Societal relevance, valorization and the usability of scientific research are central concepts in contemporary science systems. The requirement of relevance is especially salient in multi-actor research programs. These popular organizational forms link their research agendas to the challenges that society faces. To address these challenges, multi-actor research programs aim for collaborative research activities across organizational and sectoral boundaries. Despite their popularity and far-reaching ambitions, there is little clarity about the organization and effects of these policy instruments. Little or no attention has been paid to the programs’ actual approaches to agenda-setting and coordination. In the context of these programs, stakeholder involvement refers to a broad range of activities. This thesis addresses two main questions about these programs: (1) How do multi-actor research programs organize collaborative research activities? (2) Do multi-actor research programs have long-term, sustainable effects on scientific knowledge production?

The key results of this study address the coordination of research activities in the context of these programs; the roles of stakeholders and their influence on the research process; the ex-ante evaluation of multi-actor research programs; and the skills that participating PhD students develop. The empirical studies in this dissertation show a large diversity between and within multi-actor research programs. They reveal that multi-actor research programs are above all facilitators – not organizers – of collaborative research.