

PARTNERSHIPS: PRE-CONDITIONS, PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

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I. Partnership: Higher expectations of the relationship.

Partnerships are collaborative relationships of a higher quality than mere subcontracting or transactional ones. As in certain personal relationships (family, friendships), calling a relationship a ‘partnership’ signals higher expectation, not only about what you hope to achieve by but how you will be and interact with each other.

In every partnership, personal or professional, difficult moments will arise. Their nature and timing cannot be fully anticipated. There can be written partnership agreements just as there can be a marriage contract. But not every difficulty can be anticipated. And higher expectations mean stronger emotions. Mere ‘rules’ may not be enough or are too ‘cold’ to deal with them. Broad experience confirms that “*in partnering rules don’t work but principles might*».ⁱ

One of GMI’s mandates was to accompany a global group of organisations through a challenging change process that included changes in the partnering relationship. At a big gathering, the group of mostly directors of some 25 agencies from different countries and continent who had been collaborating for years and even decades, were asked what they had valued in the historical collaboration and wanted to bring to a new configuration? Interestingly, a prominent answer was ‘principles’, to which another participant added that they have to be rendered more explicit into practices.

They had not however, before, articulated any principles. We therefore took a comparative look at ‘partnership principles’ articulated by different organisations which often partner or elaborated by a group of agencies collaborating already. And included also the five of the Partnership Brokering Association. It made us conclude that it is useful to differentiate between preconditions for partnerships, principles and practices.

II. Preconditions for partnering

Often mentioned as principles are ‘*shared vision*’ or ‘*shared purpose*’, and ‘*complementarity*’ of effort and of value-added. These are more pre-conditions for partnering rather than guiding principles for partnering behaviour. Without these, a partnership would not even be considered. Little recognised pre-conditions are the adoption of a *holistic or ‘systems’* and of a *longer-term* perspective, and the *readiness to invest resources in the partnering*. A holistic perspective makes you realise that resolving a complex challenge requires a collective impact that is more than the sum of its individual parts. And as with any quality relationship, partnerships require – and merit- dedicated attention and time. Partnering can be frustrating for the impatient, but as an African proverb reminds us “*If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.*”

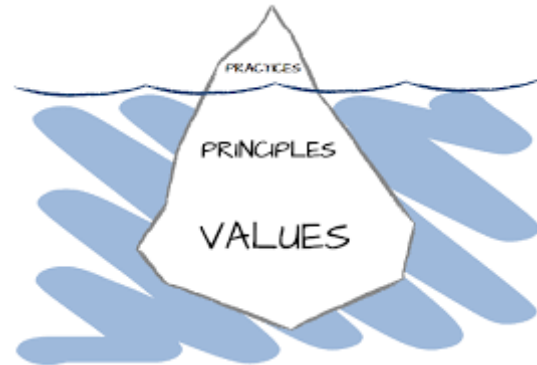
Another pre-condition should be that the *partnership relationship is institutionalised* within (the relevant components) of the respective organisations. The health of collaborative relationships ultimately depends on the behaviour of individuals. Four directors of organisations may agree to enter into a partnership – but on a daily level, it will be others in their organisation that make it work, or not. It is imperative then, that the partnership commitment, with its benefits but also its burdens, is shared by these others – and that they have the required collaboration and relational competencies.

An interesting question is whether organisations also need to have ‘*shared values*’ to be able to partner. At first sight, that seems a requirement. But for several complex challenges in the world today, we need cross-sectoral collaborations and partnerships: of public, private and/or not-for-profit sectors. Do they share the same values? Not necessarily. In critical moments, the public sector actor may prioritise

according to government policy and risk of negative media coverage; the private sector may prioritise shareholder interests, and the not-for-profit actor the ‘most vulnerable and marginalised’. As shared values do not necessarily provide common ground, agreements bolstered with principles guiding the interaction between the partners, become more important.

III. Principles: Behavioural guidance among partners.

Partnerships are entered into in order to create a “1+1=3” outcome: the partnership generates value and beneficial outcomes that is more than the sum of what each does individually. At the same time, partnerships are a constant dance of converging and diverging interests. Inevitably, there will be bumpy moments in the ride. It is then that previously agreed partnership principles become useful. These are guiding principles for the *behaviour between the partners* – not for their relationship with other stakeholders outside the partnership.



Some frequently mentioned partnership principles are e.g. ‘*clarity of roles and responsibilities*’, ‘*mutual or reciprocal accountability*’, ‘*questioning and challenging constructively with the intent to improve and not to undermine the collaborative endeavour*’, ‘*ensuring that individual interests do not -repeatedly- predominate over the collective interest*’.

Successful partnerships generate benefits beyond what each could have achieved: for the intended beneficiaries and the partnering organisations. But there are risks: of failure OF the partnership (i.e. the intended objective or impact is not achieved) and of failure IN the partnership (i.e. the collaboration breaks down). When things go well, we can share the benefits and the credit – when they don’t, we seek to apportion blame: ‘*Shared benefit, shared risk*’ therefore is sometimes made a partnership principle. Surely if one of the parties habitually transfers risks to other parties, it cannot be called a ‘partnership’.

An interesting one is ‘*solidarity*’, which rarely seems to figure as a partnership principle – even in the not-for-profit sector. It seems an appropriate principle for organisations that collaborate on issues that involve the protection of rights of certain social groups. At the same time, it seems to go against the understanding that partnerships are not an end in themselves, but a means to a shared purpose. When the purpose no longer holds, or the partnership is no longer felt to bring added value for its pursuit, ‘solidarity’ cannot be an obstacle to altering or ending the partnership? Still, a too functionalistic perspective may limit the appreciation for how ‘solidarity’ can be a guiding principle for how to alter or end a partnership.

Two common principles are ‘*equity*’ (the contribution of each partner, non-monetary as much as monetary, is valued) and ‘*relishing diversity*’. ‘Equity’ relates directly to the issue of power dynamics and different sources of power asymmetry (differences in control over financial resources, but also technical/thematic expertise, contextual knowledge, access to influencers, degree of organisation, self-confidence etc.). Diversity can provide fertile soil for fresh thinking and new perspectives, for creativity and innovation – but also complicate mutual understanding and agreement around key decisions.

Another frequent one is ‘*transparency*’. Partnerships, as higher quality relationships, require trust. When organisations partner for a common purpose, without monetary transfers from one to the other, trust becomes clearly the central nerve of the relationship. Without trust, the partnership will fall apart, even if there is still recognition of a common purpose. On the other hand, organisations engaging in partnerships, maintain their independence. So the transparency required is about the issues that matter: to the pursuit of the common purpose, and to the health of the relationship.

Equity, diversity, transparency, mutual accountability are important principles, but the challenge lies in their practical application in concrete situations, when sensitivities may be high. It can be useful to do some further proactive work to anticipate some of those likely to arise and spell out more detailed guidance.

IV. Principles into practice

Partnering principles, jointly developed and agreed, provide a structural foundation for difficult times. This can be further reinforced by anticipating concrete situations and clarifying how they will be dealt with when they arise. ‘*Diversity*’, for example, can stimulate creativity but also situations of strong disagreement over which course of action to take. Determining in advance *how you will take decisions* in such case makes you better prepared. Gradients of decision-making can be one approach to assess the degree of convergence for one option or another. Abiding by collective decisions can be a pre-agreed practice.

Other sensitive situations can be anticipated: who represents the partnership and what does it require to *speak on its behalf*? Make the implicit understanding explicit. What happens when *financial irregularities* seem to have taken place in one party: Does another one come in heavy-handed and take over, or do you first allow the party concerned to deal with it itself? Effective *communications* are critical to partnering success: In practice, you may want to agree that all communications about matters important to the collaborative endeavour reach all parties at the same time (including translated versions) – this helps to avoid suspicion that some parties have privileged access to information, while others are kept out of the loop – or only get informed with delay.

‘*Mutual accountability*’ is a critical principle. But how does it play out in practice. A good practice is to schedule periodic reviews of the health of the partnership, not just of the progress in the collective work. But there will be unscheduled moments when one or more parties feel that another has not lived up to its promises or expectations. We know how difficult it is to find the right tone and choice of words when we are speaking with an underlying feeling of disappointment or anger. Proactive practical arrangements may consist of the agreement that challenging questions will be framed in an open manner, or that an impartial and not emotionally involved third party is called upon if emotions are quite high.

How will a large partnership act, when there is a call for proposals: will only one sub-set of them be allowed to bid for it or can several do so. Are they *de facto* then *competing with each other*, or *maximising the chances* of getting extra funding for the collective purpose?

‘*Sharing credit*’ can be a partnership principle. But what happens, practically, if one of the parties has contributed e.g. an innovative approach that has value way beyond the partnership? And that may even have commercial value should intellectual property rights be established? You can follow Harry Truman’s dictum that “*It’s amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit!*” On the other hand, the partnership is likely to get undermined if other parties manage to scale up and disseminate the innovation, so that it ultimately gets associated with them rather than with the real inventor. Share credit, but also give it where it is due?

These are only some examples of plausible situations that may arise – when principles have to be translated into practice. You get the idea.

V. When to discuss principles and practices?

Principles and practices can best be discussed when new partnerships are being considered: it draws attention not only to the ‘what’ we want to do together but also to the ‘how’ and opens up space for conversation about the relationship expectations.

But partnerships may have been active for quite some time without ever having articulated such principles. When designing that big partners’ gathering mentioned before, a question had been when to plan a session on partnership principles? As organisations partner-for-a-purpose, one option was to first focus on detailing more the new global plan, then talk about the nature of the collaborations. The other option was to first clarify what the proposed nature of collaboration would be.

Given the long history of partnership, we chose the latter option. Within minutes, it became clear that there was limited appetite at that time. Several participants brought fall-out from a similar global gathering six months before (before GMI’s involvement) where a new ‘partnership model’ had been presented, in a very top-down manner and seemingly introducing a status hierarchy among ‘partners’. What participants explicitly wanted from this gathering now, was clarity about what the collective action

would be – while adopting a cautious ‘wait-and-see’ attitude given their uncertainty about the nature of future collaboration – if any. “*What are we invited to here?*” was a stark way to express this.

Had there been partnership principles and practices in the past, ‘how’ the need for change was introduced in the previous gathering very likely would have been different and avoided the strong emotional reactions. In the face of initial resistance, the wise move was to touch the issue of partnership principles only with a light touch, and devote the next two days to the ‘what’, the detailing of the global plan of action and the identification of progress markers that could be part of a common measurement system. This was framed as an open space: the organisations present were invited to share what they felt they could and wanted to contribute to this, and to consider whether they were willing and able to step in and step up and take responsibility for organising and serving smaller-scale collaborations within the global one. Any such ‘leadership’ was framed as ‘servant leadership’, with emphasis put on the ‘responsibility’ and not the ‘authority’ of such enabling style of leadership. That change in framing restored a sense of ‘equity’, after which it became possible to have a productive session on preconditions, principles and practices. The relevance of which was now obvious to everyone.

Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) is a value-based and purpose-driven consultancy. One of its key strands of work is fostering positive collaborations, within and between organisations and/or social groups.

ⁱ Lynn Morris 2016: *In partnering rules don’t work but principles might.*
<http://keystoneaccountability.org/2016/08/22/in-partnering-rules-dont-work-but-principles-might/>