

Stories from the frontline of Public Private Partnerships

What can we learn from the approach and experience of
people engaging in partnerships in their daily practice?





FOREWORD

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) hold significant potential as a catalyst for positive transformation in the socio-economic landscape of people and communities. There are lots of expectations of PPPs, but they often fall short in reality. Their true potential emerges through the dedication of individuals who grasp the essence of transformation by paying rigorous attention to the partnership process. These individuals are like trail guides, meticulously charting the course by asking the right questions at the right time, providing support when needed, and articulating information in an understandable manner. They support and challenge others and hold them accountable when necessary.

Eline Minneboo, from Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO), embodies such a person. Eline, in collaboration with her colleague Maaïke van den Berg, recognized that establishing a partnership facility alone was insufficient for genuine change. Throughout the duration of the SDG facility (a PPP facility focusing on the SDGs), they consistently emphasized the importance of a thoughtful partnership process. They sought support from the Partnership Brokers Association and inspired their own team and the SDG partnerships to take the partnership process seriously.

Within the SDG partnerships themselves, there were many individuals like Eline and Maaïke, who understood the significance of a well-executed partnership process. They are the authors of the stories in this paper, having worked at the heart of these public-private partnerships and experienced the intricacies involved. During a writeshop process facilitated by the Barefoot Guide, they reflected on the complexity of the partnership process and all its dynamics. And they captured their experiences through reflective stories. In this book, they all share their personal experiences generously and courageously for others to learn from. Their entire narratives can be found in Part Three of this book. We highly recommend reading them! These insights, drawn from the deeper layers of collaboration, offer invaluable lessons crucial to our understanding of public-private partnerships.

The second part of the book provides a meta-narrative of all the stories where we have identified common themes and everyday patterns in the public private partnerships to provide more general insights and inspiration.



We extend our gratitude to the authors for sharing their own experiences. As the stories are highly personal and are still 'in-play', some writers wished to stay anonymous. We have enjoyed working with and learning from the experiences of people at the forefront of public private partnerships. We hope you will too! We are always eager for feedback.

Helga van Kampen (Partnership Brokers Association)
&
Doug Reeler (Barefoot Guide Connection)

This paper was commissioned by the Sustainable Development Goals Partnership (SDGP), a programme of the Netherlands Enterprise Agency. Through the SDGP, the Netherlands Enterprise Agency contributes to achieving food security and private sector development on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Although many positive experiences of the SDGP are described in the stories, inevitably there is a larger focus on difficulties and challenges in both the stories and the analysis. This may leave a misleading negative impression in the readers' minds about the value of partnerships. For the writers and for us as the editors we believe there is great value in the SDGPs and that to optimize that value, it is vital that critical issues be raised and dealt with in a spirit of learning and continuous improvement.

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PART ONE

THE BACKGROUND AND ORIGIN OF THIS PUBLICATION

Listening to Real-Life Experiences to Improve Public Private Partnerships

Understanding the intricate dynamics and challenges of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) is crucial for unlocking their full potential in sustainable development. Since there are no recipes to deal with such complexities, one approach to address these complexities is to share, reflect on, and learn from the real-life experiences of practitioners engaged in making PPPs work. This can provide invaluable insights and wisdom to help partnerships adapt to changing realities and unanticipated eventualities.

In this publication you will find a range of real-life stories written by partners engaged in PPPs. From these stories we have drawn several reflections and lessons which we hope will provide helpful guidance for all stakeholders involved in PPPs.

“ Since there are no recipes to deal with such complexities, one approach to address these complexities is to share, reflect on, and learn from the real-life experiences of practitioners engaged in making PPPs work.

Where this paper comes from

Some background about the SDG partnerships

On 28 May 2018, the Sustainable Development Goals Partnership Facility (SDGP) was launched. Public-private partnerships (PPP) that want to contribute to food security and private sector development in a sustainable world where everyone counts, were invited to submit their project ideas to the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) before the end of 2018. These PPPs would have to consist of at least one enterprise, one government organization (preferably a local government), and one NGO or knowledge institution, with no more than six partners in total. The main applicant, also referred to as the lead partner, should be Dutch. They could apply for a minimum of €500,000 and a maximum of €3 million in funding per project.

With the SDGP facility, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs likes to contribute in particular to these specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- **SDG 2:** Aims to eradicate hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture globally.
- **SDG 8:** Focuses on promoting sustained, inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all, including women.
- **SDG 17:** To reach these SDG's, we must work together. That is why SDG Partnerships works with public-private partnerships (PPPs) between government, businesses, NGOs and knowledge centers.
- **SDG 5, 12 and 13** are cross cutting themes – all PPPs report on these topics (gender, climate and circular economy)



The Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) is now supporting thirty-three PPPs to address these Sustainable Development Goals in Asia, Africa and South America. These partnerships are referred to as SDG Partnerships in this paper. The project timelines cover about four years.

Effective and impactful Public Private Partnerships

The idea behind Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) is that, especially when dealing with complex challenges like food security and private sector development, a collaborative approach is more fitting than just providing services. The belief is that this collaborative method is better suited to bringing about meaningful change in complex and challenging environments.

To facilitate effective collaboration and ensure impactful PPPs, RVO introduced the [Impact Accelerator](#). The Impact Accelerator (IA) is offered to new and current PPPs as a set of activities to facilitate knowledge exchange and the creation of new networks. Activities include training courses, networking meetings and webinars. This flexible instrument aims to enhance impact, foster innovation, and facilitate learning about the PPP approach. While working towards meeting project requirements, RVO, the lead and country-level partners grappled with key partnering questions. For example, how does a collaborative approach align with SDG Partnership requirements? What does effective collaboration entail? What changes in how we work together are needed, and how do we go about making them?

In 2020, RVO asked the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) to support their SDG partnerships. PBA builds partnering capacity for those managing collaboration processes and promotes the critical importance of partnering process management. PBA's role was to address specific partnership needs or challenge poor partnering behavior as they arose, provide tailored support, when necessary, suggest learning interventions, and capture insights as the partnerships progressed. PBA initiated partnership workshops, webinars, partnership health checks, and tailored support to those PPPs that expressed a need for it.


The Realities of Public Private Partnerships

Through its ongoing support efforts, the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) has identified recurring partnering questions and challenges. Interestingly, these common challenges arise across different contexts, types of partnerships, and partner dynamics.

For instance, partners have raised concerns about the SDGP facility's approach to partnering. They point out that the SDGP operates on a transactional and projectized model, lacking a principled focus on effective partnering practices. Local partners, in particular, often find themselves engaged in bilateral interactions without a clear understanding of the broader partnership intent.

Another notable issue are the power dynamics within SDG partnerships, which are often determined by and tend to favor lead partners and donor requirements. This is evident in how crucial information and funding are shared, the emphasis on due diligence over the partnership-building process, and local partners' struggles to connect with the back-donor, a task usually handled by the lead partner.

Also, true collaboration isn't always the norm in PPPs. Sometimes, what appears as a partnership is more of a one-sided relationship, with merely some bilateral relations between the lead partner and other partners. In other cases, partners have not even realized they're part of a partnership and continue with business as usual.

 *These complex challenges are sometimes hidden from donors to avoid jeopardizing funding relations which makes addressing them all the more difficult.*

These situations highlight the challenges of fostering genuine partnerships, where mutual understanding and cooperation are essential. These complex challenges are sometimes hidden from donors to avoid jeopardizing funding relations which makes addressing them all the more difficult.

Writing Stories and Engaging in Learning Dialogues to Better Understand Reality

Listening to stories from real life PPP experiences and learning from them could tap into a treasure trove of practical wisdom that can guide future collaborative efforts. But to do so requires a more conscious and rigorous method.

So, towards that purpose, PBA invited Doug Reeler from the Barefoot Guide Connection to facilitate a 'collaborative learning Writeshop'. This method aimed to create a collaborative space for partners involved in the SDGPs to surface stories in writing, to share and reflect on them in peer learning dialogues and to develop valuable insights to guide future practices. In so doing, it served to improve future partnering practices by distilling lessons learned and suggesting best practices.

The Importance of Real-Life Insights

Listening to, reflecting on, and incorporating insights from real-life experiences isn't just about improving individual projects; it acts as a catalyst for driving systemic change. By understanding the culture, institutional arrangements, how people work and the systems they use that help or hinder the true potential of PPPs, stakeholders can collaboratively work towards transformative shifts in how partnerships are conceived and implemented.

Guiding Questions for the Writing Process

The questions guiding the writing process were created collaboratively with the participants who joined the writeshop:

- What qualities are needed for collaborative relationships in Sustainable Development Goal Partnerships (SDGPs)?
- How can we build trust?
- How do we communicate more effectively?
- How do we navigate inevitable conflicts?
- How do we unlock leadership and learning?

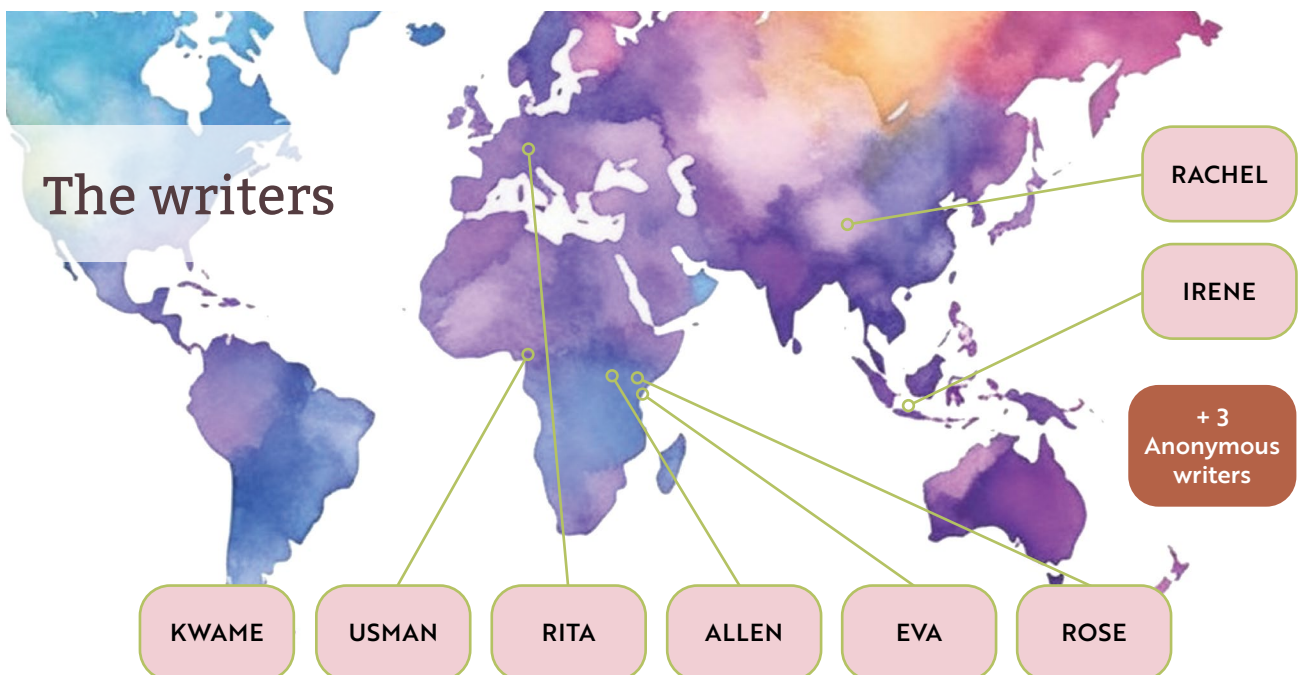
In total, nineteen SDGP practitioners participated in the writeshop.



“ These stories offer a unique perspective on patterns in current practices, including insights and implications for potentially reshaping and improving the development and functioning of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs).

Outcome of the Process

From this collaborative effort, fifteen stories were written. While some have been finalized, others are still in progress. These stories belong to the writers, but eleven of them have generously agreed to share their rich stories with other partners, including donors. Three writers preferred to contribute anonymously. All eleven stories are from people who are actively trying to improve the SDGPs in practice in the different geographical locations across the globe. These stories offer a unique perspective on patterns in current practices, including insights and implications for potentially reshaping and improving the development and functioning of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs).



The Structuring of the SDG Partnership Facility

Underlying Ideas and criteria

To understand what can be learnt from the stories, it may help to revisit some of the underlying ideas and criteria guiding the SDG partnerships, as these set the stage for the SDG partnerships to be launched. As will be seen, several of the successes and challenges can be traced to these ideas and criteria and how they were interpreted and worked with by the various PPPs.

- **Goal Alignment:** SDG Partnerships aim to contribute to specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 2 (ending hunger), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 17 (Partnering for the Goals), and with an additional focus on SDG 5, 12 and 13;
- **CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) Policy:** The underlying policy of the SDG facility is to financially support (Dutch) companies pursuing socially responsible business ventures abroad. This means the extent to which a project makes a positive contribution to society, the economy and the environment. It includes adherence of companies to OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, implementation of responsible business conduct policies, conducting risk analyses, establishing CSR monitoring protocols for partnerships, and ensuring transparency to other partners as part of financing conditions;
- **Focus on SDG 17:** The assumption is that collaboration with other sectors will lead to innovative solutions and increased impact. The involvement of local governments is deemed crucial for the success of an SDG partnership;
- **Multisectoral Composition:** Each SDG partnership involves various sectors, including business, local government, and an NGO/INGO and/or a knowledge institute. The assumption is that complementarity of these diverse sectors and maintaining equitable relations will lead to new value and solutions. This approach in the Netherlands is also known as the Dutch Diamond approach;
- **Adequate funding:** Each SDG partnership allows a maximum of six partners to apply for funding ranging from €500,000 to €3,000,000. Plus 50% of co-funding of the partners;
- **Lead Partner Structure:** The main applicant of an SDG partnership is a Dutch 'lead partner', responsible for managing the partnership and relations with the back-donor. This main applicant structure aims to mitigate risks and ensure accountability to the back-donor;
- **Inception Phase:** The SDG partnership facility created an inception phase (between 6-12 months) to emphasize co-creating the partnership and get all the practicalities sorted, set up the M&E system and to carry out the audit. This extended phase also served to alleviate pressure on Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in the later stages.

The Partnering Cycle

Partnerships are seen as a mechanism that have the potential to shift ways of working and create new value where they are built on the rich and unique contributions each partner can bring. But a partnership is not just a static mechanism that gets planned and built and switched on, to run like clockwork with occasional maintenance and fixing when it breaks down, according to the contracted project blueprint. A partnership is more of a living and often paradoxical eco-system that evolves over time, rather than a mechanistic construct. Partnerships change throughout their lifetimes and need skillful and particular attention and intention to support their successful working.

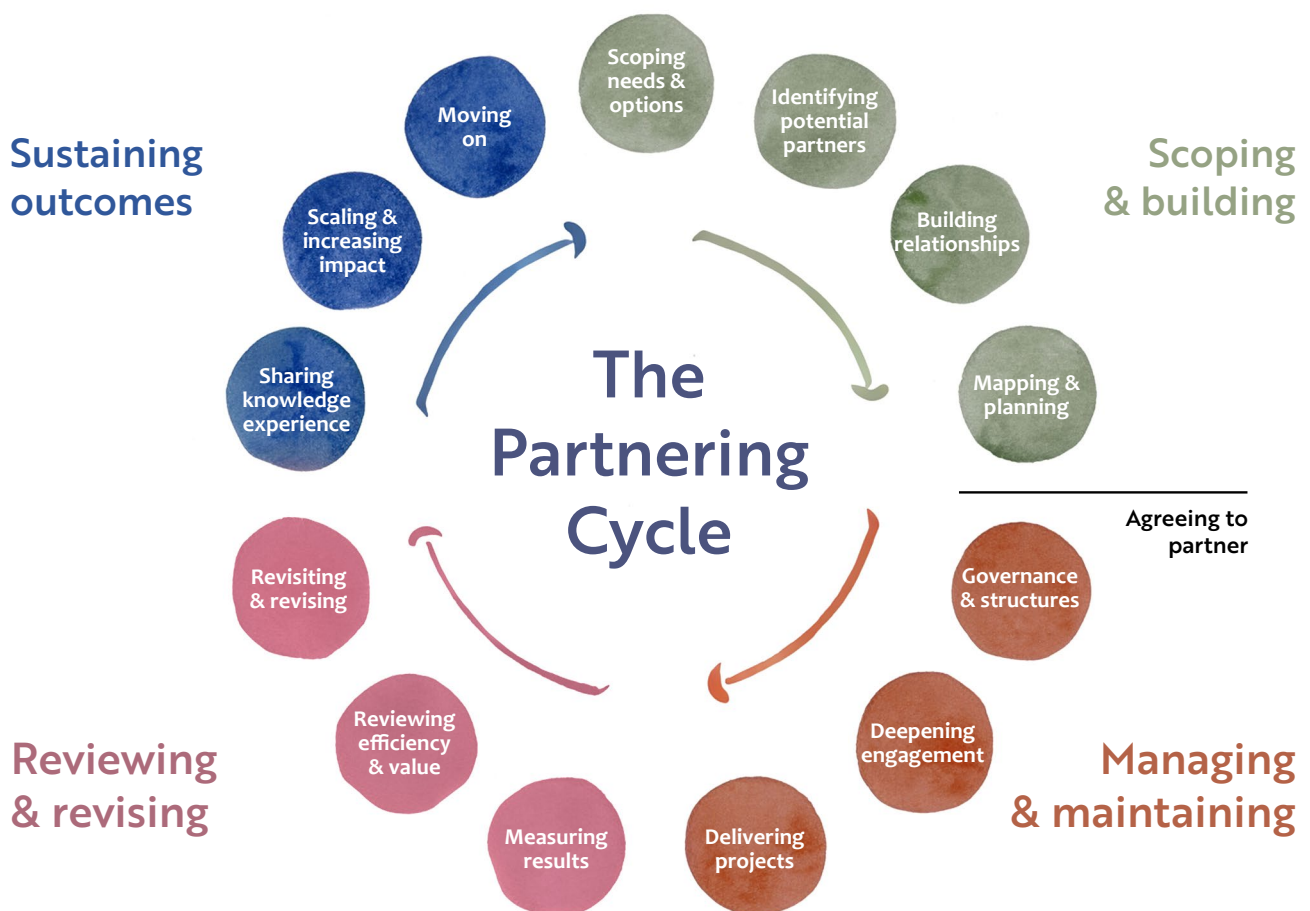
To help to anticipate and navigate the complex journeys they embark on together; the Partnership Brokers Association uses the Partnering Cycle (see below) which is a conceptual design of a typical partnership process. It has been offered to and been used by some of the SDG partners to navigate their process and relationships. Not only has this been a useful framework for those partners but it is also helpful as a lens through which to explore the stories we gathered.

“The Partnering Cycle incorporates that learning approach, offering the understanding that evolving partnership processes occur in stages, often punctuated by crisis, from which learning, unlearning and healthy resolution can flow to provide new impetus for the next stage.

The Partnering Cycle is a roadmap for partnerships that shows how partnerships typically develop over time. As a guide it acknowledges that partnerships are not a straightforward journey with each planned step neatly leading to the next. Some parts repeat, while others happen now and then.

Because of the complexities of marrying the practices and cultures of very different kinds of organizations, specifically government, business and NGOs, we know that partnerships are rife with unanticipated dynamics, unplanned occurrences and unexpected consequences. Partnering is a messy process that requires a learning approach to collaboratively navigate these complexities. The Partnering Cycle incorporates that learning approach, offering the understanding that evolving partnership processes occur in stages, often punctuated by crisis, from which learning, unlearning and healthy resolution can flow to provide new impetus for the next stage.

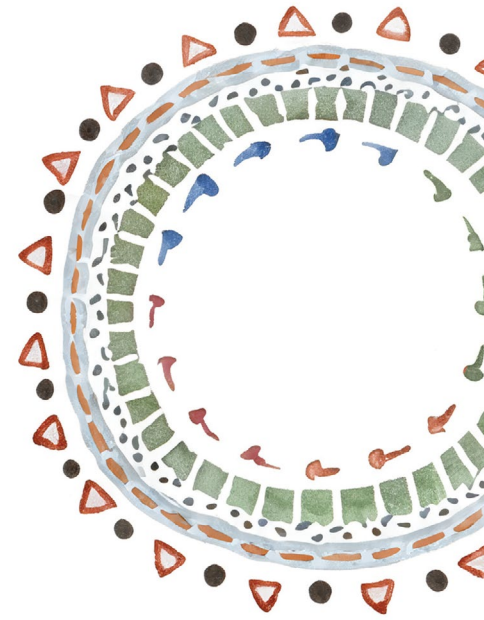
The Partnering Cycle helps people working together in partnerships to draw attention to the partnership process and anticipate what might come next, notice if something important is being missed, and understand how careful attention is needed in each phase of the partnership.



The Partnering Cycle: the Partnership Brokers Association adapted this from TPI

There are roughly four stages to the Partnering Cycle:

1. **SCOPING AND BUILDING:** partners are identified, relations are built, a common purpose is shaped, and plans created.
2. **MANAGING AND MAINTAINING:** partners deliver projects, find ways to communicate among partners and beyond, put in place governance structures and systems and deepen engagement.
3. **REVIEWING AND REVISING:** monitoring and measuring progress, but also reviewing the efficiency of the partnership while learning and improving partnering practice. This is not a phase on its own but happens throughout the life cycle of the partnership.
4. **SUSTAINING OUTCOMES:** the phase in which partners ‘move on’ either by finalizing, continuing, scaling up or down their partnership and where partners make sure their outcomes are sustained.



Understanding Power in Everyday Patterns in Partnerships: Phases of Dependence, Independence, Interdependence

In our exploration of partnership stories, we noticed recurring everyday patterns that shape how partnerships operate. These patterns can either foster healthy collaboration or reveal underlying power imbalances and social norms. Recognizing and addressing these patterns can enhance how partners work together.

One such pattern revolves around power dynamics. While partnerships aim for equitable relationships with shared goals, achieving and maintaining equal power among partners is rare. Power imbalances often emerge at the beginning and persist throughout a partnership's lifespan. For partnerships to succeed, all partners must feel equally valued and contribute meaningfully.

However, it's unrealistic to expect perfect balance from the start. Power differentials surface quickly and influence a partnership's success. For instance, donors and/or private sector may unintentionally wield disproportionate influence due to their financial contributions. Similarly, lead partners entrusted with managing funds may unknowingly exert more power than intended.

Power dynamics can manifest in various ways, such as imposing preferred working methods or dominating behaviors. Despite stated principles of collaboration and equity, some partners inevitably hold more sway, complicating efforts to address these imbalances.

Partnerships typically evolve through archetypal phases of dependence, independence, and interdependence in the power relationships between members. Initially, partners may rely heavily on donors or lead partners for resources and direction. While this dependency can streamline decision-making, it conflicts with collaborative ideals. Unacknowledged power differentials may lead to crises, either as internal frustration or outward conflict.

Navigating these crises requires proactive leadership and a commitment to equitable relations. Successfully resolving conflicts leads to a phase of independence, where partners gain autonomy and decision-making power. However, this newfound independence can create silos and hinder collaboration.

Through effective leadership and learning, partnerships can progress to interdependence, characterized by mutual respect and fluid collaboration. By understanding these phases and anticipating challenges, partners can mitigate tensions and foster truly collaborative relationships.

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PART TWO

INSIGHTS FROM THE PARTNER STORIES

The writing process revealed that Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) often encounter diverse challenges due to the involvement of different partners and the complexity of social change. It also affirmed that to unlock the full potential of PPPs, a shift in how everyone involved works is essential.

The writing process revealed that Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) often encounter diverse challenges due to the involvement of different partners and the complexity of social change. It also affirmed that to unlock the full potential of PPPs, a shift in how everyone involved works is essential. This means moving away from merely 'projectising' partnerships towards building genuine collaborative relationships. It involves transitioning from meeting the needs of one partner or back donor to co-creation. It requires moving from upward accountability to mutual accountability and from telling to listening.

So, in this paper, we're going to spill the beans on some common everyday patterns in different phases of partnerships. We'll use insights from the stories from partnership practitioners to explain these patterns and give you some food for thought. And, as said before, if you're really into understanding how public-private partnerships work in practice, we've got the full stories at the end – they're like hidden treasures full of wisdom and reflections. Give them a read!

The Scoping & Building Phase

The formation and dynamics of partnerships are usually heavily influenced by the foundational arrangements that establish them, as described above. In the context of the SDGP funding facility for Public Private Partnerships, there were some distinct components that significantly shaped these partnerships:

- The initiation of a prolonged and thorough inception phase, designed to minimize ambiguities and reduce the need for extensive due diligence towards the project's conclusion. The SDGP inception focused on due diligence and practicalities while such a phase could be used in future tenders more to encourage partners to build relations, shape ways of working that suit all, to co-create programs and to create governance and decision-making models that build on mutuality and equity.
- The implementation of a 'lead applicant' model. This model designated a primary lead applicant who served as the intermediary between the partnership members and the subsidy source, which in this scenario was RVO. The lead applicant manages the partnership and must submit the inception report (including an audit report, budget, and a Monitoring and Evaluation plan), the projects progress report and the final report. Lead applicants also manage communication with the back-donor and the partners. The lead partner is also legally responsible for the funds, so this role comes with responsibilities.

- There is no explicit mention made about managing the partnership in any of the criteria but there is an implicit expectation that a partnership approach leads to added value and that lead-partners manage the partnership process too. RVO is not a formal partner but a contractor. RVO was mandated by the Dutch Ministry, to implement this SDGP grant programme. Other partners sign contracts with the lead applicant. In some cases, this led to merely bilateral relations between the lead partner and other partners and partners focusing on their own piece of work within the partnership, rather trying to build something together. It also led to partners not being aware of the agreement between the lead partner and RVO and no direct contact between RVO and the other partners.

RVO had learned from previous partnership facilities that an inception phase would be crucial, during which partners could get all the things organized in-country with different partners and meet the due diligence criteria required by the government.

In principle an inception phase is a good idea, as there is much to think about and do when building a partnership, such as identifying the right partners, scoping the needs, building relationships, getting things organized, and jointly mapping and planning. The inception phase was intended to provide space for exactly that. RVO also offered support to SDG partnerships with the partnership building process through a series of four online workshops. Initially it was planned to organize regional learning events but due to COVID an online alternative was developed. The workshops were organized on a voluntary basis, allowing participants to engage based on their own interest.

During these workshops partners were introduced to some key partnering frameworks, such as the partnering cycle. And they were invited to create alignment around their shared vision, to understand the importance of co-creating partnering principles, to acknowledge diverse resource contributions and to jointly define what success would look like.

Although the inception phase was designed with positive intentions, it proved to be a source of significant stress and challenge for many partners. While the partnering workshops garnered positive feedback from many partners, a noteworthy gap existed between the formal inception criteria and the essential building blocks of partnership.

It seems that the strong focus on due diligence up front led to a managerial, projectized way of working in in partnerships, in many cases dominated by the lead partner, instead of more fluid, resilient, co-created and adaptive relationships that characterize a true partnership approach.

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Achieving clarity and alignment around vision, purpose and values

One of the writers started her story by saying:

How many of us, when starting a partnership, ask each other, "What are your values?" Do we ever ask our partners what they stand for? Do we seek clarity on what their non-negotiables are or try to align on language, context, and priorities? In my experience, the answer is, hardly ever.

Despite acknowledging the significance of investing time in critical questions to establish deeper partnerships, individuals often found themselves defaulting to conventional Western business models and official project startup protocols, sidelining these priorities, a point underscored in the story that follows:

"Being the project manager on the ground, I was caught in the eye of the storm. I had also committed to seeing this challenging start in COVID times through and was heavily obligated to ensure that each one of the KPIs was met. Every partner meeting left me depleted of energy from all the anxiety I had to manage. As the project manager I had self-imposed pressure to know everything about the project because to me, everyone seemed to know what they were doing. How could they not?"

Slowly, I learned to manage the anxiety. However, how was I to deal with the multicultural and personality clashes online? At one of the meetings, I attempted to align our vision as a partnership, and I asked, "What is each partner representative's dream?" I got a cynical response, a harsh put-down, "We are not here to dream, Eva. We have KPIs to achieve." It felt like an attack, a belittling of my desire to align on our shared direction and it further enhanced my anxiety in the online partnership meetings. Looking back, perhaps this was the first crack in the partnership relationship. Out of fear and intimidation, I packed away our "dream," and with it, I now see that I packed away the vital formulation of a joint vision and values to guide our collaboration."

The dominant Western paradigm subtly dictates what is deemed necessary or unnecessary. These unseen and implicit dominant frameworks perpetuate existing power dynamics, ironically undermining the partnership KPIs and results they are designed to support. And without trying to understand and incorporate diverse perspectives, they can create anxiety for people working in it.



The story continues:

Open communication and appreciation of each other's differences could have helped in the smoother implementation of the project. We did not have to agree on everything, but we at least needed to be aligned on the basics, on how we interpreted the KPI's, and to ensure that our different approaches and contributions would not clash. We needed to do this both at the beginning, to lay the foundations of our collaboration, and along the way, as a learning partnership, with frequent moments of reflection to adjust to each other and a changing context. I believe that these are the secret ingredients to good partnering.

But the question remains, how can we get agreement to discuss these things, to have the alignment conversations and to learn together, as the very basis of a partnership, if some of the partners do not value doing so in the first place?

(Eva Kimani)

In another story the importance of creating deep understanding and alignment is also stressed:

I realized that although we had sat down before the start of our partnership to discuss our expectations of one another and the importance of a suitable workforce for the task at hand, we had not prepared adequately. We could have done more to align our priorities and understanding of what we needed to have as a competent group of data collectors to conduct the baseline study. I had rushed into an assumption that the partner and I were on the same page, but clearly not! This oversight led to a two-month struggle with subpar (or dirty data), leaving me to focus on damage control rather than capacity building. The experience taught me a crucial lesson: thorough preparation and aligned expectations are vital in partnerships, and to always check your assumptions.

(Allen Kwagonza)


Early engagement of all partners

The importance of early engagement of all partners (including the involvement of the local farmers) was stressed as a key element to create alignment in the scoping and building phase:

In the heart of our country, where farmers faced the challenges of aflatoxin contamination and post-harvest losses, an SDGP embarked on a mission to transform the maize value chain. With the support of the involved partners like government, an NGO and a business, the project aimed to enhance quality control, improve market access, and increase the bankability of farmer cooperatives.

As a cooperative advisor, my excitement grew as we implemented our action plan and organized meetings to discuss project progress. During a field visit to a farmer cooperative, I witnessed the eagerness of maize farmers, led by an experienced chairman. Despite feeling like I was intruding on their busy farming activities, I was warmly welcomed.

The farmers shared their concerns about aflatoxin contamination leading to post-harvest losses and poor market access. Despite contemplating a shift to other crops, the farmers were determined to improve maize production, their staple food crop. Intrigued, I suggested a novel approach – collecting maize on the cob for sale, a concept met with hope and genuine interest by the model farmers.

 **The experience taught me a crucial lesson: thorough preparation and aligned expectations are vital in partnerships, and to always check your assumptions.**

6 To make partnerships like this work, it's crucial to include all partners, also the people whose lives will be changed the most – in this case the farmers.



In the following season, the farmers adopted the on-cob selling model, reducing post-harvest losses and securing better prices. The model garnered appreciation from partners, enabling a significant reduction in rejected maize due to aflatoxin, from 90% to 5%. This innovation not only lightened the post-harvest workload for women but also afforded them more time for household and farming activities.

(Anonymous writer)

This story underscores the vital role of engaging the people whose life will be influenced as partners too. By listening to the farmers' concerns during field visits about aflatoxin contamination and post-harvest losses and collaborating on solutions, the project tailored interventions to meet farmers' specific needs. The success of the "on-cob" selling model depended on farmers' willingness to adopt it, showcasing their crucial role in decision-making. Involving farmers in co-creating solutions empowered them to take ownership of interventions and drive sustainable change in their communities, emphasizing the importance of farmer engagement in agricultural development initiatives.

To make partnerships like this work, it's crucial to include all partners, also the people whose lives will be changed the most – in this case the farmers. Exploring the diverse needs, expectations, risks and contributions together are important elements to align on the shared vision. A partnership goal cannot be defined by one of the partners. Equally important is figuring out HOW partners like to work together and how to problem solve together. Partners actively engaging in jointly navigating challenges together, is stressed as being important by one of the writers too:

A project partnership was formed by the NGO, sourcing private company and maize cooperatives. Excitement filled the air as news of the partnership spread throughout each partner. Farmers were overjoyed at the prospect of selling their maize beyond their village borders. They envisioned a future where their hard work would finally be recognized, and their families would thrive and the sourcing private company the expectations of sourcing domestically were answered.

During the first year, maize cooperatives had more production than expected. As the cooperative prepared to deliver their first batch of maize to the maize sourcing company, everyone felt a mix of excitement and nervousness. The cooperatives waited for the sourcing company to come to load the production. Days turned into weeks, and the farmers eagerly awaited feedback from the maize sourcing company. But to their disappointment, they received news that the company's stock was full and they couldn't receive more stock. Their hearts sank, and a wave of sadness washed over them.

The cooperative members couldn't understand what had gone wrong. They had worked tirelessly, followed every instruction, and put their hearts into producing the best maize. The feeling of disappointment was overwhelming, and doubts began to creep into their minds.

However, the NGO refused to let the setback dampen their spirits. They organized a meeting with the company to understand the issues and find a solution. It turned out that the company store was fully loaded and sourced to the cooperatives, which were not in the partnership agreement. The company assured the cooperatives that they were still committed to the partnership and would work together to rectify the situation.



The partnership grew stronger as they learned from their mistakes and worked towards a common goal. With renewed determination, the farmers resumed their work in the fields. The next harvest season arrived, and this time, the cooperative delivered a batch of maize to the company and exceeded all expectations. (Anonymous writer)

Due diligence demands.

The ideal scenario for this scoping phase would involve ample time for partners to engage with each other, establish deep understanding of each other's work, existing plans, and policies, share their goals, and harmonize their diverse cultural backgrounds and working methodologies. However, partners often find themselves overwhelmed by stringent due diligence demands, including the need to manage and sign numerous documents. As a result, the work of alignment, of building trust and effective communication gets sidelined. They face pressing deadlines for conducting baseline studies and encounter difficulties in obtaining audits that meet RVO's standards, especially in countries where finding qualified auditors is challenging. Additionally, securing signatures from local governments is a time-consuming process, often leading to delays and early demotivation among partners as mentioned by Usman:

The impact of bureaucratic hurdles within the government, leads to delays, lack of clarity in decision-making, and hindrance to project management mandates.

However, none of the stories showed partners questioning the formal criteria or challenging the usual ways of doing things. Partners often prioritize meeting bureaucratic standards, and if they want to challenge them, they struggle to find the right channels to voice their concerns or the courage to do so. Essentially, the process of meeting these administrative criteria set the pace and established the norms within the SDG partnerships at the beginning.

“ However, partners often find themselves overwhelmed by stringent due diligence demands, including the need to manage and sign numerous documents. As a result, the work of alignment, of building trust and effective communication gets sidelined.





6 *We need to spend time to get to know each other, each other's hopes, fears, and ways of working. We need to co-create a way of working that enthuses and works for all and that enable all to contribute and benefit.*

Some final thoughts about the Scoping and Building phase

If we are trying to achieve different kinds of outcomes or create change in complex societal challenges that can only be achieved through collaborative efforts, we need to start differently. We need to spend time to get to know each other, each other's hopes, fears, and ways of working. We need to co-create a way of working that enthuses and works for all and that enable all to contribute and benefit. And we need to find ways to address dysfunctional power imbalances by creating equitable relations. We need to cultivate collaborative alignment not just technical agreement.

A facilitated inception workshop, ideally face-to-face could support partners to work through key partnership building questions to create alignment and deeper joint understanding such as: 1) why do partners want to partner (what are each partner's interests), 2) what is the partnership's aspiration beyond this project (what are your dreams (well done Eva!)), 3) what can each partner contribute, 4) what are important partnering values and principles that can guide the collaboration and most vitally, 5) what communication, feedback and learning culture and practices can be established to help negotiate the rocky road ahead, 6) what kind things can go wrong and how will we deal with them together?

The Managing and Maintaining Phase

Once partners have agreed to partner and have signed the contract, it's easy to think the partnership will run smoothly, and that the focus on delivering the program can finally get underway.

During this phase, partners often face communication hurdles, engagement issues, and confusion over roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes. Even with a well-executed Scoping & Building Phase, including a thorough initiation, the practical application of these plans can diverge significantly from expectations. This period is marked by both parties attempting to adapt to their collaborative roles while operationalizing their joint efforts.

Clear, respectful, and effective communication

The importance of good communication and being culturally sensitive was stressed by Irene from Indonesia. Her “gold dust” advice is for each partner to put themselves in each other’s shoes and to see things from different angles:

I was struggling a bit with the Dutch culture, the office environment and how to communicate because I heard that the Dutch people were straightforward, although I discovered some were not. In Indonesia, we have many cultures and if you want to talk with someone, it would be better if you already knew where they are from. Although in the beginning, it was not so easy for me to adapt to the culture, I managed by listening to wise people, reading some Dutch books and practising listening more. I discovered that Dutch people are more like people from the Eastern part of Indonesia.

But one of the members had a different character from the other Dutch people. I used a personal way to communicate with her through WhatsApp before we communicated formally through email. But if I couldn't manage the communication with her, I would ask my other colleague in the Netherlands office to help me and it worked, because I thought it would be easier for them to talk in Dutch. The way to communicate with the director was different as well. She is a busy person. But she wants to know everything in the field. We always had to inform her if we wanted to go to the village for this project. I tried to talk to her through WhatsApp

too and after we had talked several times, I also discovered the best time to communicate with her. So, when I learned the diverse ways to communicate with each of the members of the consortium, it helped me a lot to do my work in the field and to connect with the European team. I have heard from different people that they loved the way I communicate with them and liked what I have done so far for this project.

Working together with different people from different cultures has not been easy but if you know how to communicate with each of them to achieve the same goal, even if you have differing expertise, you can deal with issues. Try to put yourself in their shoes, if possible, to see from different angles. This is what helps me a lot to communicate with them.

(Irene P. Cahyani)

Clear and respectful communication, if it is to be effective, is essential and important for the success of any partnership. It serves as the cornerstone for both internal dynamics (within and among partnering organizations) and external interactions (with stakeholders affected by or influencing the partnership). Prioritizing open and respectful dialogue is crucial for fostering strong collaborations.

Ros Tennyson and Sue MacManus stress the importance of encouraging “respect among the partners: create a culture in the partnership where it is ok to say, “I don’t understand” or “Can you explain?”¹

¹ Source: *Talking the Walk* – a communication manual for partnership practitioners by Ros Tennyson and Sue MacManus



6 It is not uncommon for partners to disengage on a personal level, which has consequences for their organizational engagement and the partnership. It's therefore crucial to create deeper organisational engagement.

The willingness to listen and to be curious about the other partners is key. Moving from a defensive to a more vulnerable and trusting posture creates a generative impulse in the room that is more likely to bring out the creativity in each partner. Power issues (e.g. around money) that bring fear can stop that positive impulse in its tracks. Within organizations it is usually the leadership who can model and facilitate this. In public-private partnerships, lead partners could create space for this, but it requires skill and collaborative intent.

Partner engagement beyond the individuals

It's a common scenario for partner relations to initially be handled by just one or two individuals from each organization. While this is often the starting point for many partnerships, relying too much on just a few people can make partnerships vulnerable and less engaging, as shown in the story of Rachel, below:

I have worked on a semi-national project to develop a special economic zone for five years, collaborating with various organizations, investors, contractors, government departments, and nationalities. Our ambitious goal with the SDG partnership was to collaborate on the existing farming sector by introducing more efficient farming models, building capacity, and facilitating access to finance and markets.

During the project proposal, award reception, baseline survey, field survey, and planning impact pathway process, we worked energetically. The happiness among us was palpable, and our minds were filled with plans to initiate the project.

As one of five partners in this project, we collaborated by building communication, understanding, and mutual interest to achieve our goals. We signed a partnership agreement during the challenging times of COVID-19, which affected our families, work, and health. The pandemic delayed the project timeline by a year, but we did our best under the circumstances. All partners faced challenges, and our lives changed significantly. The co-chair was replaced after we lost the previous one to the pandemic, with whom we had worked harmoniously for over a year.

However, collaboration is never perfect. One day, a representative of one of the partners called me to announce their withdrawal from the project and abruptly hung up.

I was stunned by the call, feeling as if I had been broken up with by a "love partner" without any explanation. I understood this representative as an experienced and resilient expert in the field, yet I was left wondering why she made that decision. I began seeking the reasons behind it to find a solution with the management and other project partners. The project is still ongoing, with many activities. My project management partner and I are working to keep this partner connected and are considering various scenarios in case they decide to terminate their involvement.

(Rachel Thwe)

This story illustrates how tough it can be to keep partners engaged. It is not uncommon for partners to disengage on a personal level, which has consequences for their organizational engagement and the partnership. It's therefore crucial to create deeper organizational engagement. Involving more people from each organization is important, not just relying on one person, no matter how willing and capable they are. In this situation, it could for instance have been useful to explore the issue with the wider organization. You never know if the issue is personal, organizational, or something else, so it's essential to explore it.

It's worth mentioning the importance of making a habit of discussing concerns and challenges with each other in a partnership by asking questions in regular meetings relating to their personal and organizational level of engagement. Creating a culture in which it is normal to ask questions that help partners express their level of engagement is important. Such as 'to what extent does the partnership still add value for your organization? What needs change in how we work to improve the engagement? Are there any changes in your organization that would be important to know for this partnership?'

The reality is not whether challenges will arise, but rather that they inevitably will, repeatedly. Thus, the focus should be on developing the capacity to communicate effectively. This is key to ensuring everyone is engaged and equipped to address any issues that emerge.

Securing commitments

In the initial phases of building a partnership, partners often agree on the different resources and responsibilities each partner will contribute to the partnership. All too often these contributions are not delivered during the implementation phase, or just partially so, which can lead to disappointment and lack of results.

Our private sector partner was, according to the project, supposed to market salt-tolerant varieties in the coastal areas of our country. They were also expected to indicate the salt tolerance levels of their varieties. However, midway through the project, I realized that they were not as committed as we had expected. They had not put in the extra effort to identify the tolerance levels of the seeds/varieties.

Their primary objective was to increase their sales volume, as they are a profit-driven entity, and they contributed by providing matching funds. Additionally, they were supposed to develop a mobile app for disseminating knowledge among the farmers, but they have not accomplished this yet.

I am, fortunately or unfortunately, responsible for the capacity-building events such as farmer training, demonstration plots, and knowledge-sharing events of the project. I create training modules and other materials and facilitate training for the lead farmers. It is disheartening when, after the training, they do not receive the necessary inputs such as seeds.

(Anonymous writer)

Securing resource commitments can indeed present significant challenges. Partners may lack a shared understanding of commitments, or they might fail to fulfill promises. At the outset of a partnership, discussions often focus solely on the financial resources of the lead donor. However, the true value of a partnership lies in recognizing, valuing and securing the diverse contributions of each partner.

These contributions serve as the building blocks for PPPs, fostering a sense of value among all partners and enhancing the partnership's effectiveness, equity, and overall value.

Addressing questions such as who will contribute what and by when is crucial during the scoping phase. Additionally, proactive discussions on how the partnership will address instances of unmet commitments can help navigate challenges as they arise. Cultivating a culture where partners feel comfortable raising and discussing challenges is also essential.

 ... the true value of a partnership lies in recognizing and valuing the diverse contributions of each partner.

6 During the meeting with the government agency, the head of agriculture and food security mentioned that this project was good and in line with the national agricultural program and a good model to be replicated in other areas. I was so happy when I heard that statement, because in Indonesia if you undertake good projects but they are not in line with the government's program, they won't be sustained.



In some cases, engaging the government and getting their commitment has been reported as a challenging and time intensive job. Some SDG partnerships had to wait a long time and invest excessive time and energy to get local government signatures (a pre-requisite for an SDG partnership). Also finding further commitment from the government requires a great deal of work as Irene describes in her story:

I have tried to look for funds from the government, especially for gabions, in collaboration with village governments. The director of AG has tried to look for funds as well from another government's office for the agriculture sector. It's not easy to look for funds. I must contact the different government agencies and look for the appropriate agency for funds. After finding the right agency, I must follow some of the instructions and do some surveys with the Green Warriors and village staff, even the village leaders themselves. Then I must write the proposal and send it to Aliet Green to follow it up with the village office to use their letterhead for the proposal. Then I bring those proposals to that agency. After that once or twice a week, I try to follow them up.

I was happy to hear that the government agency has done the surveys and is still in the process of making the budget. I asked for the head to be approved for the implementation. It's the same process for Aliet Green's director when she tries to look for funds. But we have received no update yet about the fund from the agriculture sector.

During the meeting with the government agency, the head of agriculture and food security mentioned that this project was good and in line with the national agricultural program and a good model to be replicated in other areas. I was so happy when I heard that statement, because in Indonesia if you undertake good projects but they are not in line with the government's program, they won't be sustained.
(Irene P. Cahyani)

While this underlines the importance of government engagement and approval, it highlights some of the hurdles that can drastically slow down PPPs.

Mutual accountability

Prompting partners to deliver on their commitments in a timely manner is crucial as it helps to build mutual accountability. However, all too often accountability is just used to report towards the donor. Having mechanisms and ways of working in place to hold each other accountable may be much more helpful to achieve the results. Clarity about what success looks like for each partner, how and in what way monitoring progress is helpful for all partners (not just the donor or lead-partner), what type of ‘reports’ would be most useful for all and how you like to keep each other accountable. Having regular progress meetings in which all partners can share their perceptions and share concerns, are important here.

In complex partnerships, accountability and learning go hand in hand to keep on track not only securing commitments but doing so within a dynamic context that requires frequent adaptation.

“In complex partnerships, accountability and learning go hand in hand to keep on track not only securing commitments but doing so within a dynamic context that requires frequent adaptation.”

Governance arrangements

Rose brought up an extra dimension around power dynamics related to resource commitments and governance arrangements.

We were filled with excitement when we met the project partners over two years ago in Nairobi. We seemed like a perfect match: they included commercial companies, a Non-governmental organization, Farmers co-operatives, and we are a government research institute, each partner bringing together diverse expertise and experience to the table. I was tasked to represent our institute director and coordinate the project.

When the day came that the project was approved for funding, we were excited to begin. Then, out of the blue, the partner indicated that our station was too far from their offices to attend a meeting. It was a red flag that I pushed aside because I was impatient to start activities. But the funds did not arrive. As we waited, I consoled myself that no organization could take on our role as the premier institution in coffee research. However, I was frustrated and worried that my director would think I was not doing what was expected.

This meant that we were not able to start our work even two years down the line, despite revising the work plans several times. We were left out of the implementation and some of our roles were taken over by other partners. This was a typical case of power imbalance in the project where those with control of the money can easily sideline the others, yet we contributed in the development of the proposal.

At some point, I organized a meeting between the main applicant of the project and my director to iron out the challenges facing the partnership. But it was all lip service. Our requests for the submission of funds fell on deaf ears.



6 It is extremely hard to deal with power dynamics in any partnership particularly when the governance arrangements are not clear. And it can be frustrating when the intention is to build an equal partnership, but the reality is a way of working that in fact carries neo-colonial characteristics.

So, in the end, we developed a transactional relationship: "Give us money; we do the activities and nothing short." The partners realized they were between a rock and a hard place, and nothing was progressing. They were also under pressure to submit a report to the donor. It still took a long time for the funds to arrive and then once we got the funds, we had to revise the work plan yet again!

But then we hit the ground running. The work was tiring, but I knew the endgame. We were visiting up to 20 farmers per day for two weeks, compared to the norm of 8 to 10 farmers per day. Once we had all the samples, it was time for soil analysis. We worked late into the day and over the weekends for almost two months. The compilation of the report was not an easy task. I had to work through the Christmas holidays to have the report ready.

I remember how relieved I was to send the report to all the project partners, asking them for their review and comments. To this day I have still not received feedback or acknowledgement. What a disappointment! Things seemed to stall again when we still had other activities to carry out. How could we kickstart the partnership again?

The problem was that activities were not carried out as outlined in the proposal. There were no meetings organized to discuss the project's progress or to develop reports for submission to the donor, although these were envisaged in the proposal. This left me wondering what reports were being submitted to the donor.

(Rose Mayoli)

The story reveals several key power issues within the partnership, shedding light on the complexities and inherent challenges of navigating and addressing power dynamics. It underscores the critical importance of establishing equitable relations in collaborative endeavors.

Within this story, one partner, exerts considerable influence by making decisions unilaterally, disregarding the valuable expertise of the research institute. The story subtly suggests the presence of neo-colonial undertones, where unequal workload distribution and lack of transparent governance mechanisms perpetuate a sense of marginalization within the partnership.

The absence of clear channels for grievance resolution and respectful communication further exacerbates the situation, allowing the dominant partner to wield control over funding and project direction unchecked. It is evident that implementing robust grievance mechanisms and fostering respectful dialogue could have preempted these issues and facilitated more open and constructive discussions.

Ultimately, this story underscores the critical imperative of addressing power dynamics in collaborative efforts. Only through proactive measures to address imbalances (like clear grievance mechanisms) and through building equitable relations, genuine collaboration and meaningful progress can be achieved.

6 *It's important to set up a clear governance framework and a way to handle complaints when starting a partnership. These elements might seem well-defined at the beginning, but real challenges often pop up later. So, after making the partnership official, it's helpful to go over and specify the full extent of roles, expectations, and duties again.*

Implications and recommendations

It's important to set up a clear governance framework and a way to handle complaints when starting a partnership. These elements might seem well-defined at the beginning, but real challenges often pop up later. So, after making the partnership official, it's helpful to go over and specify the full extent of roles, expectations, and duties again. This includes sharing contact information for everyone involved, including the main donor, establishing a grievance mechanism and being transparent about all the resources each party brings to the partnership.

The way decisions are made in partnerships should be carefully planned and made together, as with other processes. Embed the values and principles of collaboration, such as clear and respectful communication, into every part of how the partnership is managed.

Keeping everyone up to date is key. Regular meetings are a chance to tackle new problems, and having a way to table challenges is vital. It's also important to make sure that the main donor is approachable for local partners if problems come up.

Taking this joint approach helps all involved have a shared understanding and commitment to making the partnership work.

The Reviewing and Revising Phase

As mentioned earlier, this phase is not only about monitoring and measuring progress, but also reviewing the efficiency of the partnership while learning and improving partnering practice. This is not a phase on its own but happens throughout the life cycle of the partnership.

A shared commitment to learning and frequent moments of reflection

Frequent moments of reflection can help partners better align their efforts. Most of us are very used to measuring progress against results or KPIs (key performance indicators). And of course, it is important to track progress. However, there are limitations to measuring progress only by KPIs. Because often these are not co-created and are strongly linked to back donors' requirements. Questions that come up are: What do we measure and how is success or quality framed in partnerships and more importantly who sets the standards?

Kwame describes in his story that some partners were sceptical, questioning whether the diverse coalition could truly overcome the obstacles they faced. They seemed to harbour reservations about the feasibility of certain strategies or even the level of commitment from all partners.

Amid these differing perspectives, we recognized the importance of emphasising the value of monitoring and evaluation. While initially, not all partners shared the same level of enthusiasm, we believed in the power of dialogue and learning. We organized capacity-building sessions and workshops to educate all partners about the value of monitoring and evaluation. These sessions highlighted how it could improve our initiatives, ensure accountability, and even attract additional funding.

6 *This holistic approach not only aimed to transform communities but also shifted the partners' viewpoints, highlighting the importance of diversifying funding sources to ensure sustainability and expand the project's reach and impact.*

To bridge our differences and ensure collective agreement, we decided to develop a common framework for monitoring and evaluation. This framework incorporated input from all partners, ensuring that it reflected our collective vision. It included clear objectives, key performance indicators (KPIs), and a timeline for assessments.

We acknowledged that our journey was not just about the transformation of communities but also the transformation of our own perspectives. We learned that by emphasizing the importance of monitoring and evaluation and accommodating diverse needs and ideas, we could harness the power of data-driven decision-making.



As we navigated these waters, we also realized the importance of improving resource mobilization and planning beyond the initial grant. This decision was born out of a shared understanding that relying solely on one funding source wasn't a sustainable approach. So, our resource mobilization strategies included actively pursuing additional grants, launching targeted fundraising campaigns, and forming strategic partnerships with businesses and foundations that aligned with our mission. These efforts paid off, bringing in additional funds that allowed us to expand our initiatives and extend our influence far beyond our initial constraints.
(Kwame)

This story underscores the transformative power of integrating learning into partnership projects. Initially met with varying degrees of enthusiasm, the introduction of capacity-building sessions educated partners on the benefits of learning and M&E, such as enhanced accountability and the potential to attract more funding. A collectively agreed-upon framework for M&E was developed, incorporating diverse perspectives and emphasizing data-driven decisions. This holistic approach not only aimed to transform communities but also shifted the partners' viewpoints, highlighting the importance of diversifying funding sources to ensure sustainability and expand the project's reach and impact.

Finding a Learning Rhythm

Several mentions have already been made about the importance of reviewing and learning. This is vital because an adaptive learning approach is required by partners to navigate or negotiate their complex journey together. Partnerships face some unavoidable realities:

- a) Almost all plans must be made knowing that they may need to be adapted or even abandoned entirely to meet unexpected changes ahead. This also means that the partners themselves must be emotionally adaptable, able to abandon their own carefully laid plans, if required to, and to work creatively and collaboratively to meet the new situation;
- b) Overplanning in uncertain and unpredictable contexts may take up valuable time and energy which is best spent when needed as the situation evolves. Flexible preparation can often be better than rigid plans.
- c) Experience, whether successful or not, is always an opportunity for continuous improvement. The only real failure is a failure to learn.

Learning rhythms in the form of regular reviews can provide ideal opportunities for pausing to take time to collectively reflect and to draw lessons and ideas for improvement. Not only is fruitful learning surfaced but partners learn about each other's practices, deepening their ability to collaborate and fostering trust and commitment.

Organizations often complain that they are too busy to take off time to reflect and learn. This is no different from a woodcutter complaining that they do not have time to stop occasionally to sharpen their axes!

“Organizations often complain that they are too busy to take off time to reflect and learn. This is no different from a woodcutter complaining that they do not have time to stop occasionally to sharpen their axes!”




One of the challenges here is to access learning skills or facilitators who can provide a disciplined methodology like Action Learning to ensure that their time is well-spent.

The importance of regular reflection and adaptations is also stressed by Usman:

Transforming Nigeria's Vegetable Markets," a project by a public-private partnership, aimed to assist 136,200 farmers in five years but faced significant hurdles. Government bureaucracy and unclear mandates slowed progress, particularly in training 30,000 farmers, leading to underperformance in the initial phases.

Two years in, a review by the consortium revealed that certain project areas lacked support and funding from the government, prompting a budget reassessment and resource reallocation for operational logistics and farmer training. This shift led to improved results, with successful training of about 15,000 farmers in the final phase.

The project underscored the need for flexible, context-specific strategies in complex initiatives. Adapting methods to changing scenarios proved crucial. These insights are vital for the consortium's future projects, emphasizing the ability to navigate bureaucratic challenges and adapt for effective, sustainable outcomes. (Usman Barau Munkela)

 *There are huge assumptions about partnerships. But do these partnerships live up to their expectations? This is something that seriously should be investigated, also to make sure that the word partnership is not just used to go on with business as usual or even hiding that there is not much new about partnerships.*

This story further illustrates the importance of flexibility and adaptability in the face of operational and bureaucratic challenges. Encountering government bureaucracy and unclear mandates early on, the project had to navigate through significant hurdles. However, a mid-partnership review and reallocation of resources demonstrated the consortium's ability to adapt to changing circumstances and overcome obstacles. The success in training thousands of farmers in the latter phase underscored the efficacy of flexible, context-specific strategies in achieving sustainable outcomes.

Both stories underline the importance of embracing paying attention to the partnership process and reviewing that regularly, the strategic diversification of funding, and the adaptability to changing contexts as key pillars for the success of collaborative development projects. They highlight the transformative potential of not only external communities but also the internal dynamics and perspectives of the partners involved.

Partnership reviews do not need to take up a lot of time. Incorporating a set agenda item on 'collaboration' into regular meetings can be a simple measure to allocate time for joint reflection on what works well and what needs to change." Creating a learning culture throughout the lifetime of a partnership can, in fact, save time!

Facing up to disappointing results

During a session held on December 7th, 2023, for SDGP projects, all partners were invited to explore strategies for sustaining project results once their partnership initiatives concluded. The session revealed diverse perspectives among SDGP partners regarding the success and sustainability of their projects. Some partnerships expressed pride in their achievements, while others found the results disappointing. There are huge assumptions about partnerships. But do these partnerships live up to their expectations? This is something that seriously should be investigated, also to make sure that the word partnership is not just used to go on with business as usual or even hiding that there is not much new about partnerships.

Rita, a PBA team member who supported several SDGPs on their partnering journey, also participated in the writeshop. She shared her unique experiences and perspectives, highlighting the disparity between intended outcomes and the reality of partnerships. Rita likened this gap to the tale of "The Emperor's New Clothes," emphasizing the importance of addressing underlying issues and fostering genuine collaboration within partnerships.



The Emperor's New Clothes

I find myself wondering: Why do people pretend so much for the good of the world and then they just do things for their own interest and benefit without real engagement? That frustrates me. There is so much talking about stuff but not doing the actual stuff. It looks so agreeable in theory, all these buzzwords and concepts: 'shifting the power', 'decolonization', 'partnerships', but what does it really mean in practice?

It makes me think about the tale of the emperor's new clothes: the people cheering and cheering him because of his supposedly so refined clothing. Until one little boy starts laughing and says: "Hahahaha, the emperor is naked!!" And the crowd - worried, insecure, and ashamed they didn't see any clothes - starts laughing too, relieved: it was not their fault they didn't see any clothes! Sometimes I just want to be that little boy, shouting at the social change industry: it's just WORDS!! There is nothing in it!! What would happen if I would do that?

Social change for me is the desire to bridge what is and what should be. The older I get, the bigger the gap between what I believe should be and reality. The weight of that burden is at times unbearable for me. Collaboration for me is the relief, acknowledgment and encouragement that comes from knowing that I am not the only one who is trying to bridge that gap. Struggling, yes, but not alone. I can feel amazement about real change enabled by genuine partnerships, but also anger and indignation about false pretense. And insecurity about my place in all of that.

I talked about it with a lady who had just started working in a partnership. She was sincerely looking at what she might contribute, looking deeper. And I recognized that. Her reflections about her own motivations, her fear of becoming corrupted herself by 'the system', and at the same time not wanting to withdraw because she really believed in what she was doing. I am afraid to be tainted by false pretense and empty words too. Getting used to it and going along with the crowds cheering social change that isn't really social change at the heart. Because that would corrupt me, I'm afraid. I don't want to be like that, and I judge others for it, even when I don't really know them.

(Rita Dieleman)

6 *By holding partners accountable and ensuring a focus on the broader SDG agenda, donors can empower partnerships to fulfill their joint promises. Neglecting these aspects risks partnerships becoming superficial, devoid of substance, akin to a 'naked emperor'.*

The added value of partnerships and the importance of back donors looking at the achievements of the social goals

In donor-driven partnerships, the power of those who control the finances is often emphasized, yet the true potential lies in donors leveraging their influence to uphold SDG commitments. With each partner naturally inclined to prioritize their own interests, there's a significant risk of overlooking the broader social and public good objectives of the partnership. While the SDGP facility supports (Dutch) companies in socially responsible ventures abroad, commercial interests will be looked after. But the absence of dedicated oversight on the SDG agenda leaves a crucial gap. Donors stepping into this role could champion the alignment of partnership activities with social goals, demanding tangible results and aggregating data on social impact. By holding partners accountable and ensuring a focus on the broader SDG agenda, donors can empower partnerships to fulfill their joint promises. Neglecting these aspects risks partnerships becoming superficial, devoid of substance, akin to a 'naked emperor'.

The Moving On Phase

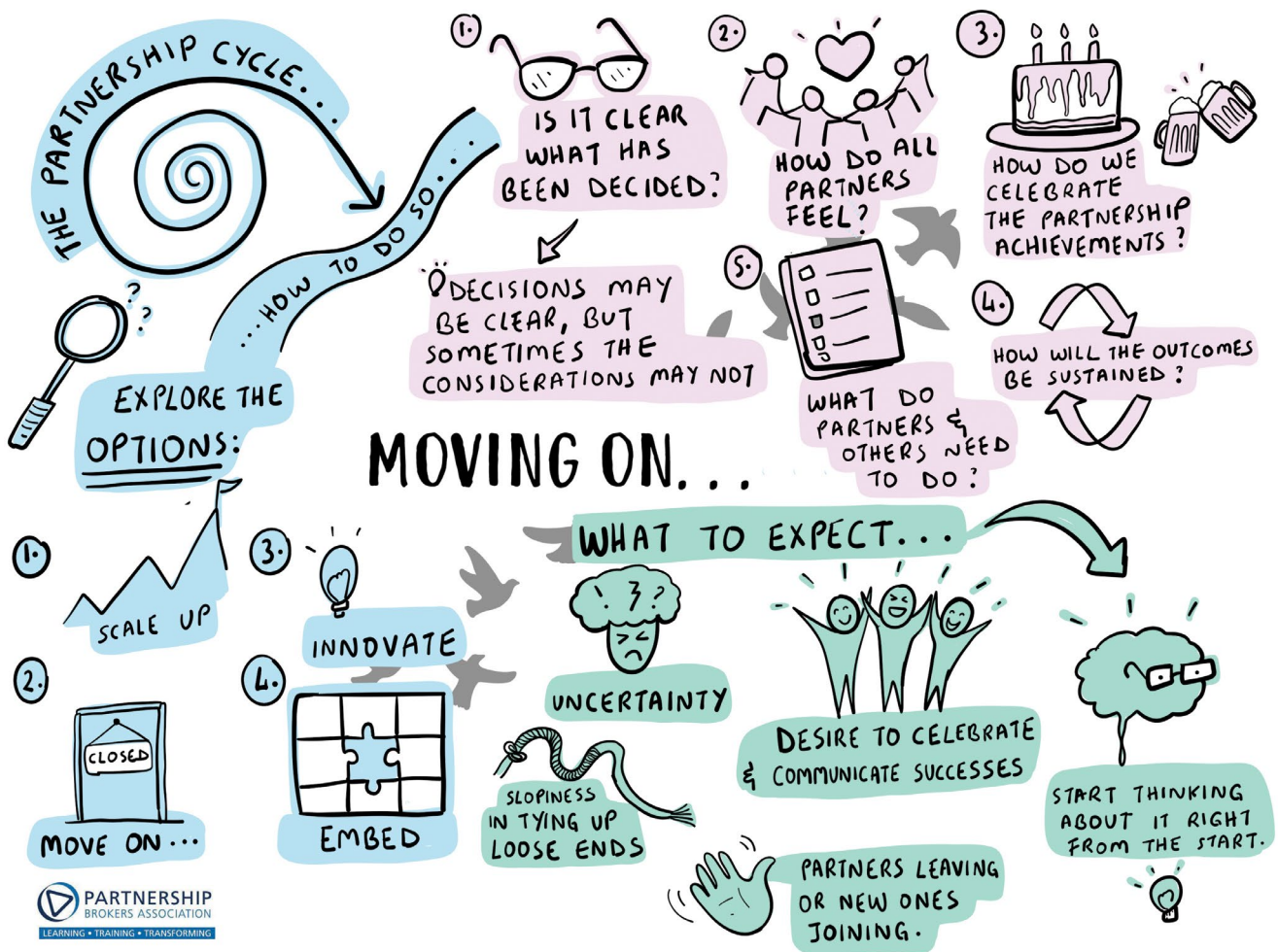
None of the stories written were about the closing or moving on phase of a partnership. This is no surprise as the writers were mostly still in the implementation phase. We do like to point out the importance of this phase as sufficient care and attention is rarely given to it. Partners tend to look out for new (funding) opportunities and become sloppy at finalizing and sustaining the outcomes. How best to sustain the outcomes of all the hard work is in fact a very important consideration. Results achieved can go down the drain after partners leave the partnership.

In general, we like to bring attention to the options when moving on. This last phase of a partnership may be an opportunity to explore what could be and what needs doing. Rather than only seeing it as an end, you can also see it as a potential new beginning, or as an opportunity to embed or scale up elements. It is also the phase where you need to agree on who is still carrying out outstanding tasks, how to finalize contracts, agree on what to communicate to whom, how to go about Intellectual Property rights of some of the co-created materials etc.

We would say that this phase deserves as much energy as the beginning. The illustration below may inspire the conversations that are needed in this phase. It was a visual from a hybrid (online and in-person) session about moving on for SDG partnerships on 7 December 2023 in the Netherlands.

Among the approximately 80 participants were partners, lead partners, and the back donor, RVO. They engaged in conversations about their experiences in the Moving-On phase. The main questions brought up from this workshop were:

- Where and how to report final achievements (or lack of results) if the lead partner 'left the room' and is not paying attention to the partnership process and the partners needs.
- What to do if the project is successful but financing is still needed beyond the project?
- What if there are no matching funds found until the end?
- What if some partners slowed down and have not implemented as agreed?
- How to include gender interventions into the technical work of the partners once the project is over?
- How to make sure all partners communicate the same about the results and outstanding pieces of work towards the end?



Illustrator: Jackie Wahome, Think Illustrate

To address these questions, it's essential for all partners, including the donor, to engage in reflective, learning conversations, as discussed above. These discussions should cover what aspects of the project have been successful, areas needing further improvement, plans for follow-up actions, potential consequences for unmet targets, preferences regarding continued collaboration beyond the project's scope, options for transitioning out, handling partner departures or new additions, and preferred communication methods for sharing project results.

Power imbalances may play up in everyday patterns again as partners may adopt more fixed positions due to increased uncertainty, resulting in focus on their own parts rather than the collective and reverting to dominant frameworks. Partners and, in particular, the lead partner may also tend to make reality look prettier to the donor than it is, as was expressed during the Moving On workshop. Skillful facilitation and helping partners navigate this often rocky moving-on process is crucial to enable honest conversations. The [Moving On Toolbook](#) offers valuable guidance for navigating this stage of the partnership cycle.

“Skillful facilitation and helping partners navigate this often rocky moving-on process is crucial to enable honest conversations.”



Final thoughts towards more fruitful partnerships

Much has been shared by the writers, and wise lessons have been provided. One aspect that we feel requires further attention in strengthening the partnering process is around the willingness and skills to reflect on and learn from the everyday patterns within partnerships. This work involves shifting from conventional, rigid project models to those that are more flexible, adaptive, inclusive, and oriented towards mutual benefits. How can this be achieved? Below, we outline ideas for transitioning from everyday patterns discussed above to more productive ones, along with the key challenges involved.

From Compliance to Co-creation and Shared Value

Core Challenge: Shifting from a compliance and requirement-driven approach to one that emphasizes co-creation, shared objectives, and values among all stakeholders. This requires aligning diverse interests, fostering genuine stakeholder participation, and building a shared vision.

From Meeting Requirements to Fostering Innovation and Collective Impact

Core Challenge: Encouraging a shift from merely meeting pre-set requirements to fostering an environment that encourages innovation, creative problem-solving, and prioritizing shared outcomes for collective impact. This requires a culture that supports experimentation, risk-taking, and aligning individual goals with collective targets.

From Hierarchical Accountability to Mutual Learning and Adaptive Partnerships

Core Challenge: Transitioning from hierarchical, output-focused accountability to a model based on mutual learning, continuous improvement, and adaptive management. Key to this transformation is establishing trust, open communication, and shared metrics for success that value process, learning, and adaptation. Donors can enable partners to co-create mutual accountability and learning by making sure lead partners provide this space for genuine reflection and connection. Regular and disciplined learning rhythms are required for this, including facilitated learning dialogues to ensure deep and honest feedback and reflections.

From Bilateral Relationships to Inclusive Multi-stakeholder collaboration

Core Challenge: Moving from limited, bilateral relations between the lead partner and other partners to dynamic and inclusive collaboration among all the different partners. This leverages diverse forms of capital including knowledge, networks, and other non-financial resources. It also involves managing complex structures, facilitating effective communication, and recognizing the unique value each partner brings.

From Uncertainty to Transparency and Shared Financial Management

Core Challenge: Overcoming unclarity and unpredictability in financial procedures by establishing clear, transparent, and mutually agreed upon financial management practices. Achieving consensus on financial protocols and ensuring accountability are key to building trust and stability in partnerships.

PART THREE



THE FULL STORIES



Alignment and Learning: the secret ingredients for good partnering

by Eva Kimani

How many of us, when starting a partnership, ask each other, "What are your values?" Do we ever ask our partners what they stand for? Do we seek clarity on what their non-negotiables are or try to align on language, context, and priorities? In my experience, the answer is, hardly ever.

My story begins in 2020 when we launched a social impact project on the circular economy in Mombasa, Kenya. The project involved four different partners: my organization (MDF Training and Consultancy), Close the Gap Kenya, Crosswise Works, and the National Industrial Training Authority of Kenya (NITA). It was a multicultural team, each playing a different role and each bringing different experiences, skills and value systems to the mix.

In the rearview mirror, I can now see how aligning on some of these things, like values, language and priorities is especially critical when you are going into a partnership rather than only focusing on the intended impact of the project. This is where most partnerships spend time while leaving out the "soft" side of things, which are quite hard to achieve and vital, as they determine the quality of relationships, communication and coherence that underpin the project. A project is run by people for people.

In the SDGP Partnership program funded by RVO, the name suggests bringing different partners together: the private sector, government, and non-governmental organizations for sustainable social impact. As would be expected, each organization had a different way of doing business.

We were in the midst of a pandemic and the upcoming lockdown. I had moved to the beautiful coastal city of Mombasa where I was going to be living THE dream, according to my friends and family. With beautiful sandy beaches, warm weather, and a new start, why wouldn't I be?

What they didn't know was that I was battling every kind of emotion. I was excited about the new opportunity, a new role. I was looking forward to a fresh start in a new house, but in the backdrop of all these positive feelings, there was fear. Fear of failure. It was a new sector, a new role, and a new city with a team across the globe. I had to prove myself.

Weeks into my arrival, the lockdowns happened, and what were supposed to be physical meetings to storm, norm, and eventually form the partnership, had to be done online amidst all the doubt, fear, and uncertainty that the pandemic spread, along with its virus. Given these circumstances, none of the partners knew what we were supposed to do. How do you recruit a team online? How do you do training that was originally set up for face-to-face interaction? Who are you selling machines to when everyone is in survival mode? Who wants to hear about partnerships when they are focused on self-preservation?

Each of the partners had made commitments: developing a nationwide curriculum, incubating startup businesses in circularity, selling refurbished machines at an impact price, and overall, contributing to building a vibrant ecosystem filled with innovative and skilled youth in Mombasa. We each prided ourselves on our experience in implementing similar programmes. The trouble was that none of us had ever done so in a pandemic. Being the project manager on the ground, I was caught in the eye of the storm. I had also committed to seeing this through and was heavily obligated to ensure that each one of the KPIs was met. Every partner meeting left me depleted of energy from all the anxiety I had to manage. As the project manager I had self-imposed pressure to know everything about the project because to me, it seemed everyone seemed to know what they were doing. How could they not?

Slowly, I learned to manage the anxiety. However, how was I to deal with the multicultural and personality clashes online? At one of the meetings, I attempted to align our vision as a partnership, and I asked, "What is each partner representative's dream?" I got a cynical response, a harsh put-down, "We are not here to dream, Eva. We have KPIs to achieve." It felt like an attack, a belittling of my desire to align on our shared direction and it further enhanced my anxiety in the online partnership meetings. Looking back, perhaps this was the first crack in the partnership relationship. Out of fear and intimidation, I packed away our "dream" and with it, I now see that I packed away the vital formulation of a joint vision and values to guide our collaboration.

In our practice, at the inception of any initiative or organization, we ask organizations to take a moment to capture their vision, mission, values and guiding principles. But what I have seen is that few funders, investors, or partners come together to do this kind of thing. In survival mode to cope with the pandemic, each partner defaulted to their cocoon. We each sought to demonstrate that we could achieve our KPIs, but we had no prior knowledge or experience of doing this in a pandemic. Looking back, we should have taken a moment to reflect on our vision, mission, and most importantly, our values.

It is clear to me that the conflict that ensued was due to a clash of values, of language and interpretation, to multicultural dynamics, and to our struggle to work with the diversity of the group. One partner was keen on recovering their investment, while the other was keen to deliver impact and to do this well. I experienced how for one partner a guiding and inspiring vision could so easily be dismissed as a fantasy by another. I dare say, that this diversity may also exist at an individual level within the different teams, where they themselves do not align on the visions and values. How do you streamline that to avoid conflict but also to appreciate each other's outlook on things? While one partner might be passionate about the partnership, the other might be focused on investment. How do you blend this so that it's mutually beneficial?

My organization calls it a "festival of failure" when you do something and it doesn't work, and you are now at the tail end and reflecting and learning. Today, I celebrate that after numerous meetings, achieved KPIs, great impact stories and a more skilled project manager I care about collaboration and partnership, and that's my value. However, if I am to ever go into any partnership, I must appreciate that this might be unique to me, and the other person may have a different value and need.

Language is vital, especially where there are different cultures at play. I must also not jump to the conclusion that it is always about a clash of values, or that a clash of values must lead to the break of a relationship. Sometimes we use different words for the same things. Sometimes we use the same words for different things.

Open communication and appreciation of each other's differences could have helped in the smoother implementation of the project. We did not have to agree on everything, but we at least needed to be aligned on the basics, on how we interpreted the KPI's, and to ensure that our different approaches and contributions would not clash. We needed to do this both at the beginning, to lay the foundations of our collaboration, and along the way, as a learning partnership, with frequent moments of reflection to adjust to each other and a changing context. I believe that these are the secret ingredients to good partnering. But the question remains, how can we get agreement to discuss these things, to have the alignment conversations and to learn together, as the very basis of a partnership, if some of the partners do not value doing so in the first place?



The collaboration that never was

by Rose Mayoli

We were filled with excitement when we met the project partners over two years ago in Nairobi. We seemed like a perfect match: they included commercial companies, a non-governmental organization, farmers co-operatives, and we are a government research institute, each partner bringing together diverse expertise and experience to the table. I was tasked to represent our institute director and coordinate the project.

They were seeking our collaboration in a project that would invest in the development of low-carbon specialty coffee by upgrading and reducing the carbon footprint of farmers. I could see opportunities to help coffee farmers increase their incomes through local value addition and job creation for vulnerable groups in society, fetching premium prices for their coffee.

There was much back and forth in developing the proposal together. We were under pressure to have the agreement for the partnership signed by our Director General and went the extra mile not to disappoint.

When the day came that the project was approved for funding, we were excited to begin. Then, out of the blue, the partner indicated that our station was too far from their offices to attend a meeting. It was a red flag that I pushed aside because I was impatient to start activities. But the funds did not arrive. As we waited, I consoled myself that no organization could take on our role as the premier institution in coffee research. However, I was frustrated and worried that my director would think I was not doing what was expected.

This meant that we were not able to start our work even two years down the line, despite revising the work plans several times. We were left out of the implementation and some of our roles were taken over by other partners. This was a typical case of power imbalance in the project where those with control of the money can easily sideline the others, yet we contributed to the development of the proposal.

At some point, I organized a meeting between the main applicant of the project and my director to iron out the challenges facing the partnership. But it was all lip service. Our requests for the submission of funds fell on deaf ears. So, in the end, we developed a transactional relationship: "Give us money; we do the activities and nothing short." The partners realized they were between a rock and a hard place, and nothing was progressing. They were also under pressure to submit a report to the donor. It still took a long time for the funds to arrive and then once we got the funds, we had to revise the work plan yet again!

But then we hit the ground running. The work was tiring, but I knew the endgame. We were visiting up to 20 farmers per day for two weeks, compared to the norm of 8 to 10 farmers per day. Once we had all the samples, it was time for soil analysis. We worked late into the day and over the weekends for almost two months. The compilation of the report was not an easy task. I had to work through the Christmas holidays to have the report ready.

I remember how relieved I was to send the report to all the project partners, asking them for their review and comments. To this day I have still not received feedback or acknowledgement. What a disappointment! Things seemed to stall again when we still had other activities to carry out. How could we kickstart the partnership again?

The problem was that activities were not carried out as outlined in the proposal. There were no meetings organized to discuss the project's progress or to develop reports for submission to the donor, although these were envisaged in the proposal. This left me wondering what reports were being submitted to the donor.

Being very different kinds of organizations, we had varied expectations from the onset of the partnership. In retrospect, we did not unpack these differences or discuss the implications, but the pressure we were under to get the project signed off did not help.

Another critical difference that we never discussed was that the partners focused more on the business component of the project rather than on building the partnership. Being a government institution and having no business interests in the project, we were interested on implementation in a way that all the deliverables were realized while strengthening our linkages with stakeholders.

We were worried that funds meant for our activities were diverted to carry out other activities by other partners, but what could we do since there were no mechanisms for accountability? Meetings were impossible to call, and queries and reports were ignored.

Of course, communication is key for a partnership to work. But that is not enough. Do not assume that one partnership is similar to another. Each partnership comes with its own challenges, and you need to anticipate, understand and overcome these challenges from the start as you build on the partnership.

When a project is not going well it is important to bring all partners together and discuss the issues each partner is facing. Partners need to nurture openness, which leads to trust. Without firm agreements from the beginning to hold regular review meetings to give feedback, to discuss issues, to agree on adjustments and to be accountable to each other, it is unlikely that a partnership can succeed. Our organization is a public institution that contributes to sustainability and upscaling of project objectives and outputs. I felt that this was not achieved yet the reports tagged our logo yet I acted on the periphery.



A different way for different people: how I work with partners from different cultures

by Irene P. Cahyani

I was so excited when I was asked to join the inception phase for a week on the last day of November 2019 with other partners for the SDGP project, called the Sustainable Intensification of Agro-Forestry Production Systems in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This consortium consists of four partners: Van Hall Larenstein (VHL) University as the lead partner, AidEnvironment as the collaborating NGO (both based in the Netherlands) and then PT Aliet Green, from the private sector and the agriculture agency (a government entity) at the provincial level (both based in Yogyakarta). The purpose of this project is to improve the incomes, productivity, and climate resilience of over 2000 (female) farmers through value chain integration and the introduction of suitable on-farm practices and technologies. I was invited by AidEnvironment to help the consortium with my translation skills and my expertise in land and water management.

Connecting to local, community culture

For this inception phase, I accompanied Maarten from AidEnvironment and did this with Anko from VHL. Three of us stayed overnight in the community village's house together to see if our approaches for this SDGP project were appropriate or not. The small house that we lived in was made of woven bamboo as the walls and the living room had traditional musical seasonal instruments. Friends from the Netherlands often had to bow their heads when going in because the door was less than two meters high. The air and water were rather cold but very fresh and free from pollution. After visiting two villages, we went to visit the other three new villages as well, as part of the new target included in the proposal. We always sat together after dinner to look over the day's results and discuss what to do for the next day. On one of the evenings, we agreed to go to the city to relax and watch the exhibition there. The three of us were always full of energy because we knew that we were doing good things here. Staying with and meeting the local farmers where they live is important for gaining trust and understanding, which is the foundation of real partnership.

Language, communication and culture

After Covid-19, restarting in July 2021, I was working with AidEnvironment here in Indonesia. I was struggling a bit with the Dutch culture, the office environment and how to communicate because I heard that the Dutch people were straightforward, although I discovered some were not. In Indonesia, we have many cultures and if you want to talk with someone, it would be better if you already know where they are from. Although in the beginning, it was not so easy for me to adapt to the culture, I managed by listening to wise people, reading some Dutch books and practicing listening more. I discovered that Dutch people are more like people from the Eastern part of Indonesia.

But one of VHL's members, Albertien, has a different character from the other Dutch people. I used a personal way to communicate with her through Whatsapp before we communicated formally through email. But if I couldn't manage the communication with her, I would ask Lysanne (my other colleague in the Netherlands office) to help me and it worked, because I thought it would be easier for them to talk in Dutch. The way to communicate with Aliet Green's director was different as well. She is a busy person. But she wants to know everything in the field. We always had to inform her if we wanted to go to the village for this project. I tried to talk to her through Whatsapp

too and after we had talked several times, I also discovered the best time to communicate with her. So, when I learned the different ways to communicate with each of the members of the consortium, it helped me a lot to do my work in the field and to connect with the European team. I have heard from different people that they loved the way I communicate with them and liked what I have done so far for this project.

Time and culture

I enjoyed doing the pieces of training for the Green Warriors, accompanying them to the pilot sites, and doing some practical work together. Starting from last January 2023, Albertien was sick so Euridice from VHL acted as the lead partner while Albertien was on leave. I always try to remind Euridice about our regular meeting schedule and Lastiana (Aliet Green's director) as well, because both are busy people. Day by day, I think our communication among the partners has become better although Euridice always asks me to communicate with Lastiana because according to her, Lastiana will answer me faster rather than to her. Sometimes Lysanne has asked me as well to discuss with Lastiana on behalf of her and she believes that Lastiana will give a fast response than if she talks to her directly. We try to manage our work through our agreed work plans and regular meetings to assess the progress and see what to do next. I try to remind them, one by one, and say "Hey it's already 2023, can we see the work plan together, etc?". Everyone has agreed to use the agreed work plan as our basis to check our progress. I am happy.

Culture and fundraising

I have tried to look for funds from the government, especially for gabions, in collaboration with village governments. The director of AG has tried to look for funds as well from another government's office for the agriculture sector. It's not easy to look for funds. I must contact the different government agencies and look for the appropriate agency for funds. After finding the right agency, I must follow some of the instructions and do some surveys with the Green Warriors and village staff, even the village leaders themselves. Then I must write the proposal and send it to Aliet Green to follow it up with the village office to use their letterhead for the proposal. Then I bring those proposals to that agency. After that once or twice a week, I try to follow them up.

I was happy to hear that the government agency has done the surveys and is still in the process of making the budget. I asked for the head to be approved for the implementation. It's the same process for Aliet Green's director when she tries to look for funds. But we have received no update yet about the fund from the agriculture sector.

Aligning with the government's culture

During the meeting with the government agency, the head of agriculture and food security mentioned that this project was good and in line with the national agricultural program and a good model to be replicated in other areas. I was so happy when I heard that statement, because in Indonesia if you undertake good projects but they are not in line with the government's program, they won't be sustained. We still try to do our best to compile all the materials/handouts in 2 languages (English and Bahasa Indonesia version), collect some photos for each training, and make posters using simple language so that the farmers can easily use them. Why we must do it? Because if other places wanted to replicate them, we already have the model to be shared.

Working together with different people from different cultures has not been easy but if you know how to communicate with each of them to achieve the same goal, even if you have differing expertise, you can deal with issues. Try to put yourself in their shoes, if possible, to see from different angles. This is what helps me a lot to communicate with them.



A Partnership with Resilient Women

by Rachel Thwe

“When we learn how to become resilient, we learn how to embrace the beautifully broad spectrum of the human experience”

– Jaeda DeWalt –

All projects start with a different story and purpose. As a project manager, I am fond of every stage of the projects and openly admit I enjoy them, whether positive or negative, as they are learning experiences and foster understanding among people. Since childhood, I have loved travelling, meeting different people, exploring new places, and trying new food. This has become a hobby and inspires my professional work, encouraging collaboration with diverse individuals.

I have worked on a semi-national project to develop a special economic zone for five years, collaborating with various organizations, investors, contractors, government departments, and nationalities. This experience has taught me to handle challenges and understand my emotions. However, I never expected to face the kind of issues that arose during my project management experience.

This story begins with a representative of one of the partners, a resilient woman, with whom I worked in partnership. As a commercial company, we sought opportunities to collaborate on projects that would benefit a specific target audience and impact the sector in our country. In 2018, an opportunity arose to address a challenge: improving the modernization and development of aquaculture supply chains in my country.

The aquaculture sector was still behind other Asian countries, similar to the poultry market, which had improved over the past 20 years. Our partnership with starts at this stage, with a promising future. The partner represented the aquaculture sector in Myanmar and brought knowledge, experience, and potential for collaboration.

During the project proposal, award reception, baseline survey, field survey, and planning impact pathway process, we worked energetically. The happiness among us was palpable, and our minds were filled with plans to initiate the project.

As one of five partners in this project, we collaborated by building communication, understanding, and mutual interest to achieve our goals. We signed a partnership agreement during the challenging times of COVID-19, which affected our families, work, and health. The pandemic delayed the project timeline by a year, but we did our best under the circumstances. All partners faced challenges, and our lives changed significantly. The co-chair of our partnership was replaced after we lost the previous one to the pandemic, with whom we had worked harmoniously for over a year.

Our ambitious goal was to collaborate on the existing farming sector by introducing more efficient farming models, building capacity, and facilitating access to finance and markets. However, collaboration is never perfect. One day, the representative of one of the partners called me to announce their withdrawal from the project and abruptly hung up.

I was stunned by the call, feeling as if I had been broken up with by a “love partner” without any explanation. I understood her as an experienced and resilient expert in her field, yet I was left wondering why she made that decision. I began seeking the reasons behind it to find a solution with the management and other project partners.

We had all been seeking a collaboration that would last five years, and we were in the third year of the project. However, the partnership faced various challenges, such as aligning organizational cultures, lengthy decision-making processes, and frequent changes in opinion. We had to engage in discussions about project goals and partner roles repeatedly.

We sought solutions through engagement, face-to-face meetings, and discussions about expectations and necessary adjustments in budget, role, participation, and expertise. The proposal was sent back to them, and we waited for a response. Despite the ups and downs during proposal writing, we continued to do our best.

As a project manager, I decided that the project must continue even if the partner's role remained uncertain. The journey would continue differently, but it was essential to reach our common goals. Managing expectations became a challenge as the partnership progressed. It was vital to establish clear, realistic expectations and maintain regular communication and ongoing evaluation to ensure alignment and focus on shared goals.

In the Aqua project, we often talk about fish in terms of resilience. Fish need resilience in genetics, health, and weather adaptation to overcome disease. This project taught me that we also need resilience, especially when working with partners. We come from different fields, have different expectations, and practice different professions. A project is about synergizing these differences to achieve common goals positively. This understanding helped me move forward and consider the partner's perspective.

The project is still ongoing, with many activities. My project management partner and I are working to keep the partner connected and are considering various scenarios in case they decide to terminate their involvement.



Prepare well for partnership... or be prepared to fix the mess later!

by Allen Kwagonza

I recall an SDG partnership which I was a part of a few years ago, where I supported the monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) processes of an agricultural project. My role was to empower the local partner for future MEL tasks. Excited to contribute to social and sustainable impact, I prepared extensively, expecting the partner to provide competent research assistants for a baseline data collection exercise.

When the training day arrived, I was shocked to find that most of the over thirty-five data collectors contracted as field officers, lacked basic research skills. They had little smartphone experience, and none had conducted professional interviews.

I realized that although we had sat down before the start of our partnership to discuss our expectations of one another and the importance of a suitable workforce for the task at hand, we had not prepared adequately. We could have done more to align our priorities and understanding of what we needed to have as a competent group of data collectors to conduct the baseline study. I had rushed into an assumption that the partner and I were on the same page, but clearly not!

This oversight led to a two-month struggle with subpar (or *dirty* data), leaving me to focus on damage control rather than capacity building.

The experience taught me a crucial lesson: thorough preparation and aligned expectations are vital in partnerships, and to always check your assumptions.

It's a common error in various types of collaborations, where stakeholders, hurried by deadlines rush into implementation without agreeing on key aspects like goals, human resources, MEL systems, and financial structures. Proper preparation can save considerable resources and prevent the chaos of fixing a mess. Before embarking on any partnership, it's essential to be fully ready and **to invest more in preparation than in fixing the mess!**



Unleashing Collective Commitment: Mobilizing Resources and Collaboration for the SDGs

by Kwame

Once upon a time, in a busy city where cooperation and sustainable development went hand in hand, there was a passionate union that worked hard to move the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) forward. This group was made up of people from government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private businesses. They were all committed to making their town and the world a better place.

The partnership set out on a transformative journey because it wanted to bring together resources, experience, and people to work on the SDGs. But, as with any big plan, there were problems along the way. Because they didn't have enough money, the team had to make some hard choices. They had to choose only a few places to test their actions, even though they wanted to make a bigger difference and reach more people.

However, the partnership recognized the need to improve their resource mobilization strategies. They sought out diverse avenues for funding, securing grants, engaging in fundraising campaigns, and establishing partnerships with businesses and foundations that aligned with their mission. This additional funding allowed them to expand their initiatives and increase their impact beyond their initial limitations.

Even with these improvements, the partnership understood the importance of sustainability planning. They developed long-term strategies to ensure the continuity of their initiatives beyond the immediate project timeline. They explored avenues for generating ongoing revenue, built partnerships with local stakeholders, and fostered community ownership to sustain their efforts for a sustainable future.

With their enhanced resource optimization and innovative approaches, the partnership was able to make the most of their available resources. They creatively leveraged their limited financial, human, and material resources, finding new and efficient ways to drive impact and reach their goals.

Outside of the partnership, their goals and hard work started to make an even greater impact on the larger society. As word got out about their innovative initiatives, people and groups who wanted to help joined forces and offered their resources, skills, and support. The partnership seized this opportunity to connect with new stakeholders and build a robust network of collaboration that expanded their reach and magnified their impact.

The partnership continued to prioritize stakeholder engagement and community involvement. They actively sought the input and participation of local communities, creating opportunities for collaboration, co-designing solutions, and fostering a sense of ownership. By empowering individuals and communities, they ensured the sustainability and relevance of their initiatives at the grassroots level.

As the team kept putting their plans into action, they remained committed to monitoring and evaluating their progress. Robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms allowed them to assess the effectiveness of their initiatives, gather valuable insights, and make informed decisions for continuous improvement. They shared their learnings and impact through compelling storytelling, inspiring others to join their cause and driving even more positive change.

The partnership's collaborative efforts, resourcefulness, and resilience were instrumental in mobilizing resources, expertise, and collaboration for the SDGs. Their enhanced strategies for resource mobilization, sustainability planning, stakeholder engagement, and monitoring and evaluation led to an even more impactful journey towards a sustainable future.



A State of Heart: Recovering our Moral compass for Social Change

by Rita Dieleman

The group is excited to get together face to face. And I feel excited too! Connected with others from all around the world, working on food security. I enjoy the kick of the rush and sense of movement that comes with it and amazement about real, practical change. I love the sense of togetherness as partners share in a vulnerable way how they have learned and struggled while working together. And then... I see this guy sitting next to me; looking around him, sighing, checking his mobile every minute, sighing again, turning in his chair, like a toddler who doesn't want to go to school.

I feel appalled and angry, asking myself: What on earth is this guy doing here, flying all around the world to get to this place, and then not showing any interest in others and the joint goal of being here?! 'It must be the money', I catch myself thinking. 'He is just here for the donor funds, showing his face to get his millions, greenwashing and feeling better than others too!' It makes me want to slap him in the face and say: 'Please leave if you don't REALLY want to be here; make room for others, who genuinely care!' But then I don't, because I feel it isn't my place to do so. I swallow my words, because I am one of the external brokers and I have a facilitating role in the group. I am mindful that I don't know him; that it is also my personal judgements popping to the surface based on my own assumptions. But the experience stays with me like a nagging toothache. Because it is not the first time I am observing this kind of indifferent behaviour. I see it all the time in different forms and shapes; applauding social change in theory but no real engagement in practice.

The emperor's new clothes

I find myself wondering: Why do people pretend so much for the good of the world and then they just do things for their own interest and benefit without real engagement? That frustrates me. There is so much talking about stuff but not doing the actual stuff. It looks so agreeable in theory, all these buzzwords and concepts: 'shifting the power', 'decolonization', 'partnerships', but what does it really mean in practice? It makes me think about the tale of the emperor's new clothes: the people cheering and cheering him because of his supposedly so refined clothing. Until one little boy starts laughing and says: "Hahahaha, the emperor is naked!!" And the crowd - worried, insecure and ashamed they didn't see any clothes - starts laughing too, relieved: it was not their fault they didn't see any clothes! Sometimes I just want to be that little boy, shouting at the social change industry: it's just WORDS!! There is nothing in it!! What would happen if I would do that?

Social change for me is the desire to bridge what is and what should be. The older I get, the bigger the gap between what I believe should be and reality. The weight of that burden is at times unbearable for me. Collaboration for me is the relief, acknowledgment and encouragement that comes from knowing that I am not the only one who is trying to bridge that gap. Struggling, yes, but not alone. I can feel amazement about real change enabled by genuine partnerships, but also anger and indignation about false pretense. And insecurity about my place in all of that. I talked about it with a lady who had just started working in a partnership. She was sincerely looking at what she might contribute, looking deeper. And I recognized that. Her reflections about her own motivations, her fear of becoming corrupted herself by 'the system', and at the same time not wanting to withdraw because she really believed in what she was doing. I am afraid to be tainted by false pretense and empty words too. Getting used to it, and going along with the crowds cheering social change that isn't really social change at the heart. Because that would corrupt me, I'm afraid. I don't want to be like that, and I judge others for it, even when I don't really know them.

The Matryoshka doll of social injustice

Injustice is and has always been a major red button for me personally, something that I felt required immediate action from both society and from me personally. When I was seven, I took home sick or left alone little ducks, cared for them at home and freed them when they got bigger. I would call the community council to clean the water in the ponds for the fishes who had a hard time getting oxygen in the summer. In primary school when my younger brother got bullied, other children would warn me, and I would come to both kick the bullies' asses and to complain to the head teacher about protocols in school. For me justice has always been like a Matryoshka doll: justice on micro-and macro-level are interlinked. I was never able to see it and do nothing. It has always frustrated me enormously to see others look away. It makes me angry about passiveness and insensitivity to injustice and at the same time it makes me feel alone, powerless and a bit estranged.

Having worked in the field of international development for almost twenty years now, I have come to believe that social change will never happen without a well-functioning individual as well as societal moral compass. I believe that we are all at risk of losing sight of that, because it is blurred by a lot of noise that is packaged as social change, but what has in fact self-interest at heart. Working for a trade union, in my first job I campaigned for decent work in the informal sector, where many are exploited. I collected tens of thousands of signatures to get attention for the rights of informal workers. I heard their stories about migration, sexual exploitation and confinement in a tiny attic while hoping for a better life that never came. I admired the political dissidents in Cuba I visited for their commitment to a cause that took such personal sacrifice. I felt anger and indignation: this should and could be different, if just everyone would stand up and fight! What could I do?

The political pace and context of the trade union environment was too slow for me; I felt it was too reactive. So, when the opportunity arose, I started my own company as an independent evaluator in the field of international development cooperation. Having wondered all my life why things are the way they are and what could be changed for the better, I love that in my work I can ask and explore on a daily basis what is working, what isn't and why that is. I have conversations with thousands of people working for countless organizations all over the world, always asking: what is working, what is not, and why is that? And what is it that you do? How does it help that you are doing it together?

And what is needed now?

Over the years, I have met the most knowledgeable people, with great experience and skills, and working with them, it always strikes me that those who are most insecure about the value they can bring, usually have the best contribution. Because they are curious, eager to learn, they want to know, they want to explore, they want others to help them become better in bridging that social gap and vice versa. They have stamina, force of will, they do what is needed although they don't always want to. They listen and are listened to. They become frustrated, but never lose sight of what they try to achieve. And above all; they have a well-functioning moral compass that guides their actions. That is who I want to be. Not swallowing and feeling resentment on the inside, but asking and reflecting openly about people's intentions, assumption, and behaviours, while also checking and reflecting on my own, knowing I am quite judgmental myself, with particular expectations and ideas...

A state of heart

I don't believe in words and theories. I believe in actions and behaviour that show a state of heart, rather than a state of mind. What is needed now I believe, is checking our moral compasses, within ourselves, within our organizations and within our partnerships. What drives us? When social change is seen as an obligation or as an opportunity for self-gain, it starts to centre around ticking boxes and the 'right answers' with success-stories. When social change is an intrinsic desire that we try to address together, there is so much hope and perspective! Even in the process of getting there together, and not only the hoped-for change.

I realize that my critical and at times raging thoughts and feelings might cause estrangement with others. My good intentions of 'real social change' might backfire if people feel judged or have a sense it is never good enough. So, what can I do? What can we all do? For the immediate future I see several possibilities to start acting more as the

little boy rather than the cheering crowds, without making a fool of the whole concept of social change, nor of all the people involved who are trying so hard every day to really contribute to social change, including myself.

The first thing is to reflect on our own assumptions for ourselves and with others. I am assuming and judging every day. Instead of swallowing my indignation, I could ask myself: do I know this person? Do I know their intentions? I could take this guy to one side and ask him: “I can see you are sighing; what is your struggle?” I could be surprised with his answer, and I wouldn’t have to speculate in my head anymore what was going on. It might even bring more mutual understanding and who knows, a good conversation about it could be a first step to change too.

The second thing is to check our own moral compasses. What are our own motivations, intentions and reasons behind what we do? In my case: is it really indignation because of injustice I feel, or is it just that I don’t feel heard or seen myself? And can I live with greyish colours too, rather than it all being black and white. Can I endure ambivalent behaviour without categorizing it either as being right or wrong? I make mistakes every day, and although I am a fierce defender of truth, I am not the bearer of truth in every situation. So, a bit more mildness and less judgment for myself and others would be nice... Questions that could help check our moral compasses would be:

- For whom am I doing this?
- Why am I doing this?
- If nobody sees this and I don’t get any credits for it, would I still do it?

The third thing is to see what our roles and positions allow us to enable. As an evaluator and partnership broker, I am in a role where I can make partners’ assumptions about each other more explicit. I can share my observations, without judging, sharing what I see, hear, feel, asking partners what this means for them. How do THEY interpret it? What are their hopes, struggles, beliefs, intentions? If I do that more frequently and openly, I can maybe contribute not so much to the change itself, but to the collaborative process that might enable change.

I hope these opportunities will help me shift further from a state of mind to a state of heart. And that is why I am sharing this story with you. So, we shout and cheer together from our hearts, for genuine social change.



Transforming Nigeria's Vegetable Markets: The Perils and Possibilities of Partnerships

by Usman Barau Munkela

"Transforming Nigeria's Vegetable Markets" was a complex project undertaken by a public-private partnership (PPP) consortium consisting of individuals from various sectors, including private companies, government agencies, NGOs, and academia. The objective was to target 136,200 farmers over a period of five years. However, the project faced numerous challenges and valuable lessons were learned along the way.

During the inception phase, one of the major hurdles encountered was the transitional bureaucracy within the government, which hindered efficient decision-making and led to a lack of clarity regarding project management mandates. Additionally, the government's component, responsible for training 30,000 farmers, experienced slow delivery, leading to low or no reports during the first and second cycles of the project. This lack of understanding and funding resulted in inadequate support and hindered the progress of certain project activities that required financial resources.

Realizing the need for a project review, the consortium called for an assessment of the project's performance after two years. The findings revealed that some components had not received the necessary support as outlined in the original proposal, and insufficient funding from the government further exacerbated the lack of progress. To address these issues, the consortium decided to review the project budget and allocate resources to provide operational logistics for project staff, particularly the extension agents responsible for training farmers.

However, the situation improved during the last reporting period, as the component responsible for farmer training reported success after adopting a new approach. They were able to train approximately 15,000 farmers, indicating a positive shift in performance.

One of the key lessons learned from this experience was the importance of adapting approaches based on different scenarios. There is no single best approach that suits all situations, but rather, it is essential to tailor strategies to the specific context and challenges faced. Flexibility and the ability to adjust methods as needed are crucial for success in complex projects such as this one.

Overall, the journey of transforming Nigeria's vegetable markets taught the consortium valuable lessons about navigating bureaucratic challenges, addressing funding gaps, and adopting adaptable approaches for achieving project goals. By incorporating these lessons, the consortium can enhance future endeavors and ensure more effective and sustainable outcomes.



Can the Private Sector and NGOs march together in the same way?

by Anonymous writer

It was a long journey to secure a project from SDGP. I worked almost a year with the private sector and other partners. Finally, in July 2020, we started our project, awarded by SDGP, with a great deal of excitement. Our excitement was even greater because the project demanded more work and pressure than usual. This was our first time collaborating with a private company, and until then, we had no idea how the implementation phase would unfold.

Our first year was the inception period, during which we were to implement on a small scale. This was an uninteresting aspect of the project, as the entire first year, out of a 48-month project, was designated as the inception period. This long inception period lessens the pace/vibe, in first year of the project, I could not tell other stakeholder like farmers, govt. departments, local leaders etc. about our project but had to work in small scale. In our country all projects must inform the government formally at the beginning but in this case I did it in 2nd year of the project and they were surprised. In the second year, we received final approval from RVO, confirming that we had been awarded the project. However, they took an additional six months to communicate this, meaning that we only had six months to implement activities that were planned for 12 months.

Our private sector partner was, according to the project, supposed to market salt-tolerant varieties in the coastal areas of our country. They were also expected to indicate the salt tolerance levels of their varieties. However, midway through the project, I realized that they were not as committed as we had expected. They had not put in the extra effort to identify the salt tolerance levels of the seeds/varieties.

Their primary objective was to increase their sales volume, as they are a profit-driven entity, and they contributed by providing matching funds. Additionally, they were supposed to develop a mobile app for disseminating knowledge among the farmers, but they have not accomplished this yet.

I am, fortunately or unfortunately, responsible for the capacity-building events such as farmer training, demonstration plots, and knowledge-sharing events of the project. I create training modules and other materials and facilitate training for the lead farmers. It is disheartening when, after the training, they do not receive the necessary inputs such as seeds.

Certainly, different organizations have different values, but in a consortium, there needs to be alignment, I believe. We should reassess and restructure the partnerships. The private sector, in particular, needs more training on partnerships for these types of projects. We need to develop such a mechanism so that everyone in partnerships pay the same rhythm as required.

In this journey of the SDGP partnership project, I am left with personal questions and feelings regarding whether a profit-making organization and a non-profit organization can effectively collaborate as we expected.



The Best Partnership

by Anonymous writer

In the heart of our country, where farmers faced the challenges of aflatoxin contamination and post-harvest losses, an SDGP embarked on a mission to transform the maize value chain. With the support of the involved partners like government, an NGO and a business, the project aimed to enhance quality control, improve market access, and increase the bankability of farmer cooperatives.

As a cooperative advisor, my excitement grew as we implemented our action plan and organized meetings to discuss project progress. During a field visit to a farmer cooperative, I witnessed the eagerness of maize farmers, led by an experienced chairman. Despite feeling like I was intruding on their busy farming activities; I was warmly welcomed.

The farmers shared their concerns about aflatoxin contamination leading to post-harvest losses and poor market access. Despite contemplating a shift to other crops, the farmers were determined to improve maize production, their staple food crop. Intrigued, I suggested a novel approach – collecting maize on the cob for sale, a concept met with hope and genuine interest by the model farmers.

The New On-Cob Model

In the following season, the farmers adopted the on-cob selling model, reducing post-harvest losses and securing better prices. The model garnered appreciation from partners, enabling a significant reduction in rejected maize due to aflatoxin, from 90% to 5%. This innovation not only lightened the post-harvest workload for women but also afforded them more time for household and farming activities.

Monitoring and evaluation became our compass, allowing us to assess the project's impact and make decisions for continuous improvement. Success stories and lessons learned were shared among partners, fostering knowledge exchange. Learning field visits empowered farmers to explore preventative measures and the on-cob model.

This partnership, facilitated by the SDG Partnership Facility, not only birthed the transformative on-cob model but also spurred government awareness. Partners proudly witnessed our country's Ministry for Commerce and Trade announcing a minimum market price for maize grain and cobs, a testament to the project's success.

Reflecting on this journey, I learned that effective communication is key in partnerships. Through various meetings, workshops, field visits, and day-to-day advisory services, we built strong relationships, ensuring inclusivity and shared success. This collaboration was more than a project; it was a journey of empowerment, innovation, and positive change.



Increased maize farmers professionalism through partnership

by Anonymous writer

Increased maize value chain efficiency in our country is the project funded by RVO. The main goal of connecting local maize farmers to the supply chain of a company, a fortified food producer in the capital city which was currently facing difficulties with finding quality maize in our country and 80% of the production were sourced outside the country.

A project partnership was formed by an NGO, sourcing private company and maize cooperatives. Excitement filled the air as news of the partnership spread throughout each partner. Farmers were overjoyed at the prospect of selling their maize beyond their village borders. They envisioned a future where their hard work would finally be recognized, and their families would thrive and the expectations of sourcing domestically were answered. After a series of meetings started to align on responsibilities of each partner. The NGO would provide financial assistance and technical expertise to increase income, the sourcing private company would focus on guaranteed market for the maize, while the cooperatives would focus on increasing their production and maintaining the quality.

With the help of the NGO, cooperative farmers implemented advanced farming techniques, improved cooperative management and their post-harvest processes. They worked day and night to collect the production fueled by their dreams of success. The maize flourished, and the harvest season arrived with a sense of hope and anticipation.

During the first year, maize cooperatives had more production than expected. As the cooperative prepared to deliver their first batch of maize to the maize sourcing company, everyone felt a mix of excitement and nervousness. The cooperatives waited for the sourcing company to come load. The production days turned into weeks, and the farmers eagerly awaited feedback from the maize sourcing company. But to their disappointment, they received news that the company's store was full and they could not receive more stock. Their hearts sank, and a wave of sadness washed over.

The cooperative members couldn't understand what had gone wrong. They had worked tirelessly, followed every instruction, and put their hearts into producing the best maize. The feeling of disappointment was overwhelming, and doubts began to creep into their minds.

However, the NGO refused to let the setback dampen their spirits. They organized a meeting with the maize sourcing company to understand the issues and find a solution. It turned out that the company's store was fully loaded and sourced to the cooperatives which were not in the partnership agreement. The sourcing company assured the cooperative that they were still committed to the partnership and would work together to rectify the situation.

The partnership grew stronger as they learned from their mistakes and worked towards a common goal. With renewed determination, the farmers resumed their work in the fields. They poured their hearts into every seed they planted, nurturing the maize with love and care. The next harvest season arrived, and this time, the cooperative delivered a batch of maize to the company and exceeded all expectations.



'We need to spend time to get to know each other, each other's hopes, fears, and ways of working. We need to co-create a way of working that enthuses and works for all and that enable all to contribute and benefit.'

