

Helpdesk Research Report

Monitoring and evaluating civil society partnerships

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Question

Please identify approaches and methods used by civil society organisations (international NGOs and others) to monitor and evaluate the quality of their relationships with partner (including southern) NGOs. Please also provide a short comparative analysis.

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1. Overview

This report lists and describes tools used by NGOs to monitor the quality of their relationships with partner organisations. It begins with a brief analysis of the types of tools and their approaches, then describes each tool. This paper focuses on tools which monitor the partnership relationship itself, rather than the impact or outcomes of the partnership. While there is substantial general literature on partnerships, there is less literature on this particular aspect.

Within the development literature, 'partnership' is most often used to refer to international or high-income country NGOs partnering with low-income country NGOs, which may be grassroots or small-scale. Much of a 'north-south' partnership arrangement centres around funding, meaning accountability arrangements are often reporting and audit requirements (Brehm, 2001). As a result, much of the literature and analysis is heavily biased towards funding and financial accountability. There is a commonly noted power imbalance in the literature, with northern partners controlling the relationship and requiring southern partners to report to them on use of funds. Most partnerships are weak on ensuring Northern accountability to Southern organisations (Brehm, 2001). Most monitoring tools are aimed at bilateral partnerships.

The tools listed below are those which evaluate the nature of the partnership, rather than the broader issue of partnership impact. The ‘quality’ of relationships is best described by BOND, in which the highest quality of partnership is described as joint working, adequate time and resources allocated specifically to partnership working, and improved overall effectiveness¹. There are no other specific definitions of ‘quality’ offered by the literature, but there is a strong narrative that equal power relations and equal decision-making would indicate a high-quality relationship, as would good communication (Brehm, 2001).

Most of the tools use **qualitative, perception-based methods** including interviewing staff from both partner organisations and discussing relevant findings. There are not many specific tools available, as most organisations rely on generic internal feedback and consultation sessions, rather than comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of relationships. Resultantly, this report only presents six tools, as these were the most referred to by experts.

2. Comparative analysis

Many organisations do not use specific tools to measure the quality of partnerships, but rely on **ongoing comments, site visits, qualitative interviews, and standardised feedback** systems. For example, Plan International implements a light-touch annual survey which asks partners for feedback on Plan as a partner (expert comments). Frequent dialogue and mini-assessments may build trust between partners (Fowler and McMahon, 2010).

The tools listed below are the more specific methodologies used by NGOs to monitor their partnerships. There are no discernible differences in which might be most appropriate for different contexts; most appear to be used across humanitarian situations, conflict and development, rural and urban programmes, and different countries.

Several of these **tools are widely used** by international development NGOs. The literature and experts consulted for the report often referred to the Keystone Accountability Partnership Survey and BOND Organisational Health Check Tool as being effective and useful. Both of these tools rely on a set of survey questions answered by the local partner. The answers to the questionnaires can then be used as the basis for a discussion or development of new partnership directions. This format – ranking of each partner by the other, followed by discussion – is very common across the literature, with few variations. Beyond popularity, there is not much information in the literature about whether and why a particular tool is successful.

Within the academic literature, **qualitative approaches** are standard for analysing organisational relationships, and most use interviews and document reviews, sometimes coupled with feedback or ‘customer satisfaction’ surveys. These have produced reliable results on organisations’ perceptions of their partnerships, but academic evaluations are not commonly used as a partnership monitoring tool by NGOs.

¹ <http://www.bond.org.uk/effectiveness/health-check>

3. Specific tools

Keystone Accountability Partnership Survey

Survey website: <http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/ngoreport>

Keystone. (n.d.). *Development Partnerships Survey: Headlines for International Development*. Keystone Accountability.

http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/sites/default/files/DPS%20headlines%20for%20ID-reduced%20file%20size_0.pdf

This is a survey which International NGOs (INGOs) can use to assess their relationships with local partners. It uses the underlying ‘Constituent Voice’ approach, which asks partners what they think about the services delivered, drawing on **customer satisfaction techniques**. The survey aims to identify the quality of financial and non-financial support provided by the INGO, quality of relationships and communications, adequacy of monitoring processes, and overall value added (expert comments).

The survey reports back to INGOs on how their partners rate them on²:

- **Efficiency:** How efficiently do you fund partners? How appropriate is the quantity and type of funding you provide?
- **Relationship and communications:** How well do partners feel that you understand and respond to them? How could it be improved?
- **Non-financial contribution:** How useful do partners find your support in areas like capacity building? What would make it better?
- **Value added:** How do the benefits of working with you compare to the costs, such as time spent on applications and reporting?
- **Credibility:** What do partners think about your overall contribution to your goals, in comparison to others?

This is a widely-used tool across the development NGO sector. To date, more than 60 INGOs have taken part and 3,000 local partners (expert comments). Each INGO receives an individual report, and can see where it fits in the broader sector, benchmarked against other INGOs. This tool is interesting because it captures the experiences of the local partners, who may hold less power in the relationship. Several individual organisational reports are available on the Keystone website³.

BOND Organisational Health Check Tool

Health Check website: <http://www.bond.org.uk/effectiveness/health-check>

BOND’s Health Check is a popular tool recommended by many UK NGOs, including Comic Relief (expert comments). It is an **online self-assessment** tool which helps organisations identify their strengths and weaknesses. It generates reports and visualisations of the organisation’s capacity, which are

² <http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/ngoreport>

³ E.g. Progressio UK (http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/sites/default/files/progressio_2.pdf); Oxfam Canada (<http://www.oxfam.ca/our-work/oxfam-canada-gets-top-marks-from-partners>); Cordaid (<http://www.cordaid.org/en/news/partners-satisfied-cordaids-support/>).

benchmarked against the sector. The Health Check is used to **measure effectiveness, gaps and strengths**, based on feedback from staff and stakeholders.

It is designed as an online survey of 11 pillars of core functions, two of which are: partners; and monitoring, evaluation and learning. Staff are asked to reflect on and rate themselves against key statements in these areas. Once ratings are given, the scores are aggregated and the facilitator can lead a discussion on what is good and what needs to be improved, finally resulting in an action plan.

Within the Partnership pillar, there is a set of questions on monitoring. The Health Check assesses organisations' quality of partnership monitoring on a five-point scale. Organisations rank themselves on the below scale (1 is the lowest and 5 is the highest):

1. We monitor our partners to ensure they are implementing projects as we agreed. We do not monitor the quality of our relationships with partners.
2. We monitor our partners to ensure they are implementing projects as agreed and sometimes use this opportunity to discuss the quality of our relationships with partners.
3. We monitor and review our partners' projects and the quality of our relationships with partners. We see this as an important opportunity to discuss how our relationships with partners are working and identify what we can improve.
4. We have a structured way of regularly monitoring and reviewing partners' projects and the quality of our relationships with partners, that has been jointly agreed with them. Both we and our partners see this as an important opportunity to discuss how our relationship is working and jointly identify what we can improve. We always act on the outcomes.
5. We have a systematic way of working jointly with partners to monitor and review projects and the quality of our relationship. Both we and our partners are deeply committed to improving the quality of our relationships and always make adequate time and resources available for this. We track the quality of our partnerships across our organisation (e.g. through a partner survey) and use this data to assess and improve our overall effectiveness as a partner organisation.

There are additional areas of assessment which also include questions relevant to partnership. A Coordinator's Guide is freely available online⁴, which outlines the detail of how the Health Check is conducted and who should be involved. Feedback from organisations using the Health Check is positive.

Africa Liaison Program Initiative (ALPI)

Africa Liaison Program Initiative and InterAction. (nd). *Ensuring Successful Partnerships: A Toolkit*. Africa Liaison Program Initiative and InterAction. (Available from authors).

ALPI was a programme running from 2003-2007 which aimed to improve the effectiveness of US assistance to Africa through a partnership approach. It supported African NGOs, US private voluntary organisations and USAID to work better together. In the course of this work, ALPI developed a tool for monitoring partnerships: Partnership Assessment and Monitoring Tool (PAT). PAT helps improve both bilateral and multilateral relationships.

⁴ http://www.bond.org.uk/data/files/Health_Check_Coordinator_Guide.pdf

PAT is designed to be used by representatives of the partners. Step 1 is to complete a quiz matrix together which answers questions on how well they know and understand each other's organisation. Step 2 draws on the 12 partnership principles developed by ALPI, and each partner is asked to discuss and rate the partnership by calculating how many examples support the principle and its associated statements. Step 3 gives average scores for each partnership principle, reviews the scores and draws out the differences and similarities given by each organisation to the other. Then the partners develop an action plan.

PAT provides a numerical score (highest mark 192) for the relationship, given by each partner. Any differences in scores can highlight the areas of contention. In a case study in Kenya in 2005, a coalition of 40 members tested PAT and reported that it was straightforward and easy to understand, while the numerical approach forced respondents to try to be objective.

Inter-Mediation International collaboration framework

Inter-Mediation.org: <http://inter-mediation.org/>

IMI has developed a 'six lenses' framework for looking at collaboration in NGO consortia. This tool allows consortia to self-assess the quality of collaboration as well as project outcomes.

- **Lens 1: Collaborative context:** looks at whether the stakeholders have aligned values and objectives; realistic expectations; and collaborative leadership.
- **Lens 2: Collaborative structure:** results-driven and achievable structure which includes accountability and collective effectiveness.
- **Lens 3: Complementary and competent representation:** well selected representatives with suitable support; good preparation for meetings and strong commitment.
- **Lens 4: Understand and embrace diversity:** deriving added value from differences; voice is represented; different viewpoints, culture and power are respected.
- **Lens 5: Collaborative attitude:** respect and trust; shared leadership; transparent processes; a balance of creativity and pragmatism.
- **Lens 6: Effective communication:** dialogue rather than debate; understanding and listening; respectful.

In one case study described in Fowler and McMahon (2010), this framework was applied to a consortium of development NGOs operating in the Horn of Africa – assessing multilateral relations between INGOs and local organisations. The results were collected via an **anonymised online survey** of partnership members which asked specific questions and for general comments on these areas of interest, then reported back in a **facilitated workshop assessment and discussion**. IMI followed up with further in-depth phone interviews. This paper notes that some survey responses were incomplete, possibly due to heavy workload and timing of the assessment. It also notes that a survey should aim to take 30-45 minutes to complete, as anything longer is onerous. Surveys work best when triangulated with a face-to-face discussion of the results.

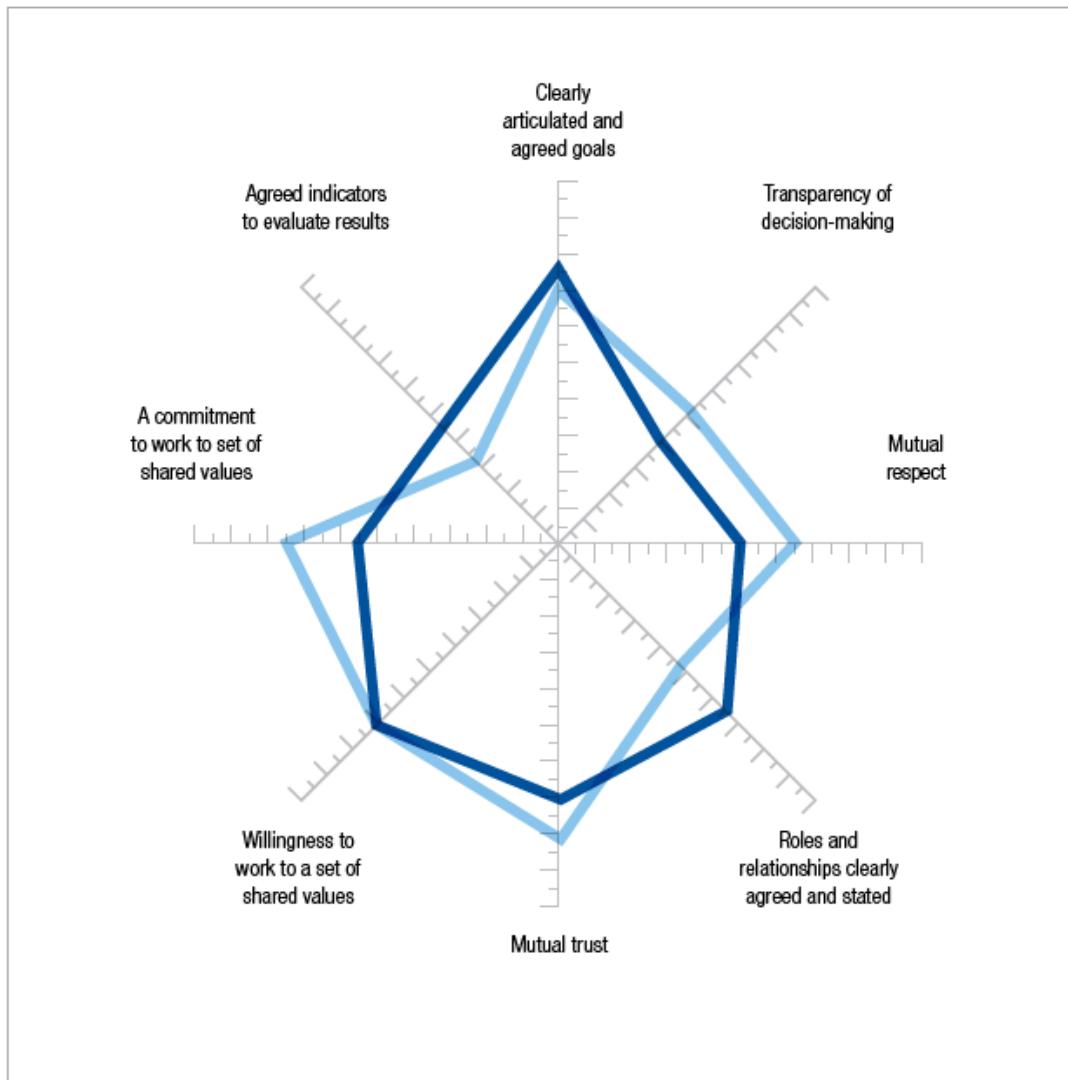
World Wildlife Fund Partnership Toolbox

Sterne, R., Heaney, D., & Britton, B. (2009). *The Partnership Toolbox*. World Wildlife Fund. http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/wwf_partnershiptoolboxartweb.pdf

WWF has developed a straightforward guide for partnership principles, which it has used extensively in its relationships with partner organisations. It outlines partnership from set-up to monitoring.

The monitoring tool presented aims to measure progress in the relationship and is oriented towards being part of a regular progress review. It compares differences in perceptions of the relationship from both sides and examines changes over time and desired changes.

The tool uses eight criteria to plot a spider diagram to show the shape of the partnership and allows overlaying one partner's perceptions with the other partner's.



Source: Sterne, Heaney, and Britton (2009: 22).

The eight axes are collaboratively decided by the participants, and ranked either individually or collectively. WWF state it works best as a group exercise. This visual aid can be a good starting point for discussion.

Participatory evaluation

Hunt (2010) describes the process of an evaluation of an Indigenous Australian community development project run in partnership with Oxfam Australia. The project, Yorgum, works in partnership with Oxfam. In 2009, the author participated in an evaluation which aimed to assess the relationship between the partners as well as the more standard outcomes and impacts of the project work. It was also partly planned as a capacity development exercise to strengthen the Yorghum staff abilities in evaluation. The organisation was involved in conducting the evaluation and suggested some innovative methodologies. Yorgum expressed a strong desire to stay true to the essence of their organisation throughout the evaluation, which resulted in a strong emphasis on documenting the evolution of the organisation over time, using **story-telling methodology**.

The Yorgum staff expressed quite strongly throughout that they felt their success was shown in the continued use of their services. They saw less need for a formal evaluation and/or reporting on hard-to-identify outcomes, since they were clearly providing a service which the community wanted. Staff members used some of the evaluation workshop time to present a **visual timeline** of Yorgum's growth, illustrated with photos and memorabilia from its history. They also developed a painting of a tree, pinned with significant events in the organisation's history. After this, the evaluation team developed guiding questions and used interviews, focus group discussions, story gathering and questionnaires to complete the rest of the evaluation.

This paper reflects the importance of involving Southern or smaller partners in the evaluation process and enabling the use of alternative and locally-appropriate methodologies as well as industry standards.

4. References

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- Fowler, A. and McMahon, J. (2010). *Self-Assessment of a Multi-Stakeholder Collaborative Process. Findings and Lessons from a Survey of a Consortium for the Enhanced Livelihoods in the Mandera Triangle (ELMT) and Enhanced Livelihoods in Southern Ethiopia (ELSE) Program 2007-2009*. Consortium Survey Report.

Key websites

- INTRAC: <http://www.intrac.org/>
- Inter-Mediation: www.inter-mediation.org
- Keystone Accountability Partnership Survey:
<http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/services/surveys/ngos>; and publically available reports:
<http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/ngoreport>

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