

Making Partnerships Effective

The partnership challenge

Partnership-based approaches to sustainable development and to the MDGs are not new, but it is increasingly clear that genuine partnering is not a ‘quick fix’ or an easy option. In fact, partnering requires a significant adaptation of skills, systems and procedures for its contribution as a key delivery mechanism to be achieved.

Partnerships are not ‘business as usual’. They require some adjustments in practice and may even be perceived as ‘challenging’ to the status quo since they are based on a collaborative approach – building from the diversity of the different partners – rather than a more traditional ‘command and control’ scenario.

Experience drawn from a wide range of global and local partnerships, suggests that effective partnerships (i.e. those that deliver genuine added value) are those that are:

- Underpinned by a shared goal and a set of values and principles agreed between the partners;
- Developed collaboratively (‘co-created’);
- Inclusive and transparent in approach;
- Able to secure continuing and deepening engagement from the partner organisations (beyond the key individuals involved);
- Regularly reviewed and, where necessary, revised in order to ensure maximum achievement, continuing innovation and mutual benefit.

Facilitation of partnerships in Cambodia

This programme of work has one strategic objective:

To make a significant contribution to the strengthening of partnerships so that the Government can work effectively with development partners to secure the results anticipated in the National Strategic Development Plan and the Cambodian Millennium Development Goals.

The aim has been articulated as: *To facilitate senior Government and development partner officials in a process that can support a greater understanding of partnership concepts and principles that can be applied to the Cambodian development context.*

CDC commissioned The Partnering Initiative (TPI) and VBNK¹ – working in partnership – to undertake a programme of work over a 15-month period to help to strengthen development partnerships in Cambodia.

TPI-VBNK is facilitating a four-staged process:

1. Engagement and Inception (June 2009)
2. Strategic Meeting on Making Partnerships Effective (September 2009)
3. Follow-up (October 2009-January 2010)
4. Further Follow-up and Recommendations (February-August 2010)

1. Engagement and Inception (June 2009)

The TPI-VBNK team began their task with in-country research, data collection, and analysis of data to develop an understanding of the partnering context and to identify progress to date, challenges and underlying issues. This has focused on individual interviews with the TWG chairpersons and other senior Government officials. Alongside this were interviews with development partners (in two focus groups), which included TWG lead facilitators and donor agency representatives. During this stage the TPI-VBNK Team completed interviews with a range of key individuals associated with 18 of the TWGs.

The interviews focused on four themes:

- Views of the actual / potential added value from partnership approaches;
- Reasons partnerships are effective;
- Issues to do with partnering in the Cambodia context;
- Suggestions and expectations of the September event.

What we learned

It is clear that all those interviewed feel that the time is right for a significant step forward to take the TWG partnerships to a new level.

“Things have changed ...we are now ready to move forward more quickly.” (Government Partner)

“We need a fresh way to look at old issues and build on what we have done so far in new ways.” (Development Partner)

Building on these expressions of enthusiasm for moving forward within the TWGs – a very useful starting point for this project – we have identified a number of themes, issues and patterns in the experiences of both groups of partners. In fact by ordering our findings in the form of a SWOT analysis, we have discovered some remarkable alignment between the two partner groups. Some of the common issues emerging are: the challenges involved with institutional arrangements, the nature of the enabling environment, the interpretation and undertaking of roles, and the implementation of the *Principles of the Paris Declaration* and putting into practice their underlying values.

¹ TPI is a specialist programme of the International Business Leaders Forum – an international organisation with 18+ years of leading-edge work to promote and set standards for cross-sector partnering activities designed to achieve sustainable development goals. VBNK is a local capacity development organisation with 11+ years experience working with local and international NGOs, and commune, province and central-level Government staff working in Cambodia.

Moreover, there is the request made during the Inception Meeting (10 June 2009) and subsequent focus group discussions to identify and apply success factors for partnerships.

We are now in the process of designing the Strategic Meeting to be held in September, so that there will be an opportunity to advance upon the experiences gained.

2. Strategic Meeting (9th to 11th September 2009)

This event is designed for the TWG leaders (from both the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Development Partners) who are critical to the achievement of Cambodia's development priorities. It is described as 'strategic' since it is aimed at the most senior people involved in the TWGs and is expected to focus on issues of leadership, strategy and systems.

The Strategic Meeting aims to build a strong and shared understanding of: what partnerships can achieve; how best they can be led; what competencies are needed for them to be managed effectively and how their true value can be assessed and maximised.

During this Strategic Meeting the group will work together in a range of ways to:

- Reach agreement on how best to turn partnering principles into practice;
- Strengthen working relationships between the two partner groups within and between TWGs;
- Understand the roles, skills and behaviours that contribute to effective partnerships;
- Contribute to the building of a more enabling environment in which partnership approaches can achieve ambitious goals.

This Strategic Meeting will be participatory in nature with activities and tasks undertaken in different group permutations. Participants will be asked to undertake some preliminary work in advance of the meeting to ensure the time together can be used most effectively.

In advance, the team will be circulating some core information about partnerships and partnering – this is to help build a common language and understanding of what a partnership approach means, key success factor in effective partnerships and how they can be expected to evolve over time.

During the meeting, participants will work together to explore how partnership lessons can best be adopted and applied to their TWGs in the future. These will be articulated in practical plans for moving forwards.

After the meeting the team will be developing a further programme to support the TWGs in making the partnership approach more effective.

What will the Strategic Meeting achieve?

- Adoption of common partnership principles and practice across TWGs;
- More confident ownership of the TWG process by government partners;
- Greater coherence in development partner approaches to the TWG process;
- Recognition of the importance of good leadership and facilitation in effective partnering;

- Shared understanding of what constitutes ‘success’ and agreement on how to measure success over time;
- Commitment to sharing experience, achievements and learning in the future within and across TWGs;
- Agreement to a follow-up programme that will build the competency and efficiency of the TWG support structures and key staff.

3. Follow-up (October 2009 – January 2010)

The third stage of the process will be shaped by the outcomes, outputs and agreements arising from Strategic Meeting. At this early stage, it is anticipated that follow-up may include some or all of the following:

- Access to partnering skills training – especially for those operating at secretariat level – probably in the form of a rolling programme of one-day trainings on specific topics;
- Initiatives to engage with a wider group of Government officials and development partners to build a stronger partnering culture;
- Capture of good examples / case studies of where TWG partnerships are proving effective that can provide encouragement and practical guidance for others;
- Provision of a permanent partnership ‘resource centre’ giving access to information, tools, case studies that support partnership development work (drawing on global as well as Cambodian / regional experience);
- Building a cadre of partnership specialists with knowledge and skills to provide advice, support and facilitation services to TWGs in future.

4. Further Follow-up and Recommendations (February – August 2010)

The fourth stage of the process is threefold:

- Follow through on the implementation of learning so far;
- Closing the project by compiling learning and achievements and;
- Leaving in place some long-term resources to support partnering approaches in Cambodia – with the capacity to expand the reach to NGO, academic and the private sector as potential sustainable development partners.

The project will be completed with the production of a Final Report and recommendations on partnership concepts and principles that can be applied to the Cambodia development context.