M&E OF PARTNERSHIPS

intrac for civil society

CSOs are increasingly monitoring and evaluating their partnerships with other agencies. This is often based around three different approaches; partner reviews, partnership assessment tools, and partner surveys. CSOs should monitor and evaluate partnerships in a way that is consistent with their partnership values and principles.

In social development, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) frequently work in partnership with other organisations. These include other CSOs, private sector organisations, social movements, government bodies, and many other kinds of organisation. NGOs may also work in partnership with individuals, alliances, networks and coalitions.

Large international or national NGOs choose to work with and through partners for many reasons. These include tapping into relevant contextual knowledge and understanding, supporting local ownership of work, improving the sustainability of projects and programmes, and enhancing the impact of work. Many NGOs work with a small number of core or strategic partners, which may themselves be strong or well-established NGOs, and may in-turn have their own partners.

Partnership can take many forms. For example, the British Red Cross divides its international partnerships into four types (BRC 2020):

- **programme partnerships** designed to bring about specific project or programme objectives;
- **institutional partnerships** involving joint strategizing and support between different organisations;
- **transactional relationships** where partners are sub-contracted to deliver specific services; and
- **diplomatic relationships** where organisations work together for common purposes, with sharing of information, but without transference of funds or explicit support being provided.

However, although partnership is considered an important element of many larger NGOs' work, it has rarely been the focus of monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This has begun to change recently under the new localisation agenda. Localisation aims to support financial and management capacity in-country, shifting power away from Northern institutions and towards the global South. As part of the localisation agenda, Northern NGOs are recognising the need to devolve power, money and decision-making closer to where the need is, and to give a greater say to local communities and their representatives (BOND 2020). Increasingly, M&E is being conducted to help establish whether these partnership principles are being put into practice.

In some ways, the M&E of partnerships resembles the M&E of capacity development. Indeed, capacity development can sometimes be seen as one aspect of partnership. But whilst tools and approaches for monitoring and evaluating capacity development work are well-established, the focus on M&E of partnerships is newer, and there are fewer examples of good practice.

As with the M&E of capacity development, the complexity of partnership M&E depends to a large extent on the number of partners an NGO has. Where two organisations work together in partnership, formal M&E may not be needed. This is because both parties are involved in the process, should be aware of any issues around the partnership, and should be able to take decisions based on existing knowledge. But if an NGO has multiple partners, and wants to compare and contrast elements of partnership across them, things can get more complicated, and a more systematic approach to M&E may be needed.

Of course, some aspects of partnership are relatively easy to measure. These include the number and type of partners an NGO has, the extent to which different partners are represented in different decision-making bodies, the amount of money transferred directly to partners, etc. (Pasanen 2016). However, monitoring or evaluating more intangible aspects of partnerships requires different methods and approaches to be used.

Currently, NGO efforts to monitor and evaluate partnerships appear to be mainly based around three different approaches. These are not mutually exclusive, and are often carried out in combination. They are:

- partner reviews;
- partnership assessment tools; and
- partner surveys.

Partner reviews

Partner reviews are routinely carried out by most NGOs engaged in formal partnerships, and have been for many years. Partner reviews can be carried out when partnerships are being set up; they can be routinely carried out as monitoring exercises; or they can be conducted as part of evaluations. Partner reviews are conducted to assess how partnerships are progressing, address any issues that may be affecting a partnership, discuss necessary changes, and agree actions going forward.

Partner reviews may be held bilaterally with individual partners. In some circumstances, however, partner reviews can be held as joint exercises. In these cases, an NGO could review its partnership with multiple agencies at the same time. Joint reviews are often held in workshop settings.

Sometimes, partner reviews are not seen as M&E at all, and may simply be considered good practice management of relationships. However, formal M&E is more likely to be required when there is a desire to collect the same, or similar, information across multiple reviews, and analyse findings across a portfolio of partnerships. In these circumstances, NGOs often develop a set of common questions for reviews. Some illustrative common questions can be found in the box below.

Potential questions for reviews

- **Questions around partnership objectives**
    - To what extent has the partnership achieved its objectives?
    - Have there been any unanticipated benefits of participating in the partnership?
    - How has the partnership contributed to building the capacities of different institutions?
    - What have the successes and challenges of the partnership been?
- **Questions around process**
    - To what extent are any agreed partnership principles being respected?
    - To what extent are partnership management / decision-making mechanisms, such as meetings, effective?
    - Are any disagreements involving members of the partnership resolved quickly and constructively?
    - To what extent is there shared understanding and compatibility of the different partners' rationale and objectives for participating in the partnership?
- **Questions around added value**
    - What costs have there been in relation to the partnership
    - To what extent, and how, has the partnership involved cost-sharing, including efficient pooling of technical resources?
    - What has been possible as a result of working together, that would not have been possible previously?
    - What is the 'multiplier effect' of this partnership? How else will it help partners (if at all)?

Source: Adapted from British Red Cross (undated)

Questions such as these provide an NGO with the opportunity to compare and contrast the findings of multiple reviews, using common headings and criteria, and therefore draw some conclusions across a portfolio of different partnerships. Of course, the true value of the review still remains the conversation between different partners, and the extent to which this helps to maintain and improve the relationship.

Partnership assessment tools

Many NGOs use partnership assessment tools. There is no common, agreed name for these kinds of tools. However, they are similar in nature to organisational (capacity) assessment tools, which are designed to assess the results of capacity development work, and they work according to the same principles. (Indeed, these kinds of tools can be adapted to monitor and evaluate almost any kind of intangible aspect of organisational change, such as capacity, partnership, empowerment, gender focus, equity, etc.) The basic steps are as follows.

STEP 1: Partnership is divided into discrete areas or dimensions.

STEP 2: A rating system is developed.

STEP 3: A process for rating the different areas of partnership is agreed.

STEP 4: Methods for summarising and analysing results are developed.

STEP ONE

Firstly, **partnership is divided into discrete areas or dimensions**. The different dimensions are often further broken down into more detailed statements each addressing a different element of partnership. In some tools the dimensions or statements are pre-set. In others there is flexibility for different dimensions or statements to be defined by partner staff, which helps to make the whole exercise more participatory. Some examples of common dimensions of partnership are as follows:

- the extent to which the partnership adds value to the work of both parties;
- capacity development;
- mutual learning;
- equality of power relations;
- quality of dialogue;
- synergy;
- shared risk-taking;
- clarity of the relationship; and
- mutual accountability and transparency.

STEP TWO

Next, a simple **rating system is developed** to assess partnership against each of the different dimensions (or statements). A rating system might involve a sliding scale, such as a scale of 1 to 10, where '10' denotes the most desired level of partnership and '1' the least. Or a set of pre-defined statements may be developed, such as:

- 'A': there is complete equality of decision-making between the partners
- 'B': decisions are made jointly, but one partner reserves the right to be the final arbiter
- 'C': There is consultation, but in the end the decision is always made by the senior partner
- 'D': key decisions are made by the senior partner without consultation.

An extract from a partnership assessment tool used by the British Red Cross is shown in the box below. This tool uses the dimensions of a) relevance; b) equality, respect and integrity; c) mutually achieving expectations; and d) transparency and accountability. Scoring is done on a 1-4 basis against separate statements within each dimension.

STEP THREE

There are many different potential **processes for rating partnership** in different areas or dimensions. For example, each partner could meet to discuss issues on its own, internally, and then discuss them jointly. Or partners could meet together to reach consensus. Sometimes surveys are used (see next section) and multiple partners may be asked to provide ratings in particular areas or dimensions of partnerships.

STEP FOUR

As with similar tools used to assess capacity development, the value of partnership assessment tools mostly lies in the discussion and analysis process, and they are considered worthwhile simply to help people critically **analyse and reflect on partnership**. However, the resulting analyses can also be used for other purposes. For example, an action plan might be developed to address weaknesses, or build on strengths. This plan could then be monitored over time. Or the partnership assessment could be repeated at regular intervals, and findings examined to show what has changed, how and why. As far as the M&E of partnership portfolios is concerned, ratings from multiple different partnerships can be aggregated and summarised to look at broader partnership trends. For example, NGOs placing a heavy emphasis on localisation might want to see whether an increasing range of partners genuinely feel that there has been more equality of decision-making over time.

Perhaps the biggest danger with this kind of approach is taking the ratings too much at face value. It is easy to see how ratings may vary, based on different circumstances. For example, a partner that sees itself as having very little power within a relationship might initially provide positive ratings (e.g. stating there is good mutual learning within a partnership) in order to flatter a more powerful partner. Later on, as the relationship becomes more mature, or more equal, the partner may start to provide lower ratings. This could be because it is more confident within the partnership, and feels it can be more honest. A reduction in ratings does not always mean a reduction in the value of the partnership.

Partner surveys

Some NGOs carry out partner surveys across multiple partners. These can be used for a variety of purposes. They can be used to understand partner satisfaction. They can be used as an opportunity for partners to provide feedback to an NGO, and thereby enable an element of downwards accountability. They can be used to assess what value partners get out of a relationship. They can be used to help identify areas of concern to address going forwards. And there are many other purposes.

Extract from a partnership assessment tool used by the British Red Cross

+ Principle 2: Equality, Respect and Integrity

Referring to the *behaviour of partners in a partnership*

"Equality, respect and integrity is the commitment and ability of partners, irrespective of their size, resource s and power, to understand and accept each other's culture, background and context. The partners demonstrate this through acting in all sincerity."

Indicators or statements		**Practice (0-4)**	**Supportive evidence/examples**
2.1	All actors in the partnership communicate in an open, respectful and constructive manner		
2.2	Leadership has easy access to the appropriate peer level within the National Society of their partner and practices and receives timely feedback		
2.3	Uneven financial means, time and resources between partners are acknowledged but do not undermine partners/the partnership		

Extract from a partnership tool used by the Civil Society Support Programme in Ethiopia

Question 4: Please state how good our performance is in the following areas of partnership.

	Very poor	Poor	Good	Very good	Don’t know / N/A
quality of communications	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
responsiveness	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
reliability	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
honesty	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Partner surveys tend to use a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. A simple set of closed questions is contained in the example above. Open-ended questions are those that ask for a narrative answer, such as *‘what are the things you most or least value about the partnership?’*

NGOs often develop their own unique surveys to explore different aspects of their relationships with their partners. However, many INGOs and large national NGOs regularly use a specific partnership survey developed by Keystone Accountability (2020). This survey is designed to address multiple elements of partnership, and is described in the case study opposite. The survey not only provides an opportunity for NGOs to compare and contrast partnership scores across their own partners, but also across the partners of similar NGOs.

Partner surveys need not be used in isolation. They can also be used as part of partner reviews, and they can be used to provide ratings for the kind of partnership assessment tool described in the previous section.

The Keystone Partnership Survey

The Keystone Partnership Survey (KPS) is a tool designed to measure and improve cross-organisational performance and impact. It is designed to enable NGOs and others to improve their performance with feedback from their partners. Keystone Accountability, as a third party, collects anonymous feedback from partners through a survey, which typically consists of 20-30 questions. These cover aspects of partnership such as relationship quality, communication, financial support, non-financial support, etc.

Although some questions can be customised for the organisation conducting the survey, many other questions are standardised. This has the great advantage that organisations can not only compare and contrast findings across their different partners, they can also compare findings against other organisations that have used the survey.

The KPS has been adapted for different types of organisations. As well as International NGOs, these also include social change networks, foundations, and social investors. The KPS works in the same way for each, with partners completing a confidential survey about different aspects of their partnership with the organisation commissioning the survey. Feedback is then benchmarked against similar organisations to allow a better understanding of how organisations are adding value through partnerships, and where improvements can be made.

Source: Keystone Accountability (2020)

Key principles

In common with areas of social development such as empowerment, capacity development, etc., it is important to remember that the purpose of monitoring and evaluating partnership should always be to enhance performance, or at the minimum do no harm. If M&E undermines the partnership process then it is counter-productive and should be abandoned or revised.

It is often useful to develop a set of key principles to ensure that organisations pursue M&E in a way that reflects their ambitions of achieving genuine partnerships. At different times this may involve, for example:

- ensuring there are not power imbalances in the way that partner reviews are scheduled, organised or administered;
- considering whose voices are being represented in reviews or surveys – who is invited to participate, and how powerful those voices are;
- being sensitive about the time commitments required to engage in partner reviews and surveys;
- thinking about who convenes and/or facilitates reviews, and whether there is a need to ensure partner facilitation or neutral facilitation;
- ensuring that partner reviews do not become compliance mechanisms;
- enabling space for disagreement;
- recognising cultural issues that may affect the environment in which M&E is conducted; and
- making sure that NGOs are really willing to address some of the issues arising out of partnership M&E, even if they are difficult or challenge established ways of doing things.

Further reading and resources

Other papers in the M&E Universe deal with some of the issues raised in this paper, and can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

- M&E of capacity strengthening
- Organisational assessment tools
- M&E of network development
- Surveys and questionnaires

Details on the Keystone Partnership Survey can be found at the Keystone website, at https://keystoneaccountability.org/. Many organisations that have used the survey have made the reports publicly available. They can be found through simple internet searches.

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INTRAC is a specialist capacity building institution for organisations involved in international relief and development. Since 1992, INTRAC has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge on monitoring and evaluation. Our approach to M&E is practical and founded on core principles. We encourage appropriate M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts, and we work with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs.

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