

# Partnerships for service delivery: what makes them tick?

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**Issue 27 of Capacity.org addressed the roles of networks and partnerships in capacity development. To take the discussion one step further, and make it more concrete and specific, this issue focuses on the role of partnerships in the delivery of basic services. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals will remain but a pipe dream unless effective systems are realised for the delivery of services such as education, healthcare, microfinance, communications, water and sanitation, etc., which often require collaboration between various kinds of actors. Can partnerships offer solutions that will help to improve access to basic services? If they can, what does it take to make partnerships work, and to grow the capacities not only of individual actors, but also of the relationships between them?**

There is a lot of rhetoric around the issue of partnerships. In the development context, the term is often used as a synonym for the wish to maintain equitable relationships between donors and recipients, concealing the very real power differences between them. In the feature article, 'Engaged or divorced?', Professor Richard Batley notes that in many countries governments pay lip service to the idea of partnerships, but in practice they rarely collaborate with non-state service providers. Thus the benefits of partnerships that are assumed in theory are rarely realised in practice, which only adds to the suspicion that they are little more than hype.

Despite the rhetoric, there are good arguments in favour of partnerships in the delivery of basic services, as we demonstrate in this issue of Capacity.org.

Partnerships can lead to more effective and efficient use of financial resources that may otherwise be spread over different organisations with little coordination and minimal effect. At the local level, such organisations include local governments, deconcentrated line ministries, NGOs, faith-based organisations and grassroots self-help groups. Successful partnerships, such as the Puntland Health Partnership Programme in Somalia, have overcome long-standing barriers due to compartmentalisation and have started to collaborate across organisational boundaries, resulting in improved access to basic services.

As well as being effective in the 'direct' delivery of services, partnerships can also be good for establishing a 'service environment' that is more coherent and sustainable. Godfrey Jjooga Ssebukulu shows how in Uganda the microfinance sector had developed with donor support, but had reached its limits. In order to be sustainable in the long term, microfinance institutions had to commercialise their operations. A transformation of these institutions into a coherent, regulated

system was needed at the national level. For this to succeed, donors, the government and microfinance institutions had to work in partnership.

Partnerships can also bring together sources of knowledge and expertise that complement each other and thus foster improvements in service delivery. By working together, the various actors involved in decentralised health service delivery in Mali have overcome the initial friction, and are now contributing the knowledge and skills that are indispensable for health facilities to function well. Another example of complementarity of expertise is the public-private partnership involving Ericsson, Mobitel and UNHCR in Tanzania. They have set up a mobile communications network that is expected to support the many organisations providing emergency services for thousands of refugees.

Making a partnership work is an art that requires virtues and conditions that are not always available in abundance. Just a few of the many highlighted in this issue include alignment of ambitions and interests, mutual trust, transparency, clear objectives and inspiring leadership. In the guest column, Professor Alan Fowler argues that more attention needs to be paid to the role of facilitation in developing effective partnerships that are most likely to produce results on the ground.