Cooperation in multi-stakeholder partnerships:

conflict management

Content

Introduction

Multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) are char-acterised by cooperation between an extremely diverse group of stakeholders. This central feature of MSPs serves as a key resource and at the same time gives rise to numerous challenges, not least conflict. Stakeholders differ in their goals, interests, communication styles, levels of power and influence, organisational structures, and working methods. If the partners in an MSP are to work together effectively, then it is fundamental that differences and challenges relating to coop-eration are recognised and conflict is addressed constructively.

These guidelines focus on managing disputes that arise between stakeholders within MSPs and that can restrict or hinder cooperation, or even render it impossible. These conflicts may pre-date the MSPs and impact upon cooperation (such as conflicts of interest over resources and its sustainable use which the MSP seeks to promote) or they may arise during the course of cooperation (for instance, due to different communication styles or the speed of decision-making).

Conflict is part of the human experience, be it at home or at work, between family members or team members, or within and between organisa-tions, states and all manner of institutions. Ongoing harmony and the absence of conflict are more the exception than the rule in a social or institutional context.

Conflict avoidance often stems from insecurity and fear of negative consequences, yet if left unaddressed and unresolved, conflict will become entrenched or intensify, detrimentally affecting cooperation. It is important that stakeholders within MSPs actively address disputes. Conflict resolution can have a positive effect in terms of promoting reconciliation, building trust, improving and reinvigorating working relationships, encouraging sustainable solutions and creating a constructive environment. It allows partners to cooperate effectively (once again) on achieving the goals of the MSP.

In putting together these guidelines, we have drawn on scientific literature and manuals, our own experiences and discussions with colleagues who have practical experience in the field. The guidelines are designed to help MSP practitioners and MSP advisors to understand conflict and its causes and identify solutions.

One thing is for sure: tension and conflict are a fact of life. They are not easy to resolve and some disputes are ongoing, but it is worth taking the time to recognise and address them, especially in an MSP context.

Causes of conflict in MSPs
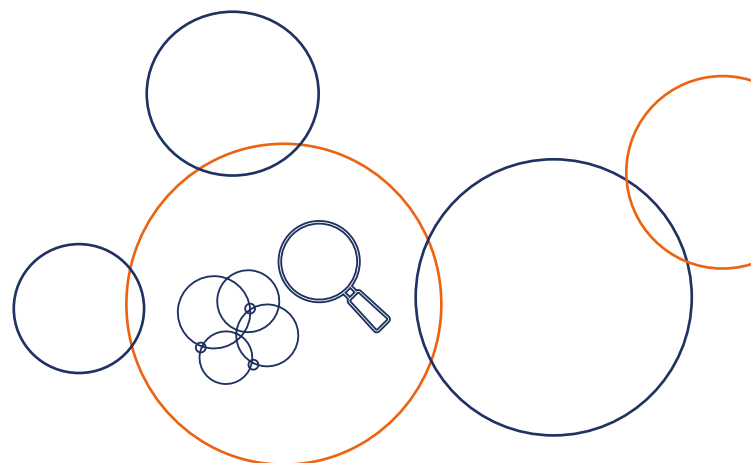
Conflicts are social situations in which opposing views and interests collide with one another. They can lead to such discord that it is no longer possible for stakeholders to work together. Conflicts can differ greatly in nature. They can be caused by all manner of things, manifest themselves very differently and vary in intensity and duration. When it comes to understanding and tackling them, it is helpful to distinguish between the informational and the relational level. The former concerns facts and figures, while the latter refers to emotions, needs, desires, self-esteem, attitude and values. Conflict frequently involves both levels.

The following factors are often reported, investigated and addressed in MSP manuals as the causes of conflict.

Differing perceptions and assessments of problems and contexts: Different stakeholders possess different information or interpret the same information differently. Stakeholders from different sectors of society or regions of the world may perceive problems, risks and potential solutions differently based on their individual experiences and perspectives. They also have different priorities, resulting in different assessments of the urgency and necessity of particular measures. Sometimes you could almost say they live in different worlds.

EXAMPLE

Different stakeholders may assess and manage risks differently. In MSPs designed to improve occupational health and safety for (smallholder) farmers, for instance, members often have divergent opinions on the best way to manage the risks associated with dangerous pesticides. Pesticide manufacturers and retailers frequently stress the need for training and protective equipment. However, environmental organisations and smallholder associations consider it more important to put a stop to the use of these pesticides and replace them with alternatives. They believe that, even with training, there is little that can be done to change the way pesticides are handled day to day in rural areas.

MSPs are usually marked by **power imbalances** in terms of financial resources, political influence and expertise, among other factors. Stakeholders with more power are usually able to assert their views and opinions more vigorously, which leads to conflict with less powerful stakeholders. If members of MSPs are to work together effectively, then account must be taken of these power imbalances by addressing problems and identifying opportunities resulting from the differences in perspective. 'If the differences remain undiscussed (even though all cooperation partners know of their existence, but interpret them completely differently), this will usually lead to a weakening of engagement among the cooperation partners' (GIZ Capacity Works 2022, p. 54).

The different goals and interests of stakeholders are not always compatible and this can give rise to conflict when it comes to agreeing specific strategies and activities for the partnership. This can be due to the sector in which a cooperation partner operates. For instance, companies do not always pursue the same goals and interests as non-governmental organisations or trade unions. Differences may also occur at individual level if particular persons deem certain goals a priority and pursue them vehemently.

Conflicts of interest are often tied to **competition over limited resources**. The resources that can be deployed for partnership activities are always finite, be they finance, time or expertise. Conflict can arise over the (perceived) equitable distribution of these resources or there can be a clash of opinions on the most effective way of leveraging them. It is also not uncommon, that donors finance individual activities of an MSP rather than the entire partnership, and that MSPs submit specific funding applications for specific projects or seek investors. However, because specific activities might be especially relevant to certain stakeholders or stakeholder groups, these parties might feel disadvantaged if especially these activities are not financed or receive less finance than others.

EXAMPLE

In one MSP focusing on the set-up for sustainable development of an urban neighbourhood, disadvantaged youth groups were the main voices calling for the construction of more cycle and in-line skating paths. However, because the local authority had already invested heavily in expanding cycle paths in another neighbourhood the year before, municipal finance was now allocated to other projects. As the conflict escalated, the youth groups threatened to pull out of the MSP and lambast it on social media as 'nothing more than a public relations exercise for adults'. The dispute was resolved by reviewing all the activities of the MSP and striking a better balance between different interests.

Communication problems are a frequent cause of conflict, including in MSPs. Different languages, communication channels and preferences can give rise to misunderstandings and gaps in communication. Information that is incomplete, unclear or contradictory can cause insecurity and confusion. Such situations can usually be resolved swiftly where there is trust between parties. However, in MSPs, where trust first has to be built and perpetually nurtured, this can quickly lead to conflict. A lack of openness and transparency can foster mistrust and conflict, if information is withheld or not shared with all parties simultaneously, or if this is suspected to be the case. Last but not least, lack of listening, empathy and understanding can create tension and conflict.

Different values and identities: Stakeholders from different sectors or areas often differ in at least some of their values, convictions and norms, which influences their interests and actions. A failure to understand or take account of these differences can easily lead to conflict. Fundamental value differences rooted in political visions and/or religious convictions, and identification with these values on the part of stakeholders present a serious challenge to cooperation. Values and identities are bound up with strong emotions, and differences in values hinder mutual understanding, making it difficult to build.

This is also linked in many cases to stakeholders having **stereotypical views** of each other. Stereotypes are often negative and can lead to parties failing to listen to and making no attempt to understand one another. This can bring about misunderstandings, rejection, injustice and discrimination, which in turn give rise to tension, marginalisation and conflict.

Stereotypes

The way our brains work means we tend to form stereotypes, that is, simplistic views of certain groups or categories of people. Stereotypes arise when we hastily categorise people based on limited information or under time pressure. While not necessarily negative, they can lead to prejudice, discrimination and unfair treatment if they are accepted and applied without reflection. To be aware of creating stereotypes, to think critically and be open to diverse perspectives is crucial to promoting equitable social interaction. The same applies to cooperation within MSPs. We can assume that all stakeholders must address their own socialisation and their views of other areas of society if they are to enjoy peer-to-peer interaction and leverage effectively the diverse range of perspectives and contributions within the MSP.

Unfulfilled expectations, failure or insufficient success within an MSP can also give rise to conflict (see, for example, Sanginga 2007), particularly if stakeholders attribute the failure to a lack of engagement or contributions on the part of other partners. Poor and unclear communication can result in members of an MSP having different or wrong expectations. The associated sense of disappointment can then lead to a loss of trust. Differing views among stakeholders as to what constitutes success and how failure should be viewed (for instance, as a set-back or a learning opportunity) can have a detrimental effect on cooperation.

A failure to clearly define partner roles and responsibilities within an MSP can lead to **role conflict**. Uncertainty about who is responsible for which task or decision can result in activity overlap, diffusion of responsibility and conflict. Partners may also have different ideas of their role within the MSP. Different styles of working, decision-making processes or communication patterns can be a factor in creating the impression among partners that others are failing to fulfil their roles or to fulfil them properly.

MSPs are sometimes established in response to official regulations or legal requirements. This type of **mandated or prescribed partnership** can establish cooperation arrangements between opposing stakeholders, but these players usually show little commitment and do not really identify with the joint project. Mandated cooperation is not always able to reduce conflict; the power imbalances and limited opportunities for learning can result in disputes re-emerging at a later stage (see, for example, Gray & Purdy 2018).

EXCURSUS: Conflict levels

In the MSP Guide (Brouwer et al 2016, pp. 85 ff.), conflict management is discussed as a principle of effective MSPs, since conflict resolution is a success factor in such partnerships. The conflicts in view here are those that give rise to MSPs in the first place, as well as those that can emerge in the course of cooperation within MSPs:

- **Data or information conflicts:** Which facts and figures are accurate? Lack of information. Different interpretations of facts.

- **Conflicts of interest:** Who is permitted to use the scarce water that is available and for what purpose?

- **Structural conflicts:** Resource distribution, legislation and rules, e.g. structural discrimination against women.

- **Value conflicts:** e.g. markets as the solution versus scepticism towards capitalism.

- **Relational conflicts** between individuals, misunderstandings, negative emotions.

EXCURSUS: Stages of conflict

Conflict can give rise to accusations, disputes, deadlock and discontinuation of cooperation within MSPs. It is important to understand the cause of the conflict in question, the extent to which the stakeholders are embroiled in it and, most importantly, how they can free themselves of the conflict. Conflict researcher Friedrich Glasl has developed a model that describes nine stages and three levels of conflict escalation, and outlines solutions for the different stages (Glasl 2004). Typical results patterns are assigned to each of these:

Stages of conflict	Conflict levels
1. Tension: Different opinions collide with each other.	**Win-win:** The parties find a solution agreeable to both of them.
2. Debates and polemics: Parties attempt to convince each other of their own standpoints.	
3. Actions instead of words: Arguments become unimportant – precedents are set, for example, by pressing ahead with a project before the parties are in agreement on it.	
4. Coalitions: Parties seek out allies and supporters.	**Win-lose:** Some parties win and others lose.
5. Loss of face: There is an increase in personal attacks and unfairness.	
6. Strategies of threat: Opponents issue threats to one another.	
7. Limited destruction: All parties suffer (limited) damage.	**Lose-lose:** A 'solution' in which all parties lose.
8. Total annihilation: Everyone else is drawn into the conflict.	
9. Together into the abyss: Destructive fury is the order of the day, with parties out to harm each other.	

Not every conflict escalates through all nine levels. This escalation model simply describes the development of conflict where the parties fight it out to the bitter end. There are certainly opportunities to step away from these stages, though this becomes more difficult as the conflict escalates. What could initially still be resolved through bilateral talks may at a later stage require professional support. Glasl's model thus also points to various **conflict resolution strategies** for the different levels, though hardly any solutions have been specified for individual stages. There is often overlap between solutions and a number of different approaches to resolving conflict, given that each conflict is unique.

Stages 1-3: Self-help is an option. The parties can work together to find a solution.

Stages 2-3: Facilitation is required or assistance from the immediate environment.

Stages 3-5: External professional support and guidance for the process

Stages 4-6: External support for the socio-therapeutic process

Stages 5-7: External professional mediation

Stages 6-8: Arbitration proceedings and similar

Stages 7-9: Intervention is required 'from above', e.g. at the leadership level of MSP partners.

It is easy to see that external professional support is often advisable in MSP conflicts. This can range from facilitating individual meetings to longer-term process support and mediation.
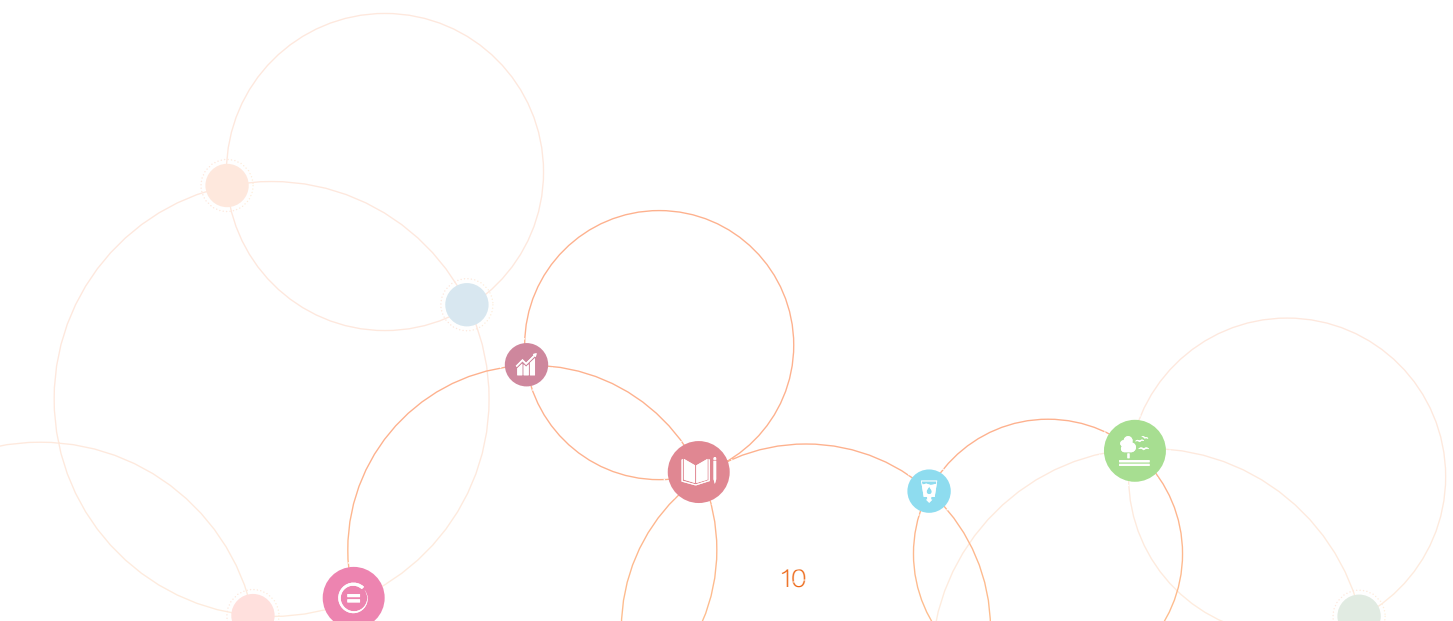
Approaches to conflict prevention and resolution
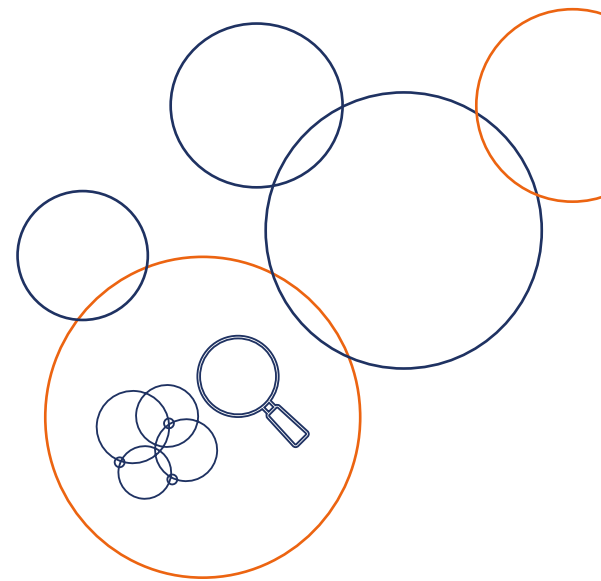
Like the causes and trajectories of conflict, the approaches to tackling and managing conflict vary greatly. The focus should always be on the objective of the MSP itself, namely for its members to work together to create added value for the common good. Conflict resolution is thus not only an achievement in and of itself, but is also relevant to the shared vision and mission upon which all partners have agreed.

Facts and shared goals

Fact-based work in MSPs: For MSPs to be effective and to prevent and resolve conflict, they should always work on the basis of facts and scientific findings. There are several **reasons** for this:

○ **Trust-building:** Facts serve as a common basis for objective discussion. Sharing verifiable facts and figures allows partners to build trust and create a common basis for cooperation.

○ **Informed decision-making and effective problem-solving:** Facts provide information and data that are foundational when it comes to sound decision-making and strategising. Analysing facts, figures and data enables partnerships to better understand the origins of problems and take targeted measures to address these issues effectively and efficiently. Cooperation between stakeholders with different perspectives and interests within MSPs can help to prevent potential bias or one-sided perspectives.

○ **Transparency and accountability:** Working on the basis of fact enables MSPs to create transparency and provide accountability. All partners are able to grasp the logic behind decisions and measures that are undergirded by verifiable facts. This encourages openness and makes it possible to review the results and the decisions taken.

Another foundational element in preventing and resolving conflict is the use of discussion and negotiation techniques that help **partners focus on their common objective**. This requires stakeholders to be aware of how their own positions and interests may clash with the interests of other stakeholders. Adopting an attitude focused on maximising added value and achieving the common objective provides a good basis for mutual understanding and joint action, akin to the motto of focusing on milestones, not on conflicts.

Nonetheless, interest-based negotiation processes (see below) are also helpful as a means of avoiding skimming over the differences between stakeholders. Especially in groups with power imbalances, discussing and becoming familiar with each other's points of view provides a solid basis for joint brainstorming and co-creation work.

If the views and perspectives of individual partners are so divergent that it is impossible to formulate joint goals and agreement even after extensive joint efforts, then MSPs could also seek for other organisations from the same stakeholder group as partners.

EXAMPLE

A number of the companies involved in a standardisation MSP were not willing to comply to environmental standards that had the backing of all other stakeholders. This led to a protracted deadlock in the partnership's work. After the companies in question threatened to withdraw from the MSP if their wishes were not honoured, several partners decided to approach other companies and invite them to join the MSP. The move paid off. Ultimately, the MSP reached an agreement after several of the companies obstructing progress left, while several others ultimately agreed to the standards favoured by the majority.

EXCURSUS: Sustainability strategy and feminist development policy

The German Government report *Transformationsbericht der Bundesregierung zu internationaler Verantwortung und Zusammenarbeit – Herausforderungen und Wege der Transformation* ('Transformation report by the German Government on international responsibility and cooperation – challenges and pathways of transformation') (Deutscher Bundestag 2023, p. 18) (German only) states: 'Another fundamental element for open dialogue with partner countries is found in reflecting in depth on the impact of the colonial era and analysing our own concept of development. Colonial continuities and racist mindsets must be identified and consciously dismantled. Asymmetrical power and dependence structures are subjected to scrutiny. This new understanding is reflected, for instance, in BMZ's feminist development policy and its Africa Strategy.'

Germany's feminist development policy seeks to dismantle discriminatory structures and eliminate imbalances in power for equal participation by all people in social, political and economic life – irrespective of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, skin colour, disability or other characteristics. Reflecting on the role of the Global North is also relevant when it comes to pursuing a post-colonial approach. Consideration must be given to structural causes and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as power hierarchies, legislation, social norms and gender roles.

This approach is scientifically underpinned by feminist standpoint theory and social psychology theories such as social constructivism, social identity and critical theory, which address among other things the fact that people's knowledge, perspectives and reality shape their social and cultural contexts, and the ways in which this plays itself out. This constitutes a recognition that objectivity and a non-judgemental approach are not possible, a basic assumption that is also reflected in the following well-known quote from physicist Heinz von Foerster: 'Objectivity is a subject's delusion that observing can be done without him.'[or her]

The Wheel of Power, also known as the Wheel of Power and Privilege, helps individuals become aware of their own privilege and position of power. It also shows how social categories and experiences of discrimination can intersect with one another. The Wheel of Power can be used by groups or individuals for reflection and learning.

The 'Managing power imbalances' tool helps to identify and recognise sources of power and to develop measures for addressing power imbalances within MSPs. First, any power imbalances within the MSP are (jointly) identified and the causes ascertained (e.g. resources, formal positions, values and orientations). Possible measures and steps are then proposed and examined to determine whether and how they could be implemented for the MSP in question. (UN & TPI, 2020: SDG Partnership Guidebook, pp. 88 ff.)

Communication and interaction

Agreement on the basics of communication within an MSP means that all stakeholders agree on common rules and principles for communication. This covers information-sharing, the exchange of views, listening, showing respect and understanding for each other's perspectives, engaging in constructive conflict resolution, jointly agreeing on deadlines and meetings, participation in consultations, and the right to speak and length of speeches in MSP meetings. Agreeing on a common basis for communication enables effective and harmonised cooperation - with greater transparency and mutual understanding and with less misunderstandings. Facilitators sometimes introduce these basic rules at the start of a workshop or they allow participants to draw them up among themselves. In this way, MSP stakeholders can also draft their basic rules on an ongoing basis.

Respecting diversity and different resources within MSPs means recognising and valuing the various contributions and perspectives of stakeholders. This includes all kinds of resources that the different players have to offer: finance, information, knowledge, experiences, advocacy for human rights, climate targets and other values, credibility, and human resources. All stakeholders have specific contributions they can make to resolving the complex issues at hand. The wide range of perspectives helps partners to adopt different standpoints and develop more comprehensive solutions. This enhances the quality of potential MSP activities.

Ultimately, mutual respect strengthens the partnerships by creating a positive working environment and a sense of solidarity, which is foundational for jointly addressing difficulties that arise in the course of cooperation.

The, at times stereotypical, views we have of others influence the way we perceive and interpret their behaviour, which serves to perpetuate the stereotype. It is thus important for stakeholders within MSPs to familiarise themselves with the **identity and values of their fellow stakeholders** and to have an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives, convictions and values. This can be systematically encouraged using a range of methods, including storytelling and active listening.

Storytelling enables stakeholders to share their stories, experiences and backgrounds with each other and to come to understand their different identities, origins, values and motives. This tool can be used in the initiation and design phase of MSP meetings, for instance, so that all stakeholders can get better acquainted with one another and set aside any prejudices.
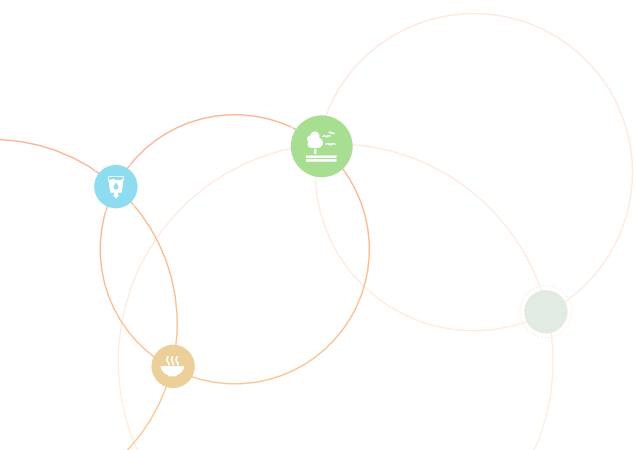
All MSP success factors, from cooperation management and resources to monitoring, contribute directly or indirectly to establishing positive cooperation arrangements. It is also important for initiators, leading stakeholders and secretariats to lead by example in terms of the desired behaviour. In this context, effective communication depends not merely on useful tools and methods for group work, but also on **individual skills**, most notably the ability to listen and to learn together through dialogue. The requirements for individuals who design, run, advise and implement MSPs are also stringent in this regard, and it is extremely important to the success of MSPs that these persons receive training and coaching, and have the opportunity to engage in dialogue.

Active listening

Active listening is a key skill for familiarising oneself with the identity and values of others. It is about listening attentively and empathetically with a view to truly understanding what others are saying and experiencing. Being aware of one's own views is a prerequisite to doing so. Active listening also involves asking questions for clarification and to avoid misunderstandings. It enables stakeholders to respect each other's perspectives and values and establish a relationship based on trust. In the event of conflict, it is particularly important to slow down the discussion ('first, take a deep breath, then respond') and ensure that participants express themselves clearly and understand what other participants are saying. Active listening is the primary means of supporting both of these endeavours. This kind of dialogue encourages reflection on one's own views and can play a decisive role in developing common goals and even new ideas and solutions.

Negotiations play a key part in resolving conflicts within MSPs by offering a structured and facilitated framework for open communication and information-sharing. They allow interests to be clarified, along with roles and responsibilities. By working towards a consensus or, failing that, a compromise, negotiations help to identify common interests and objectives and thus establish trust, particularly where long-term agreements can be concluded. An effective negotiation process requires time, patience and a willingness to compromise on the part of all stakeholders.

SPECTRUM OF NEGOTIATION APPROACHES

	Adversarial	Interest-based	Value-maximisation
Goal	Maximising the value to my organisation at the expense of the other: **Win – lose**	Ensuring all parties in the negotiation gain sufficient value to have their interests met: **Min win – min win**	Maximising the added-value, collaborative impact of the partnership along with the value gained by all parties: **Max win – max win – max impact**
Focus	Focuses on individual self-interest	Focuses on all parties' stated interests	Focuses on the collaborative advantage of the partnership, along with the widest set of partner interests towards which the partnership could contribute
Style	Argument	Conversation and enquiry	Brainstorming and co-creation
Effect	Negative effect on relationship	Positive effect on relationship	Highly positive effect on relationship

Source: The Partnering Initiative 2020: The SDG Partnership Guidebook, p. 43

Structures and institutions

An equitable environment and clear governance structures, that guarantee all stakeholders a voice and opportunities for participation and co-determination, promote equitable cooperation in MSPs. These could be safeguarded, for example, by means of regular meetings, workshops or consultations. Clear structures and processes should be established to govern decision-making and the distribution of responsibilities and tasks within MSPs. In so doing, it must be ensured that all stakeholders are equally represented in the decision-making bodies. These bodies facilitate regular dialogue, providing a forum for discussing emerging issues, drafting solutions and issuing recommendations. Transparency is a key factor in creating trust and an equitable environment. All stakeholders must be afforded simultaneous access to information, decisions and relevant documentation. It is important that the processes and procedures are clear and comprehensible, and that all players have the opportunity to contribute in equal measure. Decisions should be made by consensus wherever possible, with a view to involving all partners and securing long-term acceptance on their part. Majority decisions can be used as a back-up option where consensus cannot be reached.

TIP:

Governance structure, legal form and funding are elements of the institution- alisation of MSPs. These practical tips provide a brief overview on institutional- isation and financing, as well as on legal forms (German only).

Working together intentionally within an MSP to develop **conflict resolution mechanisms** can also help to address different views and perceptions and to resolve any arising conflicts fairly and constructively. Account should be taken in this context of the conventions of each stakeholder. Which mechanisms do they use for conflict resolution, which traditions do they uphold, and which useful tools can they contribute? Asking these questions usually unlocks a treasure trove of resources that can be used by partners within an MSP.

The first step generally involves conducting a joint **conflict analysis**, that is, a systematic examination and evaluation of conflicts between MSP stake- holders. It incorporates the process of identifying conflicts, examining their origins and analysing their dynamics to assess the potential for escalation, as well as analysing their impact on the MSP. The conflict analysis helps stakeholders gain a compre- hensive picture of the existing conflicts, reflect upon their own role and responsibilities, and develop appropriate conflict resolution measures. External process experts often provide support in

conflict analyses. If relevant, these professionals conduct individual interviews and present initial insights to the entire group for discussion, with a view to initiating a joint process for identifying solutions.

Conflict resolution mechanisms within an MSP include negotiation processes (see above) and the (temporary) formation of working groups compris- ing key individuals from different stakeholder groups to clear up misunderstandings or prepare compromise solutions. If communication between conflict parties is impossible for a time, then MSP secretariats can support the process by engaging in a form of shuttle diplomacy whereby they speak in turn to each of the parties individually. However, where there is marked escalation in a conflict, it is advisable to bring in external mediation services.

If conflicts arise between individual stakeholder organisations or networks, it often becomes difficult for them to work together in an MSP, as some of these conflicts affect the MSP and their individual role within it. In this instance, the MSP management, the MSP secretariat or other players close to the MSP can discuss the problem with the relevant individuals and, where applicable, offer support or mediation. As a general principle, partners should not burden the MSP with their own internal conflicts. If necessary, this principle can also be incorporated into the MSP's basic rules of cooperation. If internal conflict means a partner can no longer participate effectively in the MSP, then one option is for this partner's membership to be suspended until agreement has been reached.

Grievance mechanisms can afford partners an opportunity to address perceived discrimination and similar issues to enable these issues to be handled fairly within the MSP. These processes can also help to prevent similar conflicts in the future.
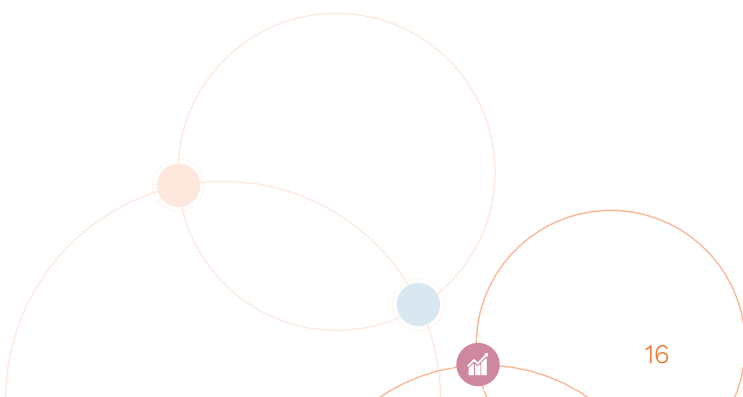
The Problem Tree is a tool for creating a structured analysis of the causes and effects of a problem or conflict. The branches and fruit represent effects, while the roots denote causes. The process of analysing a problem and breaking it down into smaller, manageable units promotes understanding and helps in getting to the heart of the issue.

Finally, mechanisms or processes can be used that enable **individual stakeholders or stakeholder groups to establish their positions on their own initially**, without the fear of having to immediately defend these positions or of losing face. For example, the MSP secretariat can organise workshops and facilitation for individual stakeholder groups to aid them in preparing to (re)engage in cooperation within the MSP. Some MSPs have taken this approach as a means of allowing women's or youth groups to set out their positions and draft recommendations.

EXAMPLE

Ahead of the inaugural meeting of an African MSP on nature conservation that started with 15 member countries, representatives of environmental authorities and national parks were invited to a dedicated workshop to share information and ideas and prepare a joint presentation on their priorities. This presentation was subsequently delivered to the other partners (private foundations, enterprises and regional organisations) to enable discussion of the objectives and activities of the prospective MSP. The advance workshop was not only held to agree common priorities, but also to offer participants an opportunity to practice giving presentations to stakeholders hitherto unknown to them.

Building long-term trust

Open and honest communication is decisive for building trust. The stakeholders should be prepared to share information and address any concerns.

It is important that all partners make good on their promises and commitments. This serves to underscore their **credibility and trustworthiness**. Dealing openly with difficulties and being prepared to reach compromises in the event of differing opinions helps to establish trust.

By **working together and supporting each other**, stakeholders build confidence among themselves. The focus should be on achieving common objectives and making the MSP a success. It is nonetheless advisable to invest in team building activities that go beyond mere cooperation as an MSP, such as informal initiatives on the fringe of decision-making body meetings or at a retreat. This encourages stakeholders to get to know each other and helps to reduce potential prejudices between people (groups) who have previously had virtually no contact with one another.

As mentioned above in the context of governance structures, **transparency** concerning decision-making processes, resource distribution and responsibilities boosts trust. The MSP must be seen to act fairly if it is not to squander the trust of partners.

Sometimes it is necessary to first build certain **capacities** within MSPs to be able to execute the partnership in the first place. Conducting **joint training** for stakeholders has proven an effective strategy when it comes, for instance, to them becoming acquainted with potential governance structures and working together to develop their own. The same applies to communication and negotiation strategies that can be practised jointly. This not only develops the necessary capacity, but also strengthens trust and cooperation.

It is important to **evaluate the MSPs regularly** and to make adjustments as necessary. This shows a will to improve and develop the partnership, which in turn boosts confidence. Joint self-evaluation is also useful, for instance, reflecting regularly on cooperation: What is going well? What is not going so well? What might we want to change? Annual gatherings or strategy retreats are especially suited to these activities. Such events should also be used to address difficulties and failures, with external facilitation if applicable. Open communication encourages the division of responsibilities and shared learning from mistakes.

Partnerships2030 has devised a self-assessment tool that can be used by individuals, a secretariat or an entire stakeholder group, and a workshop concept that can be implemented in groups.

The following saying is most relevant: **'Trust takes years to build, seconds to break, and forever to repair.'** Once there is mistrust, it can take a long time to rebuild trust, which will rarely be as strong as it once was. This is where patience is required, along with a particular focus on the aforementioned factors and activities for establishing long-term trust.
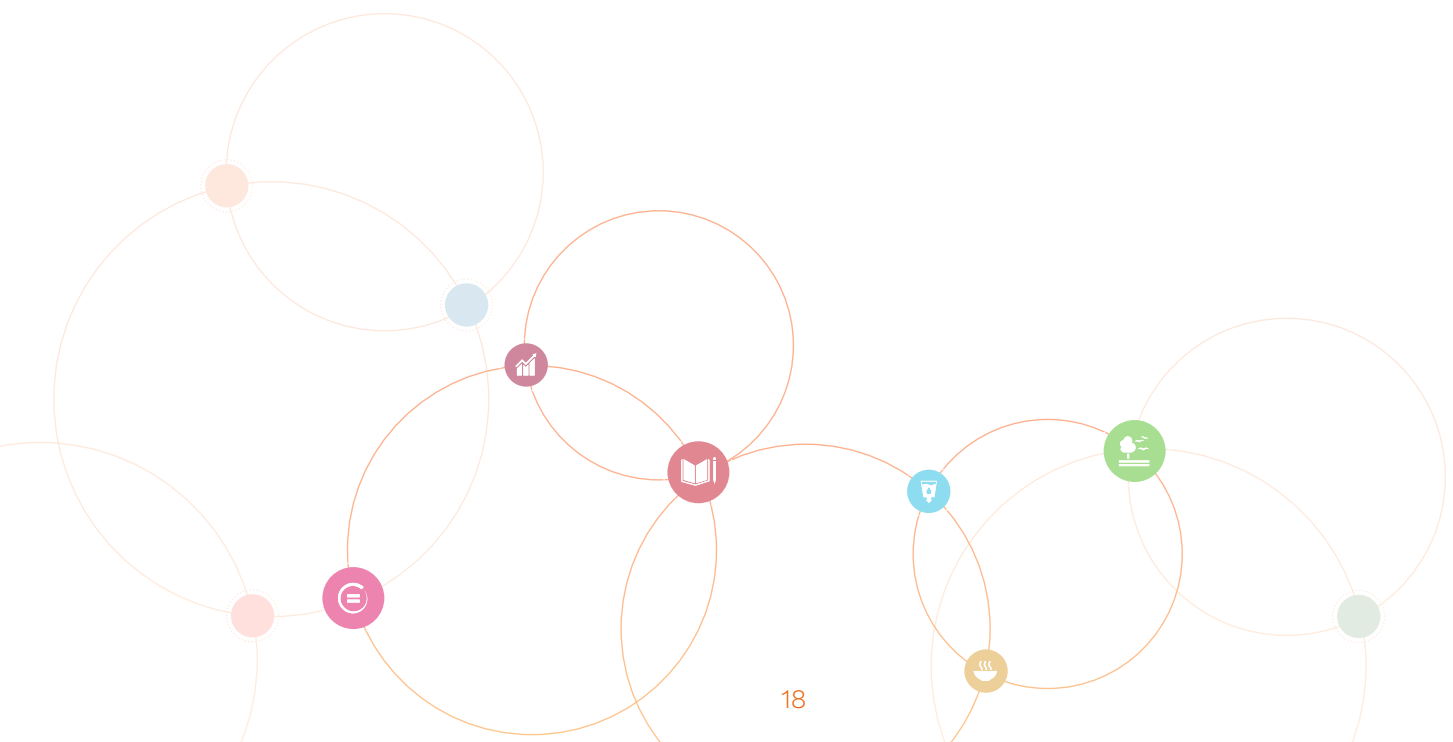
More information and support

You can find more information about MSPs on our website:
www.partnerschaften2030.de and Our Services – Partnerships2030.

Partnerships2030 is also happy to provide advice on an individual basis. If you require this service, please do not hesitate to contact us at: info@partnerschaften2030.de, phone: +49 228 4460-3357

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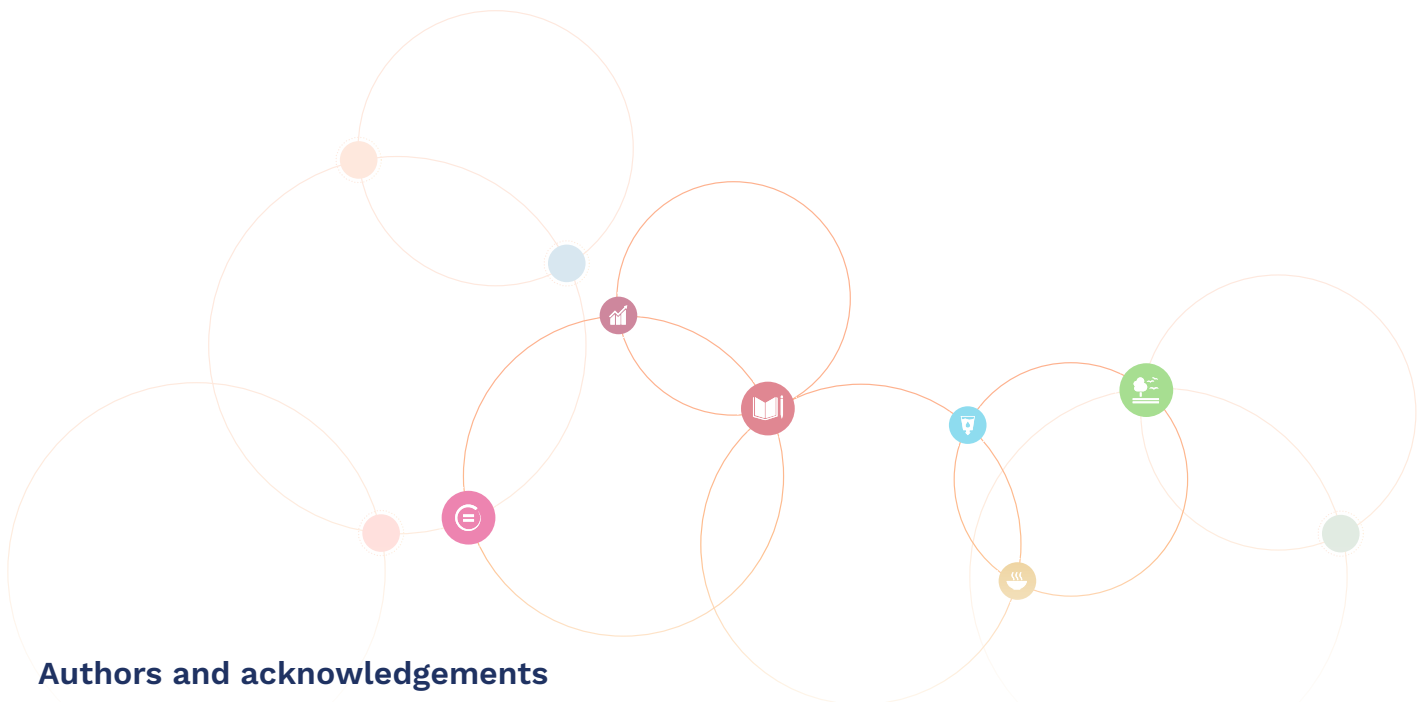
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The Partnering Initiative & UN DESA, The SDG Partnership Guidebook: A practical guide to building high-impact multi-stakeholder partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (by Darian Stibbe & Dave Prescott), New York, USA/Oxford, UK, 2020

Recommendations for further reading on this subject are available from Partnerships2030.

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