

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Partnerships for progress



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Collaboration is the 'new normal'

As development goals become increasingly dependent on partnerships of diverse actors, how can the barriers be broken down to enable effective, concerted action?

By **Dr Darian Stibbe**, Executive Director, The Partnering Initiative (TPI)

In September 2014, the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals (OWG) will present its report to the UN General Assembly. While specific targets and indicators are still being finalised, one aspect is clear: partnerships will be essential to achieving the goals, and they will be needed at a level that dwarfs current collaboration.

This is a heavy demand. While the rhetoric around partnership may be scorching, the reality – particularly at country level – is still lukewarm. Partnering across sectors with different interests, motivations, cultures and timescales, and often lacking in trust, is challenging.

Too many existing partnerships are not delivering fully on their potential and, with few mechanisms to support new partnerships, the number of collaborations is only scratching at the surface of what is required.

If we are to scale up and mainstream collaboration, we must do more to build the 'partnership infrastructure': the structures, mechanisms and capacities needed to make them happen at scale. Unfortunately, the issue of how this could be achieved is not touched on by the OWG's latest draft.

On the basis that 'what gets measured gets done', The Partnering Initiative (TPI) believes that, as an essential delivery mechanism, specific 'structural targets' should be included around partnerships

▲ Processing rice at a mill in Nigeria. GAIN, which supports public-private partnerships to increase access to missing nutrients in diets through the fortification of staple foods, is one of a number of multi-stakeholder platforms already in operation globally

in the post-2015 agenda, with indicators focused on the degree to which the enabling partnership infrastructure is in place.

Towards a new infrastructure for collaboration

To mainstream partnerships, concerted, collective action is needed at four levels:

1. Systemic mechanisms: multi-stakeholder platforms catalysing partnerships
A number of multi-stakeholder platforms are already in operation globally – for example the Global Alliance for Improved

Nutrition – as well as at country level, such as the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania and the new Business in Development Hubs that TPI is developing in Zambia and Colombia.

To systemise partnership development, such platforms need to raise awareness among all actors about the potential for partnership in a particular area of development or geographic region; build trust and facilitate positive dialogue among the sectors; broker potential partnerships (including building capacity for partnering); and connect them with possible sources of funding.

Structural targets could be set for the existence and quality of global-level platforms for each development area, as well as country-level platforms that drive local action.

2. Partnerships: improving quality and effectiveness through international best practice

The quality of partnerships needs to be measured and improved to ensure they are delivering as effectively and efficiently as possible. Partnerships need to:

- **Be set up properly:** they must be suited to the context; have the right partners on board; have defined objectives, roles and responsibilities; and offer clear value to all partners.
- **Operate effectively:** this includes strong project management, with partners delivering on their commitments, communicating well, tracking progress and conducting regular reviews.
- **Manage the relationship:** this means ensuring that the partnering principles of equity, transparency and mutual benefit are observed, and that all partners are engaged and committed.

Creating an agreed set of international best practice standards against which partnerships can be measured would act as a tool for continuous improvement, as well as help to build a common understanding of good partnering. Structural targets could include the percentage of partnerships operating above a certain standard.

3. Organisations: becoming ‘fit for partnering’

Whether government or business, NGO or donor, UN or academic, one of the most common challenges to partnerships is that organisations are rarely set up to partner effectively. Operational and administrative obstacles can lead to considerable professional and personal frustration, slow partnership development and missed opportunities.

Through its work across sectors, TPI has identified four key elements for an organisation to be ‘fit for partnering’:

- **Strategy:** partnership must be built into organisational strategy, given an assigned budget, and be advocated strongly by leaders at both international and country level.
- **Processes:** from assessing a potential opportunity through to appropriate legal agreements, internal systems and processes must be designed to aid a partnership approach. In the case of government, this includes ensuring laws and regulations are supporting and not obstructing partnerships.
- **Skills:** staff must have the right skills, guidelines and support, for example, through a dedicated partnership support unit.
- **Culture:** organisations need a culture that appreciates the strengths of other sectors and includes a willingness to innovate through collaboration.

TPI has worked with a number of UN agencies and other international organisations to create a Fit for Partnering assessment system, which could be used to provide a standardised rating of development actors, with structural targets set for the percentage of governments, institutions and international organisations above a certain rating.

4. Individuals: building essential partnering competencies

As mentioned above, building effective public-private collaboration is challenging and requires a specific set of competencies to ensure that they deliver. TPI structures its partnering training courses around four

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‘MUST-have’ partnering competencies: a partnering Mindset; Understanding of other sectors; relationship and negotiation Skills; and Technical knowledge of the partnering process.

The adoption of a common standard across any organisation’s courses would allow the number of trained individuals to be tracked, and the setting of structural targets on that basis.

Further, there is currently a major gap in general education around partnering. A target could be introduced around the number of business schools and public policy schools incorporating concepts of public-private partnerships for development into their curricula.

Agreeing common definitions

One issue affecting the wider adoption of partnerships is the lack of clarity of the word itself. The term can be used to describe a hugely diverse range of relationships. ‘Public-private partnerships’, for instance, include anything from a simple business-NGO partnership for development, to a profit-making regulated arrangement for business to deliver public services or infrastructure.

In general, governments are more likely to have the latter arrangement in mind, while civil society actors are more inclined to resist it as a form of privatisation. This hugely muddies the issue and reduces the acceptance of business as a legitimate development partner.

A common set of definitions for different forms of collaboration would reduce the confusion. Meanwhile, international best practice standards could significantly improve the time it takes to develop partnerships and the quality of what is created.

Measuring value and bridging the evidence gap

Evidence of the effectiveness and efficiency of partnerships in delivering sustainable development is limited. In some cases, this is because they are tackling complex issues that require a partnering approach, so there is no non-partnering alternative for comparison. In other cases – just as with any development project – impact might come



▲ A kindergarten run by Al Inshaat Charity with support from UNICEF in the besieged city of Homs, Syria. The Partnering Initiative has worked with a number of UN agencies and other international organisations to create a Fit for Partnering assessment system

a significant time after implementation, making attribution difficult and data costly or impossible to collect.

Nevertheless, a well-conceived partnership will have specific, measurable objectives and a clear theory of change to describe the impact expected. At the very least, all partnerships should report against these. We also need to measure more systematically the value added by partnerships – understanding how the partnership approach has achieved objectives in ‘better’ ways (e.g. more transformational, sustainable, integrated, context appropriate), as well as appreciating the ancillary benefits that may come, such as capacity development, technology transfer between sectors, better trust between government and business etc.

While the sheer diversity of partnerships rules out a one-size-fits-all

approach to reporting, if partnerships are to continue their rise as an essential development approach, they must justify the resources invested and demonstrate the value they are creating for both business and society.

Post-2015 – an opportunity not to be missed

Global understanding of the role of business in development has changed dramatically since the UN Millennium Development Goals were adopted in 2000. The post-2015 agenda provides an incredible opportunity to change the way we think about and ‘do’ development.

By appreciating the interconnectedness of the prosperity of business, society and the environment we can capitalise on the strengths and resources of all sectors in a way that achieves new levels of innovation and sustainable impact.

And by building the infrastructure for partnerships, we can genuinely achieve a vision in which collaboration is the new normal and business plays its full role as a partner in post-2015 development. ●