

## REPORT of the 5th Meet Up for Strategic Partnerships

# The effectiveness of strategic partnerships

5th of July, Humanity House, The Hague

"When strategic partners join forces and coordinate their lobbying and advocacy instruments and methods, their overall effectiveness may be enhanced". This is one of the main assumptions underpinning the dialogue and dissent framework. But is this assumption true? Are we more effective working in partnerships? If so, how does that come about and what determines a successful partnership? These were the questions that we addressed during this fifth meet up in which some 25 representatives of organizations in the Strategic Partnerships and staff of DSO-MO, IOB and Partos. It resulted in recommendations to both organizations and the Ministry for current and future partnership programs.

Important take aways (see further below for a full overview of challenges, factors of success and recommendations):

Main challenges are the time and capacity it takes to build and organize effective strategic partnerships on the basis of equal relations and trust. The partnership with the NL MFA is more challenging when it comes to the dissent part, especially when it concerns other interests within the Ministry or of other Ministries. Southern leadership does not necessarily guarantee that all relevant Southern voices are on board.

A factor of success is the early involvement of all partners in the development of your Theory of Change and program. For effective and equal partnerships it is further more important to be aware of the power dynamics. Southern participation can make us of aware of these power dynamics. Open relationships with all partners involved, including those with the Ministry (although also the donor), are key.

An important recommendation is to build a partnership when possible on already existing relations (both here and in the countries) that are mutually beneficial; keep a maximum of flexibility in your program as to accommodate the necessary flexibility of the strategic partnership; and regularly reflect on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of your cooperation.

The program included two very interesting presentations done by Annelieke Douma (Both Ends) on behalf of the GAGGA Alliance, and by Thandie Mwape (The Netherlands Red Cross) on behalf of the Partners for Resilience, focused on Southern leadership and the partnership with the NL MFA respectively. Both presentations are attached and worth reading. They were followed by a plenary exchange and work in groups on the basis of World Café: what are our challenges, what are the factors of success and what are our recommendations. The meeting was facilitated by Marije Nederveen of Oxfam Novib, and organized by a group of Partos members, including NL Red Cross, SNV, NIMD, IUCN with the support from Partos and The Spindle.

## Results of the Exchanges in Working Groups

### **1. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AMONG PARTNERS IN THE ALLIANCE**

#### **Challenges:**

- Forming, norming, storming, performing takes time: a strategic partnership, getting to know each other, finding practical ways to cooperate is time consuming. Many

organizations that have entered into a new alliance under the SP feel that it is only now, after 2,5 years of cooperation, that the partnership is really starting to work in practice.

- Design of joint PME framework
- Unequal power balance (Calimero-effect): in those partnerships where big organizations are in the lead, the smaller alliance partner runs the risk of being snowed under)
- Importance of SP programmer for survival: in partnerships where the SP funds are vital for the survival of one of the alliance partners, but only of marginal importance of another, organizations sometimes run into challenges in cooperation
- Dependency on people involved: In the end, all cooperation boils down to personal relations. If people leave, or are replaced within an alliance dynamics change automatically (either positively or negatively)
- Aligning planning & reporting within the alliance and amongst all partners: especially bigger alliances sometimes end up having rather large coordinating structures and many bureaucratic layers that hamper an effective cooperation – Keeping the structure mean and lean (particularly in bigger alliances) is a challenge.

#### **Factors of Success:**

- Already existing cooperation (PfR): in those cases where alliances have the opportunity to build on an already existing cooperation, it provides the alliance with a comparative advantage, as alliance partners already know each other, working methods are clear. The alliance can build on experiences and move forward faster.
- Complementary (choice of partners): in those cases where alliance partners have a clear added value and complementing skills and knowledge, cooperation tends to work smoother, as in those cases it is easier not to interfere in each other's business and to allow for sufficient space to operate.
- Equality within partnerships (no subcontracting relation): alliances work best if there is a degree of equality within the partnership, allowing all partners to make a meaningful contribution.
- Accept differences and discuss the partnership itself: alliances work best if partners are willing to accept differences and put the partnership relation on the agenda regularly (are we still happy with how things go? What can we do differently/better?)
- Comparable sizes (or small one in the lead): it is easier to come to an equal partnership if the alliance is made up of organizations of more or less the same size, or (in case of an alliance between a big and small organization) where the small organization is in the lead. This helps to balance out power relations.
- Power balance within partnerships: see earlier point
- Coordinating team for the whole alliance: some alliances have opted to appoint a coordination team for the alliance that operates more or less independently and takes responsibility for the alignment of planning and reporting, communication, etc.
- Clear identification of roles – you do not have to do everything together.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Don't force partnerships and look for complementarities (get rid of the 'forced marriages')
- Allow for continuity and longer term cooperation (+5 years), as working in a strategic partnership takes time, and will become more effective in the long-run
- Be honest about what works or not: allow for honesty (and new partnerships)
- Test the assumption if working in a strategic partnership indeed delivers more or more effective results
- Involve current partnerships in design of IOB evaluation and DD2.0 framework
- Allow for alternative/innovative partnerships (alliance partners).

- Look at the cost effectiveness of partnerships

## **2. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE MINISTRY**

### **Challenges:**

- Capacity constraints @ DGIS and Royal Netherlands Embassies
- Communication between RNEs and SPs not always optimal (see also below)
- Different interests within MFA and between ministries
- Double role: partners vs donor/recipient may complicate partnership relationship
- SPs insufficiently define and communicate needs to embassies
- The dissent part

### **Factors of Success:**

- Open relationship
- Flexibility
- Shared vision on strengthening voice of civil society

### **Recommendations:**

- Define expectations amongst partners in programmer design phase
- Manage expectations during implementation (both at the Hague and at RNE level)
- Recommendations for further improving engagement with embassies
  - Map relationships and priorities
  - Maintain regular communication between partners and embassies. This is a joint responsibility.

## **3. SOUTHERN OWNERSHIP WITHIN THE PARTNERSHIP**

### **Challenges:**

- How do you define Southern leadership/ownership?
- There is not one Southern voice.
- Southern organizations do not always know better to bring in Southern ownership/agenda's
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- Southern involvement in program development and application process (*costly!*)
- Joint strategic sessions and outcome harvesting sessions difficult to organize
- Involvement in ToC development (also strengthens capacity) difficult to organize
- Well defined programs leave little space for Southern ownership and flexibility
- Changes in program because of desired changes Southern partner can have painful budgetary consequences for the Northern partners in the alliance.
- How to organize a lobby in the North not only on Southern agenda but also with Southern voice.
- Receiving direct foreign donor money may not be allowed, or place the organization in a difficult position
- Power dynamics.

### **Factors of Success:**

- Being international federation/network with Southern presence
- Equality of partnership
- Mutual capacity development
- Recognizing each other's strengths
- Advisory committee consisting of Southern organizations
- Open program design.

#### **Recommendations to MFA:**

- Involve Southern organizations in development of new framework
- Provide opportunities and incentives for equal partnerships
- Embassies should be more open to engage with/support Southern/local organizations
- Keep the flexibility of working with ToC and PME in place!

#### **4. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AMONG LOCAL PARTNERS IN THE COUNTRIES**

##### **Challenges:**

- Lengthy process to build relationships and build trust
- Competition amongst partners
- Cultural differences
- Lack of documentation: evidence based is often in heads of people, not on paper/video

##### **Factors of Success:**

- Take time to build trust; important basis for joint work
- Together we are stronger; once first results make this visible motivation to work together grows.
- Optimize different skills and networks; focus on complementarities
- Shared values
- Documentation of evidence in support of your L&A
- Strong local facilitator/coordinator

##### **Recommendations:**

- Choice and selection of partners
  - Thematic (complementary)
  - Advocacy expertise
  - Consider existing relations and dynamics (competition) – this can lead to tensions
- Take time to build trust: it will pay off later (the basis should be good)
- Local awareness of 'Strategic Partnership': not all partners we engage with are well aware of the uniqueness of this partnership, cooperation with Ministry of Foreign Affairs and how to make use of this partnership
- Include southern organizations early i.e. as from the design phase of the programmer
- Not necessary to do everything together: make strategic use of the partnership (which sometimes means that you allow others to take lead, instead of doing things yourself)