



# The Partnering Alliance

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Driving the quality and effectiveness of multi-stakeholder collaboration for the post-2015 development agenda (v.0.5 2/03/15)

## Introduction

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In September 2015, the UN will announce the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals. While specific targets and indicators are still to be finalised, one aspect is clear: multi-stakeholder collaboration between business, NGOs, government, the UN and communities will be essential to achieve the goals and at a scale and quality that dwarfs current levels of collaboration.

This is a heavy demand to place. The process of collaboration is generally slow, with different levels of understanding around partnering, high transaction costs and with partners often falling into the same traps and reinventing the wheel. And while many existing partnerships are beginning to have a serious impact on development, others have not lived up to expectations. Between the extremes of 'good' partnering (efficient, well-run and delivering real impact) and 'bad' partnering (poorly run or set-up, failing to deliver), the majority of existing multi-stakeholder collaborations are not delivering at full efficiency or effectiveness.

This is understandable. Partnering across sectors with different interests, motivations, cultures and timescales is challenging. However, multi-stakeholder collaboration is no longer – or should no longer be – the experiment it once was. The partnership community has come a long way in its understanding of what makes partnering effective – we know what works and what doesn't.

To achieve the necessary step-change in the quality and effectiveness of multi-stakeholder collaboration will require the widespread adoption of best practice in partnering. And while there may be different effective ways to collaborate, by agreeing to use common definitions, common principles and common approaches to partnering – by ensuring everyone is on the same page – the development of well-functioning, impactful partnering can be greatly sped up and mainstreamed.

The objective of the Partnering Alliance is to develop open source best practice reference standards for multi-stakeholder collaboration that can be widely adopted by all sectors of society and support the highest quality and continuous improvement of the majority of types of cross-sector partnerships for development.

By integrating common best practice into how organisations approach collaboration, into the development and implementation of partnerships, and into partnering training, tools and guidelines, we aim to instil a shared partnering language and approach that will provide an essential boost to scaling up the effectiveness and impact of collaboration worldwide.

## What is the Partnering Alliance?

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The Partnering Alliance (PA) is a multi-stakeholder initiative with the following aims:

- To agree a **common language, definitions and typology** around cross-sector or public-private collaboration thereby both demystifying the area and ensuring that potential partners have the same clear understanding of the form of relationship they are planning to engage in;
- To create **best practice reference standards** to which new collaborations are developed. This will give partners a clear, shared understanding of the process and milestones they are heading towards (and so help to speed up the process of partnering); ensure that partners have discussed and agreed the critical elements required; and ensure that the partnerships are set up for success;
- To provide a reference against which existing partnerships can measure their current level of good practice, and understand the steps that might need to be taken to further develop their partnership, and so provide an opportunity for **continuous improvement**.

To ensure the highest quality and take-up, the PA is made up of both **technical partnering experts** alongside **major users of multi-stakeholder collaboration** (or associations thereof).

## How will the reference standards be developed?

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A draft set of definitions, common language and best practice reference standards will be developed initially by the technical experts. These reference standards will then undergo extensive consultation with the users of multi-stakeholder collaboration who will provide in-depth comments and input based on their own experience. The draft will be updated and sent out for a second round of consultation and adaptation before version 1.0 is released.

The aim is to develop best practice reference standards that are simultaneously rigorous and highly practical so that they will be adopted as far and wide by as many organisations and partnerships as possible. Major users of multi-stakeholder collaboration will officially adopt the reference standards as the aspiration for all partnering in which they are involved. As the number of adoptees increases, both through publically adopting the reference standards, and through requesting their partners to agree to use them, so the reference standards should spread through a snowball effect.

## What will the reference standards look like?

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The best practice reference standards will look at multiple aspects of the *process* of partnering across all phases, the *setup*, the *operations* and *governance*, the *relationship* between and the *commitment* of the partners and the *monitoring and measurement* of results and of the 'health' of the partnership.

In each of these areas it will set out best practice principles, criteria for measuring against those principles and example ways to fulfil those criteria. A partnership that is fulfilling the reference standards should be confident it is set up and running as well as possible to efficiently deliver its objectives and create value for all.

## How will the reference standards be used?

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- **Organisations** which adopt the reference standards will aspire to introduce them into all new and existing partnerships in which they are working. This includes the internal adoption into their partnership strategy and policy, into partnering agreements, into training they may provide to their staff and into any tools and guidelines they create. Many organisations are in any case developing their internal policy and procedures and the reference standards will provide them with a welcome shortcut to incorporate best practice.

- **When developing new multi-stakeholder collaborations**, partners can agree in advance to aspire to the PA reference standards. PA-compatible guidance notes for new partnering can then ensure that partners all have the same understanding and expectations for the development and good practice set-up of their collaboration.
- The PA reference standards will encourage **continuous improvement of collaborations** by providing diagnostic and guiding tools (both online and consultant-driven processes). These can then be used by partners to assess the quality of their collaboration against best practice criteria, understand in which areas the partnership should improve, and see examples of how such improvements could be made.
- **Training courses, modules within MBAs or public policy degrees and tools or guidebooks** on partnering can be written or adapted to be fully compatible with the PA reference standards and carry the PA logo.

## Who is behind this?

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The Partnering Alliance is initially being convened by two organisations that for over a decade have separately pioneered the theory and practice of cross-sector and multi-stakeholder collaboration: The Partnering Initiative (TPI) and the Collective Leadership Institute (CLI). They are joining forces to combine their experience and tried-and-tested approaches together with the work of academics and other similar organisations to form the technical group.

A number of multinational companies, international NGOs and development agencies, business associations and NGO coalitions have agreed in principle to joining the Partnering Alliance and the list of members will be released and continuously updated as membership is formalized.

## How do I get involved?

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If you would like to discuss becoming a member of the *Partnering Alliance*, please contact:



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## Frequently asked questions

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### **1. While I fully understand the need for the Partnering Alliance's approach, I know my organisation will be very wary about signing up to a set of 'standards'.**

The PA is developing 'reference standards' for good partnering practice. These are **NOT** similar to ISO-type standards. They provide a common language, approach and the building blocks of effective partnering around which partners and partnerships can coalesce. They are not intended to become a burden or external judgement on the partnership but simply a way for partners to more efficiently build robust effective partnerships and avoid reinventing the wheel.

### **2. Is there sufficient evidence of what is effective partnering to create reference standards at this point in time?**

The partnership community has several decades of experience in understanding what makes for good partnering. Nevertheless, it is the case that practitioner knowledge is ahead of academic evidence and with such a complex issue, there are certainly knowledge gaps. Hence the reference standards will not be static but will evolve as they are put into practice and more evidence is produced. The development of the version 1.0 reference standards will reveal areas where there is not yet consensus on good practice. The aim would then be to undertake research to help plug such gaps and incorporate new knowledge (as well as that gained from the experiences of using version 1.0) into the next version of the reference standards.

### **3. How can a set of reference standards possibly cover all types of collaboration?**

They won't. While they will cover a wide range of collaborations, as the reference standards are developed, they will include clear guidance as to their applicability. Even within the focus target, individual reference standards will not be absolute, inviolable proscriptions. For reasons of pragmatism, or due to their stage of evolution, or because it is not relevant, a partnership may decide not to implement a particular reference standard. This is absolutely to be expected. The important thing is that where a variance is necessary, partners have discussed the principle behind the reference standard and together agree how to implement that aspect of the partnership (that process in itself would represent good practice in partnering).

### **4. Would joining now commit my organisation to adopting the reference standards?**

No. While we would assume that most members would end up adopting them, that will be up to the organisation when the reference standards are ready.

### **5. But there are loads of guidebooks on partnering, aren't there? Why do we need reference standards?**

Yes, there are many excellent guidebooks and tool kits for partnering, along with a variety of *partnering principles* adopted by organisations, although none is comprehensive.

The aim of the Partnering Alliance is to develop common language and standardized approaches that allow partners (whatever societal sector) to be confident they have thought through and set up their partnership to be effective, efficient and provide value to all. Having reference standards that are widely approved and adopted by major organisations from all societal sectors will build that confidence as well as speeding up partnership development by having everyone on the same page from the beginning.

The reference standards will build wherever possible on existing knowledge and guidance and a comprehensive mapping of existing material will be undertaken.

### **6. How much time would we need to commit if my organisation were to become a member?**

It's down to you – your level of interest and the amount of time you have available. There are several ways of being involved:

- As a member of the Steering Group, helping to set the direction and process of TPA and supporting its development, you would expect to commit around 4-10 days;
- As a member of the Experts Group, together developing the draft reference standards, you might commit anything from 2 to 20 days;
- As a 'Major User' providing inputs and comments on the draft reference standards, you may commit anything from a couple of hours for an individual response to a couple of days if sent out to colleagues for a collated organisation-wide responses.

### **7. What happens now?**

We are currently in the process of gathering expressions of interest from organisations to become members of the Partnering Alliance and in particular in joining the Steering Group. The plan is to hold a first meeting of the Steering Group in Europe in early May 2015.

2<sup>nd</sup> March 2015