

Anticipating, managing and mitigating power imbalances

Use: This tool will help partners acknowledge, identify and explore sources of power and design appropriate mechanisms to address, and actions to mitigate, problematic power imbalances

Partnering phase: Building, managing and maintaining

What is a power imbalance?

A power imbalance is being expressed when one partner (or a group of partners) is able to dominate decision-making or otherwise asserts power in ways that disadvantages other partners or are not in the best interest towards achieving the partnership objectives.

One of the core principles of partnering is equity: the idea that all partners are committing resources and bring something essential to a partnership, and that 'buys them a seat at the table'. Power imbalance, when it is manifested, destroys equity and will likely cause poor partnering because:

It can result in poorer decision-making

Partnership decisions should be made based on the best information and experience available. Power imbalances may result in the advice of a 'weak' partner with the best knowledge (e.g. an NPO having close ties to a community or a particular technical specialism) not being sufficiently taken into account.

It reduces commitment

If a partner feels disempowered, their level of commitment to, and willingness to invest in, the partnership will be reduced;

It risks unsustainable partnerships

Partnerships are about creating value for all the partners. If power imbalances during negotiation results in a partner not gaining sufficient net value, that partner will eventually withdraw. Or if the negotiation results in one partner unfairly and disproportionately benefitting, it risks ongoing bad feeling within a partnership.

Perceived or real power imbalances may be relatively unimportant in situations where the aims of all the partners are very closely aligned but very significant where partners' aims diverge.

How can we manage/mitigate imbalances?

Phases	Assessment questions	Steps to take to manage/mitigate imbalances
SET UP		
Acknowledge the boundary choices that you make	Who (and who isn't) being represented in the partnership? Who (and who isn't) being represented in the different committees and meetings? How are decisions being made? How is information being shared?	Take responsibility for your choices: be aware of and make explicit the boundary choices that you make and the resulting implications that entail on who is being included/excluded and whose voice is being heard Create a governance structure that ensures appropriate representation and shares power Create decision making structures and mechanisms that acknowledge and share power Define the roles and responsibilities of each partner (as clearly as feasible at each stage) Ensure participants with a similar level of seniority, who are able to make decisions on behalf of their organisations, are at the table
Explore and demonstrate the unique and valuable resources of all partners	What does each partner bring to the table?	Define and make explicit the unique resources that each partner brings to the table Acknowledge where partners bring a specific technical or social knowledge that should be paramount in decision-making

Balance of power assessment

Sources of power come from a whole range of factors. No partnership would expect to have balance across each individual factor (after all, each individual partner is different) but the hope would be for a 'feeling' (one cannot mathematically average as the sources of power are not directly comparable like for like) for an approximate balance on average across all factors.

	Partner 1 [0-5]	Partner 2 [0-5]
KEY RESOURCES		
Providing a disproportionate amount of funding towards the partnership		
Holding resources / knowledge / social capital etc. essential to the partnership		
POSITIONAL		
Partner is in a position to be able to walk away (the partnership is not that important to them) or to easily find an alternative partner		
Formal authority		
HUMAN INFLUENCE / ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE		
Discursive power / ability to communicate and persuade		
Seniority / numbers of representatives at meetings		
Agility / flexibility to take decisions and move quickly		

Are we suffering from a power imbalance?

While the assessment above may give a theoretical or 'book' feel for the balance, the reality is that even if there is an apparent imbalance, it may be that partners do not exert their power, the imbalance is never manifested and no problem is caused. Also, even if there feels to be a reasonable balance of 'book' power, perception of power can be just as important as the reality, and can be unhelpfully asserted. The assessment below seeks to check if there is an actual or perceived power imbalance that is being manifested.

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS	Yes/No	NOTES
Do you feel the partnership unfairly skewed to deliver benefits in favour of one of the partners?		
Do you feel one partner is dominating decision-making of the partnership?		
Do you feel any partner's points of view are not being properly heard / considered?		
Do any partners show signs of being disempowered? E.g. not attending, or keeping quiet, at meetings		
Are any of the partners 'doing their own thing', rather than as part of the partnership?		

How can we manage/mitigate imbalances? (Continued)

Phases	Assessment questions	Steps to take to manage/mitigate imbalances
MANAGING AND MAINTAINING		
Acknowledge the sources of power and power dynamics in the partnership	What sources of power does each partner hold? What are the explicit and more subtle power dynamics between the partners? How are these expressed? - Through individuals? - Through interactions?	Acknowledge and explore the different sources of power/ power dynamics in the partnership Cultivate a partnering mind-set among all the members, underpinned by: - humility to realize others may have more appropriate knowledge / resources - an ability to balance and sometimes suppress individual ambitions with those of the partnership - willingness to give up control and autonomy of decision-making
Actively manage power imbalances	Can I support the different partners to reduce power imbalances? Adapt the governance structure/mechanisms that reduce power imbalances?	Build the confidence of partners with less real/perceived power by supporting them in identifying, owning and exercising their source of power if/when appropriate Support the more powerful (whether real or perceived) parties to appreciate what other partners bring to the table and how a collaborative approach benefits them Support the more powerful partners to adopt behaviours which empower others In meetings: Ensure information is distributed in advance to cater to participants who may need to consult internally or to reflect in order to react and contribute actively Ensure everybody’s voice is being heard and encourage the quieter ones or those with less real/perceived power to express themselves
Address problematic power imbalances	Are specific power dynamics problematic? What makes you think that? Are there specific interventions that can help mitigate the imbalance?	Identify when specific power dynamics become problematic Design appropriate interventions to address them
MOVING ON		
Understand when / when not to continue partnering and maintain your ability to walk away	When should you/should you not continue with a partnership? Are you prepared and in a position to leave the partnership if it does not fulfil your organisations’ and the collective’s needs?	Develop critical analysis skills to assess when and when not to partner Identify alternative options to participating in the partnership Maintain the ability to walk away