



Partnership in Bangladesh: A Working Aid

Introduction

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has been addressing the issue of partnership with both governmental and non-governmental partners in Bangladesh since 1997. It was also decided in 1999 that through a self-evaluation process, the "Partnership Guidelines" would be developed with partner organisations. In 2000, six of the existing partners (LGED, CDF, IDE, CMES, CFSD and VFFP) and relevant staff of SDC identified the elements of an effective partnership through six daylong workshops. The workshops were facilitated by an external organisation - "Communica". The proceedings of the workshops were used to make the basis of the present "Partnership Working Aid".

The Working Aid will be distributed to the partners and will be used by SDC staff in the daily work. This document will be updated with experiences gained. The real challenge will be to put them in practice.

I. Overarching Principles

A functional, viable and productive partnership is a cluster of relationships with well-defined roles, responsibilities, rights and obligations. Common objectives or shared interests are the most powerful motives for forming a partnership, but they are not sufficient in themselves. Others factors are necessary for a sustainable operation of a partnership:

Transparency: regular information sharing, easy access to relevant (including financial) information, openness on expectations from each other is essential for a transparent partnership. Sharing information and acting on it, in an open manner helps stakeholders to gather information that may be critical to their interests.

Mutual Accountability: accountability means the requirement that those in position of responsibility answer to stakeholders on the disposal of their powers and duties, act on criticisms or requirements made of them and accept responsibility for failure, incompetence or deceit. Mutual accountability would mean that both SDC and the partners are accountable to each other.

Mutual Trust and Respect: it is a result of experiences of people working together and of sharing common values and commitment as well as mutual expectations.

Ownership: it refers to the degree to which the stakeholders effectively participate and are held responsible and accountable for all that is done in the partnership. If ownership is lacking or perceived to be lacking it will be very difficult for a partnership to be sustained.

II. Search for Partners

Most of the programmes of SDC in Bangladesh have been implemented through local partner organisations including government, NGOs and other private organisations. Partner organisations play a significant role in the success of each of the program implementation. Thus, the "quality" of a partner organisation is a crucial factor for

achieving the common goals and objectives of the project. It is imperative that the partner organisations are selected carefully and critically. A checklist has been developed which could be used to identify potential partner organisations in Bangladesh (Annex 1). The checklist focuses on criteria which ensure quality of a partner organisation. For example the partner organisation must have their mission, vision and values/priorities, strategy on sustainability, experience, good management as well as monitoring, supervision and reporting skills.

III. Building the relationship

Sharing of vision/mission/goals with each other

The organisational mission, vision and goals of SDC and partner organisations must be shared with each other, which will be the basis of the institutional relationship. These principles have to be transferred into practice and also at the field level. A brief document presenting the mission and the vision of SDC is enclosed. (Annex 2: Abstract of SDC's Guiding Principles).

Acquaint partners with overall SDC programme

SDC will provide all partner organisations with a clear overview of SDC and its programmes in Bangladesh. A mechanism will be developed to ensure sectoral as well as cross-sectoral information for the partner organisations. This will enable the partner organisations to explore synergies with each other on their respective projects and also within a sector. SDC will act as a promoter and facilitator for its partner organisations to have access with other projects and programmes. Possibility of replication and dissemination of various experiences of the partner organisations will be explored by SDC. Partners will be informed and updated with information on any changes at its level.

Reaching Mutual Agreement on objectives

Based on the understanding of each other's mission, vision, goals and values, SDC and the partner organisation will finalise the objectives of a joint programme or project. Good understanding and transparency on the objectives are essential to build a strong foundation of the relationship. This will also enhance the accountability of both partners on the basis of mutual agreement on the objectives.

Duration of partnership

A time frame will be discussed at the very initial stage of the institutional relationship. This is an important and sensitive area for the partner organisations. The duration of the project or programme will depend on the mutual interest of both partners. The time frame will also be based on the performance and achievements of the programme outcomes. Specific indicators will be used to measure such achievements. Both SDC and the partner organisations will plan activities, especially the phasing out, considering the length of the partnership and sustainability of the programmes.

Language Barriers

In certain cases, especially with smaller NGOs, it may be necessary to undertake special measures to overcome language barriers. This may mean that the Swiss staff work with their national colleagues or that the SDC staff and the local partners consciously make arrangements for translation from English to Bangla and vice-versa. Summaries of main SDC documents should be available in Bangla.

Reporting procedures

A clear reporting system is being developed by SDC. The reporting system will indicate the requirements from partner organisations in terms of reporting type, format, content, frequency and deadlines. During the planning stage of a partnership, SDC should inform about this reporting system to its partners. Communication between SDC and the partner organisation should be simple and effective. Messages or information on reporting procedures provided by SDC should be consistent and clear. The partner organisations should indicate any constraints in following the reporting system. They should also inform their preferences with regards to reporting to SDC. All rules and regulations on reporting to SDC should be agreed at the very initial stage of the collaboration.

Fund releasing procedures

SDC will inform and clarify to the partner organisations on its fund release procedures and requirements at the very beginning of the partnership process. Vital information required by SDC are financial statements, audits, 'call forward budgets'. Partners will need to be informed on the time schedule for submission. Consistent and clear messages on financial issues will be delivered to partner organisations by SDC. Partner organisations will also inform their preferences and constraints in fulfilling the requirement placed by SDC. Both partners should be transparent about their expectations and try to accommodate each other. Several formats have already been attached with the Agreement document.

IV. Maintaining and strengthening the partnership

Communication

In a "healthy" partnership or relationship, it is imperative that both the partners should be able to speak openly and accept constructive criticism. SDC and its partners will work towards such an environment and encourage openness and assertiveness, which will allow positive attitudes and mutual learning. Adapting 'flexibility' in dealing with each other and being responsive to each other's requests and initiatives is also an essential component of the effective partnership. SDC will extend its 'appreciation' to positive achievements of the partners on the agreed project or programme. 'Mutual respect' will add value to the process of maintaining an effective partnership.

A system for open and timely feedback will be developed and agreed on by both the partners. It is important to provide both positive and negative feedback for the benefit of the programme. All negative feedback should specify the exact problem or incident and should be accompanied with suggestions for improvement. Both formal (letters, memos, meetings) and informal (telephones, verbal) channels can be used for providing feedback. Timely reaction and feedback can be effective in promoting changes and organisational learning.

The communication between SDC and the partners will seek to involve the organisation as a whole: the management team and in some cases the governing body should also be consulted. SDC will encourage and promote a second line leadership in the partner organisations. Designated contact persons at the different levels of the organisations will be helpful for both the partners. Internal hierarchies and lines of communication will be respected.

Monitoring

Regular meetings will be encouraged to discuss the progress of a project by SDC. However, other opportunities will also be used to monitor the performance of the agreed objectives implemented by the partner organisations. SDC and the partner organisations may review the progress of the project through half-day workshops during the

submission of the six monthly financial and progress reports. Presence of the governing body of the partner NGOs is also encouraged.

Field visits

Field visits enable SDC to be better informed and aware of project realities at field level and enable its programme staff to better appreciate what is really happening, both the achievements and the constraints faced by the partner organisations. Joint field visits are encouraged which provide more opportunities for discussion and clarification. Regular field visits should be planned by SDC and the partners. The objective and purpose of the field visits should be identified ahead of time and enough time should be allocated for in depth discussion. Particularly relevant field visits should be documented through writing a field trip report by SDC staff and shared with partner organisations for their feedback and action. Lessons learned from the field visits should be used for the steering of the programmes in future.

Signaling problems and constraints

During the course of project or programme implementation it may happen that various problems arise, unforeseen events happen or that various constraints are encountered. In relevant cases it would be desirable that the partner organisations, who would most often be the first to know of such things, bring the information to the notice of SDC on their own. This would demonstrate that they have up-to-date information on activities, and they are able to acknowledge problems and mistakes and then look for solutions. There may be a joint search for solutions and measures. If requested, SDC may play a role in conflict resolution and/or mediation.

Regular Review of relationship

It is considered useful to regularly review the terms of the relationship between SDC and partner organisations. This could be done during the periodic progress reporting meetings or separate meetings set up for his specific purpose only. These regular review meetings will serve to clarify any misunderstandings within the project cycle. These meetings would signal that both SDC and the partners are willing to invest on the relationship and would like to maintain it.

Management

SDC will not interfere with the day-to-day management of the partner organisation, i.e. it will not interfere with staff recruitment, placement, purchasing process and other related matters. It will respect the rules and regulations of the partner organisation and will focus its interest only on the programme-related activities and their achievements. SDC may intervene on irregularities in audit reports, lack of transparency and for any gross mismanagement of financial issues shown through audits or other investigations. In such cases interventions would mean raising the issues with management, the board and in the final instance terminating the agreement. The respect of each other and institutional governance rules should be ensured.

Consulting Partners on SDC's programme development

The partner organisations are important and direct sources of knowledge and experience, which need to be consulted for SDC's own programme development and strategy planning. This has been done in the past and needs to be more systematically encouraged and ensured. Short term issue based committees with representatives from partner organisations could be organised.

It has to be kept in mind that SDC being a governmental institution has to respect its own rules and legal frame and will not be able to take into account all suggestions.

Promote partners within sectors

SDC will act as an "Advocate" for its partners at the policy level and among other international agencies. Partners will be recognised for their "best practices" and will be introduced in the various fora. SDC will introduce its partners to different networks and promote its partner organisations at the national level for their contribution in their respective sectors. The advocacy role of SDC will strengthen the relationship with the partner organisations.

Share new ideas and information with partners

SDC will facilitate the process of sharing lessons learnt, best practices, and new technologies among the partner organisations to enrich their knowledge on new ideas and technologies implemented in country or abroad. SDC has built up in-house expertise in some areas and these can be shared with the partner organisations. At the same time, partners will also present their innovative ideas and experiences from working at the grass root levels with SDC. The two-way information flow should be encouraged and SDC can play an important role in encouraging the creativity and fostering the partnership spirit among the partners. This can be termed as an additional technical support beyond the institutional relationship.

Capacity building of the Partner Organisations

There is often an expectation from partner organisations that SDC will not only provide support for programme activities but also provide support for capacity development of the organisation. This is in some cases already part of the project design and planned for. This effort will apply to long term partnerships. In other cases the needs for capacity development arise when internal constraints are faced during implementation. This implies that both SDC and the partner organisation may address issues of implementation capacity during project planning and also during monitoring and review of progress.

As the strengthening of the capacity of partner organisation is recognised as an area of intervention and interest in SDC Bangladesh's HID strategy, such needs can be addressed and will be examined by the SDC HID team or the sectoral HID focal points.

V. Phasing out or Sustainability of Partnership

SDC will encourage the partner organisations to elaborate their concepts and strategies for sustainability that reflect best their values, goals and objectives. A phasing out plan or at least some future perspectives should be included in the project document. This plan will indicate the probable length of the mutual involvement, terms and conditions of the involvement and "exit plan" of the partner organisations.

Sustainability can be addressed at various levels and entails different dimensions which should be addressed. In fact, sustainability can be assessed at the activity level (question of efficiency), at the outcomes level (question of effectiveness) and at the impact level (question of relevance). The dimensions of sustainability could include the following:

Social,
economic / financial,
institutional,
environmental, and
technical.

Each project and programme will have to define its own stand and strategies regarding sustainability.

VI. Other forms of partnership in SDC programme

Partnership with multi-donor programmes

SDC may support partner organisations with multiple donors or may have partners with multi-donors. It will maintain good contacts and communication with other donor agencies in order to maintain transparency on various projects and activities. SDC will also encourage other donors to practice similar principles, such as accountability, transparency, mutual trust and ownership. This will allow open communication among all stakeholders, where partner organizations may continue to contribute in joint decisions, chairing of meetings on rotation basis etc. SDC will also have to play a proactive role in ensuring that the other donors give sufficient space and attention to its views and priorities. However, it is important to understand and agree on the expectations and approaches of other donors, which are cofunding its partners.

Multi-layer partnership

SDC works with various kinds of partnership and cultivates cooperation at different levels. One very particular example of such partnerships is that it cooperates with few Swiss NGOs "Regisseurs" who enter into partnership with governmental, multilateral institutions as well as with NGOs. In this example partnership exists at different levels. At the operational level, the Swiss NGO enters into partnership with local institutions to coordinate their activities, ensure financial support and provide technical know-how, whereas, SDC participates directly at the policy dialogue level with close coordination with the Swiss NGO.

In order to achieve greater outreach, SDC may enter into partnership with local institutions which have extended partnerships or networking with local NGOs. The cooperation model is similar to the "Regisseurs" one, where SDC interacts at the policy level, with the national level institution.

Both of these models seek to keep institutional development at the centre of the partnership strategy. SDC aims at strengthening the partner institutions, and enabling them to be more efficient and effective in their own core activities with their own partner organisations.

SDC expects that these guidelines will be applied at the different levels in the multi-layer partnerships. SDC will monitor the status of such partnerships in the regular programme review.

ANNEX 1: Checklist for selecting potential partner organisations for new programmes or projects.

The selection of partners will come at a stage when the project idea is already analysed and fitted in relation to the Country programme, the strategy and the goals of the sector concerned and matching with the other sectors. The enumerated steps are considered, as if SDC would proceed with a general programme idea and its own values as a base to partner(s) selection. Usually, institutions propose project ideas. In this case, the checklist is to be used focusing on the institution that took the initiative, even though it has not to be limited exclusively to it. A good project idea has not necessarily to be executed by the proponent itself.

SDC consults other organisations and networks in order to complete and consolidate its analysis for the selection of partners. A time limit has to be fixed and communicated.

Qualities & Capabilities

Keeping in mind the project activities (summarise the expected results), which are the most important qualities needed in the partner?

Institutional Mapping

Make a chart of all the institutions active and/or influential actors in the project area. Analyse their interactions, list their main activities, and quality in their working area (how they are perceived locally by beneficiaries, clients, competition, etc?). Partner's contribution (voluntary or financial) are particularly encouraged.

Shortlist possible partner institutions

For each partner institution make a SWOT analysis.

Compare the results with the needed qualities and capabilities, and prioritise the shortlist.

Check

Do the possible partner institutions and SDC share similar visions and values?

What reputation/practice does the organisation have related to accountability, financial records, staff capacity, outreach (institutional governance)?

Check the relations of the organisation with others in the same sector: government, NGOs, private, networks, donors, etc. and possible coordination mechanisms?

Select the partner institution

From the shortlist select the partner(s) who are most adapted for the implementation of the project idea.

Include also their development potentials and their vision, making the criteria visible for a later evaluation.

Negotiation

Enter into contact with the selected institution(s) and start negotiating a project document. If the process is too lengthy/burdening, or if other unforeseen difficulties are coming up, consider going back to the shortlist.

Based on the project document, the credit proposal and the agreement with the partner will be then finalised. The poverty and gender related values and approaches have to be made visible, for example as strengths and weaknesses as well as potentials and risks, in the general assessment chapter

ANNEX 2: Guiding Principles of Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

VISION

SDC aims to confront the global tasks of the future and make a salient contribution so that...

Men, women and children can live in peace, freedom, security justice, and enjoy a sense of well-being.

Future generations will be assured of access to resources sufficient for their development.

Switzerland will cultivate an attitude of openness, generosity and solidarity.

MANDATE

Poverty alleviation

We provide assistance to the disadvantaged so they can gain better access to productive resources and improve their living conditions by developing their own strengths.

Ensuring sustainability

We are committed to ways of life that safeguard resources and that secure the resource base for use by future generations.

Aiding victims, resolving conflict, and ensuring peace

We provide aid for victims of natural disasters and wars and work to prevent and resolve conflicts.

Empowering the disadvantaged

We support people-especially children and young people-so that they can build confidence in and develop their own initiative and capabilities.

Providing access to information

We consider access to information as a prerequisite for autonomous development and support the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Ensuring equitable development for women and men

In both our activities and our approaches, in partner countries as well as in Switzerland, we seek to promote gender equality in development.

Fostering understanding between cultures

We respect the cultural diversity of our partners, while remaining aware of our own values, we seek to promote mutual understanding between cultures.

Supporting human rights, the rule of law, and democracy

We regard the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights as universally valid principles without which lasting development is impossible.

Improving living conditions

We support the efforts of disadvantaged men and women to improve their living conditions and develop societies that offer freedom, equal rights for all, and sustainable development.

Protecting lives and aiding victims

We provide protection and aid to victims of both human-induced and natural disasters.

Shaping Swiss foreign policy

We play an active role in helping to solve international problems that also affect Switzerland, and we are committed to ensuring that development is supported in every aspect of Swiss foreign policy.

VALUES

SDC is a value-oriented, forward-looking institution that is open to learning. Our working culture and the interests of our staff reflect the commitment to a common cause, which we share with our partners. Our values are the following:

Justice, solidarity, equity

Trust, respect and participation

Responsibility, commitment and competence

Performance and cost-consciousness

Personal fulfilment