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# **Cluster of Cooperation in the Tropical Andes-Central America region - Conéctate A+**

**SUDAC 2 - Strategy Document**

**FINAL**

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# Cluster of Cooperation in the Tropical Andes-Central America region

## Conéctate A+

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# **Cluster of Cooperation in the Tropical Andes-Central America region Conéctate A+**

## **1. Rationale and regional context**

Over the past few years, an image of the Tropical Andean and Central American regions emphasizing the complexity of their social and ecological systems has emerged. This conception implies synergistic interaction among a broad range of scientific disciplines, including social and natural sciences.

Despite the range of historical, political, sociocultural, geographical, linguistic, and ecological particularities, fundamental continuities run through the Tropical Andes and Central America, i.e., there are many similar bio-physical and socio-economic characteristics and trends that are shared across the region, which also point to shared challenges towards fulfilling the United Nations 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), among other commitments to sustainable development. These connections, which are at stake in the discussions promoted by this Cluster of Cooperation (CLOC), Conéctate A+, include: a) the inequality gap between rural and urban areas; b) the vast territories located in this region identified as notably vulnerable to the combined effects of climate change and land use and land cover change; and c) the fact that, despite the urgency to address these socio-environmental issues in this region, they have not been fully incorporated into global-to-local science-society-policy spaces and initiatives related to sustainable development.

However, such framings based on main social-ecological characteristics only partly encompass an array of dynamic and innovative communities of practice that have emerged in this region. Diverse communities across the Tropical Andes and Central America are already contributing to address the challenges associated with climate change, ecosystems, and health, and also advancing innovative processes to integrate the social, political, cultural, economic and ecological realities of local communities to current global discussions on sustainability.

Overall, this context calls for a need to promote collaborative arrangements for knowledge consolidation and co-production, relate and ground theoretical discussions with lived realities, and articulate the accumulated experience of these communities of practice, thereby consolidating efforts in the Tropical Andes and Central America region to overcome barriers that impede the successful implementation of sustainable development policies.

In the first phase (2019-2021), we focused on identifying and connecting a community and establishing a platform for exchange. This document outlines a strategy and envisaged activities that builds on these past achievements and take the network forth into its second phase (2021-2024).

## 2. Vision and objectives

The vision of Conéctate A+ is to become:

***a long-term dynamic hub, platform, and community of exchange of knowledge and practice, promoting learning and advancing our understanding in the field of climate change, ecosystems, and health in view of sustainable development.***

Conéctate A+ started as an integration of the two COFERs KnowledgeForClimate and One Health, and then opened up as a hub for the community in the aforementioned fields. In fact, the integration of the scientific and practical fields and topics of the two COFERs is a great opportunity to build a major network on key topics of sustainable development, strongly anchored in the Tropical Andes and Central America region and in Switzerland. As such, Conéctate A+ welcomes institutions from these regions



(Figure 1) that are committed to contributing to and engaging in productive processes of knowledge and practice exchange and advancement. However, this is not to suggest that other countries in the broader Central and South American region are excluded from engaging in the activities of Conéctate A+, recognising that there are many existing collaborations among individuals and institutions with partners in those other countries.

As such, in this second phase, Conéctate A+ will also seek to better support these exchanges and expand the membership basis at this continental scale, as well as invite new members of SUDAC in Switzerland with interest to collaborate in this region (see also Section 6. Perspectives).

**Figure 1. – Map depicting current membership in terms of countries from the Tropical Andean and Central American region, represented by the founding partners in Conéctate A+ .**

The approach and thematic priorities of Conéctate A+ operate under the thematic umbrella of the UN 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. This posits specific challenges in our understanding of the interactions (positive and negative) among goals and targets, the interconnections among drivers of social and environmental change, and the importance of addressing scales when acting upon complex social-ecological systems. In the next SUDAC 2 phase, Conéctate A+ is interested in exploring new interdisciplinary theoretical pathways and concrete cases that articulate the main thematic fields of climate change, ecosystems, and health, including the relevant human dimensions across these fields such as environmental governance (see also Section 1. Rationale and Regional Context). For example, possible topics include existing or future research on the links between climate change and the distribution of disease vectors and how these are addressed, or the role of healthy ecosystems in mountain areas to guarantee water security. Considering the geographic and thematic expertise of the CLOC members and other invited institutions (associate partners) that will join this CLOC in the future, we see this as an excellent opportunity for innovative inter-institutional academic collaboration.

Conéctate A+ will promote interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research tools that allow integrating relevant knowledge across the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, as well as stakeholders outside of academia, to respond to the specific needs and operational contexts of the CLOC partners and to fully consider and interrelate local experiences, voices, needs, knowledge, and interests in policy processes. This includes, for example, a) cultural and political analyses to explore additional dimensions of sustainable development interventions and b) combining social research tools, theoretical critique, and practical support to anticipate the unintended side effects of the application of scientific knowledge in certain contexts, among others.

Conéctate A+ aims to strengthen the capacities needed to achieve the SDGs – both in the Tropical Andes and Central America region and in Switzerland - by providing an adequate platform to promote knowledge generation, information exchange, and academic collaboration opportunities among Conéctate A+ partners and other key actors that are playing an active role in discussing, formulating, and implementing the most innovative sustainable development strategies and policies in the Tropical Andes and Central America region.

Specifically, this CLOC will:

- Promote, use and analyse adequately new forms of inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration among research and other stakeholder institutions in Switzerland and the Tropical Andes and Central America region.
- Articulate academic research outcomes on the most relevant findings and current debates in sustainable development and environmental governance in the Tropical Andes and Central America region, focusing on climate change, ecosystems, and health within the framework of sustainable development.
- Prioritize collaborative arrangements to produce and disseminate relevant knowledge on sustainable development and environmental governance in the Tropical Andes and Central America region, which will emphasize bridging knowledge and action in key decision making and policy processes.
- Contribute to the formulation and implementation of new sustainable development strategies and projects.

### **3. Activities**

The activities of Conéctate A+ essentially serve the aims and vision of this CLOC, and are guided by its thematic priorities and approach, namely: the UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development; the interactions among climate change, ecosystems and health; and the application of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research tools, to respond to the research needs and context of the Conéctate A+ partners.

Furthermore, the activities also align with and continue the activities and achievements of the two COFERs KnowledgeForClimate (KfC) and One Health, such as the interdisciplinary teaching portfolio developed by KfC based on principles of joint knowledge production and the Swiss-Peruvian Health Research Platform (SPHR) and research done on One Health and syndromic surveillance by the COFER One Health.

Specifically, the following activities are planned for the period 2021-2024:

### 3.1 Communication and dissemination using the IT infrastructure developed in phase 1 and other media

An important operative role for the Conéctate A+ platform is to serve as a knowledge hub regarding research, action, and policy initiatives working at the intersection of sustainability, climate change, ecosystems, and health. To achieve this, the efforts will be oriented at identifying, curating, and communicating valuable information to the partners of the CLOC and to broader audiences, relevant information that may otherwise remain fragmented or underutilised. In addition, it is expected that effective communication channels will improve the collaboration among the partners of the CLOC, enabling the identification of common goals and fostering collaborative arrangements. Specific tasks under this activity include (summarised as a list in Annex 1):

- Update the CLOC website<sup>1</sup> initially, then regularly, especially when new content is available relating to:
  - Recent publications
  - News and events relating to the CLOC and its partners, as well as broader network
  - Funding and other opportunities for collaboration, etc.
- Prepare and present reports and communication outputs relating to CLOC activities (e.g. news articles, infographic material, audiovisual clips, policy briefs, etc.), via email and other media, to promote widespread diffusion through the media outlets of the partners.
  - Communicate with the CLOC via an updated internal contact list.
  - Communicate with the public via a dedicated section of the monthly MRI Global Newsletter.
- Schedule and organise the programming of the webinar series
  - Plan a series of webinars aligned with the thematic foci, agendas, and activities of the partners of the CLOC, including:
    - Research, study, and scholarships for students in the tropical Andes, Central America, and Switzerland.
    - Lecturer training (with materials developed by KfC and One Health).
    - Building inter- and transdisciplinary research capacity.
  - Incorporate in the planning the events related to research projects that received grants in the first round.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cloc.condesan.org/>

- Facilitate exchange and engagement with decision makers (e.g., national and subnational public agencies, international organizations such as the Organization of American States (OEA), the World Bank (WB), the United Nations Environment Programme (UN Environment), among others, on topics relating to knowledge needs for policy processes working at the climate change, ecosystems, and health nexus.

### **3.2 Promoting collaborative and integrative research in the Tropical Andes and Central America region, including science-policy exchanges**

Collaborative efforts to generate sound scientific information that can support applied work and policymaking is at the core of the Conéctate A+ initiative. This is based on the recognition that substantial gaps persist, especially related to the interaction of social and environmental dynamics as they influence sustainability outcomes. Collaborative publications and funding for promising integrative research initiatives will be supported through mechanisms such as:

- Identify priority thematic areas and research questions that can guide collaborative efforts in the CLOC in the short and medium term.
- Follow up on the three ongoing research projects of the first call (2019-2021) of the small grants initiative,
- Design and implement new small grants call to be implemented in S1 2022 and S1 2023,
- Scan and facilitate processes for consortium forming and funding opportunities for research within the CLOC.
- Identify and coordinate efforts to publish special issues in high impact journals in thematic areas relevant to the focus of the Conéctate A+ platform.

### **3.3 Strengthening links between Swiss partners and partners in the Tropical Andes and Central America region**

The main goal of SUDAC is to promote research and innovation on global challenges by strengthening collaboration among Swiss higher education institutions and partners in the Global South. In this context, Conéctate A+ seeks to increase collaboration with Swiss universities, looking for complementary

strategies in terms of thematic focus, geographic areas of expertise, and new mechanisms for collaborative research. The main tasks identified are:

- Design/implement mechanisms to promote active exchange and collaboration between partners and researchers in the Tropical Andes and Central America and Switzerland. These include but are not limited to:
  - Dedicated workshops under the lead of one or several of the partners.
  - Identification of funding opportunities and elaboration of proposals.
  - Internships, study tours, thesis projects, or specific capacity programs, for students in Tropical Andes, Central America and Switzerland.
- Design/implement mechanisms to promote the recruitment of graduate students from the Tropical Andes and Central America region in Swiss universities, including:
  - Webinars demystifying research, study, and scholarships for students in the tropical Andes, Central America, and Switzerland.
- Design/implement mechanisms to promote science-policy exchanges with relevant regional stakeholders.
- Design/implement mechanisms to engage Swiss students in research projects in the Tropical Andes and Central America region, including the aforementioned webinars.
- Facilitate a means for the founding partners (COFERs) to propose activities that help them transition from their previous COFERs to this CLOC, specifically with the objective to extend the network of the original partners of the two COFERs to additional partners of the Andes and Central America region and in Switzerland, and to make available tools, material, and achievements in research and teaching to the larger CLOC network.
- Consult with CLOC partner organizations to:
  - Establish communication priorities.
  - Define research agenda.
  - Assess feasibility of potential collaborative activities.

### **3.4 CLOC coordination and management**

These activities correspond to the day-to-day management of the CLOC to promote its goals, promote the articulation and communication among the partners, and provide operational support for the planned activities. The main transversal tasks are:

- Continuous scanning for external funding, publishing, and research opportunities relevant for supporting and developing the CLOC, with emphasis on opportunities for collaboration among partners.
- Coordinate and facilitate ordinary meetings with the partners (both founding and associate members, where appropriate).
- Inputs and participation at meetings convened by SUDAC related to overall program coordination and inter-CLOC exchange.
- Promote the expansion of the network through the identification of interested researchers and institutions.
- Identify research initiatives and other relevant information items relevant to support the sustainability of the network's operations.
- Compile and prepare inputs for reporting to SUDAC.
- Together with the CLOC co-heads and the founding partners, prepare and co-design a detailed annual work plan that takes stock of outcomes from activities in the previous year and specifies content and proposed timelines for activities in the coming year. We plan to schedule these meetings to prepare and confirm the work plan in July 2021, 2022, and 2023.

#### 4. Structure, organization and management

The CLOC structure is based on the network developed during phase 1 and seeks to include new members from institutions in Switzerland and the Tropical Andes and Central America region. Based on the gained experience, the second phase will reflect on new work structures to achieve a dynamic, agile, and participatory network.

**Head:** Dr. Carolina Adler, Executive Director, Mountain Research Initiative (MRI)

**Co-Head Switzerland:** Prof. Dr. Christian Huggel, Department of Geography, University of Zurich

**Co-Head in the Tropical Andes and Central America Region:** Mr. Manuel Peralvo, Research Coordinator, Consortium for the Sustainable Development of the Andean Ecoregion, (CONDESAN)

**Founding partners in Switzerland (SUDAC institutional members):**

- ETH Zurich, Weather and Climate Risks Group, ETHZ/MeteoSwiss (ETHZ WCR)
- Bern University of Applied Sciences School of Agriculture, Forest and Food Sciences (HAFL)
- University of Bern, Centre for Development and Environment (CDE)

- Swiss TPH, University of Basel

**Founding partners in Central America:**

- Universidad Centroamericana ‘José Simeón Cañas’, San Salvador

**Founding partners in the Tropical Andes:**

- Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Department of Geography, Colombia
- Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia, School of Sciences and Philosophy, Peru
- Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), Peru
- CARE, Lima, Peru.

**Associate partners:**

We expect to broaden the thematic and epistemological scope of the CLOC platform by engaging a diverse group of researchers from Switzerland and the Tropical Andes and Central America region, as well as include individuals and their institutions from other regions whose research work is focused in the CLOC region. Initial contacts have been established with the following institutions during the first phase, who are included in the CLOC and as part of the network as associate partners:

- Universidad San Antonio Abad del Cusco, Peru
- Universidad Nacional Agraria la Molina, Lima, Peru
- Universidad Antonio Ruiz de Montoya, Lima, Peru
- Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), Peru
- Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, Bolivia
- Universidad del Azuay, Ecuador
- Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Quito, Ecuador
- Indiana University Bloomington, United States
- University of Washington Bothell, United States

Additional associated partners are expected to be included in the second phase and will be regularly added to this list on an on-going basis. This also includes new members of SUDAC in Switzerland whose research scope and focus, and/or collaboration interests, aligns with the thematic areas and countries in the Tropical Andes and Central America region. New Associate Partners are expected to sign a simple Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Co-Heads of the CLOC to confirm interest and

commitment. While the partners are typically listed at the institutional level, the MoU can be signed at the level of an individual research group, departments, faculty, or the academic institution.

The Co-Head institutions manage the overall CLOC coordination, as well as reporting and administrative requirements, and are responsible for ensuring inclusive and transparent communication and participation among all founding partners, whose role is to guide and participate in the decisions that need to be taken to implement the CLOC's proposed activities. Regular partner meetings are envisaged to plan and maintain an overview of work progress.

Further adjustments to the governance structure can be defined during the second phase of this CLOC, accounting for the dynamic nature and evolution of the CLOC, and considering best practices implemented by similar hubs and networks elsewhere.

## **5. Perspectives (incl. beyond 2024)**

- In the period 2021-2024, the objective is to establish Conéctate A+ as a widely recognized network and important player in sustainable development in the region.
- Conéctate A+ is already linking with externally funded projects of regional scale and scope in fields of climate change adaptation, ecosystems, and sustainable development in mountains. Such synergies will be further developed during the SUDAC 2 phase and facilitate sustainability beyond 2024, and also to address connections between mountains and lowlands.
- In the period 2021-2024, efforts are ongoing to establish and further develop contacts and coordinated joint perspectives and activities with key partner organizations, including the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Organization of American States (OAS), and UN organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). This network will ensure sustainability of Conéctate A+ beyond 2024.
- Beyond 2024, the Conéctate A+ platform will continue to provide opportunities for science-society-policy dialogue, integrating key stakeholders from the academy, civil society, and public sectors in the Tropical Andes and Central America. Furthermore, Conéctate A+ will seek to foster fruitful exchanges and participation within its network with individuals and institutions from across the Central and South American region, and Switzerland – including existing and new members of SUDAC.

## **ANNEX 1 – CLOC CONÉCTATE+ proposed activities**

### **3.1 Communication and diffusion using the IT infrastructure developed in phase 1 and other media**

- Regular update of website
- Communication outputs (e.g. news articles, infographic material, audiovisual, policy briefs, event flyers).
- Scheduling and programming of webinar series

### **3.2 Promoting collaborative and integrative research in the Tropical Andes and Central America region, including science-policy exchanges**

- Collaborative development of a research agenda for the Conectate\_A+ network
- Small grants for synthesis research projects 2021-2024
- Collaborative publications in high impact journals
- Seed fund for grant development
- Facilitation of science-policy dialogues
- Curate content for science policy dialogue publications (e.g. policy briefs)
- Annual general meeting with whole network (virtual symposium)

### **3.3 Strengthen links between Swiss partners and partners in the Tropical Andes and Central America region**

- Exchange workshops between CLOC partner institutions
- Fund to support student participation in international meetings and scientific conferences (from CLOC partner organisations).
- Capacity building development programs
- Activities to integrate and link with COFERS

### **3.4 CLOC coordination and management**

- Hub coordination in Central and South America (CONDESAN)
- Hub coordination in Switzerland and overall administration and reporting to SUDAC (MRI)