

Getting to partnership

The neglected role of facilitation

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Whether or not the label 'partnership' is appropriate, the message in this issue of Capacity.Org is clear: in service delivery relationships matter. But less plain are processes that create successful interactions between diverse organisations – communities, ministries, local governments, aid agencies, NGOs, private sector contractors, etc. We therefore need to look at the neglected use of skilled, professional support to help organisations learn to work well together.

Be it through service delivery or other means, no one actor can redress poverty, inequality, injustice and poor governance. In today's jargon, effective development calls for multi-sector partnerships. Typically, this means creating combinations of the roles, technical capabilities and motivations to be found in the public and private spheres and within civil society.

Practical experience testifies to the difficulties of linking the efforts of actors that live with different cultures, power structures, time frames, incentives, resources, mandates, owners, internal processes, external connections and performance measures. Institutional studies and programme evaluations often show that waste, delays, under-disbursement, conflict and frustration result when more and more actors collaborate in aid initiatives without adequate investment in getting the processes of engagement right.

So, how does combining or partnering typically happen? Who can or should legitimately take the lead? Who has the skills? What skills are needed anyway? How can they be developed or improved? Who pays? Often the answers lie buried in the ways that funders and governments plan and negotiate aid projects, and then invite bids for contracts.

By implication, leadership in partnering 'naturally' belongs to donors and/or governments that typically adopt regulatory approaches where they are 'in charge'. Partnering principles – equality and negotiation on the rules and terms of engagement, with risks and rewards fairly distributed – seldom feature in the way relations arise. Consequently, trust is lacking. The parties involved hide behind contracts, blame and defensiveness when things go wrong, and self-promotion when things go well.

These unwelcome results are frequent enough that remedies are being actively sought. Recognising that prevention is better than cure, one focus is on the value of facilitation and brokering of relationships at the very beginning. Professional specialisation and competence in partnership development are now being recognised and formalised. Examples are the Partnership Brokers Accreditation Scheme and organisations like Inter-Mediation.

Facilitating relationships

Facilitation can be applied in two ways. Most straightforward is to have an external person who assists in convening and mediating between organisations as they establish working relationships, and who can also monitor and report on the partnership over time. When selection, commissioning and financing are well conceived, this professional resource acts from a position of independence and neutrality. But an external party is often only selected when relationships are sufficiently advanced to make this type of collective decision possible. As yet, this option is underappreciated and too seldom used.

More complicated is a process where one of the parties evolves into a 'member' or internal facilitator. That is, other players recognise the value of one of their number taking on preparation, convening and mediating tasks. A difficulty is acceptance of the person's independence and impartiality. Less problematic is the financing arrangement. Interestingly, the task of facilitation in partnerships often befalls organisational development advisers or capacity builders. In one sense these actors are 'outsiders'. But the task of improving a client's capabilities brings a unique position of 'engaged semi-detachment' from which they can be also be trusted to work with the wider relational system. While ambiguities might remain, the value of this innovative contribution to effective partnerships is increasingly being proven in practice.

Whatever the nature of the facilitator, the challenge is to raise awareness that introducing this skill after conflicts or problems have arisen is inefficient. Employing facilitation and brokering to get relationships right from the start brings benefits for all concerned. Given the calls for results-driven aid, for how long can multi-actor service delivery neglect relational facilitation in any of its forms?

Links

[Inter-Mediation](#)

[Partnership Brokers Accreditation Scheme](#)