

CONSTRUCTING AN ALLIANCE

Once a core group of prospective partners has been identified and the due diligence has been completed, the next phase in alliance building is the actual development, where appropriate, of an alliance. This entails ensuring that the most appropriate partners are “at the table” and that, ultimately, partners are willing to commit organizational resources to a partnership being constructed to resolve a jointly articulated development problem.

CONVENING PARTNERS

The first meeting of prospective alliance members is exploratory; generally, the partner that is initiating the alliance will organize this meeting. The goal is to build trust and commitment. When contemplating an initial meeting of potential partners, consider the following:

Who convenes? The convening individual or group must be highly regarded by and have credibility with all prospective alliance members.

Who attends? Those with appropriate organizational responsibility and position must attend the meetings. Often, such meetings require attendees possessing clear authority to speak on behalf of their organizations.

Where? For an initial few meetings, it may be best to identify neutral ground. This prevents the meeting from being perceived as being under one organization’s control. Some circumstances may require that participation by one of more members be by teleconference or electronic conferencing. The technology for electronic conferencing is readily available.

Who moderates? The convener often fills this role. If choosing a moderator for the initial meetings, find a facilitator who will allow alliance members to raise issues without getting bogged down in unproductive discussions.

What is discussed? An agenda for the first meeting might simply focus upon two things: personal and organizational introductions and a sharing of viewpoints about the common cause or issue that has brought the alliance together. If the organizations have not had a history of interaction, the meeting might appropriately end with only a summary of viewpoints written for distribution.

If the meeting members already know each other, they might move directly to determining their collective vision of the problem and its solution.

The [Partner Analysis Worksheet](#) below provides a sample agenda for meetings with potential partners.

SETTING DIRECTION

Alliances often encourage looking at old problems in new ways, bringing energy and creativity along with shared solutions. This happens most easily if the alliance members begin with a shared understanding of the nature of the problem and ideas about possible solutions. Steps you might take together include:

Defining the Problem

Successful problem definition involves identifying a meaningful junction of the interests and needs of alliance members. Bringing representatives of all interested parties to the table is highly desirable.

Equally desirable is for the alliance members to seek out and bring to the discussion the positions and strengths of those who might oppose the work of the alliance so that issues can be addressed. Some questions to answer are:

- What is the nature of the problem that this alliance might solve?
- Why is it advantageous to organize an alliance to solve it?
- How are the stakeholders affected by the problem?

Brainstorming Solutions

Noting the importance of having the beneficiaries' support, describe each member's stake in the problem and identify solutions to it (without getting bogged down in tasks, resources, personalities, and histories). This is the time to clarify the vision of the alliance, its goal, and its strategic objectives, and to establish a climate of hope and a willingness to work together. Some questions to answer are: To what extent are resources from different alliance members required? What skills and human and/or material resources does each member have that could help solve the problem? Is there another organization that should be brought into the alliance?

Identifying Local Allies

For mission-level alliances in particular, there are often local organizations already active in solving the problem. They may already be working in partnership with other public or private entities. In the public sector, different agencies at various levels of local government often collaborate to address a particular issue, based upon their mandate, interests, and resources. In business, joint ventures, trade associations, and federations are common. And in civil society, NGO coalitions are often formed around common issues or relationships to more effectively utilize resources. Some questions to answer are: What are the local organizations active in solving the problem (and who are the key actors in the organizations)? Among these, are there organizations with the capacity to become donor members of the alliance? Are there organizations with the capacity to become implementing partners?

ADVANCING THE ALLIANCE

In subsequent meetings, the prospective alliance partners can further develop goals and objectives. Key questions to consider are:

How should actions be implemented? Open lines of communication are vital, as are clearly defined planning rules (for example, something akin to a logical framework that helps the alliance set lower-order outcomes and outputs and roughly identify inputs and cost estimates). The implementation of major action plans may involve recruiting new alliance members (or implementing partners) that may not have been part of earlier problem-solving discussions.

How will resource allocation take place? Each member has distinct financial, human resource, and technological capabilities. This issue often becomes a sticking point during the implementation process. Alliance members must discuss resources continuously—who's providing what and when—to ensure that the issue remains well understood from the outset.

How can alliance members implement detailed plans in ways that respect their particular interests? Action planning may bring out further points of difference among the alliance members. It is important to respect these differences at all times. Differences exist in every alliance and accommodating them is a necessary component of successful alliances.

EXAMPLES OF JOINT PLANNING

One clear lesson learned from alliance experience to date is that private partners like to be involved from the ground up and, when they are, both the alliance design and the level of partner commitment are strengthened. Ideally, this involvement begins with defining what development problem the proposed alliance aims to address.

There is no formula for a successful joint planning process. Joint planning can take place on-site or off; it can involve all partners or only key partners; it can start with only the vaguest notion of what could be done, or with a well-articulated proposal developed by one or more potential partners. It can follow a systematic, structured process or evolve in a more ad hoc fashion. The crucial ingredients are a willingness to consider a range of ideas, a clear-eyed view of each partner's objectives, an ability to identify where there could be areas of overlapping interest, and time to allow for problem solving by and among partners as the process proceeds.

Five years of alliance building has yielded good examples of joint planning, such as:

USAID/Angola Strategy Development. USAID has been active in Angola since 1996 and implemented a program that was coming to an end in September 2006. One notable feature of this program has been the extent of collaboration through GDA with several private sector partners, including ChevronTexaco and Esso. Therefore, the Mission was charged with the development of a new three-year plan for the 2007–2010 period. USAID was anxious to begin its strategy process by listening to a wide range of voices within Angola; its closest partners—ChevronTexaco, Esso, and BP—expressed an interest in being part of this learning process. Together, the four organizations decided that their first step should be an ambitious series of focus groups with a wide array of stakeholders to help them better understand the environment in which they are operating, learn from lessons of the past, diagnose needs, and identify possibilities for future interventions.

West Africa Sustainable Tree Crop Program. This alliance originated from the cocoa industry's commitment to expand environmentally sustainable cocoa production. However, as a result of USAID and International Labour Foundation engagement in alliance planning, the alliance broadened to embrace the larger social concern for raising cocoa farmer incomes and reducing child labor. Planning for the alliance followed a stepped process, beginning with a workshop that brought together researchers from industry, academia, and the international research community to develop a broad programmatic framework of research and farmer training interventions. The workshop was followed by a conference that enlisted governments and donors as stakeholders. This approach represents a very deliberate and structured planning process of bringing in partners in successive stages—first to develop and then to operationalize a program strategy.