

## Research with Development Ambitions—Partnering with Non-Researchers

### Lived experience from the Limpopo and Volta River basins

#### Message

To deliver on a development mandate it is necessary to partner. Partnerships should be based on achieving a common goal, through the partners working on complementary objectives. Partnerships should be based on related objectives, where single organisations will not be able to achieve the goal alone, and where the partnership can lead to more rapid achievement of the goals. Preferably partnership should be objective specific, temporary by nature and dynamic.

No one entity can completely address the complexity of real world problems—yet they often propose to do just that. Time and money should be invested in diagnosing pathways to impact, including identifying potential partners with mandates to deliver within those areas of impact. Plan for and invest in the long and enlightening process of engagement with partners, including those who will appear (and disappear) along the way.

#### Q1. Is it necessary to partner?

No it is not. Business as usual with the same incentive structures, processes and goals can be done within existing arrangements. If you want business as usual than stop reading this brief!

If however, the goal is to move beyond outputs to development outcomes and impact for sustainable change then access to new kinds of technical and financial capacity, political responsibility, organisational willingness and convening power will be necessary. **Unless an organization can be completely transformed and re-oriented to play all roles along the pathway, then YES it is necessary to partner.** So, keep reading.

#### Q2. Why partner?

If our goal is sustainable development (focussing for example on water management, natural resources management or agriculture) it requires multiple changes at numerous “places” within the system. No single organisation can address all of these at once, because these are diverse in nature (maybe technical, procedural, policy orientated or management or governance related). No organisation can do all of these effectively, and no single intervention on its own can bring about large-scale effective and sustainable change.

#### Q3. Who to partner with and how to decide?

This depends on the intended outcomes and impact and an honest assessment of starting and entry points into the process. What is the pathway diagnostic? Which sectors are involved in the intended sphere of impact, who are the key actors within those sectors, and what are their roles and responsibilities?

Invest and engage in a process of understanding the pathways to the desired change including policy processes, actors, issues, entry points and context—and plan (and budget) to regularly go back, reflect and revise them.

Assume that organizations currently exist whose job it is to answer the questions and address the problems being explored. Ignoring them and their mandates suggests a lack of willingness to engage in the legitimate processes and systems in place. Failure to engage them limits the likelihood of outputs leading to outcomes and eventually to impact.

Engaging existing institutions, systems and processes may be frustrating—but this is where meaningful partnerships are built. Partners' capacity, systems, and goals will not mirror your own and must therefore be well understood, appreciated and supported when necessary. Are there intermediaries who can play this role? Are they willing to do so? Getting to outcomes and impact may take significant investment to level the playing field and generate mutual understanding between partners—for long-term benefit. Is there a willingness to look outside of the tradition partners usually included and to share resources with them?

#### **Q4. How good of a partner are you? Why would others want to partner with you?**

Conceptualize and describe your efforts and investment as part of an on-going or long-term change process that includes myriad other actors. If you do not bring them anything that they believe they need, then go back to question 1 and reconsider.

#### **Q5. How to become the kind of partner that others will want to work with?**

Working towards outcomes and impact will take more than two or three years unless it builds on existing platforms and success. If uncertain of long-term prospects or if focus is likely to change due to reform or restructuring, then think carefully about the requests of partners. Who bears the risk of shifting targets, goals and funding and are they aware?

Other positive changes to the system may be required before your specific intervention becomes relevant or effective. Infrastructure may need to be developed, knowledge may need to be shared, or capacity established before other interventions become effective. Your contribution may not be able to effect change alone, or within a reasonable timescale. Partnering with organisations that can facilitate your contribution being relevant may be highly effective in achieving overall change.

Engaging new kinds of partners may require flexible contracting, capacity development and an adaptive approach to sharing resources. Partners will have their own goals, targets and mandates and have a lot to teach—for a mutually beneficial relationship.

### **Conclusion**

Taking on and engaging meaningfully with partners is no small thing. Making that shift within your organisations demands consistent leadership courage, understanding and buy-in from across the organisation and an ability to listen and take a back seat when partners must drive processes.

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