

Developing quality partnerships for quality research

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Pertinent questions and sound methodologies are essential for quality research, as are quality partnerships. By what criteria do we select partners and how do we build meaningful partnerships that add value to our research efforts? And that contribute to improving the overall landscape for the development and use of research? We would like to propose several areas of concern for partnership development and management that many of us deal with on a daily basis and that might seem obvious but nonetheless merit repetition as we still do not integrate them fully into our work. Drawing on personal experience in a research network, this essay invites reflections from others in grappling with questions related to the development of quality partnerships for quality research.

We try to present here perspectives of research units, networks and institutions, including university-based ones, particularly in West and Central African contexts.

Articulate where you're going

It is dangerous to enter into partnership when your institution does not have a clear vision of what it is trying to accomplish and how, articulated in a multi-year strategic action plan. Projecting the kind of world we envision is sometimes more useful than starting with a set of problems we hope to resolve. Effective institutional leadership and an action plan based on empirical evidence and developed with wide participation are essential ingredients for driving a research agenda.

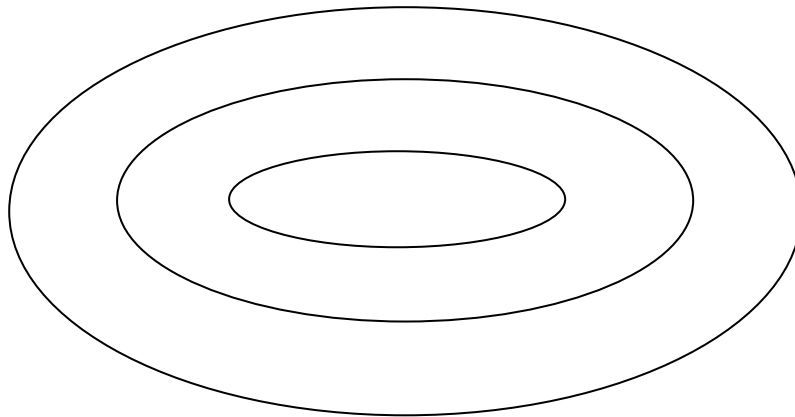
Map your institution's current and desired partnership configuration

To be strategic about partnership development, it can be advantageous to visualize an institution's current and desired partnership situation. This can be done on a set of concentric circles called a "Partner map" (see Figure 1 below) that shows where different partners are currently. Those that are closest to the heart of the institution's operations should be listed in the inner circle. Those important to the institution yet not intimately involved in determining strategic directions and in decision making should be listed in the second circle and those partners that are more peripheral in the outer circle. Partners not involved with the institution but which should be involved should be listed "off" the map. Through this exercise we might realize that key stakeholders who should be in the inner circle are in the second circle and that donors who should be in the second circle are too close to the heart of everyday work. If the

¹ The Network for Policy Research Review and Advice on Education and Training (NORRAG), www.norrag.org; NORRAG is coordinated from The Graduate Institute in Geneva, Switzerland. *NORRAG News* is edited by Kenneth King of the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom.

institutions' governing bodies are in the peripheral circle, this would indicate institutional problems. So the next step, after this diagnosis, is to draw arrows indicating our "desired" partner map. Who "off" the map would we like to move into the peripheral circle or the second circle? Indicate the desired move with an arrow. We can subsequently develop strategies to make the moves possible. Visualizing the desired partner configuration is a first step to making it happen.

Figure 1: Partner map template, for visualizing current and desired institutional situation



Put in place a team responsible for partnership development and resource mobilization

Partnership development is a team responsibility. Create a team with a clear mandate and the opportunity to meet or discuss monthly, in person or virtually via technologies. Document lessons as you go and share them within the institution so as to develop an entrepreneurial culture of quality partnership development and management. Be wary of outside consultants. Try as much as possible to promote partnership development and management competencies within the organization. If outside consultants are used, ensure that there will be a veritable contribution accompanied by internal appropriation of their work.

Create opportunities to meet with targeted partners

Conferences provide opportunities to meet with targeted partners, as does inviting them to events your institution organizes. After an event, or piggybacking on an event organized by a partner, consider organizing a round table to present your institution's strategic action plan. And be sure to follow up with institutions that expressed preliminary interest. Visits to partners you are most interested in attracting may be necessary. But go prepared, having researched the targeted partner's areas of interest and specific approaches and prepared digestible documentation on your institution's achievements. Partners will also inform themselves about your institution via internet, so make sure your web site is up to date.

Use concept notes and specific sums

Full blown proposals may sometimes be required when responding to calls for proposals, however letters of intent and concept notes are also useful in resource mobilization. Why invest many hours to develop a full blown proposal if we are not at least 60% sure that a partner will finance the project? Use a two-page concept note to initiate conversation with a partner and to obtain initial feedback that will inform and guide your next steps. And be sure

to indicate the range of funds required for the proposed activity. On the other hand, if a partner responded negatively to a full blown proposal, adapt and submit it to another partner. And remember that even a negative response may also be a stepping stone toward a favorable one on another project if that partner is important for your institution.

Develop negotiation skills and document what each partner brings to a collaborative initiative

The quality of institutional relationships can be improved through frank communication and regular evaluation. This requires discussing and documenting from the outset the philosophical basis for the partnership as well as what each partner will bring to the table in terms of resources but also what each partner hopes to gain. This last aspect is often neglected but when made explicit can promote more mutual respect and transparency. Relations of power sometimes keep us from negotiating for the benefit of our institutions, yet it is just such negotiation that can contribute to changing the balance of power and constructing relationships of mutual learning. Sometimes we acquiesce too quickly when we have a responsibility to educate our financial and technical partners about our real challenges and aspirations.

Ensure strong governance structures and sharing of institutional reports

We need to inspire confidence among our partners by keeping them informed of meetings and major decisions of governance structures. The institution's annual report with clear financial reporting in relation to the strategic action plan as well as by project and partner should be on file with pertinent national authorities and shared with each partner. But sharing the report is not sufficient. To ensure that major partners actually read it, consider soliciting feedback by email or phone or in person. This is an opportunity for letting your partners see how their contributions fit into the overall development of your institution and make your partner more committed not just to ensuring that specific project objectives are met but also that they contribute to achieving the vision articulated in your strategic action plan.

Balance short term and long term commitments

Every partnership has a cost and we need to ensure that the efforts we put into developing and maintaining the partnership merit what the institution obtains in return. Multi-year partnerships that allow us to deepen expertise and contributions in specific areas are most often preferable to shorter term contracts with high administrative costs. However, there may be specific reasons for accepting shorter term contracts, for example to get to know a new partner, to launch into and learn a new area of work, or to complement resources from another partner in an ongoing area of concern.

Conclusion

Partnerships, ill chosen and badly managed, can promote dependency and destroy rather than develop. Reflection, planning and teamwork can help us develop and deepen partnerships that serve the medium and long term aspirations of our organization and begin to improve the landscape in which we conduct research in West and Central Africa.

Resources

Resources on strategic partnership development and resource mobilization are available from the IDRC Partnership and Business Development Division (PBDD) at www.idrc.ca/en/ev-96648-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html.

A partnership evaluation tool is available in the 2007 Annual Report of the Educational Research Network for West and Central Africa (ERNWACA), Annex L, accessible from the ERNWACA Virtual Library at www.ernwaca.org or in *NORRAG News*, no. 35.

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