



chapter 5

#5

Making Partnerships Work

#5
Partnerships



Organisations often delegate project activities to, or share responsibilities with, local partner organisations. However, such 'partnerships' are not necessarily the result of participatory approaches – in many cases it may simply involve the sub-contracting of activities or services in return for payment. Likewise, working with a local partner does not necessarily mean that an inclusive, participatory approach is being adopted.

For many organisations it is a way to involve local groups and organisations in the response to a crisis and potentially a way for crisis-affected people to participate in a humanitarian response. Partnerships can be an opportunity to establish a more meaningful relationship between the organisations, jointly defining objectives and the means of achieving them, sharing responsibilities and learning from each other.

A partnership is far more than a simple contractual relationship; it is based on a number of ethical and practical principles. This chapter provides guidelines on how to make partnerships effective and how to make them work by building individual relationships, showing mutual respect, and taking into account the personal attitudes of all the people involved.

A partnership can be established at various phases of the project cycle, but if established at the beginning it is more likely to ensure that all partners have a shared understanding of the situation, jointly-agreed objectives, and a procedure to establish not only what they will do, but also how it will be done.

A 'partnership' involves two or more parties joining forces to achieve a common objective. Ideally, each partner should be equal, but in reality no partnership is equal, and does not necessarily need to be, as long as it is complementary. In a context where both material and non-material resources are exchanged, the objective is to find the right balance.

Partnership is based on two elements: friendship and trust on the one hand, and a contractual agreement on the other. The first entails building a relationship over time, the second aims to concretely define the terms of the agreement.

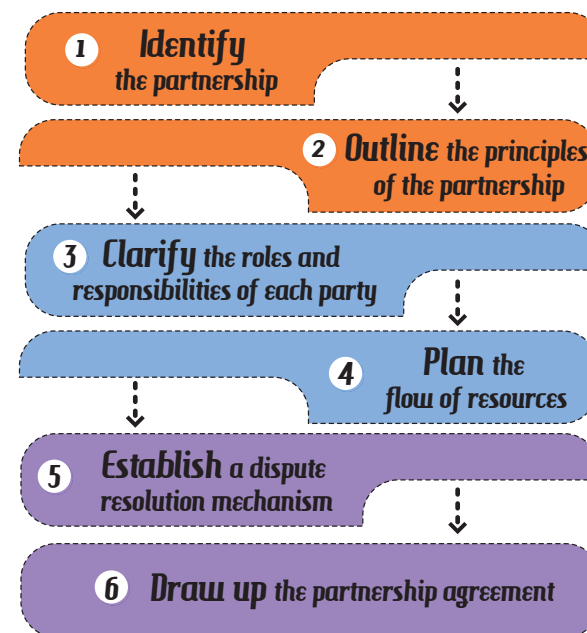


Figure 4
Steps involved
in establishing a
partnership

The process used to choose a partner is the foundation on which the future relationship will rest. Although it can be time-consuming, it is useful to carry out a thorough analysis to identify reliable partners with whom you are likely to share common ground. This should include mapping the organisations which are active in the geographical area of operation and the relevant sector (e.g. public health, medical etc). Potential partners are not limited to local NGOs; they can also be informal social entities such as villages, women's groups, etc. Who you engage with will depend on each situation. International NGOs often work with local partners, but a partnership can also involve two international institutions with complementary expertise and capacity.

Where possible use NGO platforms and co-ordination mechanisms in order to get to know other organisations.

U.1 Identify the partner

Tips & Warnings

Beware of 'Mushroom' NGOs!

In situations where massive amounts of aid flow to a region, some organisations are created solely as a means of capturing available resources. These are known as 'mushroom' NGOs, because they grow like mushrooms after the rain, and may not have the capacity or expertise, or even the desire, to effectively assist the affected population.

During the assessment of context and needs, or when identifying potential solutions on which to base project design, potential partners may emerge spontaneously. Community leaders, leaders of existing organisations, or other aid staff who have been in the area longer can give you information about the reliability and legitimacy of different organisations.

When analysing potential partners the following factors should be taken into account:

- The organisation's **impartiality or neutrality**: check whether the organisation or individuals within it are affiliated or associated with parties to a conflict or other political actors.
- The risk of **exclusion and discrimination**: for political, social, or cultural reasons, some organisations may engage preferentially with certain groups.
- **Access to the affected population**: the local institution may not have access to the affected population, or specific groups within it, for political reasons, or because of a lack of expertise or capacity to operate in certain areas.
- **The organisation's legitimacy among the population**: some institutions have no legitimacy due to their history, actions they are/were involved in, cases of corruption, etc.
- **Technical and methodological capacity**: be sure to assess the technical capacity of potential partners if that is going to be a necessary element in the partnership. Assess the possibility of specific technical training that could be included in the partnership 'deal'.
- **Administrative and financial indicators**: ensure that potential partners have the capacity and skills to manage

administrative and financial requirements, particularly if you have external donor funding.

Even if most international aid organisations would like to be able to claim that they can meet all of the above criteria, it would be difficult to find ones that can. This should not discourage you from establishing a partnership. Strengthening an organisation's management and governance system can be part of the partnership's objectives. In some areas, the motivation behind a partnership can be to support the creation of local organisations, as part of institution building or community development strategies.

Potential partners should agree on the main principles of any future partnership.

- **A shared interest in forming a partnership**. All parties should make their interest in the partnership clear, and if necessary be given support in doing this.
- **A shared understanding of the context and needs**. If possible, a joint assessment of this should be carried out with potential partners. If this cannot be done, perceptions of the needs and demands of the affected population should be harmonised.
- **Compatibility and complementary goals**, strategies, modes of operation and means. In spite of different levels of complexity, mutual transparency on these issues is something to work towards.

International aid organisations should take into account the following factors:

Recognise and respect the autonomy of partners. Be prepared to adapt your requirements to theirs. Accept their right to make (strategic, not financial) mistakes - to err is human - and errors can be a good source of learning.

U.2 Outline the Principles of the Partnership Agreement

Develop one's capacity to propose innovative methods of support and co-operation, for example, by developing networks of expertise, or organising short technical support missions in the crisis area, rather than having to rely on the presence of permanent technical staff.

Example

Following the earthquake that hit **El Salvador** in January 2001, a French relief NGO (Atlas Logistique), a Salvadorian NGO (Fundesyram) which worked on socio-economic development and environmental conservation, and a private Austrian development foundation based in El Salvador joined forces. The objective of their programme was to provide vulnerable and isolated families in two areas with permanent housing, made with local materials and earthquake mitigation techniques.

Analysis of the consortium showed that the partnership had had definite advantages for all the agencies involved:

- A more integrated, multi-sector perception of beneficiaries' needs and constraints
- A technically sound and innovative intervention
- Integration of emergency response and longer-term development
- Greater involvement of local communities (through Fundesyram extension workers)
- Enhanced credibility of the three agencies with the population and authorities

However, in this case the partnership in itself did not prevent difficulties in implementation, nor did it ensure the project's sustainability and guarantee a transfer of technology and competence from the foreign NGO to the Salvadorean NGO.

These weaknesses could have been avoided through a finer definition of objectives and responsibilities and through the elaboration of a common methodology, including a strategy for communication and co-ordination both between partners and with other organisations.

From 'Partnership as a quality tool?': Case study on the Consortium between Atlas Logistique, Fundesyram and Horizont 3000, El Salvador, Central America, by Gabrielle Savi (Groupe URD, 2001)

U.3 Clarify the Roles and Responsibilities of each Party

Clarifying each partner's roles and responsibilities is essential. If they are not clearly defined from the outset, it can lead to misunderstanding, frustration and possible conflict.

A partnership requires that both or all of the parties share responsibility for managing and implementing the project. The following points should therefore be negotiated:

- Resources to be mobilised by each partner
- Who is involved in decision-making and on what issues
- Who does what during project implementation and monitoring
- Establishment of rules and sanction mechanisms

Ideally, each partner's roles and responsibilities should correspond to their area of expertise and their financial, managerial, and operational capacity. The commitment made by each partner should be realistic and should encourage participation.

A joint steering committee, with all partners represented, is a useful structure. It is important to clarify the following points:

- Who represents each partner on the committee?
- What decision-making power does it have?
- How often does it meet?

Continuous communication between partners is an essential component of a successful partnership. The steering committee can help to develop good lines of communication between and within partner organisations, provide a framework for regular reporting, and organise regular meetings and workshops.

Co-ordinating external communication, notably with donors, and communities and individuals targeted by the project, is

important to ensure consistence and avoid confusion. This includes management of the partnership's visibility and 'public image'. The partners should establish which individuals will represent them when negotiating with other stakeholders, sub-contractors, suppliers and members of the population.

U.4 Plan the flow of resources

Any partnership is likely to involve some resources moving from one partner to another. These can include funds, materials, technical expertise, training, or secondment of staff between the organisations. The resources that will be shared or exchanged should be defined at the same time as the principles of the partnership and the roles and responsibilities of each party, but what is often overlooked is *how* these resources will be exchanged. The flow of resources can be represented in a simple chart, diagram or table defining what each partner will contribute, when and how the resources will be transferred and the conditions of transfer.

If resources are being 'lent' to an organisation only for the duration of the project, establish the terms and conditions clearly. For example, if the aid organisation is to provide vehicles to a local partner, it is important to define who is responsible for insurance, maintenance and repairs, and issues such as whether these vehicles can be used for other projects.

Financial planning should also establish the dates and amounts of financial transfers, which party is responsible for bank charges or fees, and what factors are to be respected before each transfer can take place (e.g. the submission of a financial report for a previous instalment, or the completion of a particular set of activities).

The partnership may also involve technical support and institution building. In cases where a new organisation has

been established or existing organisations are very weak, another aid organisation can play a vital institution building role, particularly in the following areas:

- Improving the organisation's capacity to assess and analyse situations
- Improving administrative and financial management and stability
- Contributing to the partner's legitimacy and capacity for representation (reinforcing the partner's social grounding)
- Improving project management, proposal writing, and negotiation skills
- Strengthening the partner's visibility and integration in networks at the national and international level.
- Training or capacity building in specific technical areas.

These objectives can be attained through continuous technical support on the ground, such as regular visits by training staff, and so on. All activities must be planned and budgeted, and the necessary resources mobilised by all partners. Technical support should be seen as a reciprocal process, as a 'balanced' partnership is based on each party recognising the skills, expertise and experience of the other. International aid agencies should value their partner's resources, which will often include very valuable perspectives on the culture, and the political, social and economic system, and should seek to draw on these as well as the more obvious technical skills.

U.5 Set up a Dispute Resolution Mechanism

Although foresight in establishing roles and responsibilities and practical ways of working at the outset can reduce the chance of disagreements at a later stage, differences of opinions between the partners are still likely to arise. A dispute resolution

mechanism, agreed to by all parties, should be set up at the planning stage. This should be context-specific. Mechanisms which are innovative or adapted to traditional practices of consensus and engagement are very useful.

U.6 Draw up the partnership agreement

In the case of a partnership between formally constituted organisations, the terms of the agreement between the partners should be put in writing in a contract specifying not only the usual requirements of a contract, but also the procedures when working in insecure

environments, such as who is responsible for the security of project teams and equipment, common security rules and regulations, and so on.

When there are no existing and recognised organisations

There are many situations where a formal partnership is not possible because there are no suitable institutions with which to join forces. In these situations it is possible to support the creation of new organisations or committees. As this will be a new entity, there will be opportunities to establish a high degree of participation and transparency, but there will also be constraints imposed by your role in 'setting it up'.

It is important not to impose a form of organisation that is foreign to the local culture and which will not be accepted by the affected population. If your project creates new forms of organisation that superimpose on those already in existence, there is a risk of undermining local strategies and damaging traditional relationships between various groups.

To encourage the creation of a new entity, it is important to draw on local cultural references, traditional consultation mechanisms or other structures that the population can identify with.

It is also possible to unintentionally reinforce discrimination patterns that are entrenched in a society. Dealing with

this issue requires good knowledge of the local society, diplomacy and judicious interaction with various people to see how the issue can be addressed in a culturally sensitive way.

Chapter 5 summary Making Partnerships Work

- 1 Partnerships are not necessarily the result of a participatory process, but do offer the opportunity to increase participation.
- 2 A partnership is far more than a simple contractual relationship – it is based on a relationship of trust, shared values and principles and a desire to work together in order to achieve a goal.
- 3 A thorough analysis should be made before deciding on a partner.
- 4 An effective partnership will include agreements on the objectives of the partnership, mutual roles and responsibilities, resource transfer and how to deal with disputes.
- 5 Partnerships are based on mutual respect and recognition of the resources, skills, and experience that each party brings to the partnership.