

## Partnerships for International Development

### Q. How do partnerships work in the development context?

**A.** There is growing recognition within the international community—from donor and development organizations, to local and national governments, to multilateral institutions—that partnerships can be a way to accelerate impact and improve aid effectiveness. This *NGO Tips* paper looks at the concept of “partnership” and what it means in different contexts.

#### How do you define a *partnership*?

According to the Partnering Initiative, a global program of the International Business Leaders Forum, a partnership is collaboration in which organizations work together in a transparent, equitable and mutually beneficial way towards a sustainable development goal and where those defined as partners agree to commit resources and share the risks as well as the benefits associated with the partnership.

USAID defines *partnership* as an association between USAID, its partners and customers based upon mutual respect, complementary strengths, and shared commitment to achieve mutually agreed upon objectives.

Building partnerships is about relationships that are in-depth, involve a few carefully selected targets and have specific, practical goals. It is different from *public relations* or *networking* where activities are likely to be less in-depth, involve many more targets, and be for the general purposes of information-sharing and solidarity. Organizations use different words to refer to partnerships—*external relations*, *strategic alliances*, etc... What’s important is that an organization clearly defines and understands for itself the key words it will commonly use.

#### Why do organizations enter into partnerships?

There are a lot of reasons why organizations join together in partnerships. Here are a few common motivations:

- **Expand expertise.** Organizations responding to increasingly global and complex challenges often find that they alone can’t provide the technical skills necessary for a comprehensive response. Additionally, staff reductions and turnover drives organizations to look to partnerships as one of the primary ways to renew and expand their technical capabilities. By combining the knowledge and capabilities of different organizations, the potential for innovative, comprehensive, demand-driven response is much greater than going it alone.
- **Increase operational efficiency and scale.** Responding to challenges such as the global economic recession, HIV/AIDS pandemic or the aftermath of a natural disaster, international development organizations, businesses and local governments alike are under increasing pressure to do more with less. Partnerships are seen as a way to lower costs, spread risk, and sustain or scale-up services. This is exempli-

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fied by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), which brings together donors, government agencies, vaccine manufacturers, NGOs, and multilateral organizations to reduce and prevent the number of deaths by preventable diseases.

- **Respond to trends in funding.** As donors become more convinced of the power of partnership, their policies and funding strategies are shifting to emphasize them. In a January 2009 Foundation Center survey, two-thirds of foundations said they expect to engage in more collaborations and partnerships in response to the economic downturn. Donor agencies like USAID and the Gates Foundation often fund/reward those working in partnerships that provide a more comprehensive response team. For many, organizational survival will depend on the ability to creatively and effectively partner.

### What are some different partnership models?

While partnerships tend to share certain attributes, there is quite a lot of diversity to their form and function. Variations may encompass geographic scope, theme and sector, membership, purpose and structure, just to name a few. The following are several partnership models highlighting this diversity:<sup>1</sup>

#### *Bilateral Partnerships*

Probably the most common model, bilateral partnership involves an exclusive relationship between two actors. Bilateral partnerships may have a sole focus, such as knowledge exchange or resource sharing, with the objective of improving the functions of the respective partners, or a common purpose such as delivering a service. Since the relationship is more closely knit than in partnerships with more actors, variations and alternatives to as-

pects of the partnership agreement can be more easily identified, discussed, and changed. In addition, it is comparatively easy to communicate with each other, identify needs and be held accountable.

#### *Mono-Structural Consortia*

A mono-structural consortium is a collaboration of organizations from, and working in, one particular sector, e.g. health. Consortia are beneficial because they can give more visibility to organizations or institutions that otherwise would struggle to garner attention. In this model, organizations from a sector come together to offer a focused product range, which can in turn be adapted to different concepts and contexts. As long as the partners are focused and responsive, the consortium can serve to complement the organizations' respective strengths and bolster their effectiveness and recognition.

Conversely, if the organizations within a consortium do not distinguish themselves enough from each other, they may end up competing against each other, for funds raised and earned by the consortium. Likewise, roles within the consortium must be clearly defined and understood, and mechanisms must be in place in order to properly handle any funds coming in. For this reason, as well as the fact that a consortium is naturally a larger and looser type of partnership than the aforementioned category, strong operational systems, processes, and protocols must be in place to ensure trust and transparency.

#### *Multi-Structural Consortia (cross-sectoral partnerships)*

This partnership model is a cross-sectoral form of collaboration that can involve actors from civil society, the public and private sectors. Being a part of a multi-structural consortium opens the door for being able to connect with diverse organizations, build capacity, or gain recognition. With the greater number of partners, consortia are more easily capable



There are many reasons why organizations partner—from increasing the scale of their implementation capability to influencing policy. The continuum above highlights some common strategic objectives and places them along the partnership model continuum described above. In reality, partnerships will rarely fall into a single category—indeed, for a partnership to be most effective it may be necessary to cover a span of activities.<sup>2</sup> It is important to clearly identify strategic intentions and match those with the most appropriate partnership model. One size does not fit all—so let the form follow function.

### Guiding Principles for Effective Partnerships

The following are some guiding principles commonly cited as essential for successful partnerships.

*Trust (and Respect)*—Trust leads partners to be much more open to sharing information, innovative approaches and resources, contributing to a healthier and more effective partnership.

*Shared vision*—Partners should share an explicitly stated, clearly understood vision of why they are in a partnership and what they hope to accomplish. A shared vision is typically complemented by shared values.

*Transparency (and Accountability)*—Trust breeds transparency, and transparency breeds trust. Clear and effective communication must be constant among partner organizations in order to assure successful partnerships.

*Assigned and agreed upon roles*—For the partner organizations, and the individuals within the organizations there should be an appropriate degree of structure and formality consistent with the complexity of the partnership and its goals.

*Equity*—Power imbalances in the structure of a partnership are common, so efforts to recognize and address them should be made.

*Mutual benefit (and Risk)*—Clearly identifying the expected benefits of each party is vital to appreciating what motivates and sustains joint action. Given that all partners are expected to contribute something, they should share proportionately in the benefits as well as the costs.

*Evaluation*—Evaluating a partnership is essential to determining its impact and to checking whether the benefits of the partnership outweigh the costs to all partners. Evaluation fuels learning for improvement and can lead to greater validation and commitment.

*Resourcing*—There must be sufficient resources committed from all partners in line with the expected impact and scale of the partnership itself. In more complex, multi-stakeholder partnerships, achieving large-scale impact requires resourcing the appropriate coordination, governance and exchange functions. Partnership structures and support mechanisms must provide a scaffold sufficient to support the vision, purpose and function of the partnership.

*Communication*—Frequent communication between partners is essential to reinforce partner commitment to and progress towards the shared vision. The greater the diversity of the partners—geographically, sectorally or culturally—the greater the need to ensure that partners are effectively communicating. Ongoing communication of partnership achievements tends to invigorate partner participation and commitment.

### Recommended Resources

Just as there are numerous understandings and conceptualizations of types of partnerships, there are many documents, reports, and studies about partnerships—including types, principles, strategies, models, implementation plans, evaluation plans, and more. Here are some useful ones to check out:

- The Partnering Initiative. An organization and Web site dedicated to helping understand, build and sustain partnerships. Check out the “Partnering Toolbook” in the Publications section.  
<http://thepartneringinitiative.org/>
- *What to Consider in Creating a Strategic Alliance: An IISD Communications Practice Note*. International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). Identifies key features of an alliance, with great relevance for partnerships.  
[www.iisd.org/pdf/2006/networks\\_strategic\\_alliance.pdf](http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2006/networks_strategic_alliance.pdf)
- *A Review and Taxonomy: International College Partnership Model*. British Council. A report identifying different partnership models.  
[www.britishcouncil.org/intl\\_partnerships.pdf](http://www.britishcouncil.org/intl_partnerships.pdf)
- *Ensuring Successful Partnerships: A Toolkit*. Africa Liaison Program Initiative (ALPI) – InterAction. A toolkit to help organizations evaluate their partnerships.  
[www.interaction.org/document/ensuring-successful-partner-toolkit](http://www.interaction.org/document/ensuring-successful-partner-toolkit)
- *Enablers and Principles for Successful Partnerships*. Quality Information Agency’s Development Programme Train to Gain. This lists conditions and principles that should be followed for successful partnerships.  
[http://wcs.excellencegateway.org.uk/webfm\\_send/117](http://wcs.excellencegateway.org.uk/webfm_send/117)
- The Resource Center of the Impact Alliance website contains a topic folder on Partnership with some very useful resources.  
[www.impactalliance.org/ev\\_en.php?ID=1416\\_201&ID2=DO\\_TOPIC](http://www.impactalliance.org/ev_en.php?ID=1416_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC)
- *Toolkit: Pathways to Partnership*. The International HIV/AIDS Alliance. A user-friendly, comprehensive guide to partnerships.  
[www.impactalliance.org/ev\\_en.php?ID=4074\\_201&ID2=DO\\_TOPIC](http://www.impactalliance.org/ev_en.php?ID=4074_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC)

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Partnership models adapted from a listing of the British Council. “A Review and Taxonomy: International College Partnership Models”
- <sup>2</sup> Section based upon the partnership typology presented by the International Business Leaders Forum (2008).

#### For more information:

This NGO Tips brief is available online at [www.NGOConnect.NET](http://www.NGOConnect.NET). This dynamic and interactive site is dedicated to connecting and strengthening non-governmental organizations (NGOs), networks, and support organizations worldwide.

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