly strengthened my scientific writing capacity. Before joining the consortium, I had only one publication in a peer-reviewed journal, but I have since contributed to seven manuscripts and as a first or second author to at least five of the seven manuscripts. I am especially proud to have disseminated this work on international platforms such as The Union and ATS, including receiving an ATS Travel Award scholarship which is given to authors with outstanding abstracts.”

Ms Rhoda Pola, Early-Career Researcher, ReSoK, Kenya



“My experience as an Early-Career Researcher within LIGHT has been genuinely transformative. The mentorship and structured support I received strengthened my capacity in implementation research, health systems evaluation, and evidence generation for policy. Through close collaboration with colleagues across institutions, I developed greater confidence in leading research processes, managing complex datasets, and translating findings for policy and practice.

Dr Jasper Nidoi, Early-Career Researcher, MLI, Uganda



ECAG members at a panel at LIGHT Consortium meeting in Nigeria 2024

INSTRUMENTAL IMPACT

Research management capacity was also strengthened through the Research Administration and Management Programme (RAMP). Through RAMP, LIGHT equipped administrators, managers, and finance officers with practical skills, tools and knowledge needed to manage externally funded research grants more effectively. This led to increased confidence, improved performance, enhanced reporting accuracy and team efficiency in grant management.



“Being part of RAMP has enabled me to contribute to the research financial management ecosystem by training research administrators and managers at different institutions across Uganda and Kenya. Individuals trained have expressed better understanding of the project finance management cycle; from budgeting at proposal stage, budget control, and budget management. I am grateful for the LIGHT Consortium that has enabled this knowledge and skills transfer across institutions in different countries.”

Mr Emmanuel Kansime Muntu, Finance Manager, MLI, Uganda

To extend the impact of this work, participants who completed RAMP were eligible to apply for an LSTM-certified Training of Trainers (ToT) programme. Successful applicants went on to deliver RAMP within their own institutions. This contributed not only to skills development, but also to participants’ professional visibility, career progression, and recognition within their organisations. The ECAG also supported capacity strengthening through mentorship of early career researchers and guidance on research design and research uptake.



“My experience with the LIGHT Consortium has changed me profoundly and improved both my leadership and confidence. My comprehension of research administration and management has grown as a result of RAMP. As a certified RAMP trainer, I play a critical role in mentoring and teaching others, significantly advancing institutional research management practices. My primary accomplishment has been achieving RAMP ToT certification and enhancing research administration quality within my organisation by leading several RAMP courses as an instructor.”

Ms Jackline Nakabira, Administrator, MLI, Uganda



ENDURING CONNECTIVITY

LIGHT fostered long-lasting networks, friendships, and academic collaborations across LIGHT partner countries and institutions and beyond - leading to enhanced peer support, expanded professional networks and future research collaborations beyond LIGHT.

“Beyond research, LIGHT fostered lasting professional networks, laying the building blocks for equitable collaborations where African researchers are not only participants, but leaders in generating and shaping evidence.”

Dr Jasper Nidoi, Early-Career Researcher, MLI, Uganda

The ECAG further enhanced enduring connectivity by bringing together researchers, policymakers, technical experts, and advocates from different sectors and geographies. In doing so, it strengthened trust, sustained dialogue, and mutual learning across the consortium, all of which are important for the effective use of evidence.

“...Throughout the process, I witnessed how LIGHT fostered genuine partnership and meaningful stakeholder engagement. This collaborative approach not only enhanced the quality of the research but also facilitated stakeholder buy-in and helped ensure that the evidence generated was incorporated into policy discussions and decisions at multiple levels.”

Dr Mohammed Yassin, ECAG Member - Senior Advisor, Tuberculosis, Global Fund, Geneva

“...I was especially impressed by their early and substantive dialogues with National TB Programme representatives and community-based partners. I saw just how much these counterparts valued their engagement at the cross-country meeting in Nigeria. The LIGHT Secretariat reached out to ECAG frequently to seek fora to amplify awareness of the work and findings. Equally important, the ECRs worked hard to craft research syntheses and top messages, so essential to having a policy impact.”

Ms Diana Weil, ECAG Member - Former Lead for Strategy, WHO Global TB Programme



ECAG member & LIGHT RU manager at PV exhibition in Nigeria



LONG-TERM CULTURAL IMPACT

LIGHT's equitable approach helped normalise more inclusive and participatory ways of working across the consortium, reinforcing principles of shared ownership, accountability, and equitable partnership.

Several of LIGHT's partnership approaches contributed to long-term change, beyond the lifetime of the programme. LIGHT enhanced partners' academic and professional recognition, in some cases leading to promotions and career progression. It also enhanced visibility and created opportunities for partner institutions, including initiating the first joint master's programme between Zankli Research Centre at Bingham University in Nigeria and LSTM. These achievements will continue shaping academic and community health landscapes.

RAMP further contributed to longer-term institutional change. By enabling trained participants to become certified trainers and deliver the programme within their own organisations, LIGHT helped embed research management capacity locally. Partner organisations adopted stronger grant management practices and increasingly recognised the importance of research support staff in enabling research delivery and impact.

Above all, LIGHT leaves behind a committed network of partners, strengthened systems, and shared learning. Its legacy provides a foundation for continued collaboration, high-quality research, meaningful engagement and equitable partnerships.



"...My growth within LIGHT directly benefited my institution by strengthening our ability to design and implement rigorous studies, contribute to high-quality publications, and engage policymakers using locally generated evidence. My ECR journey culminated in completing my PhD, thereby contributing to research outputs that support health systems strengthening for equitable TB care."

Dr Jasper Nidoi, Early-Career Researcher, MLI, Uganda

PROFESSIONAL AND CAREER PROGRESSION AND ENHANCED VISIBILITY



Professor Chakaya winning the Union Medal Award for his efforts to ending TB at the Union Conference 2025.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ **1. Institutionalise equity through routine partnership practices**

Equity should be embedded in the day-to-day running of research partnerships, not treated as a stated principle alone. Future programmes should formalise practices such as rotating leadership roles, inclusive agenda-setting, shared chairing and note-taking, and structured handover processes within partnership agreements and standard operating procedures. This helps distribute power more fairly, strengthen ownership, and ensure that different institutional and country priorities shape decisions.
- ✓ **2. Use shared leadership to build capacity as well as govern effectively**

Leadership models should create opportunities for early-career researchers, research uptake staff, programme managers, administrative and support staff to take on visible roles in chairing meetings, presenting work, and contributing to decision-making. Shared leadership not only strengthens performance and inclusion, but also helps develop confidence, skills, and future leadership pipelines.
- ✓ **3. Invest in research management and support systems, not only researchers**

Strong and equitable partnerships depend on professional research management as well as scientific excellence. Future programmes should expand and replicate models such as RAMP to strengthen the capacity of research administrators, managers, and finance staff, including through certification and online or hybrid delivery. Positioning research management as a recognised professional track can improve efficiency, reporting quality, and the long-term sustainability of research systems.
- ✓ **4. Embed dedicated working groups as part of consortium governance**

Smaller, purpose-driven working groups can strengthen collaboration, trust, transparency, and the flow of information across large partnerships. Future consortia should consider using working groups as a standard governance mechanism, supported by clear Terms of Reference, regular review, and opportunities for cross-group learning.
- ✓ **5. Sustain inclusive advisory mechanisms to strengthen relevance and uptake**

Advisory groups with diverse representation across geography, gender, sectors, and expertise can improve the quality, legitimacy, and policy relevance of research. Future programmes should maintain and strengthen such mechanisms, ensuring strong representation from partner institutions and contexts, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and closer links to implementation and evidence use.
- ✓ **6. Embed co-creation across all stages of research**

Co-creation should be built into agenda-setting, study design, implementation, interpretation, and dissemination. Partner-led processes, shared storytelling, and collaborative decision-making help increase ownership, strengthen contextual relevance, and support impact beyond the life of a project. Practical tools and templates may help make co-creation more systematic and measurable.
- ✓ **7. Strengthen impact tracking and partner-led learning**

Future partnerships should document not only research outputs, but also changes in behaviour, institutional practice, leadership, and policy influence. More systematic tracking of these wider impacts, combined with partner-led storytelling and case studies, can build a stronger evidence-base for equitable partnership approaches.
- ✓ **8. Plan for sustainability from the outset**

Sustainable impact requires more than delivering project activities. Partnerships should include succession planning, institutional embedding strategies, follow-on funding pathways, and opportunities for trained individuals to become trainers or champions within their organisations. Lasting impact is more likely when practices, systems, and relationships are designed to continue beyond the funding cycle.



The LIGHT team celebrating the graduation of two LIGHT doctoral fellows in Liverpool

CONCLUSION

Equitable partnerships are most effective when equity is embedded in the systems that shape how research is led, governed, and managed, rather than treated simply as a shared value. LIGHT showed that capacity strengthening, co-creation, and shared ownership should be treated as key deliverables and as core elements of effective and sustainable partnerships. LIGHT's inclusive and participatory governance model helped reinforce norms of equitable partnership, evidence-informed decision-making, and accountability across the consortium. Together, these contributions suggest that LIGHT's impact extended beyond immediate programme delivery, influencing institutional culture, professional practice, and partnership norms in ways that can endure over time.

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