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## The BCO Alliance

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**We all agree that harmonisation is necessary. But it is often far from easy to achieve in practice. This article argues that it can be helpful to co-design flexible frameworks in order to ensure cooperation among partners with very different interests.**

From a traditional project management perspective, the prospects for the Building Communications Opportunities (BCO) Alliance did not look good. The parameters seemed far too loose. Evaluation and management models were not included in the original design, for example, and logical frameworks were also lacking. But in reality these apparent shortcomings turned out to have a positive effect on learning and collaboration.

Launched in 2004, the BCO Alliance is a partnership among five donor agencies and six implementing NGOs to investigate, mobilise and support ICT4D opportunities that will help reduce poverty. In order to build confidence among the partners, responsibility for coordinating the Alliance's activities was assigned to one of the NGO partners, rather than bringing in an outside management consultant. All the partners have collaborated in both the management of the Alliance and the programme content, which over time has encouraged respect and mutual learning.

In the early days, the Alliance invested considerable effort in making sure that all the partners understood their various missions, strategies and values. This was done through formal presentations, as well as in social events that provided effective opportunities for networking. The result has been organic, open and flexible relationships among the non-profit and public sector stakeholders.

Practical matters such as the format of reports and the frequency of meetings had not been discussed before the launch, and so had to be addressed by the partners in a collective decision-making process. This actually increased the sense of ownership, making the partners creators of their own programmes.

## Assessing impacts

The work of the Alliance in the area of impact assessment is an outcome of collaborative brainstorming. After drafting logical frameworks for the projects, the partners chose to go one step further, and developed an innovative impact assessment tool that provides evidence of the role and contribution of ICTs in areas such as providing a voice for the poor, enhancing good governance and stimulating policy dialogue.

The project framework is very flexible, allowing project elements and parameters to be changed as and when necessary. While this flexibility may have made it difficult to fit some projects into the framework(s), it has meant that the partners can respond rapidly to changing circumstances on the ground. They have also been able to experiment with different technologies and to choose solutions that would eventually lead to greater impacts.

## A platform for learning

As a result of all these factors, the BCO Alliance has become a fertile platform for learning and collaboration. The partners have already developed and implemented various joint projects, including the study *Louder Voices* (CTO/Panos, commissioned by DFID) and *ItrainOnline* (an initiative of seven organisations with expertise in computer training).

There is also evidence that the collaborative approach adopted by the BCO partners has trickled down to the field level. One example is the initiative to formulate an ICT strategy for agriculture in Bolivia, coordinated by SDC, DFID and IICD. Another is the e-Brain Forum in Zambia, a local network that is working to influence policy makers and raise awareness of the potential of ICTs.

The experiences of the BCO Alliance demonstrate how learning and sharing are processes that require both space to develop, as well as incentives that will help to build ownership, encourage experimentation and cement trust.

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## Further reading

R. Gerster and S. Zimmermann (2003)  
[ICTs and Poverty Reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Learning Study](#). Gerster Consulting.

D. MacLean et al. (2002)

[Louder Voices: Strengthening Developing Country Participation in International ICT Decision-making.](#) CTO/Panos.

World Bank (2005)

[E-Development: From Excitement to Effectiveness.](#)

## Links

[e-Brain Forum Zambia](#)

[ItrainOnline](#)