

PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

How to Make a Partnership Work

March 2005



**CANADIAN INSTITUTE FOR
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW AND POLICY**

**L'INSTITUT CANADIEN DU
DROIT ET DE LA POLITIQUE
DE L'ENVIRONNEMENT**

CIELAP Shelf:
Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy;
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Partnerships for Sustainability : How to Make a
Partnership Work

RN 27272

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper, and the ones that accompany it, has been produced with the support and guidance of many of CIELAP's friends, staff and supporters. The team that has given extraordinary support to the production of these documents includes the author, Ravenna Barker; CIELAP staff, Anne Mitchell, Susan Holtz, Iana Nikolova and Jolanta Rasteniene; CIELAP Board Members, Pamela Robinson and Lisa King; and also Christopher Gore.

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada.

CIELAP extends grateful thanks to the International Development Research Centre for its support and flexibility.

ISBN: 1-896588-49-2

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
How to Determine If the Qualities are Present.....	5
Checklist.....	6
How to Establish the Qualities	8

INTRODUCTION

Partnerships are arrangements "between two or more parties who have agreed to work cooperatively toward shared and/or compatible objectives and in which there is: shared authority and responsibility, joint investment of resources, shared liability or risk-taking; and ideally, mutual benefits."¹ These relationships are vital to achieving the aims of sustainability which require the coordination of economic, social and environmental benefits. Partnerships for sustainability usually bring together players that are not accustomed to working with one another, and who are often from traditionally adversarial organizations. These relationships tend to be difficult, sometimes so much so that they fail before achieving any results, or are partnerships in name only.

This checklist is part of the antidote to failing or ineffective partnerships. It is for partnership members and brokers alike. Its purpose is to help existing collaborations to avoid problems before they arise and to correct existing problems. It can also help partnerships in their beginning phase to establish themselves in a way that will lead to the greatest possible success. Further, it can provide a useful resource for others researching partnerships and their effectiveness.

The checklist includes three sections: How to Determine If the Qualities are Present, Checklist, and How to Establish the Qualities. The partnership members or leader should read through the section on How to Determine If the Qualities are Present, and then all members should go through the checklist. If any of the qualities are missing, they should then go through the processes outlined in How to Establish the Qualities.

1 Rodal, Alti and Nick Mulder, 1993, "Partnerships, Devolution and Power Sharing," *Optimum*. 24 no 3, Winter. pp 27-47

HOW TO DETERMINE IF THE QUALITIES ARE PRESENT

In order to determine if a given partnership has all ten qualities of effective partnerships, all members of the partnership must participate in a process of checking off each checkpoint in the list that follows, either negatively or positively. In order to check off each checkpoint, the participants must answer questions about the collaboration and about their involvement in it. To accurately check off each point, the members should not simply answer yes or no, but should study the point in detail.

To illustrate, the first checkpoint can be used as an example. The checkpoint is one of the aspects of having a solid base of joint commitment and understanding: that the partners either have common backgrounds or mandates, or go through a process involving extensive face-to-face contact to define problems or opportunities being addressed, and to understand each other's concerns. The questions that should be asked in order to check off the checkpoint, either negatively or positively, are: What are the partners' mandates? What are their backgrounds? Are they similar? If the answer is no, what concerns does each partner have? Do the other partners know about and understand these concerns? Do the partners agree about what issue their partnership is addressing? Do the partners have a similar narrative about the issue that the partnership is addressing? Do they have a similar understanding of how the partnership will address this issue? How much face-to-face contact have the partners had? After answering these questions, the members should know whether or not this part of the quality is present in their partnership.

Getting the Most Out of Partnerships provides lists of questions for each checkpoint, available in the sections entitled *Is it Missing from the Partnership*. It also provides guidelines for how the process of answering and discussing the questions should be undertaken. The following general principles are derived from those guidelines.

The first principle that should be followed during the checklist process is to define all terms unambiguously and clearly at the initiation of any discussion, and to continue to define new terms as

they arise. Little should be taken for granted. Partners need to agree on, and clearly define, all terms.

The second principle that should be followed is maintaining open and honest communication throughout the process. This is important in all parts of a partnership, but can be very difficult. Partners must share their perspective on the partnership at all steps of determining whether or not a quality is present.

The third principle is to keep the representatives of each partner consistent as much as possible. The process of figuring out if the partnership has all of the qualities that it needs, and building those that it does not, may take place over a series of sessions. When the same people participate in these sessions, they get to know each other and the partnership better than if the people change each time. It is also important to have representatives with enough knowledge of their organization and the issues that the partnership addresses to adequately represent the organization's interest in discussions. Keeping the same, appropriately knowledgeable individuals working consistently on the partnership builds trust, understanding and effectiveness.

Finally, it can be appropriate to bring in a broker, negotiator or neutral body to assist the process. Doing so is most advisable in collaborations where the partners are not progressing or are not getting along well. An outsider can bring new perspectives, mediate problems, and interpret partners to one another.

If the partners follow these principles during the process of determining whether or not a partnership has all of the ten qualities, at the end of the process they will have a more accurate reflection of the status of the partnership. Refer to these principles often, and make sure you are using them while employing the checklist.

CHECKLIST

- 1) The partnership has a solid base of joint commitment and understanding:
 - partners either have common backgrounds or mandates, or go through a process involving extensive face-to-face contact to define problems or opportunities being addressed, and to understand each other's concerns;
 - partners clearly define vision;
 - partners clearly define goal;
 - partners clearly define general methodology/strategies; and
 - partners clearly define relationship to one another.
- 2) There is a clear and appropriately detailed plan for achieving the goals of the partnership:
 - a plan exists;
 - the activities planned will lead to realization of goal;
 - the plan defines who will undertake each action;
 - the plan defines what resources they will use;
 - the plan defines a timeline for completing action;
 - the plan defines how action will be evaluated;
 - the plan includes reflection on the processes of the partnership; and
 - the plan addresses further continuation or ending of partnership.
- 3) Each partner clearly benefits from the partnership:
 - the activities of the partnership help each participant to achieve part of their mandate.
- 4) Sufficient and appropriate resources are committed from all partners for achieving the goals of the partnerships:
 - each partner contributes to the partnership;
 - all partners acknowledge that resources necessary to the partnership include more than financial resources;
 - there are enough resources available to achieve the aims of the partnership in the short term and long term;
 - there is a clear agreement as to who will provide specific resources, and when those resources will be provided;
 - the provision of resources is planned in a timely manner; and
 - if resources are acquired for the partnership, there is a plan for what to do with them after the partnership.
- 5) The partnership has an appropriate level of formality:
 - if the partnership has begun action, the partners have thought about formality and consciously decided how formal it should be; and
 - if the partnership is just being initiated, partners are discussing different structures.
- 6) The partnership has good leadership:
 - the partnership's leadership is defined;
 - there is openness in communication with the leadership;
 - the leadership has strong abilities in the areas of negotiation, team building, planning, evaluation, time management, financial management, conflict resolution, and stress management;
 - the leadership clearly supports and

- understands the vision and goals of the partnership;
 - the partners trust the leadership and are supportive of it; and
 - the leadership is open to change and improvement.
- 7) The partnership has clear and enforceable lines of accountability:
- each partner understands their responsibilities;
 - each partner reports thoroughly on their actions to other partners, leadership and to their organizations;
 - there are mechanisms for addressing non-fulfillment of responsibilities; and
 - there are mechanisms for monitoring each partner's progress.
- 8) Partners communicate in productive and supportive ways:
- there is a plan for communicating within the partnership;
 - there is a plan for communicating with the public;
 - each partner has a plan for communicating internally about the partnership;
 - all plans outline the frequency of communication;
 - all plans outline the general content of the communication;
 - all plans describe how information will be transmitted;
 - there are general ground rules and/or principles that guide the partnership's communication; and
 - potential conflict is addressed in the communication plan.
- 9) There is trust in the function of the partnership:
- partners are willing to share resources, success, and risk with one another to the extent that the partnership's actions demand it;
 - partners are able to fulfill the commitments that they make; and
 - partners are open with one another.
- 10) Accurate and appropriate indicators are used to monitor and improve the success and progress of the partnership:
- there are indicators of what the partnership will look like if it is successful;
 - there are indicators of what successful completion of each action of the partnership will look like;
 - the indicators are reflective of actual success;
 - the indicators are, in some way, measurable;
 - partners agree on the methods of measurement; and
 - there is a system in place to continuously improve the partnership based on the indicators.

HOW TO ESTABLISH THE QUALITIES

Once the partners have gone through the process of determining whether or not the qualities are all fully present in the partnership, the next step is to fill in any gaps. Some qualities may be wholly missing from the partnership, while others may be missing one or two elements. In either case, the partners must undertake a process for developing the quality.

Introducing each missing quality or element of a quality into a partnership will require renegotiation and reorganization of the existing relationship. If a broker or outside body is not already involved, it would be wise to consider involving one at this point. Whether or not the partners go through this process with a broker or negotiator, there are some general principles they should follow in generating each quality.

First, they should continue to follow the principles laid out for determining whether or not a quality exists.

Second, the members need to allow enough time to develop each quality and each aspect of each quality. Developing each of the qualities will require careful thinking and planning. Rushing the process, while it may save time in the short term, will likely lead to a less successful partnership. With some qualities, such as trust and common understanding, time, particularly time spent working together, is a necessary ingredient. Worrying that the quality is not immediately present, or rushing the process of developing the quality, will not aid the partnership in the long-term.

The third principle, and one closely tied to maintaining open communication, is to build consensus. Because a partnership is made up of independent groups or individuals who participate voluntarily, it is very important that all participants feel their needs are being met, and their concerns considered and addressed. While processes of democratic voting can work in partnerships, it is always important to make sure that every decision made in restructuring the partnership works for all of the partners.

The fourth principle that needs to be followed in restructuring or reorganizing a partnership is to keep a focus on reality. Sometimes partners may have expectations or desires of themselves or of their collaborators that are not realistic. Most often people will underestimate the amount of time or money a project will require, or will commit to doing more than they can manage. It is very important each partner analyze the commitments they make to the partnership. They must not make commitments they cannot fulfill, or that will cause them to overextend themselves.

The fifth principle should come into effect after the partners have negotiated new structures or new plans. At this point partners should formalize all agreements. Too much formality too early in a partnership can destroy creative momentum. In an established partnership that is restructuring or renegotiating this is much less of a risk. In such partnerships formalization, even just in the form of memoranda or letters of understanding (MOUs or LOUs), can do a great deal to make sure that the partners are committed to the changes and that the partnership moves forward.

The sixth principle that needs to be followed when renegotiating and restructuring the partnership is to involve representatives of each organization who have adequate authority to make decisions and commitments for the organization. During the process of renegotiation, all participants are going to need to make decisions and commitments about future actions and structures. If the representatives of any participant do not have enough authority to make such decisions, the process of renegotiation will take much longer and will be less effective.

The final principle needed to be followed in renegotiating or reorganizing partnerships is allowing for the possibility of dissolving the relationship. Sometimes partnerships are not the best way to address an issue. In some cases, groups find it too difficult to collaborate, or find that unilateral action would be much more effective. In cases where collaborators seem to have intractable disagreements, or are unable to find productive ways of working

together, it is important to let the partnership go and to pursue other ways of addressing the issue the partnership worked on. A decision to dissolve a partnership should be carefully considered prior to being taken. In situations where the partners seem to get nowhere renegotiating the partnership, the decision to dissolve the partnership should be taken.

By following these principles and processes, partnerships that are not doing well, or that are simply not doing as well as they could be, can achieve much greater success.

