

## Tips to overcome the most common challenges of working in partnership

Working in partnership can bring much added value, but it also poses several challenges, especially when partners are not used to work in a collaborative way, do not share a ‘working in partnership’ culture, when there are power imbalances within the partnership, when a common vision and/or an effective leadership are lacking, etc.

Below are summarised some recurring challenges of working in partnership and tips are suggested on how to overcome them. The tool is addressed to Managing Authorities, but it can be also used by partners in the context of a project.

RECURRING CHALLENGES	TIPS ON HOW TO OVERCOME THEM
<p>When selecting the partners for a Programme, Managing Authorities are often trapped in the dilemma between choosing the partners from the previous programming period or including new partners.</p>	<p>Relying on the same partners has the advantages that trust is more easily built when there are pre-existing relationships, and it is easier to have a common understanding about the issues to address. This usually translates into objectives being agreed more smoothly and ways of working established in a faster way.</p> <p>At the same time, bringing in new partners leads to fresh and more innovative approaches to issues, initiatives and methodologies, and often new skills and expertise.</p> <p>Therefore, when selecting the partners, it is recommended to Managing Authorities to make a careful and balanced assessment of the pros and cons of both situations. Ideally, a partnership should not always be composed of the same partners, and there should be room for including new partners. In your assessment, consider the time factor: with new partners, trust building takes longer, and it takes time to get things started.</p>
<p>Partner selection is crucial: is the Managing Authority choosing the ‘right’ partners?</p>	<p>Like in a project, it is recommended to the Managing Authority to carry out a stakeholder mapping and analysis. Stakeholder mapping is useful to identify new potential partners. Once old and new potential partners have been identified, it is useful to carry out an analysis, including with the involvement of the potential partners themselves, about each potential partner’s skills, expertise, capacity (can and will they deliver?), added value they could bring, size, resources (both in terms of human resources and financial resources), ability to work in partnership, motivation to join the partnership, degree of innovativeness,</p>

	<p>representativeness, representativeness of vulnerable groups, and weaknesses. Assess their legitimacy by asking if the organisations are empowered by their members/stakeholders/management boards to make decisions on issues regarding the work of the partnership. Pay attention if the individuals that represent them have the authority to act on their behalf.</p> <p>Make sure that all the relevant partners with the necessary expertise and skills to tackle the issues you are going to address are present in the partnership. Ensure diversity and complementarity in the partnership and balance the power of finance by experience, skills, and expertise.</p>
<p>Encouraging partners' engagement is difficult. Keeping partners engaged throughout the whole duration of the partnership is challenging.</p>	<p>Some tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encourage discussion and open dialogue about the partnership and its aims whenever possible</li> <li>• reinforce contacts and identify key people in partner organisations who can encourage involvement</li> <li>• hold initial workshops on the scope and theme of what is being proposed</li> <li>• hold regular meetings to explain the aims of the partnership</li> <li>• use a facilitator to moderate the discussion process and move people along to common ground</li> <li>• dedicate a staff member from the Managing Authority or an experienced partner organisation to work with a new partner, especially if with less resources</li> <li>• learn about and get to know potential partner organisations well</li> <li>• establish good informal relationships with partner representatives</li> <li>• have a single clear issue focus that partners can identify with easily</li> <li>• ask partners to sign a letter of commitment / partnership agreement and remind about the commitments they made whenever possible.</li> </ul>
<p>Agreeing on a common vision</p>	<p>Reaching consensus about what the partnership stands for and its central purpose is important in giving a sense of commitment to the partnership. Therefore, objectives and methods need to be clarified by defining</p>

	<p>exactly what the partners wish to pursue and how they will go about this.</p> <p>Some tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use participatory approaches, group facilitation and consensus building methods to develop a common vision.</li> <li>• Make sure that it is the group and not an individual who drives the partnership' vision forward and ensure the vision is realistic!</li> <li>• Make sure that every partner (and individual representing the partners) is on board. Have bilateral talks to understand the issues underlying the disengagement and find possible solutions. Revisit the partnership mapping whenever necessary.</li> </ul>
<p>Maintain engagement and participation</p>	<p>Some tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous regular contact where partners constantly touch base through conferences, seminars, workshops, meetings, discussions, reviews, newsletters, e-mail, phone calls and visits</li> <li>• Practical engagement through an emphasis on productivity and the demonstration of some early form of tangible output that can transmit a sense of achievement</li> <li>• Reinforcing goals and objectives and using strong action plans</li> <li>• Creating an open atmosphere with clear and transparent procedures and links with wider stakeholders</li> <li>• Clear leadership which positively promotes the work of the partnership and participation within it</li> <li>• Building good relationships by using informal activities such as evenings out together, visits etc</li> <li>• Mentoring by proactively supporting and encouraging partners who are held back by issues such as lack of resources/experience</li> <li>• Valuing all partners and their contributions on an equitable basis at all times</li> </ul>
<p>One or more partners are fully disengaged and do not fulfil their</p>	<p>This is a very common challenge. The first step is to have bilateral discussions to understand the reasons</p>

commitments

why a partner does not respect its commitment and find possible solutions, including a reallocation of roles and tasks within the partnership. It is important to verify that lack of engagement does not depend on not having the right skills and expertise to work in partnership. If this is the reason, a partnership skills training conducted by experts in partnerships can be very useful.

If lack of engagement derives from lack of resources, for example in case of smaller organisations, a capacity building programme could be useful. Coupling experienced partners with lots of resources with less experienced partners with little resources can also be a strategy.

Check also if the level of disengagement is not due to lack of transparency in decision-making or in imbalances of power within the partnership, or poor internal communication among the partners.

When a solution cannot be found, it is better to replace the partner. For this reason, it is important to set at the beginning of the process clear rules for partner replacement.