First Steps in Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSP)

Tips and Tricks

Complex challenges in the context of the 2030 Agenda can often be better addressed together with other actors. How can a new partnership best be started and what are the points to be considered?

Based on a "Getting Started in Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships" peer-learning workshop, this document provides practical tips for initiating and preparing partnerships. The workshop took place in April 2018 in Bonn and was organized by the German multi-stakeholder partnership platform Partnerships2030 to implement the 2030 Agenda.

The following are the first steps in multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSP). The respective step is explained, followed by practical tips as well as further links to helpful → tools and → tips in the adjacent box.

1. **POINT OF DEPARTURE**
   cross-sectoral societal problem
2. **INITIATING A PARTNERSHIP**
   idea/motivation to tackle the challenge
3. **SEARCHING PARTNERS**
   Networking and exchange between potential
4. **PARTNERSHIP STARTS TO OPERATE**
   Content work and structure of organisation

1. Point of departure

The idea of starting a new partnership or cooperation is often a result of an encompassing (sectoral) social problem or a current crisis, or the desire and need for change. The exact reasons vary. For example, the textile alliance was initiated by public actors after a crisis, the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI) emerged from a scientific study combined with general rising attention for the issue, while the Sustainable Cocoa Forum and the Sustainable Palm Oil Forum have emerged from to satisfy economic interests of companies. Among other things, already established partnerships fight against the unsustainable exploitation of → raw materials and → products or issues such as → corruption, → supply chain opacity and → human rights violations. Existing pressure to act generates political momentum, a high level of media and political interest, and the willingness to work together with other actors.

Practical Tips

- Early definition of the goal and related clarification of the question: "Is a multi-stakeholder partnership the right method to achieve this goal?" (→ MSP Guide, page 20).
- Ensure added value of a new partnership. This can be done by answering the key question "Is there a partnership that works?", "Does it make sense to start another partnership?"

Tools

- Introduction on how to work together (→ Tool 1, 2) and how to gain more understanding of the complex situation (→ Tool 3)
- Defining the challenge (→ Tool 8, 14) and therefore the goal (→ Tool 41)

2. Initiating a partnership

Organizations, companies, and/or individuals can initiate a new partnership. Here, the motivation and the conviction to tackle the problem and the associated challenges are important. The individual actor is not alone but shares the willingness to tackle a challenge together with other actors from different sectors.

Practical Tips

- Mobilize network.
- **"Stakeholder mapping":** Which other actors are there in the field? Which other partnerships exist already?
- **Definition of the vision:** What is the goal of a potential partnership?
- **"Copy-paste principle":** Learn from other partnerships and their way of working together, adopt existing mechanisms if necessary, to avoid to reinvent the wheel.

Tools
- Stakeholder identification (→ Tool 5) and stakeholder-mapping (→ Tool 12)
- Definition of the goal/aim (→ Tool 41)

3. Finding partners

After identifying the problem, potential partners are identified. This can be done via bilateral talks, an open exchange of interested parties or the mobilization of existing networks. Building trust on all sides of the involved parties is particularly important, so potential partners can imagine future cooperation in which compromises will be made, decisions are taken, and a leap of faith is often necessary. In addition, cultural realities and differences of the potential partners and the desired target group should be taken into account.

Practical Tips

- Ensure funding and resources while avoiding short-term financing and financing from a sole principal financier.
- Early stage analysis of potential new partners and their review (due diligence), on-going stakeholder analysis in the further process.
- A partnership can be started with just a few partners in order to start the process sooner. Other partners can join in future.
- Develop, strengthen and constantly ensure trust and credibility.
- Strive for transparency.
- If necessary, identify and delegate tasks to an intermediary e.g. in the form of a secretariat to ensure neutrality and fairness.
- Clearly define and communicate the roles and needs of the respective actors.
- Individual actors define their „red line" (maximum compromise or concessions possible) and communicate these as transparently as possible to partners.

Tools
- Different roles within the group/partnership (→ Tool 11, 27, 29, 35)
- Cultural differences (→ Tool 30, 42)

4. Partnership starts to operate

After stakeholders have been identified as potential partners, the content and organizational work can start. Setting a joint objective is the immediate focus. The actors should ideally also already agree on working modes that accompany and determine the cooperation. Answering the key questions “How does the collaboration work?” and “How are decisions made?” helps to determine the first structures on which the content work can build.

Practical Tips

- It takes patience and time:
  - › Take your time (as little as possible, but as long as necessary),
  - › Consider long decision-making processes when planning a partnership,
  - › Set communication rules (especially for internal votes),
  - › Be prepared for possible frustration, and
  - › Engage in expectation management of the participating actors.
- Develop decision-making and communication structure and, if necessary, note it down in a “Code of Conduct”.
- Define milestones and intermediate goals.
- Keep stakeholders “in line”, e.g. by:
  - › Internal communication of small, interim victories and progress, while avoiding premature external communication of unsecured results,
  - › Offering peer-learning formats,
  - › Implementation of joint projects with scalability,
  - › Knowledge sharing and knowledge management inside the partnership and with external partners.
- Generally clearly separate internal and external communication.
- Regular and self-critical reflection (also during the process and the other first steps).
- Keep area of action and work as small and specific as possible.
- Clearly define responsibilities and ownership.
- In-person exchange and meetings (formal as well as informal) for the purpose of exchange, trust building and mediation between the partners.
- Identify high level key figures as a ‘door opener’ to promote the partnership and its attractiveness.

Tools

- Agree on rules (→ Tool 9, 22)
- Agree, communicate and expand decision-making processes (→ Tool 28, 44, 46)
- Making partners stay (→ Tool 50, 59)
- Expectation-management (→ Tool 38)
- Reflection (→ Tool 56, 57, 60)
- Communication (→ Tool 37)

5. Challenges across phases and steps

Along the individual steps, the interested parties often encounter major and minor challenges. Some examples of these are:

Overview: Starting of a partnership

- **Why start a partnership?**
  To address a (cross-sectoral) societal challenge.
- **What does a partnership need?**
  Motivation, willingness to work together and to compromise.
- **Who participates in a partnership?**
  Ideally actors from civil society, academia, private sector and state structures.
- **How do you work in a partnership?**
  Ways of cooperation vary and need to be customized to the context and the partners.
- **How long does the first phase last?**
  On average 2.5 to 3 years.

www.partnerships2030.org
info@partnerschaften2030.de

June 2018

For further tips and tricks for MSPs please see:
→ Institutionalisation and → Impact and Impact Assessment.