

Partnership Principles

For cooperation between local, national and international civil society organisations

27 February 2014

Partnerships between local, national and international civil society organisations (CSOs) are a powerful tool to achieve societal change. They help local and national CSOs to empower citizens to perform their civic rights and to ensure representation of local communities as well as local ownership of programmes. Moreover, partnerships create benefits on both sides if partners work equally empowered towards mutually-agreed objectives. International CSOs have a better chance to achieve long-term effects with higher legitimacy if they engage in partnerships with local and national CSOs.

However, these partnerships are at times being strained by power dynamics and a growing disconnect. Tension keeps arising at global meetings and in social media. This trend was confirmed during the *Global Perspectives* conference¹ 2013 in Johannesburg, South Africa. In discussions between local, national and international CSOs, a number of shortcomings in the cooperation and partnership between local and national CSOs on one side and international CSOs on the other side were identified.

Subsequently, CIVICUS and the International Civil Society Centre joined forces to review existing partnership documents and to propose a set of principles for future cooperation. First, we have collected partnership documents from a range of CSOs². Second, we reviewed these documents and identified the main, most commonly applied principles. These principles are described below. They can guide cooperation between local, national and international CSOs. We recommend taking the partnership principles as the starting point for developing country specific initiatives. Any feedback on the principles and their application is highly welcome.

Partnership Principles

1. Vision

All partners should share a similar vision on human rights-based development (Equality, Participation, etc.) and should align to the Istanbul Principles on CSO Development Effectiveness³. The vision and mission statements of all partners should be sufficiently compatible to allow them to collaborate. There should be a higher aim involved in the partnership rather than partnering for partnership's sake. The partnership shall aim, amongst other things, to connect local issues to global discussions and local voices to a global audience.

¹ Global Perspectives is the International Civil Society Centre's annual conference providing a platform for leaders from civil society, politics, the corporate sector and academia to address some of the world's most pressing challenges, opportunities and trends affecting civil society.

² Links to the documents reviewed are provided in the annex to this paper.

³ http://cso-effectiveness.org/IMG/pdf/final_istanbul_cso_development_effectiveness_principles_footnote.pdf

2. Values

Partnerships should build upon shared organisational values. There should be a sufficient overlap in the values of all partners allowing them to collaborate comfortably.

3. Expectations

Expectations are to be set at a level that reflects the capacities of all partners to deliver outcomes in a realistic and timely manner. There should be mutual benefits in the partnership and mutual learning from the relationship. International CSOs should not expect their partners to deliver to higher standards than the international CSO itself. Local and national CSOs shouldn't rely entirely on international CSOs financial assistance and international CSOs should mitigate these dependency risks by encouraging local and national CSOs to build a diversified, sustainable mix of resources.

4. Respect

Recognise and respect differences between the organisations, especially due to power imbalances since international CSOs often have significantly more funding and capacities than local or national CSOs. Respect means accepting the counterpart as an equal partner and engaging in mutual learning. Additionally, respect means entering the local job market in the civil society sector without distorting it. Finally, respect means that international CSOs recognise and promote local development practices which are embedded in a cultural framework, etc.

5. Strategy

All partners have their own strategic plans and agendas which will have to be sufficiently compatible. A common strategy for the implementation of the partnership needs to be agreed upon. This may include that international CSOs develop a clear, transparent exit strategy in consultation with local partners. Additionally, local and national CSOs should not have to change their overall strategic direction to accommodate the partnership. The priorities of the local and national CSO should be prioritized and decisions should be taken at a level as close as possible to the people affected (this is particularly important when addressing the management of institutional or community dynamics).

6. Responsibilities

Specific roles and responsibilities should be set out in an overall partnership agreement. This helps during the implementation of a partnership and helps to avoid that international CSOs crowd the operating space of local and national CSOs. For instance, commonly agreed rules and coordination mechanisms should indicate how each partner is allowed to autonomously approach media (local/international), government, donors and other external audiences when representing the partnership and in which cases a prior joint sign-off is required.

7. Accountability

Develop and ensure a robust accountability framework, evaluation process and accountability mechanisms. All partners commit to being fully accountable to each other and to other stakeholders, including the final beneficiaries. The partnership shall be deployed with a phased approach, including regular reviews of the joint strategy plan as well as of the partnership itself. The level and ways of disclosing information between the two partners and to the other stakeholders need to be agreed at the onset of the partnership.

8. Flexibility

The context in which CSOs work can change significantly, quickly and surprisingly. Thus there is a need for flexibility regarding objectives, approaches, activities, etc. Periodic reviews on the partnership and related activities need to be in place.

9. Communication

Have an open and professional relationship. Solve problems transparently and harmoniously and come to mutual agreements of the best solution. Recognise that there may be differences in the way of communicating and work with them respectfully.

Recommended Guidelines

The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations (DOCHAS) (2013): [Guidelines on partnerships with southern CSOs](#).

Mercy Corps (2011): [Local Partnerships: A guide for partnering with civil society, business and government groups](#).

Other Resources

Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (2010): [The 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management](#).

The Sphere Project (2011): [The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response](#).

KEPA (2012): [Compass for partners](#).

Partos Association (2012): [Code of Conduct](#).

The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations (DOCHAS) (2010): [Partnership in Practice: A Kenyan Perspective on the Nature of Relationships with Irish NGOs](#).

Mario Torres (2012): [Knowledge Management for North-South Partnerships: Promoting the Canada-Latin America Connection](#). CERLAC Report.

Hauck, V. and T. Land. (2000): [Beyond the Partnership Rhetoric: Reviewing Experiences and Policy Considerations for Implementing 'Genuine' Partnerships in North-South Cooperation](#). ECDPM Discussion Paper 20. Maastricht: ECDPM.

CIVICUS

CIVICUS is the only global network of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world. We are proudly based in the global south and have over 1000 members in more than 120 countries. Founded in 1993, we are internationally recognised as a credible, trusted voice on civil society issues. Find more information at www.civicus.org. For feedback on this document please contact Clara Bosco: clara.bosco@civicus.org

International Civil Society Centre

The International Civil Society Centre is the global action platform for international CSOs. The Centre believes that international CSOs need to change dramatically in order to survive and be able to push effectively for social change. The Centre supports international CSOs through this change process by scanning the horizon, identifying opportunities and developing guidance on how to navigate change. Please find more information at www.icscentre.org. For feedback on this document please contact Joachim Fünfgelt: jfuenfgelt@icscentre.org.