Synergy unleashed: Key factors for effective collaboration in consortia

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Content

Summary

In development programming, collaboration in consortia is an important strategy to create synergy in addressing complex societal issues. However, due to a variety of reasons, such as their multidisciplinary nature, such collaboration is very often challenging. This study has aimed to unlock knowledge about collaboration in consortia by identifying key success factors.

The key success factors that have been found can be summarized as following.

1. Consortia are more successful when carefully considering, creating and maintaining the **complementarity** of their members.
2. Consortia that invest significant time and energy in the development and implementation of **strong rules of the game** are seen to be more successful.
3. Creating fair **power distribution** and working on a basis of equality and equity helps to lower tension and conflict and ensures better exchange of expertise and more intensive collaboration.
4. Putting significant attention to **learning and capacity building** supports not only strengthening knowledge, but also creates positive relationships, feelings of togetherness and good exchange of information.
5. Finances are a common cause of friction. Best practice examples have shown that **open and fair budget management** through transparency is key in countering these tensions.
6. Because of the complexity of collaboration in consortia and the importance of good leadership to deal with such complexity, investment in **leadership capacity** is a final success factor.

In addition, the **use of the systemic perspective** as a framework for understanding dynamics in a consortium is found to be able to help stakeholders when reflecting on, designing and/or managing their collaboration.

Introduction

Motivation

For society's bigger questions, not one organization has the capacity to address them single handedly. Collaboration and partnerships between organizations, both public, private and nongovernmental, are increasingly crucial to effectively impact issues like good governance, social justice, peace building and conflict resolution. Such partnerships, like consortia, foster a well-coordinated response - avoiding duplication, stimulates complementarity of programs, makes knowledge sharing and learning easier, enables cooperation and coordination and makes it possible to better tailor to the needs of the local community.

Nevertheless, interorganizational collaboration requires serious efforts and attention as it often doesn't come naturally. Many consortia deal with difficulties in overcoming conflicting interests, dealing with complexity, creating mutual understanding, balancing local-national-international power asymmetries and more.

Despite the need to understand how to overcome such challenges, the available knowledge on the key factors for successful collaboration in a consortium is limited. Therefore, this (action) research aims to unlock knowledge about collaboration in consortia, about critical success factors, and best practices.

Challenges consortia face

With this research varying stories have been collected about challenges in consortia. Quite often consortia are not able to reach the desired or necessary level of collaboration. While collaboration in the proposal phase is relatively easier, difficulties often arise when programs move to the implementation phase.

Consortia typically face challenges because of different philosophies about and approaches to the work. Finances is also a topic that causes many issues. It is for example often difficult for the partners to come to a supported division of the budget or to collectively approve adjustments to the budget during the program. In addition, consortia often struggle with how to divide roles, responsibilities and activities, or work with strong power imbalances.

These struggles regularly turn into conflict and cause underperformance. It's not uncommon for consortia to be ended prematurely. Or, to find that collaboration is really challenged but no intervention is being done. The strategy is to then just 'wait for the program to be finished'. Yet other examples show consortium partners resorting to working parallel to each other. In such cases, the partners all focus on a specific activity or a specific geographical area and limit exchange and collaboration as a way to make the complexity manageable. Sometimes, this is decided in reaction to challenges. In others it's a conscious strategy to create a 'funding-consortium'. Then the strategy beforehand is to create a consortium to respond to donor requirements but to anticipate a limited extent of collaboration. This doesn't have to be a real problem, but it is fair to say that the added value of working in a consortium is not achieved with such strategy.

> *"We often see individual projects in a consortium. That's doesn't have to be a problem, though it often is"*

A final important reason for conflict is a mismatch between organizations regarding e.g. culture, capacity and/or expertise. This can happen as a result of a so called 'forced marriages'. A forced marriage is when a donor pushes organizations together with too little regard for the complementarity and fit between the organizations, which results in unnatural or mismatching partnerships.

"We didn't have a choice to propose other partners. That's the way the donor went about it. It felt like a forced marriage. We had to make it work."

Overall, these challenges and trends frustrate many actors in the development field and put pressure on the good use of resources. It creates doubt whether working in consortia is a strategy still worth pursuing. This study aims to bring insights on how to better deal with these challenges.

"Not one consortium has worked as we hoped. We have to draw our conclusions from that. We rather don't work with consortia anymore; we rather have one partner who then works with subcontractors"

Approach and methodology

As an approach to unlock knowledge on collaboration in consortia, this research has engaged with several consortia working on peacebuilding and/or in fragile contexts in Rwanda and DRC to learn about their challenges, practices and solutions.

Methodologically the study draws from Appreciative Inquiry. This is a participative approach for research, design and learning. The underlying concept is that a system develops in a positive way when people together start to investigate what works and what they want for the future. It builds on what is there and what is possible (rather than what is missing or impossible). It zooms in on positive examples of that what is desired and aims to draw lessons from that in order to make the positive grow. This does not mean neglecting frustrations or negative examples. Those can just as much be fuel for learning and progress, by reflecting on them and turning the experience around in a way that releases positive energy and new ideas.

To gather insights and information, a series of 21 interviews has been done with 38 people from 17 different organizations. The organizations were members of five different existing consortia active in DRC, Rwanda and/or East-Africa, or were a donor to consortia. The interviewed consortium members were about 50% INGOs and 50% local or national NGOs. The roles interviewees fulfilled in their organizations were mostly managerial, such country director, project coordinator, program manager, finance director, but also researcher and advocacy officer. For some interviewees, it was their first experience working in a consortium; others had experience with various consortia.

The interviews were held individually or in groups of 2 or 3 representatives of one organization; about 20% was done in-person, the other interviews were done online. The basis for the interviews was a semi-structured interview guide; interviewees were asked about success moments in the collaboration and what factors contributed to those success moments. In addition, questions were asked about specific approaches and practices that supported collaboration as well as tensions and difficulties that needed to be overcome to integrate and create synergy. The interviews took 1-1,5 hour.

A framework to understand collaboration

In order to analyze and organize the success factors and the difficulties in collaboration, it is helpful to use a framework. In this report, we will use the systemic perspective and specifically the systemic perspective pyramid and the SCARF-model. Both highlight different aspects of collaboration, which makes them complementary. What they have in common is that they don't prescribe how collaboration should take place, rather they are lenses through which to describe collaboration. In this report, they are used to describe the different success factors, but of course, they can also be used in real life collaborations as a tool to reflect on the current situation, to look for ways to understand dynamics and to come up with intervention to improve collaboration. This can help actors to move from unconsciously (in)competent to consciously competent.

> *"I have my fair share of experience, and I have my intuition and common sense that guide me in making decisions about how to manage our consortium. However, I've never received any training or course on consortium management; it doesn't exist. It would be very helpful to learn more specifically though."*

One framework that bring this benefit is the systemic perspective. This perspective has been found to be insightful when reflecting on collaboration.

The systemic perspective is an approach that considers the interconnectedness and interdependence of various elements within a system. When managing collaboration, the systemic perspective is useful because it emphasizes understanding the relationships, dynamics, and influences that exist between organizations, individuals, and other stakeholders involved. It recognizes that collaborative efforts are influenced by broader organizational structures, culture, and external factors.

Two specific models within the systemic perspective are particularly useful as they align with and give clarification to insights gained in this study: the systemic perspective pyramid and the SCARF-model.

Systemic perspective pyramid

When looking at questions around collaboration, there are three aspects that are of importance, which are represented in the pyramid below. This pyramid, as developed by Dr. Marijke Spanjerberg, introduces three levels of collaboration. The three levels each have their own quality and characteristics, though they also interact with each other.
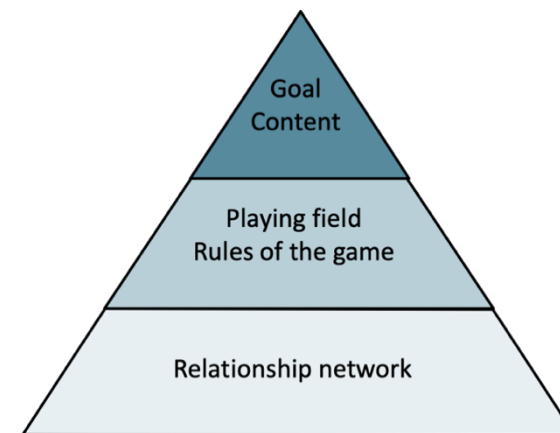

Figure 1 Marijke Spanjersberg

The top level is that of **goal and content**. This is about 'the what' of our pursuits and what content is needed to achieve it. If anything promotes mutual cooperation, it is a shared and meaningful purpose, with some room for differentiation. This is very often the case in consortia, as NGOs and other partners generally are purpose-driven and can rather easily connect to a shared bigger goal.

> *"Because of the way we planned it, and the level of engagement, everyone decided to face this very challenging project"*

A problem on this level however is that many goals have utopian traits; they are too grand, compelling and abstract; for example 'eliminating poverty worldwide by the next decade'. While such an ambition is admirable and may be motivating, it also puts pressure and stress on actors due to the complexity of addressing poverty within a short timeframe. This pressure can then cause problems on other levels of the collaboration.

Other goals contain inevitable contradictions, which makes them 'toxic' – putting pressure on the system, especially when the toxicity is left implicit. An example would be 'promoting economic growth without environmental impact'.

The next level in the pyramid is the organizational level of the **playing field and the rules of the game,** which provides clarity on 'how' to work together. This level is about defining roles, responsibilities, focus and boundaries. It is also about clarity on when you do your job well, how decisions are made and how disagreements or problems are solved and how access to information and resources is organized.

All ground rules can have a formal and an informal variant. And the less these two coincide, the more difficult it becomes. In a well-functioning system, the rules of the game are considered clear and fair by the players on the playing field. The less so, the sooner players drop out, start forming coalitions and/or go 'underground'.

Furthermore, the more toxic the goal, the more important it is to have shared and well-functioning ground rules to make tension in the goal manageable. An example for the toxic goal on economic growth without environmental impact would be to come up with rules that guide decision-making when not both economic growth and zero environmental impact can be achieved.

While this level is crucial in setting up new and complex collaborations in such a way that a 'good game can be played', practice shows that very often too little attention is spent on this level. Interestingly enough, in successful consortia ample time and energy is invested in creating a clear and constructive playing field and in setting up the right rules of the game.

> *"The MoU keeps track of the agreed practices. Without the MoU it would be chaotic. It works like a code of conduct."*

Issues at the middle level often negatively impact the lower level of the **relationship network** or interplay. This level is about the quality of the interactions between people and whether there is enough mutual contact and whether in this contact there is enough appreciation, trust and respect to work well together and to let information flow. In successful consortia, people in the system are well-connected and positive, constructive behavioral patterns are developed that strengthen the interplay.

SCARF

To understand the relationship level and to manage the playing field level, it is helpful to consider **five psychological aspects: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness (SCARF)**.

Our social behavior is largely driven by the tendency and motivation to minimize everything we perceive as (socially) threatening and maximize everything we perceive as (socially) rewarding. When something is (subconsciously) perceived as a threat on any aspect of the SCARF, one is brought into readiness to escape or fight the threatening condition or situation, which hinders collaboration. On the other hand, when something is perceived as a reward, the system and psychology is focused on moving towards that, and thus facilitates collaboration. This means that technically every action and decision either strengthens or weakens the degree to which people experience their SCARF. And this happens constantly in consortia.
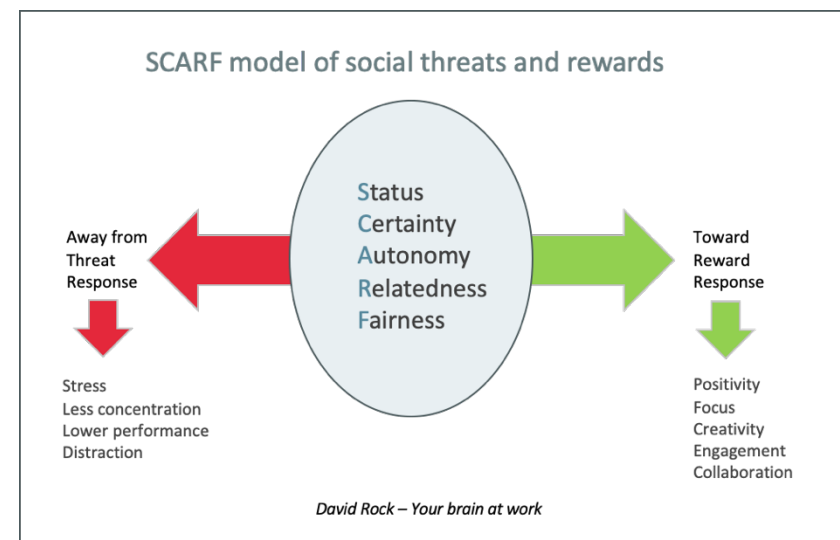
Some examples of how practices can challenge elements of the SCARF are; budgetary agreements are frequently considered as unfair; power imbalances challenge status, and interdependence can lower levels of autonomy. Also, the complexity of programs can impede certainty and the resulting lack of trust hinders relatedness.

Being familiar with the SCARF model and using it to evaluate the impact of agreements and practices can be helpful. It can support seeing in what ways they positively or negatively influence the social threats and rewards dynamics. With that understanding, changes can be made to improve the collaboration.

A short explanation for each of the five is:

- **Status**: the position one has in relation to others in a group

- **Certainty**: knowing what to expect and confidence regarding future events
- **Autonomy**: extent to which one experiences having control over oneself and events around
- **Relatedness**: the sense of connection, safety and trust one has with others in the group
- **Fairness**: the extent to which one experiences transactions between group members as fair

SCARF model of social threats and rewards

Away from Threat Response

Status
Certainty
Autonomy
Relatedness
Fairness

Toward Reward Response

Stress
Less concentration
Lower performance
Distraction

Positivity
Focus
Creativity
Engagement
Collaboration

David Rock – Your brain at work

Key success factors to facilitate collaboration

In addition to the use of the systemic framework, several key themes have been found that give guidance to building successful collaboration in consortia. These themes are:

1. Complementarity between consortium members
2. Investing in strong rules of the game
3. Fair power distribution and equality
4. Learning and capacity building
5. Open and fair budget management through transparency
6. Investment in leadership capacity

This chapter describes findings of success factors for each of the identified themes. The illustrative quotes have been drawn from the interviews.

1. Ensure and clarify complementarity between consortium members

Complementarity is crucial in making consortia successful. A consortium typically brings together diverse organisations that together have the ability to work towards a bigger programmatic goal. Only by leveraging the synergy between the members, a consortium has more value than each of the organizations working towards the goal individually. While this is important regarding the content and impact of a consortium, it is also an important success factor when focusing on collaboration.

1.1. Choosing the right consortium partners

Complementarity can be defined as "the quality of being different but useful when combined" and in practice is all about choosing the right partners to work together. This requires solid consideration from before the start of writing a proposal together. Practice shows this is easier said than done.

As becomes clear from the interviews, organizations don't always feel the space for doing real due diligence when making the decision to be part of a consortium or not. The market for funding for NGO's is quite competitive, and that can trigger especially national or local organisations to be pragmatic when being offered a possibility. In other situations, there is pressure from the donor, or there is the pressure of time and resources that limit the quality of the due diligence.

In one example, the donor mentioned that "it was a high priority to start a program for this strategic theme. We had evaluated several options, and while we felt it wasn't a great match, it was the best match we could make". Unfortunately, this consortium turned out to be really challenging and was ended prematurely.

To counter these pressures, the forming of the consortium should be considered an explicit step in the process, interviewees indicate. Both donors and NGOs can steer towards strong and independent decision-making and really keep the option of *not* joining or starting a consortium open.

In addition, knowing that collaboration in a consortium requires a significant extra effort, an integrative consortium should only be done when results cannot be achieved separately. Also, from the systemic perspective the guideline is 'only collaborate when and where you have to'. Therefore, it is important to really explore the need for collaboration, whether the proposed organizations create the necessary complementarity, and to make both explicit.

In one example, tension already arose between the members of a new consortium in the pre-funding phase. This consortium was put together by the donor and from the perspective of the prospective partners, while there was some difference between the partners, there was actually quite some overlap in strengths and activities; how the partners were really complementary was not clear. This had triggered feelings of competition between the partners, each wanting to get funding for themselves. Therefore, information was not openly shared and the collaboration in proposal writing was limited. Only when the donor shared their explicit vision for the complementarity between the partners, it became clear what synergy could be created by collaboration. As a result, relational tension decreased and people became much more open and trusting, which allowed for better collaboration in finalizing the program proposal.

1.2.   Leveraging the complementarity in practice

To then leverage the complementarity, interviewees indicate that it is important to ensure ongoing clarity on how the complementarity works. By explicating everyone's role in the consortium to work towards the bigger goal, there is a high level of understanding of how all parts in the consortium fit together and complement each other. Everyone need to know each other's strengths and focus, and throughout time, contributions of the members should be made transparent. If there is clarity on the interdependence, and there is sufficient differentiation between the members, collaboration is stimulated and competition lowered. In addition, knowing each other's worth, contribution and strengths, creates mutual respect, *relatedness* and *status*.

> *"It is helpful that everyone knows each other's strong suit. It creates a willingness to take something from another partner based on their expertise."*

> *"For example, the research on taxation; we all agreed to do this research and thanks to it, everyone can do and improve their work. It's being used for local workshops and national advocacy. One member's work benefits us all."*

Coordination meetings are often used to create transparency about complementarity and contribution, especially when communication channels are well-organized, predictable and accessible to all partners. It helps when there is intention behind the meetings, and an effort is being made to make the meetings valuable by allowing for open sharing, reflection on progress, and it is used to plan and make decisions together. This ensures understanding, transparency and accountability.

> *"A success factor is the consistent communication within the consortium. We have weekly meetings, every Wednesday, with all members. We talk about progress and the future. In those meetings we emphasize what's happening and share recommendations."*

Another helpful practice for complementarity is to undertake joint activities. In one consortium, partners would go on joint field missions to experience and really understand the role and contribution of each partner.

Leveraging complementarity requires an ongoing effort, as an example also shows that when it's less visible what a member contributes, it quickly creates resentment and friction. In this example, the lead had to step in to create understanding with all and the less visible member had to step up their game to demonstrate their value for the program.

Interestingly, the donor can be considered for complementary roles as well. In one consortium, representatives of an embassy stepped in to advocate for the consortium, acting as an active stakeholder towards the same goal. This active role has been appreciated by the consortium members and demonstrated to be effective. This however requires also openness from the donor to play such a role, awareness about what the unique capacities are that the donor can add and a relationship that allows for such collaboration.

The opposite can also hold true; when complementarity is low, it easily triggers competition. For example, when different members work for the same population in the same region with similar services, it can trigger competition if there is not enough differentiation. In one example, beneficiaries in communities could benefit from services from two different partners from one consortium, but those services were significantly different, which made the organizations start to compete; each organization tried to innovate their service in such a way that it would attract most beneficiaries. This made it a win-lose context, rather than a win-win.

Finally, having clarity on complementarity also implies that it becomes clear where collaboration is needed and adds value, and also where not. Clarity on where and when not to collaborate is just as important, as it stimulates autonomy and efficiency.

2. Invest in strong 'rules of the game'

While the level of playing field and rules of the game is often overlooked in teams and consortia, the interviews show that successful consortia make significant investments on this level. While this may cost time and resources, it seems a crucial step to run a successful consortium. Investing in setting strong rules in the inception phase of a (new) program, really sets a solid foundation for collaboration, as it contributes to positive impulses on all aspects of the SCARF and prevents tension and conflict later on in a collaboration.

2.1. MoU as backbone for collaboration

Many consortia develop and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) upon starting a program. In best practice cases, the MoU is not just a legal document; it is a living document that also contains many agreements and guidelines for behavior and collaboration. Also, in those cases all members of the group have participated defining the agreements, which creates ownership. Coming to those agreements generally requires many conversations and even negotiations, needed to make sure all members actively understand and support the MoU. The basic principle here is to 'not play with unsupported rules'. That doesn't work in any sport, neither does it in a consortium.

The process to get to a shared set of rules of the game is generally seen as one that is subject to tension as opinions differ and rules can have different consequences on different members. It requires an active commitment to on the one hand continue the conversation until consensus is reached; on the other hand, it requires members to weigh organizational interests against consortium interests.

When done successfully, the MoU has been mentioned in several interviews as an important backbone for the collaboration, as it is e.g. a reference point for decision-making or for resolution in case of disagreements. It also makes sure that different opinions are detected early on in the collaboration and thus avoid conflict later on.

> *"In our consortium, it took long to get the MoU signed. It required lots of negotiations. But in the end, it was very helpful to have had the discussions early on and in a structured way, and to have the link to a legal contract. Now we know we all have to hold up the principles."*

2.2. Harmonization of processes

A specific context for creating shared rules of the game, is the harmonization of processes. Several consortium members mentioned this as a key element for successful collaboration. In a consortium, partners typically all have different ways of working and internal procedures, for example for finances and administration. However, when creating an inter-organizational collaboration, when not addressed, these may create tension or even conflict. To avoid or manage tensions in this area, it is important to have conversations aimed at harmonizing processes.

> *"For some processes there was a lot of disparity for one same activity, for example the budgets for laptops. It's a small example, but needs to be figured out. Just like the bigger topics. It took a long time, but the only way is through. Otherwise it comes back later."*

In one consortium, the lead organization facilitated such conversations with all other members, without favoring any way of working over another. There was a strong commitment to continue the conversation until everyone supported the agreement; there were no short-cuts there. Sometimes it was necessary to get back to a certain agreement, because it turned out it was not fully supported yet and needed to be ironed out until everyone was on board. Altogether, it was a lengthy process. The result however was that there is an aligned way of working, which facilitates integration, rather than working 'next to' each other.

Important is that not only the outcome but also the process of harmonizing is experienced as fair; which means taking everyone's situation into account, allowing for discussion and creating mutual understanding before coming to a decision. While lengthy, the advantage of such an inclusive approach is that agreements are more easily accepted and acted upon. It contributes to *fairness, certainty* and *relatedness.*

> *"... (the lead organization) had its own procedures, but they weren't going to impose those on us. Instead the practice was to find a common ground and we did. We had to adjust to each other and learn."*

2.3. Translating values to agreements

Some consortia formulate certain values that the members consider important in their collaboration; such as respect, integrity or equality. Values can then help to define a desired culture and serve as a form of cohesion.

The interviews however showed that a strong practice in working with values is that it is not only continuously emphasized as a value, it is also broken down into actionable agreements that guide behavior, and are also included in the MoU. This gives clear direction on how to translate the value to practice and limits room for (mis)interpretation, which is easily the case with values. An example is that one

consortium translated the value of equality to a specific decision-making process that ensures that all members have an equal say, and formulated processes that facilitated equal access to information. Another example for the value of transparency is that conversations were held and guidelines were agreed about what technical and financial information is being shared, and also what not.

2.4. Consistent follow-up on the agreements

Once the MoU and other 'rules of the game' are set, it is important to ensure follow-up on the rules, that way creating consistency between 'paper and practice'. In many collaborative settings, there is hesitance to give feedback to people not acting in alignment with the rules of the game. However, that has shown to be a source for resentment, distancing or conflict when the rules are not respected by all members. And the longer issues linger, the more difficult it becomes to address is.

> *"As the new financial expert, I was impressed that all the tools in our department were there and followed by all members. It made the job easier, more efficient and transparent. I'm thankful for the lead who equipped us with that."*

Contrarily, behavior should be addressed as soon as there is a misaligned with the agreed-on guidelines, in an open and non-aggressive way. This generally requires most attention in the first months of the collaboration. In that phase, all members have to demonstrate their support for the rules in practice. In addition, this is often a phase where new members are added to the team. The agreements are often made by the management of the consortium members. After that the implementation team joins. The adoption of the rules of the game by these new

team members is crucial and requires a real effort to create good understanding of the agreements as well as the reasons behind them.

Adhering to the agreements in practice generally doesn't go all right at once. It thus requires strong leadership to address any inconsistencies and help everyone to play the game according to its rules.

> *"In the beginning, some individuals would feel entitled above others. This behavior was breaking the idea and ideology of the consortium, which is about working together, not ordering. When the behavior surfaced, individuals were advised to change it and they did."*

It is important to note that while we talk about rules here, the process of creating and following shared rule is also a crucial part of strengthening relationships. When people know that they can count on others to follow shared agreements, it creates certainty and predictability and therefore trust in the collaboration.

3. Fair power distribution and equality

Better distribution of power is an important topic when it comes to collaboration in the development sector. The need to decolonialize aid has been on the agenda for a while now and the sector is searching for ways to address power imbalances. When a consortium is done right, it can be a great means to work towards more localized and fairer power distribution.

3.1. Working from the principle of equality

A key practice that supports fairer power dynamics, is to take equality among the members as a guiding principle. Equality here is not about everyone doing exactly

the same; differentiation in roles, responsibilities and expertise continue to be important to leverage differences for the good of the consortium. Equality does mean that each of the members have equal rights and may have an equal say and equal influence in decision-making and agenda-setting, and equal access to information and funds. Equality should not only be a value, it should have direct translations to agreements that bring the value to practice, as becomes clear from the interviews. Such agreements and practices boost collaboration, especially for the local partners, as it strongly stimulates feelings of fairness and status. As a result, there is more active participation of all members, which then stimulates information exchange, mutual learning and building of expertise.

> *"A key rule that makes a difference is that all organizations are equal. No one is above another, and everyone has the same rights. This reinforces mutual respect and keeps procedures in place. It's the foundation of the success of the consortium."*

One consortium in the research has shown strong practices in this area. In this consortium, it can be seen that it's not only the international NGO's who set the agenda for programming. Rather, the lead actively stimulates members, national and international, to contribute to plans, agenda-setting, decisions and problem-solving. Moreover, there is much sharing of technical expertise and of intellectual property.

> *"We as a national NGOs feel really considered. For all issues related to the project, the lead brings them to the table for all of us to see. This involves everyone in the decision-making process. This participatory management style builds trust and inclusion."*

The complementarity is further enhanced because the partners are all regarded equal, while at the same time leveraging differences. This allows everyone to both bring in their expertise as well as to benefit from others expertise. For example, local NGOs are generally well embedded in communities and have a strong network with local stakeholders that the entire consortium can benefit from. On the other hand, INGOs are generally better in organizing resources, linking to donors and in high-level expertise.

Interviews showed that unfair power distribution strongly pressures the SCARF for local and national organizations into the red. Several NGOs shared that in most consortia they experience a lack of respect, unequal rights, unfair distribution of risk and lack of access to and control of resources. On the contrary, interviewees of local and national NGOs expressed to experience a positive influence on the SCARF when working in equality.

A specific point of tension concerns communication with the donor. For donors, a benefit of working with consortia is that it streamlines communication as there is generally only one lead organization that has direct communication, creating efficiencies. This can however cause tension for consortium member as it limits influence and negatively impacts *status* and *autonomy*. As solution, several consortia made the agreement that while the lead organization is the one who is directly in touch with the donor, the others are always included in communication, such as emails.

The explained level of equality counters consortia that work with implementing partners, which automatically implies there is hierarchy and differentiation in

decision-making power and access to resources. Nevertheless, also this type of consortium can benefit from upholding equality as much as possible.

3.2.   Lead – co-lead

The research found one interesting practice regarding power distribution and working towards localization. This consortium works with a lead and a co-lead. The lead organization is an INGO with experience in leading partnerships. The co-lead is a strong national NGO with the ambition to lead consortia. Working together as partners in leading the consortium, the co-lead gets the chance to build experience and capacity that helps to in the future have the credibility to lead a consortium on its own.

> *"As an organization, we wanted to be more competitive on the international market. By taking the role of co-lead of an INGO gives us international power and visibility."*

A vision for several interviewees is that in the future also local and national organizations are allowed to have the central role in a consortium, such as being the lead, receiving the funds directly and being in direct contact with the donor. For this to happen, continued capacity building and institutional strengthening is seen as necessary. Ways to do so are:
- Including a capacity building plan in the proposal and contract, including clear (performance) criteria and milestones, as well funding explicitly supporting these activities
- Giving progressive responsibilities to national partners, such as in the lead – co-lead example

4.   Learning and Capacity building

Institutional strengthening, building expertise, and capacity building are further important elements for both successful consortia as well as for localization. When a consortium is well set-up and the above-mentioned success factors are in place, learning will to a large extend already happen.

This is because people in a healthy consortium are expected to be to a large extent in a 'green' space regarding the SCARF. Therefore, there is psychological safety and thus openness and room for learning. Also, when complementarity is clear, and there is in-depth insight into each other's strengths and expertise, there are easy guidance and ideas for learning. Knowing where to go for learning, makes it easier to act on.

In such contexts, it is seen that learning happens in all directions, because of the openness, need and complementarity. The lead learns from the partners and vice versa. National organizations learn from international organizations and vice versa.

In addition, when there is real integration and collaboration (rather than parallel working processes), a lot of the learning happens on the job by the intensive interaction between a diverse set of partners. It allows members to be inspired by each other on how and where to improve practices.

> *"Just collaborating intensively like in this consortium also creates learning; we work with partners with different expertise and different levels of professionalism. We learn things mutually, there is a good exchange."*

In addition, learning is stimulated when learning is normalized in the collaboration. A good practice that we discovered in the interviews is one in which the

conversation about learning is held regularly and made part of meetings and interactions. This is seen to come from both a consortium-purpose (having to learn from and with each other to be able to reach the shared goals) as well as a personal or organizational purpose (I or we get better if we take this opportunity to learn from the other partners).

> *"We are different organizations with different expertise. We avoid judging each other and avoid measuring each other on weaknesses. We transferred the differences into something positive that consolidates our collaboration. We help each other where one is stronger than the other."*

Once there is an intrinsic motivation, learning can happen in various ways. The learning is seen to happen in settings focused on capacity building, such as training and workshops, but maybe even more so outside the training room. Some strong practices seen in the various consortia are:

- Letting members other than the lead organization be in the lead of certain activities. This is a way to distribute and vary leadership and influence, which empowers organizations and provides hands-on leadership experience and capacity building. It also positively influences *status* and *autonomy*.
- Pairing members up to undertake activities together, without intervention of the lead. When members are different but intensively work together, this leverages the complementarity and facilitates learning.
- Real open sharing about challenges and weaknesses during (monthly) meetings in a constructive and supportive context. When it is normalized to discuss challenges, and having the members see those as moments for learning, meetings can be powerful settings for capacity building.

- Creating a support plan for each organization that outlines how they are being helped to improve on certain weaknesses.
- The availability of international staff to help national or local NGOs' with capacity building is experienced as a real learning advantage for those members, as it provided access to expertise that would otherwise be hard to access.

> *"In other consortia, organizations would only share results and successes. Here, we agreed to also share challenges in the monthly coordination meetings. We exchange how to overcome the challenges. That is very intense, but it makes the meeting a learning platform, where we all learn from each other."*

> *"The collaboration makes us more competent as an NGO. This partnership helps us to realize weaknesses and fill the capacity management, which again helps us to be competitive on the international market."*

5. Open and fair budget management through transparency

Transparency was often mentioned in the interviews as an important success factor. Lack of transparency easily creates suspicion and mistrust. While this relates to information sharing and openness in many situations and for many topics, it seems to be most impactful as a way to manage tensions around budget. This is important, as in many consortia, the topic creating most tension is finances; money triggers many people into the 'red' of the SCARF and is often a cause for

further conflict. An important reason for this is that many collaborations inherit mistrust around finances from earlier partnerships, in which budgets and funds were mismanaged or unfairly distributed. Therefore, this topic requires constant attention and careful selection of practices that address this inheritance and can lower negative impact on the SCARF.

As a way to do so, some consortia experimented with open sharing of the budget of all members, despite the felt risks of doing so. In such management style, all members have access to each other's budget. This creates transparency about who receives what funds and why. This practice needs to be accompanied by conversations to explain differences and challenges and with that create real understanding and joint decision-making. Otherwise there is the risk that the openness is counterproductive. When constructive openness and understanding is achieved, it enables the cultivation of trust between organizations.

> *"Equity and flow of funds may be one of the key success factors; such open sharing of the budget enables the different organizations to feel it's honest. In some consortia, INGOs often get a lot of activities so they get a lot of money. In our consortium this is done in equilibrium; which is very important."*

> *"In our consortium, some international organizations get less funding than national ones; budget is simply relative to the activities that were done. It would be great if this can be duplicated to other consortia."*

A further tension that needs to be taken into account, listening to the interviewees, are the challenges that the bigger system of development work brings. In the development sector, for example, INGOs typically work with higher salaries compared to local or national NGOs. In a close collaboration in a consortium, this can create feelings of unfairness. In practice, it is however difficult to change salaries for people working in the consortium, as it then creates disbalance in the organizational-system or creates budgetary challenges. At the same time, these salary differences also make it financially interesting for staff of a national NGO to switch to an INGO within the consortium.

Dealing with these tensions starts with having open conversations about it, acknowledging the disbalance and issues that come with it to create shared understanding. In addition, while not easy, the consortium should as much as possible come up with measures or rules of the game to lower the tension. One example seen is that there is an agreement made about not taking over each other's staff for the duration of the collaboration.

> *"We have to deal with the imperfections of the bigger system that surface in the consortium. We try to iron out things one by one, but many are much bigger than our sphere of influence. In those situations, we try to agree on the imperfect situation."*

6. Investing in leadership development

Overall, the conversations have shown that collaboration in consortia is generally challenging and complex. Dealing with those challenges and working on the identified success factors, requires strong leadership. Interviewees expressed that all members, but most specifically the organizational leaders, need to be constantly aware of possible tensions, misunderstanding or friction, both in direct relationships as well as between others. And subsequently have the capacity to deal with those in constructive way.

The successful consortium leaders that were interviewed, demonstrated that they were able to not take issues personal, but rather evaluate them seriously and address them appropriately and professionally. Also, inclusive decision-making, taking everyone's view into consideration and creating a setting in which everyone feels free to express feelings are important.

> *"This consortium works very well compared to others, because the leadership is not authoritarian, but rather very attentive, flexible, informs and involves everyone. Also, the high level of expertise of people, while at the same time having the capacity to listen to different perspectives and ideas is impressive."*

Investing in the quality of conversations to ensure understanding is also key. A communication style characterized by openness and transparency is generally appreciated. Demonstrating active listening to all members, ensuring that all members are being heard and have a say, and or not imposing one way of working on others are important practices. Also, when members would propose different or contradicting ideas, those have been made productive. Such communication style stimulates *relatedness* and *fairness*.

> *"The lead organization didn't feel entitled. They didn't have monopoly without consulting the others. That active listening that they were doing, consulting others before making decisions, involving each member in the whole process of coming up with activities, helped in the success of consortium."*

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