

Inclusive Open Science in Practice: Funders, Knowledge Cultures, and EMCR Empowerment for a Sustainable Research Ecosystem

14th Global Research Council Annual Meeting

18th May 2026

The UNESCO Chair organised a side panel for the 14th Annual Meeting of the Global Research Council in Bangkok titled “Inclusive Open Science in Practice: Funders, Knowledge Cultures, and EMCR Empowerment for a Sustainable Research Ecosystem on 18th May 2026.”



Figure 1 Figure 1 Dr Rajesh Tandon Highlighting the Open Science Pillars 3 and 4

This side panel was the result of months of collaboration and collective work between the UNESCO Chair, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the National Research Foundation (NRF) South Africa, the Secretariat of MENA Research Councils, the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), and the Global Young Academy (GYA).

The session opened with the Secretariat of MENA Research Councils presenting

an update on the application of Open Science principles within the MENA region. This laid an important foundation for the subsequent presentation on understanding Open Science Pillars 3 and 4 and elucidating the diversity of knowledge cultures through the experiences and learnings emerging from the DECODE Knowledge Project.

The DECODE segment opened with IDRC President Julie Delahanty delivering a strong and impassioned introduction on the urgent need to recognise and operationalise Pillars 3 and 4 of Open Science- namely, the engagement with diverse knowledge systems and the dialogue with other knowledge systems.



Figure 2 IDRC President, Julie Delahanty introducing the DECODE Project

Julie noted the importance of recognising the existence of several knowledge cultures and extending respect and dignity to Indigenous knowledge systems, underlining the relevance of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), as applied within the Canadian context.

She propounded that it is essential to properly reconfigure research systems in ways that genuinely enable decolonisation and reconciliation.

Julie introduced the DECODE Project, noting that it adopts a systems-thinking approach to address imperative questions relating to justice, equality, and climate resilience.

Julie then handed over to Dr Rajesh Tandon, Co-Principal Investigator of the DECODE Knowledge Project, who led an interactive session explaining the Open Science pillars and the work of the DECODE Project.

Dr Tandon began by noting that the foundation of DECODE lies in the recognition that knowledge resides outside academia as well, and in the understanding that while some forms of knowledge have historically been systemically recognised, others have been marginalised- a process that academia, often unintentionally, continues to reproduce.

Dr Tandon then presented an overview of the DECODE Project and its work by underlining its core concepts and principles.

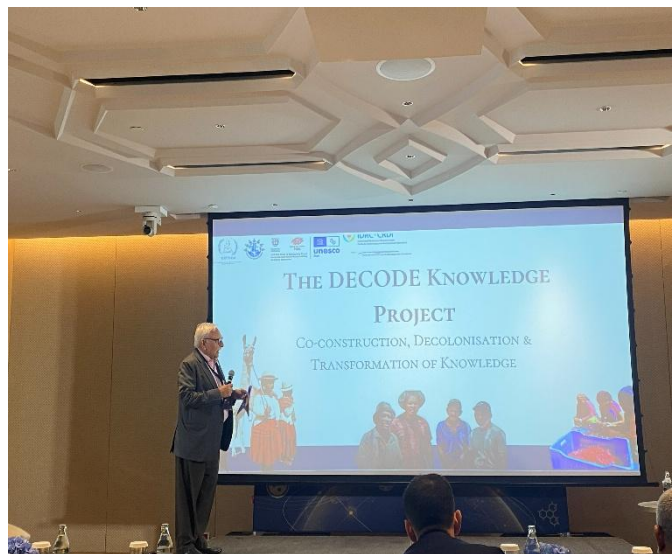


Figure 3 Dr Rajesh Tandon Introducing the DECODE Knowledge Project

He highlighted how DECODE facilitated the co-creation of knowledge through respectful and meaningful partnerships between academic institutions and communities. He noted that while community knowledge is harnessed to generate important solutions to the complex challenges emerging from the climate crisis, such knowledge itself is embedded within a spiritual worldview grounded in values of sustainability, conservation, and inclusion. It is expressed through local languages and dialects, often orally, and represented through local rituals, folklore, and cultural practices. Therefore, no research based on meaningful partnership can truly be undertaken without recognising and respecting these dimensions.



Figure 4 Dr Tandon demonstrating how people and their story's were represented through StoryMaps

Dr Tandon underlined the importance of respecting language differences and explained how DECODE has consciously incorporated this principle into its functioning. He noted that webinars were conducted in the languages of the communities themselves, and that each report, story map, and other knowledge output produced through the case studies was made available both in the language of the community and in English.

In this context, Dr Tandon also highlighted the importance of arts-based methods as a means of truly engaging with the vastness and richness of non-academic knowledge systems.

Further elaborating on this, Dr Tandon presented two story maps to demonstrate how DECODE ensured that knowledge holders themselves remained represented within the knowledge being shared with wider audiences. The story map platform enabled the DECODE case studies to highlight not only the knowledge itself, but also the communities, their languages, voices, topographies, rituals, and lived realities, thereby ensuring that these knowledges continued to remain owned by the communities and were not extracted from them. This approach ensured that knowledge creation processes remained genuinely community-led and rooted in community ownership.



Figure 5 Discussion on the Lessons from DECODE

Building on these reflections, Dr Tandon then presented ten key lessons emerging from the DECODE Project:

- Decolonised co-construction of context-specific, actionable knowledge solutions becomes sustainable when grounded in genuine partnerships and woven together with community and Indigenous knowledge. This approach enhances community ownership of research findings and supports sustainable actions for change.
- Recognising distinctive community and Indigenous knowledge cultures is essential for building partnerships rooted in mutual respect and trust.
- DECODE illustrates the imperative reflected within Pillars 3 and 4 of the UNESCO Open Science framework, which acknowledge the critical importance of including diverse knowledge ecologies in the shaping and framing of research. The project demonstrates how such international frameworks can and should be further built upon.
- Since community and Indigenous knowledge is embedded within local cultures and expressed through local languages, developing a shared understanding of research questions and processes requires greater investment of time and resources prior to and throughout the research process.
- Women's leadership and knowledge are central to community-led transformation due to their role in sustaining community knowledge, environmental stewardship, and collective wellbeing.
- Dissemination of research findings requires the adoption of diverse forms that respond to both community and academic interests, including videos, exhibitions, and policy dialogues in addition to conventional outputs such as articles and books.
- Addressing ethical issues related to ownership and benefit-sharing in co-produced knowledge openly and early in the process is critical for sustaining trusting partnerships.
- Bridging academic and community/Indigenous knowledge cultures is enabled through trusted intermediaries rooted in local contexts and accountable to all parties.
- Strengthening the capacities of academic researchers and research funding staff in community-based participatory research methodologies, including arts-based research methods, is essential for supporting decolonised co-construction of knowledge.
- Investing resources directly in community and Indigenous organisations promotes long-term efforts in the co-construction of knowledge by communities themselves.

Dr Tandon concluded by re-emphasising that significant work still remains to be done in meaningfully operationalising Open Science Pillars 3 and 4, and that only through such efforts can the principles of Open Science truly realise their transformative potential.



Figure 6 Dr Nokuthula Mchunu speaking on Open Science Pillars 3 and 4

Following this, Julie Delahanty introduced Dr Nokuthula Mchunu, Director within the International Grants and Partnerships Division of the NRF South Africa.

Dr Mchunu built upon Dr Tandon’s insights and the DECODE findings by noting that the term “Indigenous,” as reflected within the DECODE

lessons, does not adequately or uniformly encompass all contexts and territories globally. She referred to the DECODE reflection that it is necessary to distinguish between the phraseology of Indigenous-led research and locally or community-led research, and that Indigenous research is grounded within a rights-based framework, including principles outlined by the United Nations. She further highlighted that the term “Indigenous” itself is not universally used across all contexts.

Dr Mchunu further re-emphasised the need to strengthen local knowledge systems, noting that this is the only pathway through which genuine societal transformation can truly be understood and realised. She called for a deep reconsideration of funding mechanisms in order to seriously engage with what it actually takes for funding institutions themselves to work meaningfully with diverse knowledge systems. She further called for a critical rethinking of impact assessment metrics, excellence frameworks, and dominant understandings of success, arguing that excellence cannot truly be considered meaningful if it does not lead to transformation. Dr Mchunu also noted that research funders need to think more seriously about creating stronger pathways for involving everyone within processes of knowledge production. She concluded by stating that local and community-led knowledge offer important criteria for understanding and measuring impact, and that this understanding must be meaningfully harnessed.



Figure 7 Julie, Dr Tandon and Dr Mchunu summarising the session

Session moderator Julie Delahanty then summarised the key learnings from the discussion, emphasising that this is the time for academic institutions and research funding mechanisms to undertake strong structural measures to build meaningfully upon Pillars 3 and 4 of Open Science. She then opened the floor for audience interaction.



Figure 8 Prof Novaes asking questions to Dr Tandon and Dr Mchunu

Professor Moacyr Novaes, Director of the Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America, posed an important question drawing upon DECODE’s experiences, asking how community-led work such as DECODE can be meaningfully conceptualised within metropolitan cities in countries such as Brazil. Dr Mchunu responded first by providing the example of Eban food systems, noting how working with these systems contributed towards food sovereignty for people living within urban centres.

Dr Tandon then built upon this response by noting that one of the key Latin American case studies within DECODE was based in the urban centre of São Paulo. He argued that urban spaces themselves present unique complexities, with informality and inequality deeply entrenched within their very designs and structures. Therefore, when programmes within urban centres are designed by communities themselves and rooted in their lived needs and realities, meaningful and tangible transformation begins to emerge.



Figure 10 UNESCO Chair at the GRC



Figure 9 UNESCO Chair team at the GRC

With this, the session concluded. The side panel was followed by several enriching conversations between the DECODE team and academics, research funders, and practitioners from across the world, opening further pathways for dialogue, collaboration, and collective reflection on the future of inclusive and transformative Open Science.