



Tips for developing successful partnerships

This Insight sets out some basic tips for successful partnership development and management. It was prepared in collaboration with Michael Massey, Associate Fellow, Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA) for the SEED Initiative, and includes input from participants at the SEED 2007 Annual Partnerships Forum and Practitioners' Workshop in South Africa.

*The **SEED Initiative** identifies, profiles and researches promising entrepreneurial approaches to locally-led sustainable development in countries with developing economies, and provides partnership building and capacity development through a tailored support programme for start-up sustainable development enterprises.*

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Where to start

Some basic questions

- What is the aim of the partnership? Does it make sense?
- Which are the organizations that the partnership could most usefully work with?
- What are the partnership's specific goals and objectives?
- What can the partners achieve working together rather than separately?
- What is the partnership's internal governance structure and can it adapt to a change in partners?
- What are the measures of success?
- How will the partners work together?
- How will information be shared?
- How will the partnership be funded initially and over the long-term? When will it be financially sustainable? Is the partnership equipped to deal with mixed financing arrangements?
- What is the timescale? Different timelines must be reconciled, as government agencies often work on three- or five-year plans while private sector and civil society participants may work on different time horizons.
- Where will the partnership focus its efforts both initially and over the long-term?

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A clear and sustained mission statement

- A clear view of purpose is essential for success. The mission of the exercise should be framed in a short and simple statement of the desired objectives and outcomes. These should be realistic and achievable, having considered the associated risks.
- A mission statement agreed by all partners is needed to ensure focus, to gain financial and other support and to provide a benchmark for measuring success and performance. A narrow focus helps manage expectations, to ensure commitment to a shared understanding of purpose and to avoid drifting to over-extension. It must also be framed to attract relevant stakeholders, and communicated so as to generate a shared understanding among them.
- Flexibility is an important element of partnerships. Many parties will be feeling their way and will need continually to make adjustments in the light of experience. But these adjustments need to be confined to operational behaviour. Once set, the overall mission statement should not be changed substantively.
- There are however choices in the process of framing the mission. The best course may be to develop an initial statement outlining purpose and objectives with the aim of finalising it in collaboration with partners and in consultation with stakeholders. But once finalised the aim should be to stick with the statement and not change it unless circumstances change so significantly as to require fundamental reassessment.

Patience

- **Building successful partnerships requires considerable patience.** A significant initial investment of time is needed to define basic objectives and to build trust among participants. Start-up activities require extensive work up front. Preliminary conversations with prospective partners are vital to set and manage expectations, establish trust, clarify goals, and understand the interests of prospective partners. This is key to:
 - understanding constraints and opportunities regarding resources,
 - determining areas of focus, identifying geographic areas of engagement, and
 - clarifying partner responsibilities.

Good communication

- **True partnership involves a shared definition of problems and joint design of solutions.** No single partner has all the answers. To maximize the potential for success, all partners (non-government organisations, private firms, overseas stakeholders, or other, non-traditional partners) should participate in the project's design and goal setting. Sharing in the decision-making can be particularly challenging when the funding partners' interests overlap with, but are not identical, to the interests of other partners. Clearly establishing the respective roles and responsibilities of each participant is key to developing a realistic plan.

Flexibility is vital - there is no single approach

- A partnership's internal governance structure will vary depending on each partner's needs and the partnership's basic purpose. We have learned that there is no one approach that works for all partnerships in all circumstances. Nonetheless, it is crucial for each partnership to define clearly and record mutual expectations and individual roles and responsibilities, determine how progress will be measured and how problems will be solved. Partnership structures and approaches must also be adaptable to respond to changing circumstances.

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Lessons learned – Principles and strategies for partnerships

In the initial stages of a partnership it is important to:

- **Identify the relevant stakeholders and explore their needs.** Try to understand why different partners want to be in the partnership. Getting to know each partner's motivation and circumstances, discussing partners' diverging interests and common ones may take time but is worth it to avoid future problems.
- **Seek permission and, if possible, engagement from the relevant authorities.** Governments and institutions provide the policy framework within which all partnerships operate. A positive enabling environment can drive innovation and scale-up while a negative one can create unnecessary barriers.
- **Develop a shared purpose.** Shared aims, purposes, goals and strategies for the partnership, underpinned by Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between partners where necessary, help to build trusting relationships and provide a framework for action. It is well worth considering all the different types of partnership that are possible - for example, public-private partnership, commercial partnership, loose coalitions – in order to come to the arrangement that best fits the prevailing circumstances and ambitions.
- **Be clear about the roles and relationships between partners.** See the *SEED Insight* on the roles and strengths of different partners.
- **Having decided the roles of partners, agree who should be the partnership leader(s).** Without leadership, a partnership can languish and lose focus and impetus.
- **Build the business case.** This will help to attract investors and private sector organisations, which often lack the time to invest in partnerships. The initial transaction costs to get a partnership started can be too high, and seem too speculative, without a strong business plan in place.
- **Carry out a risk assessment.** It is important to get a handle on the most sensitive and the most robust aspects of the partnership and the enterprise by analysing their individual components and asking what the consequences and impacts of various scenarios would be.

As the partnership develops, other factors become important:

- **Bring in new partners as necessary.** Stakeholders and sometimes partners will change as the partnership matures and the operation becomes established and scales up. Building relationships with new partners and stakeholders is a cornerstone of success.
- **Build trust and respect.** Different partners will have different priorities. Respecting these and investing in building good personal contacts with partners will help to build mutual trust and enthusiasm for continued collaboration. Regular partnership and team-building meetings should be held, and constructive feedback between partners encouraged. It is possible and desirable to be both critical and co-operative at the same time.
- **Empower communities.** Engaging and empowering communities to bring their knowledge and skills to the table roots the partnership in the needs of the local population, making activities more suitable to local circumstances. It can be helpful to identify a local leader who has the confidence of the community and at the same time can ensure that the broader community participates meaningfully in decision-making and actions. The role of women, who are often closer to the environment, can be significant, or even pivotal.
- **Ensure capacity for implementation.** A clear idea of the technical assistance and business services needed is essential

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- **Evaluate performance regularly.** Working with partners to identify and manage risks, to prioritise activities, to share successes and address shortcomings, are all important factors in successful partnership management.

As the partnership matures further:

- **Seek to institutionalise relationships.** As the partnership matures, there need to be consolidated agreements between partners, appropriate governance systems for accountability, and a systematic approach to learning and sharing knowledge. Regular, transparent reporting is indispensable; partners should take joint responsibility for outcomes, good and bad.
- **Develop a risk management plan.** On the basis of the risk assessment, countermeasures and contingencies should be thought through and put into place.
- **Recognise that partnerships need time.** A business time-frame is often short whereas partnerships structures, trust between partners, and capacity for implementation take time to build. A careful balance, acceptable to all, is needed.
- **Handle conflicts constructively.** Conflicts in partnerships are inevitable but can be managed. A clear allocation of roles and a high degree of transparency, for example through regular information, progress meetings, etc. helps to reduce conflicts. On occasion, an external person or body can help to draw out the various interests which have led to any conflict, and to point to options for solutions.

Finally, the partnership may need to:

- **Consider an exit strategy.** There can be instances in which a partnership fails or a project turns out to be non-viable. In such cases, partners need a clear idea of how to close down the partnership, including the sharing of any assets and reporting requirements. The time to develop such a plan is during the establishment of a partnership. Friction and aggravation are likely to result if it is left until the enterprise fails.

Other Factors to keep in Mind

Preparedness to change. Even with meticulous planning, circumstances are likely to change, so it's important to consider the possibilities of negative impacts, both environmental and social, and how better to measure and value non-monetary contributions and community input. Partners' roles and relationships may change, since a lead actor for a pilot is not necessarily best placed to implement a scaled-up initiative. New partners need to be chosen carefully, and formal agreements and MoUs revisited if necessary. It is possible that specific partners may be needed on a temporary basis, during the scale up process only.

Seeking matchmakers. It is invaluable to make contact with national and international support networks, such as SEED, and to draw on their knowledge and services.

Influence government policy. If people on the ground are encountering big hurdles, it can often be that these can be dealt with only by local or national governments. Feedback and providing evidence to them will help to persuade them of the need for change, and so help to create a more supportive policy framework for action.

Maintain entrepreneurial incentive. There needs to be an incentive for entrepreneurial scale-up. Some well-meaning ideas can lead to a passive, "recipient" culture and destroy markets.

SEED Partners

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