



The potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships

This Insight sets out some basic information on the potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships. It was prepared in collaboration with Michael Massey, Associate Fellow, Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), for the SEED Initiative.

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

Briefing notes on other topics in SEED's Insight series are available online from the SEED website: www.seedinit.org

Why take a partnership approach?

As noted by the UN Secretary General and the General Assembly, there has been increasing recognition of the value and potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships to secure practical action in addressing the many challenges of sustainable development, and to encourage sustainable livelihoods. They are a complement to, rather than a substitute for, international agreements.

"..there is a growing recognition that many of the world's most pressing problems are too complex for any one sector to face alone."

UN Secretary General report to the UN General Assembly
"Towards Global Partnerships"

"The UN General Assembly:

"Welcomes innovative approaches to use partnerships as a means to better implement goals and programmes, in particular in the pursuit of development and the eradication of poverty."

"Calls upon the international community to continue to promote multi-stakeholder approaches in addressing the challenges of development in the context of globalization"

"partnerships are voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both public and non-public, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and, as mutually agreed, to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits."

UN General Assembly resolution, "Towards Global Partnerships",
December 2007

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The focus on partnerships recognises that no single party, whether governments, business or local communities can secure the changes required on their own. Each has their own strengths and competencies. Working together they can complement and enhance each other's contributions. There is no single model for partnership working. The approach needs to reflect the particular circumstances and objectives of particular situations. But as experience grows, including through the SEED Initiative, lessons are being learned about the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to promoting and developing partnerships, to making them work effectively and to scaling them up or replicating them.

Partnership strengths

The many challenges of sustainable development provide fertile ground for innovative partnership approaches and new business models. Entrepreneurial, multi-stakeholder approaches are an essential part of the solution. No single partner will have all the answers. Partnership working can exploit and pool the resources and competencies of different organisations and interests. By working together the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts.

Strong local ownership is an important component of sustainable development partnerships. Projects where local communities are effectively involved will be better fitted to local circumstances. Local ownership will help to ensure commitment and the ability to overcome obstacles and setbacks.

Partnership weaknesses

Partnerships are often complex to develop and manage. Pooling the expertise of different sectors and interests can bring significant benefits but also create a challenge in finding common ground between the perspectives of different partners as regards priorities and responsibilities. True partnership involves a shared definition of problems and joint design of solutions.

To maximize the potential for success, all partners (government and non-government organisations, private firms, academia, overseas stakeholders, or other, non-traditional partners) should participate in the project's design and goal setting.

Sharing the decision-making can ensure consensus and commitment but 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 an actionable plan and putting it into practice.

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Partnership opportunities

Partnerships provide a basis for bringing a range of perspectives and experience to a problem, encouraging innovative approaches. Close involvement of local communities helps ensure relevance and approaches tailored to needs. Involving business can bring in their skills in business planning and cost-effective approaches and helps them develop new markets and products, at the same time broadening the experience of their own organisation and people. Donors can help not just in funding but in linking to wider networks of experience and expertise. National governments can help ensure access to advice about compliance with local, national and international regulation and use their convening powers to bring potential partners to the table.

Partnership risks

Partnerships are not easy. They can be a powerful tool for producing real results on the ground and may reap valuable dividends for all concerned when they work. But they require commitment, persistence, patience and flexibility to bring them into being, and strong leadership for the longer term. But at all stages they can present major challenges in bringing the right parties together, securing funding and other support and keeping all parties committed to the common endeavour.

Future prospects for partnerships

Partnerships, although costly in time and support, are emerging as an effective means for implementation as they facilitate capacity building, diffusion and application of technology and knowledge among partner organisations, and they can be effective tools for creating market access for local products. Increasingly, thought is being given to their potentially significant role in scaling up successful initiatives to achieve a larger impact on developing societies. Measuring the effectiveness of partnerships can contribute to partnership scale-up as it identifies and builds on what works in the field; such measurement needs to become more common and more sophisticated.

SEED Partners

SEED is a global network founded in 2002 by **IUCN** (the International Union for Conservation of Nature), the United Nations Development Programme (**UNDP**) and the United Nations Environment Programme (**UNEP**). Major Supporting Partners are the governments of **Germany**, the **Netherlands**, **South Africa**, **Spain**, the **United Kingdom** and the **United States of America**.

