

## What is the Quality of your Collaborative Relationship?

### The Partnership Maturity Index

15 July 2021

#### 1. The Partnership Maturity Index: a framework for reflection and review

Partnerships are higher quality collaborative relationships. In partnerships, the quality of the collaborative relationship is also valued, not just the joint action. How we are together and relate to and treat each other, is important too – not just what we do together. Succeeding in the partnering is also important, not only succeeding in the joined implementation of an action.

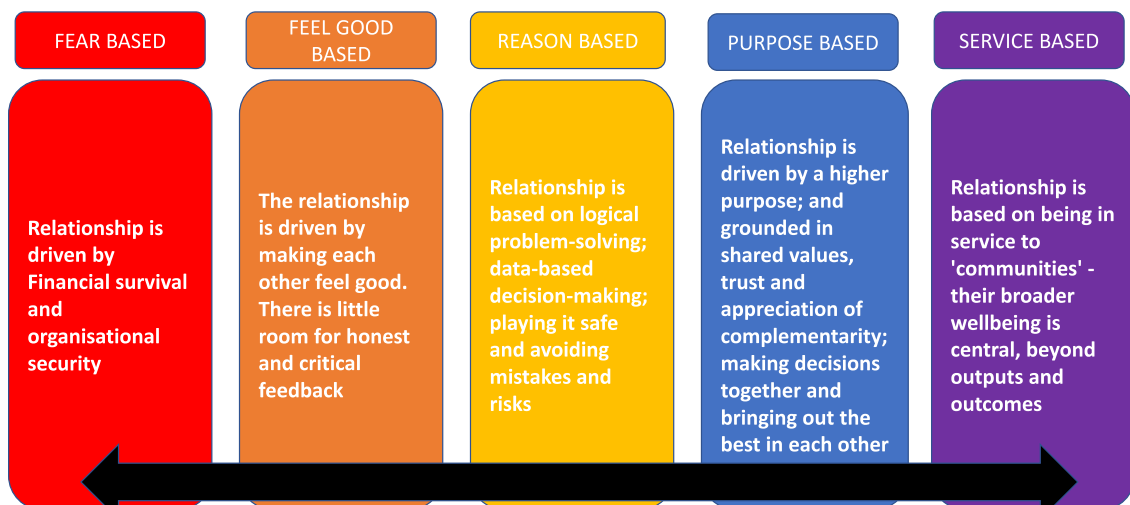
The Partnership Maturity Index was developed by GMI as one reflection and conversation framework for collaborating organisations who also value the quality of the collaborative relationship. For other GMI resource documents on partnering, see <https://www.gmentor.org/facilitation-and-partnership-brokering>

#### 2. Sources

It is inspired by the ‘*organisational and team maturity index*’ developed by the Being at Full Potential.<sup>i</sup> It has been adapted from the ‘*Organizational Maturity Index*’ which is based on the “five Koshas” which are the basis of Indian spiritual traditions. These five layers measure the level of consciousness (or maturity) of the relationship at a given point in time and indicate its next stage of growth or maturity. And draws on the many conversations we have had and continue to have with a variety of local, national and international organisations, including donors, around the world.

#### 3. Levels of maturity

### PARTNERSHIP MATURITY INDEX



### ***Fear based***

The relationship is first and foremost shaped by a funding flow between the collaborating organisations, with the receiving one(s) in a more general state of financial insecurity than the one controlling the funding flow. Constant worries about the risk that something would go wrong with the funding provided, the fund holder behaves in a rather dominant and controlling manner and demands tight compliance. There is a tendency to close oversight and micro-management, which is experienced as distrust. The fund receiver's priority is to maintain the funding flow. Fearful that anything can cause it to be called into question, the tendency is to hide any and all constraints, shortages of experience or capabilities, setbacks or less than successful outcomes. There is no transparency, empathy, or mutual accountability in the collaboration. It cannot really be called a 'partnership'.

### ***Feel Good Based***

In this type of relationship, the collaborating teams or organisations are excessively concerned that the other party/ies feel good. Creating and maintaining an impression that the relationship is great and that everything is going well again prevents open conversation and more critical joined reflection. The sense of shared purpose and shared objectives, that should underlie the collaboration, has become subordinate to the good relationship. The result is often group think, and a lack of critical learning, creative adaptation and professional growth.

### ***Reason based***

This type of partnership relationship is very adept at problem solving and applying logic to understand the root causes and underlying motives. The partners tend to play it safe in order to avoid making "mistakes". Decisions are typically made with a lot of forethought and plenty of supporting data and evidence. But there is no 'heart in the business'. Passion, deeper inspiration and motivation, creativity and breakthroughs do not emerge through such type of collaboration. The collaboration can be professionally satisfying, but doesn't necessarily generate much joy. There is little time and appreciation for the informal being together. Growing to the next level of maturity (PURPOSE) would require more compassionate and visionary leadership that is committed to realising the full potential of the partner relationship and collaboration.

### ***Purpose based***

Genuine partnerships are based on a shared purpose, and an appreciation that each brings critical factors necessary to achieve it. That appreciation of necessary complementarity stimulates attention to the quality of the collaborative relationship. The collaborating agencies take and share calculated risks in pursuit of a higher purpose. They rely not only on pure reason, data and 'best practices' of today, but also on their intuition, creativity and desire for a future situation that wants they want to emerge. They learn from each other and from the joined action and develop. Their interactional behaviours seek to bring out the best in each other because '*you at your best is my win too*', and without us being the best we can be we cannot achieve a higher purpose. There is joy in the collaboration, which is shared regularly also in informal interactions. But there is still a separation between the fate of the organisations and those they seek to be of benefit to.

### ***Service based***

Here, the collaborative relationship is shaped and guided by a deep sense of 'service' to others, which largely overrides organisational self-interests and petty squabbles between them. It puts the wellbeing of others at the center, beyond 'outputs' and direct 'outcomes' of their current action. Responsibility and accountability is squarely oriented towards those they seek to 'serve', not just those who provided the funding. This is not an expression of a 'saviour complex', but puts equity, anti-racism, inclusion and justice at the centre. In a service-based partnership, the partners' way of working are highly participatory and people driven, based on the principle "nothing for us without us". The center of the partnership is with those whom the organisations seek to be useful and meaningful to. There is no clear separation anymore between the fate of the organisations and those they seek to be of value and benefit to. Upfront transparent communications, deep listening, joined critical reflection and learning, and consequent adaptation are the normal way of working.

#### 4. How to Use the Partnership Maturity Index?

As any framework, it provides *one way* of stimulating our reflection on the nature and quality of our collaborative relationships with others. It can be a catalyst for conversation between collaborating organisations. Each can reflect separately on how they see the collaboration at the moment, and then come together and compare. That can feed a meaningful conversation about the quality of the relationship, what shapes it as it is, and needs to change – if desired- to take it to another level.

Its practical use invites nuance:

- Several of the dimensions or levels of maturity can be present at the same time. When there is power inequality between the collaborating organisations, overall the collaboration can be very task-oriented and reason based. But some fear may be lurking in the background. The more powerful may continue to worry that the other may slip and prove inadequate on an issue that matters, while the less powerful one may still worry the stronger one may suddenly pull out of the collaboration, go it alone, or partner with someone else.
- Often however, one or other dimension or quality can be quite dominant. If that happens to be ‘feeling good’ then we may start disregarding certain information that we would pick up in reason-based mode, because it creates unease and discomfort. If we are very reason-based, we may get so absorbed in the practicalities of task execution that we lose sight of the larger purpose. ‘Delivering the project’ becomes the end in itself.
- It is possible that one organisation is fundamentally service-based and the other largely reason-based in its orientation. Community-based and community-oriented organisations tend to be so, and notice that external organisations coming in to assist do not always share that same ethos. The framework can bring that out.
- Collaborations between organisations are shaped by individual people and their relationships. Maybe the focal points in each have a very strong, shared, sense of purpose – but they do not experience that so much when engaging with colleagues of the other. In other words, the experience of the quality of the collaboration may differ depending on who, in the other organisation, you are dealing with. When different colleagues come in, or the focal point changes, the dominant mode may shift, in either direction.

Can I be other than fear based if I am financially vulnerable? The sentiment will be hard to avoid. But that may be a good reason to bring it up early in the collaboration, so that all involved can operate with empathy and prevent it becoming a significant, unhelpful influence on the collaboration.

Maturing a relationship takes time: Developing a sense of shared purpose, and certainly a shared sense of being in ‘service’ to others, may not be possible in a collaboration that is only short-term. Or is it? Perhaps you could explore that in the getting-to-know each other conversations, prior to deciding to collaborate. As a Lebanese friend of us put it: When others come to my organisation to suggest we do a project together, I tell them: “*Can we meet a few times over a coffee and talk about our respective values and purpose in this context, before we start talking projects and budgets!?*”

Emotional connotation around ‘maturity’: If circumstances make me very shorter-term task oriented, and I cannot pursue a larger purpose nor pretend that I can be fundamentally ‘in service’ to others, does it mean my collaboration with you is ‘immature’? ‘Immature’ has negative connotations and appears judgmental. Perhaps it is not the right way to talk about it. But the index allows you to be aware, and be explicit towards each other, what are realistic expectations for the nature of the collaboration, and what not.

## ANNEX: How Does This Framework Relate to Others – in the Aid Sector

The Relationship- or Partnership Maturity Index is offered here as a framework for reflection on the collaboration between organisations. But it can also be used to reflect on the collaboration between units or departments within an organisation. It is not specific for the aid sector.

For those who want to use it in that sector, its specificity and added value to other frameworks needs to be clarified. The aid sector's use of the term 'partnership' is unacceptably loose however: the term is used, by the more powerful actors, to refer to any type of collaboration, also those that are manifestly transactional and use and treat the mostly national or local agency as a subcontractor. At best, they are 'implementing partners' of projects designed, steered and controlled by an international aid agency. They are not 'decision-making' partners, which is what you would expect if the term 'partnership' was used.

### a. Principles of Partnership

The aid sector, more specifically the relief sector, in 2007 articulated a set of Principles of Partnership.<sup>ii</sup> Though then largely forgotten and ignored for a good decade, they have had a modest revival in recent years. But we do not see them used regularly as reference frameworks for collaborating agencies reviewing the quality of their collaboration.

#### 2007 Principles of Partnership

- **Equality:** Mutual respect between members of the partnership irrespective of size or power. This does not exclude one or the other expressing constructive disagreement.
- **Transparency:** This is achieved through dialogue (on equal footing), with an emphasis on early consultations and early sharing of information. Communications and transparency, including financial transparency, increase the level of trust among organizations.
- **Result-oriented approach:** Effective action must be reality-based and action-oriented. This requires result-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities.
- **Responsibility:** Organisations have an ethical obligation to each other to accomplish their tasks responsibly, with integrity and in a relevant and appropriate way. They must make sure they commit to activities only when they have the means, competencies, skills, and capacity to deliver on their commitments. Decisive and robust prevention of abuses must also be a constant effort.
- **Complementarity:** Diversity is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other's contributions. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.

### b. The Seven Dimensions Framework

Under mandates from the Start Network, GMI in 2017 and 2018 identified seven dimensions that tend to be particularly important for local and national organisations in their collaboration with international aid agencies, and that do not come out clearly in the Principles of Partnership.<sup>iii</sup> In its first edition, the quantity and quality of financial resources shared came first. In its second edition, upon reflection, we put the quality of relationship center-stage. If the relationship is poor, not much genuine i.e. equitable partnership will manifest itself in practical aspects of the collaboration.

Like any framework, the Seven Dimensions' one is not meant to be used rigidly. It provides a structure that allows reflection on different important aspects of the collaboration, in a step-by-step manner, rather than jumping from one topic to another (as there are systemic interconnections).

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY	PARTICIPATION REVOLUTION	FUNDING & FINANCING	CAPACITY	COORDINATION MECHANISMS	POLICIES AND STANDARDS	VISIBILITY AND CREDIT SHARING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• respectful and equitable</li> <li>• reciprocal transparency and accountability</li> <li>• ‘decision-making’ not just ‘implementing partners’</li> <li>• Unequal power not abused</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• deeper participation of at-risk &amp; affected populations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• better quality</li> <li>• greater quantity</li> <li>• adaptive</li> <li>• financial health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustained and growing organisational capabilities</li> <li>• collaborative capabilities</li> <li>• stop undermining capacities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• national actors' greater presence and influence</li> <li>• beyond ‘avoiding duplication’ – collaboration for collective impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• national actors can contribute to and influence global and national policy and standards-development, and their application in their contexts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• roles, results and innovations by national actors are given credit and communicated about by international actors</li> </ul>

GMI’s Seven Dimensions framework is used as a reference by different organisations and has been adapted by some others. Note however that GMI also includes cross-cutting issues such as responsibility, transparency and accountability; gender; humanitarian principles; risk and opportunity.<sup>iv</sup>

In 2018, we suggested that it can be used as another source of inspiration to review the nature and quality of the collaboration and identify areas where the parties want to do better.

	Where are we now?	What needs to change?	What obstacles can we anticipate & how will we overcome them	What would success look like?	What progress markers can tell us whether we are advancing?
<b>Relationship quality</b>					
<b>Participatory approaches</b>					
<b>Funding and financing</b>					
<b>Capacities</b>					
<b>Influencing coordination &amp; contextual policies and standards</b>					
<b>Visibility</b>					
<b>Influencing international policy and standards</b>					

### ***c. The Power Awareness and Power Analysis Tool***

Developed by The Spindle/PARTOS 2020, it provides a framework that identifies key decisions, from the process to establish the partnership to sustaining outcomes.<sup>v</sup> And invites a scoring, as starting point for a conversation. While adding the focus on decision-making, its underlying scenario seems to be that of a project or programme. It pays less attention to other dimensions that the previous framework puts a spotlight on. And, apart from the ‘scoping and building’ of the partnership, is mostly focused on the task, not the quality of the relationship (though how key decisions around the task are taken influences the quality of the relationship or is determined by it – of course).

#### **d. Added Value of the Relationship/Partnership Maturity Index**

This framework brings to the foreground two key aspects of collaboration, that the two previous ones do not: purpose and vision, and the emotional experiences in any collaboration.

The quality of a relationship is different when there is a felt sense of shared (larger, higher) purpose, beyond the immediate task. The ‘results-oriented approach’ of the Principles of Partnership does not capture or evoke this. It can lead to a very reason-based collaboration without a shared sense of larger purpose. Project-based partnerships tend to be like this. A sense of higher purpose can be largely shaped by the organisation acting, or by those in whose service it wants to be and remain.

Secondly, in most collaborations power dynamics are at play, between the collaborating organisations but also between the individuals who in practice handle most of the collaboration and therefore shape its flavour or colour. Start paying attention to it, and you may notice that fear is present in varying degrees in many collaborations. It will be an inhibiting factor, preventing the collaboration from achieving a fuller potential. Fear can of course be one source of ‘feel good’ based collaborations, but there can be others: everybody feeling good is more generally a ‘comfort zone’ that we may want to preserve as an end in itself. We may have some results, we will do some reasoning, but will be reluctant to bring up something that could become a dissonant note in the atmosphere of ‘harmony’, be it related to the task or to the collaboration.

None of the frameworks need to be exclusive: it is perfectly possible to combine elements of each of them into a tapestry that should ensure a rich conversation about the quality of the collaboration, from the practical task level to power dynamics, sharing risk and sharing credit, whose interests ultimately motivate the collaboration, and the emotional undertones in the relationship.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://beingatfullpotential.com/>

<sup>ii</sup> As GMI we agree with Lynn Morris those basing partnerships on principles works better than trying to base them on rules. But would advice prospective partners to sit together and jointly articulate the principles they want their partnership to be grounded in, not copy some pre-set ones. See GMI Oct. 2019: *Partnerships: Pre-conditions, principles and practices*.

<sup>iii</sup> Start Network & GMI 2017: *The Start Fund, Start Network and Localisation. Current situation and future directions*, and 2018: *Localisation in Practice. Emerging indicators and practical recommendations*.

<sup>iv</sup> GMI June 2020: *Dimensions of Localisation*.

<sup>v</sup> The Spindle/PARTOS 2020: *Power Awareness Tool. A tool for analysing power in partnerships for development*.