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Good intentions and high ambitions are no guarantee for success

By TeamUp

Multi-stakeholder partnerships in development cooperation need to square the circle: How to be successful and effective in combining expertise and professionalism of different organizations into one program.

TeamUp Uganda is such a multi-stakeholder partnership. Starting in 2019 in the areas of agriculture, water, and health it combines the expertise of three implementing organisations in Uganda: Action 4 Health Uganda, Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung, and Whave Solutions.

By the end of the pilot phase in 2022 the group had collected a bucket full of experience about how to setup and implement a multi-stakeholder partnership. To share learnings and reflect with experts from other multistakeholder initiatives, a panel discussion has been organized and recorded in April 2023 together with the German funding partners Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung (DSW), Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung and Siemens Stiftung. The aim: to discuss, how collaboration in development cooperation can be successful. On stage: three experts from the areas of implementation, academic research, and consultancy.

Me. You. Us. Efficiency of Collaboration in Development Cooperation

‘If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.’ With this well-fitting proverb, moderator Monika Hoegen opened the discussion about the complex subject of development cooperation within a multi-stakeholder context. “But how”, she asked the panel, “can a complex operation of several stakeholders be designed, implemented and managed to work successfully and make life better?”

Initial steps

Susanne Salz, Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and Head of Project "Partnerships2030", is counselling and training people who want to engage in multi-stakeholder partnerships. She started her contribution with the somewhat surprising argument that the work on larger cooperation must commence even before the project is launched.

“There are many key points to consider before starting off,” she explained. One is a thorough context analysis which asks if there is already a similar partnership and if it is worth to start something new. “If the answer is ‘yes’, a stakeholder analysis must follow suit: ‘Who should really be seated at the table for the project to become worthwhile?’”

Salz recommended to subsequently investing some time in getting to know each other, building trust, establishing roles and governance structures. Setting clear goals together is crucial so that everybody can get on board and knows where the journey is supposed to lead to. “For example, if you involve the youth, do they know and do the other stakeholders know what their role is? Do – with respect to TeamUp – the Ugandan and German stakeholders know their respective roles, and do they coordinate with each other?” Salz asked to illuminate her point.

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Efficiency, effectiveness and success

Monica Basemera, Head of the Coordination Unit, TeamUp Uganda, agreed on these arguments and acknowledged that it takes time, commitment and work to develop successful partnerships: “When we started out, we had to set the parameters very clearly. We had to find out the specifics of each and every partner, and had to look for the intersections of our respective areas of work.” Constant evaluation and learning are the most important inroads to sustainable success after the partnership took off, she emphasised.

Once the cooperation takes off, the organisational structure of the partnership is also critical. “The democratic processes within the partnership are of utmost importance”, Leona Henry, PhD and Senior Research Associate at the Reinhard Mohn Institute for Corporate Management University of Witten/Herdecke, stressed. The stakeholders have to ask if the partnership is fit for purpose. Is everybody sufficiently equipped to fulfil the tasks they set out to handle? “Good intentions and high ambitions are no guarantee for success”, Henry warned. Like Monica Basemera, Leona Henry underlined the importance of a well-functioning self-reflective process and monitoring procedure.

This point was endorsed by Susanne Salz, too. “Monitoring and evaluation systems are crucial”, she reaffirmed. A Theory of Change is needed, and it is only possible to measure successes and failures if there has been a proper stocktaking and an analysis of the situation from where the project starts. “If something is not working, learning is essential in order to do it differently in the future”, Salz settled her argument.

Monica Basemera added that multi-stakeholder partnerships can be more successful and sustainable if they make use of the arrangements and structures that already exist in communities. However, she cautioned, if those cannot be found, the stakeholders have to build them. They ought to make sure that they are controlled by young people who should also make the decisions because they are often embracing change readily. But in order to achieve any of these tasks a thorough understanding of the local situation is indispensable.



Specific challenges



Multi-stakeholder partnerships often struggle to maximise their impact on the field level. To make a difference it is vital to track the work that has already been done. The results then can be communicated it to new members, to funders and to the public. “However, the messages that come from monitoring and evaluation are usually not such a good fit for partnerships”, Salz cautioned. “An impact narrative is better suited for this purpose - especially in the beginning of a project phase.”

Leona Henry readily confirmed the importance of a common goal, but added that it is equally important to arrive at a common understanding of how to reach it and a common logic about the way forward. “A truly bottom-up approach is crucial”, she summarised. Even though a lot of partnerships have the ambition to involve all relevant stakeholders continuously, this is all but a given. “Involving a multitude of people creates efficiency problems. It is a conflict of objectives”, Henry concluded. The three panellists agreed that collaborative challenges tend to return repeatedly throughout the whole project cycle and that a strong coordinative person or even unit is needed to apprehend them.





Adding some encouraging aspects, Monica Basemera shared her observations from the TeamUp Uganda experiences in Mityana, the district close to the capital Kampala in which TeamUp is implemented.

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The impact of TeamUp Uganda on young people’s lives

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A variety of opportunities

“Fatuma is what we call a Youth Champion who is leading the local Youth Empowerment Centre in her community. She is a brilliant example of what happens if you give power and decision making abilities to young people, especially young women and girls. First, Fatuma worked as a treasurer in the agricultural segment of TeamUp. However, once she got in touch with the Youth Empowerment Centre she became very interested in SRHR. And that is where the multi-stakeholder partnership comes in: We are able to offer several inroads to a meaningful life for the youth and they can evolve choosing amongst a variety of opportunities. After Fatuma began to work in the Youth Empowerment Centre she also started to interact with the district administration and now she is even engaged at the national level. She became a true leader because she could live up to her special commitment to SRHR. And those are the kind of leaders that we want in this community. Fatuma is a role model and other young people can try to emulate that.”

Fatuma's story was shared during the panel discussion in a short video with insights into her daily life, her activities and her family farm.



Disruptions

Leona Henry recently did a study on the resilience of multi-stakeholder cooperation with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic. She found out that such partnerships can indeed be very resilient if they manage to develop innovative and entrepreneurial approaches to community engagement very quickly – and together with community members. This can be achieved for example by mobilising digital technology in new ways or by restructuring the setup in a novel manner. “After overcoming an obstacle the partnerships can even bounce back stronger”, Henry emphasised.

As TeamUp Uganda was one of the organisations Henry had examined in her study, she had some praise to offer to the project in Mityana: “TeamUp Uganda developed some of these very innovative features in responding to the pandemic outbreak”, Henry recounted. “The phone farming example is very telling: Normal field trainings were substituted with virtual meetings in order to stop spreading the virus.”

Underpinning Basemera's point Henry added that changing working procedures on the fly is something that requires a very strong connection between local communities and the partnership already before the moment of crisis arrives. This connection is a key element of success in general but even more important during times of crisis. Another factor is the really strong integration of local youth into the partnership as they are more willing and able to welcome changes.





To achieve equitable relations between stakeholders within a partnership, Leona Henry counselled to asking the following question frequently during a project cycle: ‘Do all stakeholders who are affected by the partnership really have a say in decision making? Do they really get to raise their voice?’ She advised to including the subject of participation and fairness into monitoring and evaluation activities and reports.

Susanne Salz then listed the most important preconditions for achieving respect and fairness between diverse actors: “Having common goals, having trust, having transparency, having communication and governance structures in place – all of that definitely matters. Communication, clear communication channels and trust are important keys in realising role clarity.”

Monica Basemera added further relevant aspects to accomplishing successful cooperation: Every stakeholder and partner needs a certain degree of autonomy to fulfil the tasks at hand. “If you learn from mistakes, it’s ok. You have to accept and sometimes even to allow them.” She otherwise deemed it impossible to learn and to do it better the next time. She went on saying: “I think that the results are more sustainable and replicable, if there is a code of conduct on what is acceptable, and what is not. This makes it easier to learn the necessary lessons about trust and common values.”

However, in her concluding remarks Basemera remembered everybody that a multi-stakeholder cooperation remains a mere means to an end: “Our ultimate goal is to make ourselves not needed.”

Links: Me. You. Us. Platzhalter Videolink der Podiumsdiskussion
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57oknLOCsdc>