



## Practitioner Note Series:

### PARTNERSHIP INDICATORS

#### Measuring the effectiveness of multi-sector approaches to service provision

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*Measuring the effectiveness of partnerships between different sectors proves particularly challenging. Different interested and affected groups will measure the success of the initiative according to different sets of criteria. Partnership elicits qualitative values such as trust, responsiveness and flexibility that are more likely to be “measured” by gut reactions rather than by more mechanical means. However, the creation and maintenance of a carefully selected set of indicators tailored to specific partnership projects should enhance relations by increasing clarity and reinforcing communication channels.<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Why measure the effectiveness of partnerships?**

Partnerships are not an end in themselves – they are formed to achieve other goals, with the implicit or explicit recognition that by acting together partners can accomplish more than by acting alone. However, bringing together partners from different sectors (public, private and civil society) to work towards a commonly defined project is not an easy task. Actors within these sectors have very different objectives and working styles and typically respond to very different incentives. Their diversity is what makes partnership attractive in the first instance – each brings something new to the mix, their own strengths and weaknesses, resources and capabilities. This diversity means that it takes time for partnerships to

grow and engender mutual understanding, for partners to learn to speak a common language and to agree what the partnership project hopes to achieve.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plays an important part in partnerships, without which partners cannot evaluate their impact on the ground. To be sustainable over the long term partnerships must therefore offer something to each of the participating actors – it must respond to their own individual goals and objectives. If not then commitment to partnership will wither and both project and partnership sustainability will be threatened.

Crafting indicators that respond to both mutual and individual goals is challenging but important. If actors have not bought into the need to collect certain data, then the effectiveness of its collection will be reduced. Similarly, if indicators are used to judge the effectiveness of a partnership and its activities, conflict will occur unless these indicators have been agreed well before the evaluation phase. At the same time, indicators will have to respond to individual goals – allowing partners to see that partnership is responding to their needs and delivering value for their organisation.

Indicators that measure project impacts are one thing – indicators that measure the effectiveness of partnership another. The former obviously allow partners to monitor their impact on the ground. The latter serve a different purpose. If partnership is a good mechanism to harness the resources of different sectors, then by monitoring and evaluating the partnership itself will ensure that impacts are maximised.

Partnerships do not exist within a vacuum – they are formed and evolve in accordance with complex and fast-changing surroundings. Partnerships are thus dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws from BPD experience with 8 multi-sector water and sanitation partnership projects. For more information, please see <http://www.bpd-waterandsanitation.org>

in nature: roles and responsibilities shift over time. The structures that shape partnership need to reflect this; they need to be flexible enough to cope with changing dynamics between partners and between the partnership and the context within which it functions. Measuring the effectiveness of partnership has an important role to play in this process. By doing so, partners will be able to determine what works well and what works less well, and make adjustments. They will be able to minimise the costs and maximise the benefits of partnership. Ongoing M&E (and appropriate feedback) will help forestall the conflict engendered when rigid structures fail to adapt to changing circumstances. Feedback will enable roles and responsibilities to be adapted to reflect new realities.

### Measuring qualitative aspects of partnerships

Measuring the effectiveness of partnerships, as distinct from project impacts, is not an easy task. How does one tell whether a partnership is going well or doing badly – whether roles and responsibilities are divided up appropriately, or only poorly reflect partners’ attributes; whether structures are well-designed or are ill-suited to local contexts and existing assets?

Numerous indices are being created to measure the health or robustness of civil society, the corruption levels of different governments and corporations, the appropriateness and depth of corporate social responsibility, and other equally qualitative factors. Cross-sector partnerships are living, breathing organisms that change on a daily basis. Thus methods to determine a baseline, measure achievements along a given axis and then use those measurements for future planning must somehow capture this dynamism.

It is relatively easy to determine a set of project indicators to measure quantitative changes in service delivery and cost recovery. Practitioners can even make some assumptions about changes in behaviour from a set of quantitative indicators. However, consensus has not been reached about how to measure the health of partnerships. Project practitioners often contest that healthy project indicators suggest a healthy partnership. Others suggest that healthy project indicators are more likely to reflect solid project design and contextual conditions that are conducive to project success. Still others suggest that indicators are unnecessary for “gut instinct” is

a more influential decision-making tool for partnership practitioners (be they from the public sector, private sector or civil society organisations). Public image and credibility (often stemming from fewer complaints, smoother operations, etc.) influence the value they place on engaging in partnership.

If this is true, why then do we need to move beyond gut instinct? For several reasons. For one, gut instinct is hard to share and as institutional buy-in (i.e. persuading colleagues throughout an organisation of the value of partnership) is important, such instincts form a poor basis for sustainable partnerships.

Equally, concrete and tangible indicators are vital to communication between partners. Without being able to point to objective, and mutually agreed, indicators of success or failure, disagreements between partners that share very different viewpoints and backgrounds are unlikely to be easily resolved. Gut instinct also forms a poor basis for identifying the means by which partnership structures can be adjusted to reflect changing context and evolving project cycles.

The accompanying table lists some of the commonly cited expectations of partnership indicators alongside some of their potential limitations.

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### Using Indicators to Measure Partnerships

| <i>Expectations</i>  | <i>Limitations/ Considerations</i>  |
|--|---|
| Indicators will provide guidance on where to improve performance                 | Tendency to collect what is available versus what is meaningful   |
| Indicators will prove the partnership’s rationale (like a cost-benefit analysis) | Partnerships are a constantly evolving process whereby strict cost-benefit analysis undoubtedly oversimplifies impacts, constraints and benefits  |
| Project outputs will provide some analysis of partnership effectiveness          | Analysis of outputs alone fails to consider the numerous contextual-institutional factors within which a partnership works and may not give many clues of how to improve the partnership itself |
| Indicators of project outputs provide some analysis of partnership success       | Partnership success is usually defined quite differently by different partners  |
| Indicators will provide feedback on meeting objectives                           | Indicators are usually subject to varying interpretations depending on the perspective of different stakeholders  |
| Indicators provide a forum for dialogue  | They can also provide a source of conflict  |

The key building blocks of successful partnerships relate to qualitative attributes, namely partner respect, responsibility, responsiveness, flexibility, etc. The section below attempts to provide guidance on devising indicators to measure such intangible aspects of working in partnership.

### Indicators for forming and maintaining partnerships

The following broad lessons provide food for thought on the formation and maintenance of partnerships in water and sanitation projects (taken from Caplan et al., 2001). Each key theme noted below is followed by considerations for measuring how effective the partners/partnership has been in these areas. Clearly these need to be modified and adapted to particular partner and project situations.

*Partnerships are not an end in themselves – they are formed to achieve other goals, with the implicit or explicit recognition that by acting together partners can accomplish more than by acting alone.*

*Context is key.* The wider environments within which water and sanitation projects operate are invariably complex. The various influences on decisions at the project level (from the free water policy in South Africa to the cultural context in El Alto, Bolivia) create different demands on partnership approaches. Partners and partnership projects are impacted by economic and political events. Practitioners from several of the projects with which the BPD Cluster has been working noted that the pressure to produce results allowed insufficient time to analyse the

wider context sufficiently. Some contextual factors which favour partnership success include: a relatively stable economic environment (or at least some predictability in the short term); evidence of political will and the push of political expediency; a willingness to build social capital; and, finally, the existence of a regulatory framework (of some form) that provides a grievance mechanism should the partners run into difficulties.

Various indicators can help analyse the impact of context upon partnership. One qualitative indicator (in this case yes / no) is to ask whether a participatory situation analysis (where all stakeholders discuss the context and its ramifications) has been conducted and then revisited at regular intervals. Have all relevant primary players been asked to contribute, as appropriate, to the project itself? Is there a process which allows the impact of context to be periodically reviewed along with each

different partner's understanding of the project context? One example of a baseline indicator could be to collect information on who takes different decisions regarding how decisions are taken.

#### *Building on existing assets and filling gaps.*

Tri-sector partnerships for the provision of water and sanitation in poor communities are presumed to incorporate private sector funding and technical contributions, public sector monitoring and regulation, and civil society/NGO sector links with communities and households. To some extent the experience in the focus projects with which the BPD has been working challenges these assumptions. In practice the different organisations that come to the table may or may not offer what is expected of them. NGOs often come with funding and communities are often mobilised by public or private sector staff. The key recommendation here is to understand what is available on the ground, enhance the capacities of existing resources, and determine the best way to fill the gaps.

In looking at what already exists on the ground and what is further required, structuring indicators around the project cycle is helpful (i.e. planning, design, implementation, operations & maintenance, and monitoring & evaluation phases). Has the work of all relevant players been included in the design of the project? In cases where different providers have provided similar services, has benchmarking been undertaken to compare the effectiveness (including costs and benefits) and appropriateness of one stakeholder conducting a specific component of the project versus what other stakeholder groups may be able to contribute? Have appropriate roles for each individual actor been identified? Do these still apply after later review of the partnership's activities?

*Understanding partner incentives and conflicts.* For each partner, understanding one's own individual and institutional incentives, negotiables, obstacles, and assets (including reputation) proves the primary starting point for partnering. From this initial internal reflection, partners need to find ways to share and understand each other's motivations, constraints and definitions of success (for instance, 'sustainability' might mean different things to different stakeholder groups). Too often, partners fail to differentiate between individual, institutional and stakeholder-wide incentives. For example, a private or public sector official may be inclined to group NGOs together in

terms of their motivations and constraints. Though in some cases NGOs' macro assessment of the project might be similar, their decision-making styles, capacities and drivers may be quite different. NGOs in turn perceive private sector actors to all be much the same, though clearly in water projects, private firms (or departments within a firm) responsible for design might have quite different approaches and incentives to those responsible for operations and maintenance. Poor communities face incentives and barriers to partnering and participation as well. These need to be understood in order to promote community buy-in, for without community ownership and beneficiary inputs, the project is likely to be unsustainable.

The process of understanding individual partner incentives should begin with discussions as to how each partner defines the sustainability of the programme. Once this has been fleshed out, specific indicators reflecting that partner's definition(s) of success should be created and shared. For example, private sector objectives and hence indicators of success may relate to improved cost recovery, safeguarded inputs (personnel, materials, infrastructure), reduced implementation time, lower cost technology options, and/or fewer call-outs for maintenance. Public sector goals may include increased numbers served, reduced complaints, reduced use of health facilities, increased school attendance, and/or fewer disconnections. Communities also have a role to play in designing indicators that reflect their view of success. Including communities should render project design more appropriate and increase community buy-in (Jones, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Once the *individual* goals, objectives and indicators have been elaborated, indicators that combine the interests of the different partners can be developed. Ownership of these indicators (i.e. participation in their design and interest in their monitoring) must be as widespread as possible to make monitoring, evaluation and feedback more effective. Early and mutual agreement on both indicators and conflict-resolution mechanisms will facilitate smoother partnerships. Often, measures of success are

imposed on partners without appropriate prior dialogue.

Naturally indicators cannot address all partner incentives and motivations. Incorporating intangibles, such as fears relating to the loss of identity for an NGO, the loss of control for public sector officials, and the sharing of decision-making for the private sector, is challenging. Indicators struggle to address issues such as public image and public perceptions. However, closer consideration of the context, of potential partner contributions and of the different drivers each partner faces should allow for more informed decision-making.

*Understanding time frames and time requirements.* Different stakeholder groups work within the bounds of different time frames. Public sector officials are often driven by election cycles (or influenced by politicians who are), private sector firms by predetermined contract duration and internal financial/reporting cycles, and NGOs by donor and community/seasonal cycles. Ideally a partnership process will allow the different stakeholder groups to strive for modest milestones that coincide with their individual cycles. This will not occur without negotiation. Varying time cycles are not the only time-related issue - partnership building itself takes time. Too often the pressure is on to produce results, even though partners have not been given or made the time to get to know each other. Investing time at the beginning should save effort in the long term as each partner becomes more familiar with how other partners make decisions, invest resources and take action.

Indicators that assess progress as a function of time may however be

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#### **Long-term perspectives**

Much of the work in the BPD focus projects is experimental in nature and concerned with the long-term view. Indicators must therefore be careful to incorporate a longer-term analysis. For example, various stakeholders within the public and private sector fear that increased community participation will lead in the short-term to being inundated by complaints and irreconcilable requests. A longer-term view would suggest that proper education and awareness activities, that flow throughout the different stakeholder groups (not just directed toward communities), will permit the smoother running of projects. For instance, complaints are initially likely to rise as systems are put in place to receive them and consumers gain a greater awareness of their rights and greater knowledge of procedures. However, with greater interaction between the stakeholders, evidence suggests that such complaints will taper off at a later stage. (Condy, et al, June 2001)

<sup>2</sup> Community / NGO indicators could deal with issues such as affordability, participation of women, improved customer service, enhanced quality of service, improved NGO / community relations, increased or sustained NGO funding, spin-off impacts, etc.

problematic as timelines may lengthen or shorten as a result of working in partnership. For example, increased community participation may add to the time it takes to implement a project, or by achieving buy-in and forestalling obstacles, it may speed up the process. The primary time-related indicator is whether milestones for each partner have been built into the process and whether these have been met. Each partner organisation needs to determine its own time scale that then needs to be matched to the project cycle and to the timescales of the other partners.

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*Differentiating between individuals and institutions.* Without doubt, the nature of the individuals that come to the table is critical to the effectiveness of the partnership. Partnership projects need champions to carry the cause and to sell the idea and process. Champions can reduce layers of management to propel projects into action. However, the challenge is that individuals can usually move faster than institutions. To ensure sustainability, partnerships need to move carefully and systematically beyond the individuals and into institutions. Ownership cannot be vested in any one individual. As individuals also move on, mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure smooth transition. Induction programmes, frequent and structured reviews,

*Regular reviews of context, partner incentives, costs and benefits must be built into the partnership approach.*

rotating chairs and other mechanisms will enable greater institutional ownership.

As suggested above, indicators related to institutionalising relationships would note whether complete orientations have occurred for individuals newly involved in the process. The increased involvement of different individuals from participating organisations could also be an indicator of increased buy-in, as long as the participation is not being passed around without continuity, for this would reflect a lack of serious commitment. Indicators that measure changes to job descriptions as a result of the partnership approach, reporting requirements or the like could provide some evidence of successful internal E&A work.

Ideally the project should have support at the highest levels within each partner organisation, though the work on the ground would be carried out at the lowest appropriate level. Project implementation will assuredly be unsuccessful if there is a lack of interest

and commitment at the practitioner level. Indicators would reflect whether those responsible for given aspects of the project are actually undertaking this work – this will suggest whether partnership roles and responsibilities are being appropriately divided amongst partners. Mechanisms to gauge the expectations (and commitment) of different levels within partner organisations would be useful.

*Allowing for transformation, modification and capacity building.* Separate from changes in staffing and representation, other influences will force change upon partnerships. Change should be expected even if its exact nature cannot be anticipated. In order to accommodate such change, institutions need to build up the capacity for partnering - i.e. the capacity to recognise the vital contribution of each stakeholder, the capacity to understand the constraints other partners face, the capacity to compromise and negotiate fairly, etc. Effective partnering requires not only a workable interface between representatives and organisations sitting at the table but requires that each develop effective communication channels within their own individual organisations.

M&E serves little purpose without appropriate feedback. Regular reviews of context, partner incentives, costs and benefits must be built into the partnership approach. Evaluation of such processes should provide some indication of how flexible and effective the partnership has been in incorporating the recommendations that come out of these reviews.

## Conclusions

The focus of this piece has been primarily on measuring the effectiveness of the partnership approach rather than the project itself. It is understood that the outputs of the project provide clues as to social cohesion, empowerment, enhanced reputation, or other facets that strengthen the ability of the partner organisations to be effective partners. Many of the partnerships with which the BPD has been working are still quite new, and it is difficult to draw absolute conclusions with regard to both the impacts of the partnerships on poor people and the satisfaction with which each of the partners holds the relationship. Obviously in the final analysis, tri-sector partnerships will be judged not necessarily by the impacts on the partners themselves but by their positive impacts on the poor in terms of health, livelihoods, education, time, empowerment, etc.

Admittedly indicators for measuring the effectiveness of partnerships will not replace the gut feelings of partnership practitioners. On the other hand, the creation and maintenance of a carefully selected set of indicators for a specific partnership project should enhance relations by increasing clarity and building stronger communication channels. Experience of partnerships shows that there is no “one size fits all” model that can be neatly applied from place to place. Indicators for measuring the effectiveness of partnerships are much the same: they must be developed in situ taking into account the definitions of success of each partner.

### Other sources of information

More information on measuring and evaluating partnerships, indicators and impact assessment can be found in the resources below:

#### *Assessing the benefits to partners through monitoring and evaluation*

A short BPD note that discusses developing a set of mutual indicators to assess partnership success as a tool for getting partners to think more closely about what they as individual organisations hope to get out of and avoid happening in partnerships.

#### *Measures for success: assessing the impact of partnerships*

This document from the International Business Leaders Forum includes a clear and easy-to-understand framework: How to set group objectives, determine indicators, gather information and evaluate results. It also contains some good links and case studies relating to partnership impact assessment and indicators. {6 pages}

#### *Appreciating and tracking the dynamics of a partnership*

Who does the tracking and documentation? How are the results measured? Who reflects on the results? How is feedback incorporated into future action? This document stems from the final week of Development Forum discussions on "Learning to Partner with Civil Society", The World Bank, January 2000.

#### *US National Network for Collaboration: Collaboration Framework*

This network "is designed to help individuals and practitioners who are either starting collaborations, or need help in strengthening an existing collaboration". It acts as part guide, part diagnostic tool to evaluate the continued development and expansion of the group. Tools, checklists, workshop exercises etc, are available.

Links to these and other resources can be found at:

[www.bpd-waterandsanitation.org/english/resource.htm](http://www.bpd-waterandsanitation.org/english/resource.htm)

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