

Building competences for partnering— how donors can ensure multi- stakeholder partnerships succeed

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Key messages

For Agenda 2030 to succeed, multi-stakeholder partnerships become increasingly important. However, their success hinges on the capacity of all actors to understand how to manage change collaboratively. Donor funding procedures need to reflect this.

Donors need to acknowledge that building successful collaboration requires time and resources. They also need to ensure that collaboration takes place at all levels of intervention. High quality partnering projects require collaboration structures at international, national and local level. This should be reflected in project designs and budget

Donors need to invest in capacity building for partnering. A project in which all actors understand the essentials of making partnerships successful has a much higher likelihood of success. Donors need to help build the knowledge base around partnerships, give orientation and support practice exchange. Learning and capacity building around partnering should be part of every project budget.

The world's current sustainability challenges require actors in the global society to rapidly shift their way of thinking, acting and, above all, their way of *leading* transformative change around the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Not surprisingly, SDG goal number 17¹ encourages stakeholders from business, NGOs, government, donors and communities to partner for change. More and more bi- and multilateral donors promote such partnerships. Many NGOs have started to collaborate with the private sector² as part of their own development strategies, while partnerships between companies and governments are on the rise.

"We speak about it lightly, but collaboration is an intense discipline that doesn't happen accidentally; it requires intention, attention and integrity."

Dennis Meadows, Co-author of the Club of Rome Report "Limits to Growth"

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg17>.

² Kuenkel (2016a).

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are expected to deliver towards the Global Goals more effectively and faster than traditional ways of implementing projects and programmes but *what is required to ensure that multi-stakeholder partnerships can meet expectations?*

The multifaceted and complex nature of partnering

There is a gradual yet increasing acknowledgment of the multifaceted and complex nature of collaborative engagement between cross-sectoral stakeholders. Hence, it is as important to increase the *quantity* of partnerships for SDG implementation as it is to ensure the *quality* of partnering processes. But many donor organisations are still unaware that partnering can only become effective with increased competencies and skills for effective stakeholder collaboration. The existence of good partnering knowledge and practice is not a given. It is therefore important to see the need for quality partnering as an emerging professional field that needs to be nurtured, fostered and stewarded. Building the competencies of all actors for partnering is key.

Partnering needs high quality process management

As more and more SDG partnership endeavours emerge – from global alliances, network platforms, strategic initiatives, development partnerships and local cross-sector collaboration, it is important to understand that process management in partnering is key to success. This applies to all forms of partnerships. There is an enormous range in the purpose of partnering. Some organisations partner between not more than two or three organisations around SDG implementation in order to achieve concrete change at grassroots-level, or in a defined geographical area. Others get together with a large number of stakeholders from private sector, civil society and public sector and aim at high-level systemic impact in an entire region, for an entire sector, or for a global issue – such as responsible value chains or global water management. There is also a proliferation of broader cross-sector networks that gather around an SDG issue. More complex partnering is often described as *transformative* partnerships³. It means aiming at systemic impact that addresses challenges holistically and involves multiple stakeholders at multiple levels. In addition, there is also meta-collaboration – the collaboration between partnerships or multi-stakeholder initiatives in order to increase leverage, achieve systemic impact or drive transformational change. Yet, the impact of partnerships is dependent on a functional link between different intervention levels⁴. Rather than focusing on events, process management⁵ is of most importance.

What does this mean for donors supporting multi-stakeholder partnerships?

Effective multi-stakeholder partnerships around the 17 SDGs require not only new ways of thinking, but also a shift in the way projects and programmes are implemented. If donors want to see their impact increase, they should invest in quality partnering⁶.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships operate on a different logic to traditional programme implementation. Institutions with very different organisational cultures and operating logics find themselves in non-hierarchical working relationships and are responsible for a joint impact none of them can steer alone. Managing such processes is hugely different from the way each of the institutions normally operates. This equals to a complex change management process with a variety of actors, with no one institution being able to fully take the lead. [High quality process management](#)⁷ is key, from the design to the starting phase, and from the implementation to the scaling phase. Capacity building on partnership design, process management, partnership structures, communication and evaluation is crucial.

³ Beisheim (2012).

⁴ Byiers et al (2016).

⁵ Kuenkel (2016b).

⁶ Byiers et al (2015).

⁷ <http://www.stakeholderdialogues.net/learning/textbook/getting-active/>

How can donors support the development of competencies for partnering that take such good practices into account?

First, donors need to acknowledge that building successful collaboration requires time. Setting up complex collaboration structures requires resources. Hence, project budgets should reflect this.

Second, donors need to ensure that collaboration takes place at all levels of intervention. High quality partnering projects require collaboration structures at international, national and local level. This should be reflected in project designs.

Third, donors need to invest in capacity building for partnering. A project in which all actors understand the essentials of making partnerships successful has a much higher likelihood of success. The budget needs to cater for capacity building.

Fourth, donors need to help build the knowledge base around partnerships, give orientation and support practice exchange. Learning around partnering should be part of every project budget.

Invest in competence building for partnering

Here are two examples of how donors can strategically contribute to the effectiveness of partnering:

- The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has taken a decisive step towards ensuring that multi-stakeholder partnerships can succeed: They brought together the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Collective Leadership Institute (CLI), and Engagement Global—Bengo to pool knowledge for implementing successful partnerships. In a partnering support platform (www.partnerschaften2030.de)⁸ they offer not only practice exchange, the generation of new ideas for partnerships, and better orientation about what partnerships are and can achieve, but they also provide competence building for high quality process management. In particular, the platform capacitates NGOs to engage in multi-stakeholder partnerships with private sector and government actors. By offering foundations for partnering training, project specific capacity building for collaboration and strategic advisory for how best to build functional cooperation systems among multiple partners, they accompany NGOs during the first steps and into a new field of project implementation. The [Collective Leadership Institute](http://www.collectiveleadership.de/apex/cli/home/),⁹ as the content partner of the platform, brings in 11 years of helping stakeholders make collaboration effective, and focuses on helping actors to design high quality partnering processes. As a result of the investment into network building among 300 actors, 71 NGO leaders from 27 different civil society organisations were equipped with specific partnership management skills. The usefulness of the capacity building was not only documented in a 91% satisfaction rate of the training or coaching, but led to 10 multi-actor partnerships in the application or implementation phase emerging within one year.
- Additionally, with support from the German Government, the Collective Leadership Institute developed an online learning space for quality partnering (http://www.stakeholderdialogues.net).¹⁰ Targeted competence building is enhanced through webinars, online learning and case studies comprising specific tools and approaches like the [Dialogic Change Model](http://stakeholderdialogues.net/learning/textbook/getting-active/dcm/)¹¹ and the [Collective Leadership Compass](http://stakeholderdialogues.net/learning/toolbox/collective-leadership-self-assessment/)¹² as well as partnership process monitoring with [success factors](http://stakeholderdialogues.net/learning/textbook/getting-reflective/key-factors/).¹³ This helps disseminate knowledge around quality partnering and encourages best practices for actors that may not be able to participate in on-site courses.
- Also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands supports an information platform that uses success factors for partnering as a gateway to knowledge building and better practice. ‘**17 factors for 17 Goals**’ (www.effectivepartnering.org)¹⁴ is a web-based support platform that shows a pathway

⁸ <https://www.partnerschaften2030.de/>

⁹ <http://www.collectiveleadership.de/apex/cli/home/>

¹⁰ <http://www.stakeholderdialogues.net>

¹¹ <http://stakeholderdialogues.net/learning/textbook/getting-active/dcm/>

¹² <http://stakeholderdialogues.net/learning/toolbox/collective-leadership-self-assessment/>

¹³ <http://stakeholderdialogues.net/learning/textbook/getting-reflective/key-factors/>

¹⁴ <http://www.effectivepartnering.org/>

towards mastering the complexity of partnering. Five partnering knowledge Institutions, the [Partnership Resource Centre](#),¹⁵ the [Collective Leadership Institute](#),¹⁶ the [Partnering Initiative](#),¹⁷ the [Partnership Brokers Association](#)¹⁸ and [Partnerships in Practice](#)¹⁹ have come together to share and integrate their research and practice knowledge. It functions as a resource repository for partnering, encourages the exchange and learning among cooperation partners, and enhances quality partnering by helping actors consider the most relevant factors in their project and program planning.

This can surely be only the first encouraging step into a new professional field. If the world wants the new mindset of collaboration to succeed against the old habit of working in silo-competition, donors as much as implementing agencies should open up anew to learning project implementation and societal change. Building competence for partnering from local to international level is paramount for achieving the [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#).²⁰

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¹⁵ <https://www.rsm.nl/>

¹⁶ <http://www.collectiveleadership.de/apex/cli/home/>

¹⁷ <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/>

¹⁸ <http://www.partnershipbrokers.org/>

¹⁹ <http://partnershipsinpractice.co.uk/>

²⁰ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>