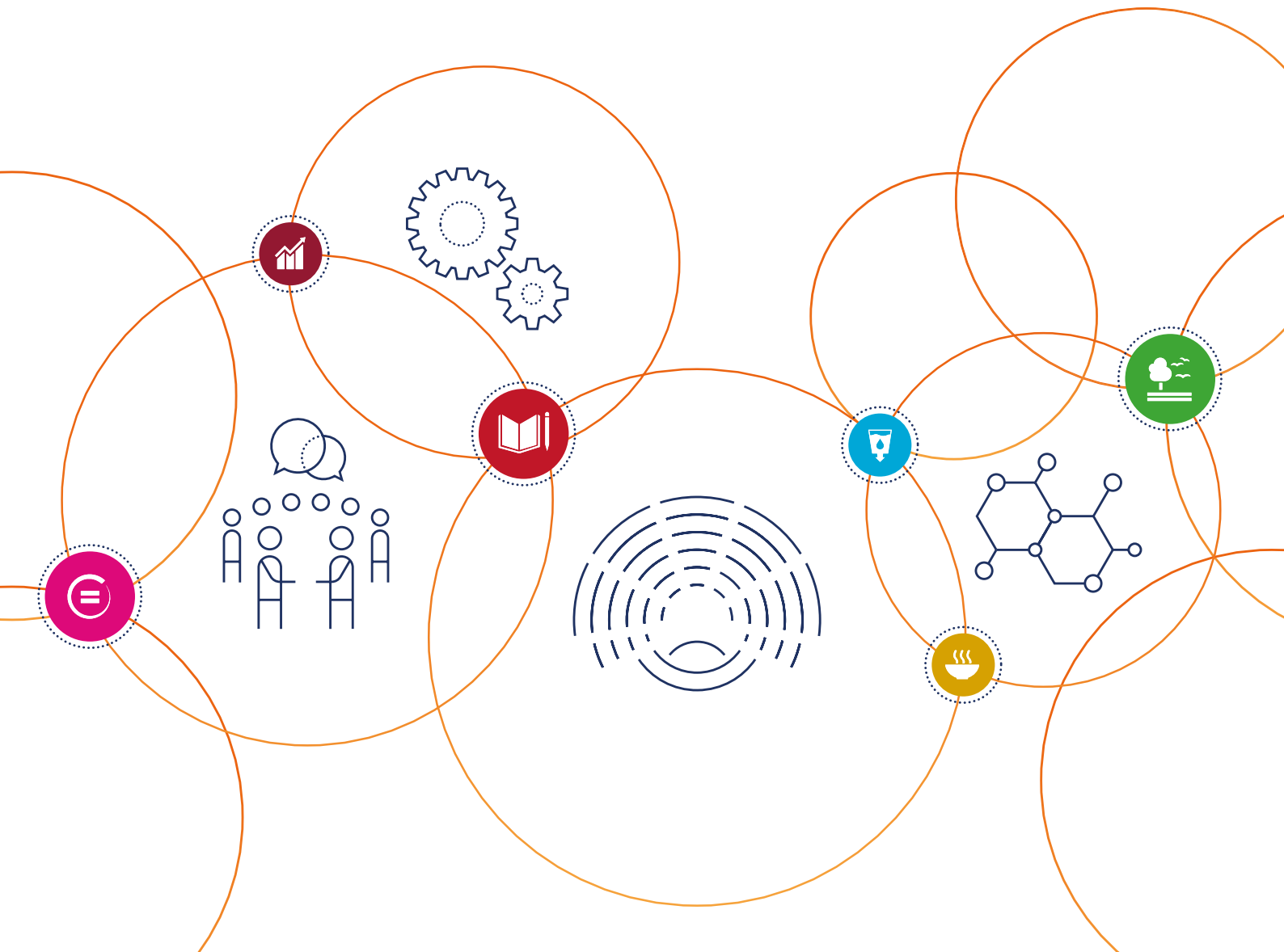


Collaboration on an equal footing in multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs)

A practical guide



Published by:

Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Registered offices

Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

**Partnerships2030 –
Platform for Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for
Implementing the 2030 Agenda**

Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 32 + 36
53113 Bonn, Germany

T +49 228 44 60 3539
F +49 228 44 60 803539

E info@partnerschaften2030.de
I www.partnerschaften2030.de

Responsible

Susanne Salz und Jan-Lukas Nienhaus, Bonn

Authors

Dr. Minu Hemmati, Berlin

Design/layout

DIAMOND media GmbH, Neunkirchen-Seelscheid,
www.diamond-media-pr.de

On behalf of

the German Federal Ministry for
Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Division G 40 Policy issues of cooperation with
civil society, private organisations

Bonn, 2024

Note: As this is a translation of the original text,
errors may occur.

On behalf of

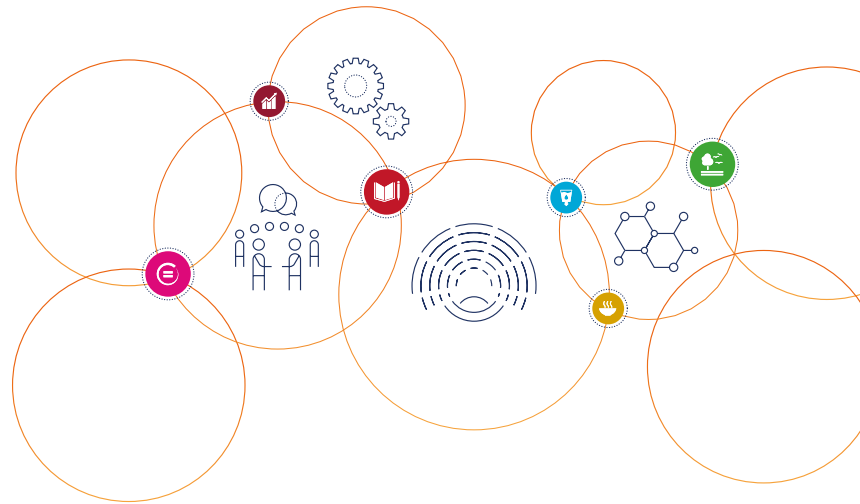


Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

Content

Summary	4
Introduction	5
1. Root causes of power imbalances	6
2. What is collaboration on an equal footing?	7
3. Why is collaboration on an equal footing so important for an MSP's success?	9
4. Promoting collaboration on an equal footing within MSPs	11
4.1 Individual level	12
4.2 Relationships	13
4.3 Structures and processes	14
4.4 Culture of collaboration on an equal footing	16
5. Suitable methods, formats and tools	17
6. Promotion of collaboration on an equal footing by individual MSP stakeholders	20
7. Literature and methods	22
Quoted literature	22
Methodology and further reading	22
Authors and acknowledgements	23

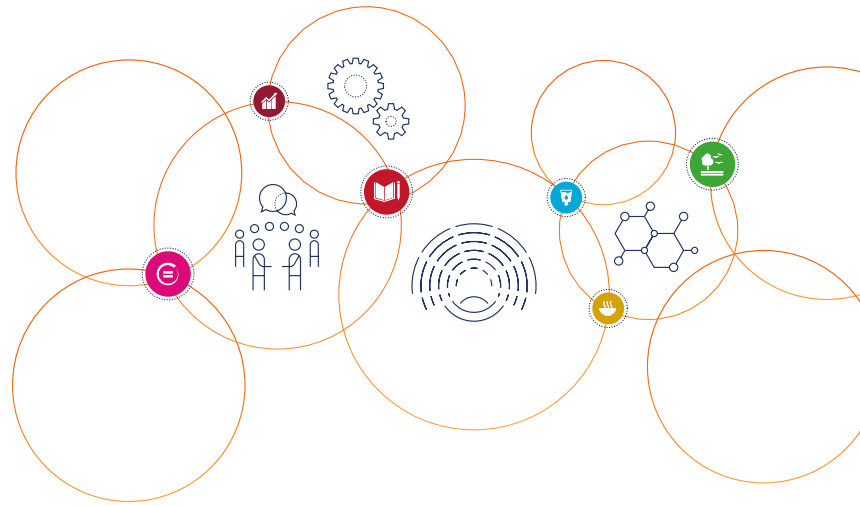
Summary



The core elements of collaboration on an equal footing in MSPs can be summed up as follows:

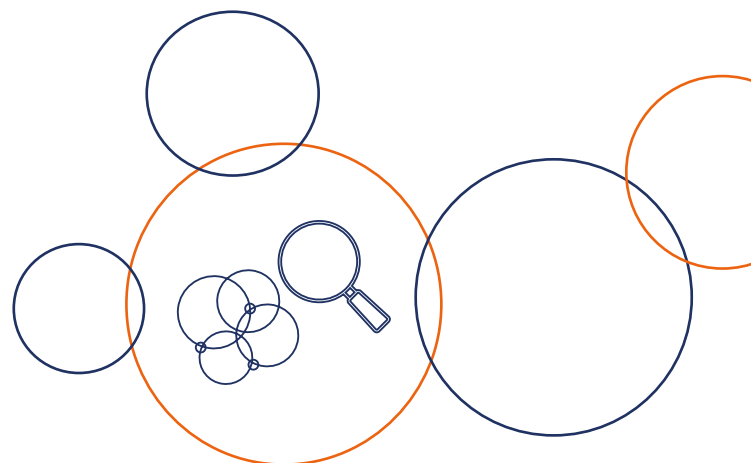
- Collaboration on an equal footing is key for the sustainable success of MSPs and for implementing sustainability across the board. Without **SDG 10 – Reduced inequalities** – the other SDGs cannot be achieved.
- **Partners are diverse, but collaborate on an equal footing, and their diverse contributions are of equal value to the partnership.** Obviously, equality before the law remains an inviolable principle.
- **Respect, trust and equality** are closely connected, and all contribute to an open and col-laborative atmosphere.
- **Trust is a complex issue.** We place trust in people's characters and/or skills. Trust can exist between individuals, institutions and/or stakeholder groups.
- The **joint will** to achieve something for the common good and the observable fact that **everyone contributes** whatever they can to the best of their ability are the basis for respect and equality in our interactions with each other.
- MSPs are **learning spaces**. Collaboration on an equal footing must be learned and developed together.
- Collaboration on an equal footing can never be taken for granted. It is a goal that we must **constantly strive** to achieve.
- In order to achieve collaboration on an equal footing among diverse stakeholders from different parts of the world, using different resources and capacities, we must also explicitly address the **root causes of power imbalances**.
- There are **many possible ways** to promote and consolidate collaboration on an equal footing in MSPs in the long term, from the individual development of stakeholders to working on their relationships and creating suitable structures and processes, through to strengthening a culture of cooperation on equal terms.
- **All partners of an MSP** can and must help to promote, strengthen and maintain collaboration on an equal footing.

Introduction



This guide is intended to support multi-stakeholder partnerships in strengthening collaboration on an equal footing among all the actors involved, since this is one of the crucial factors in the success of MSPs. To start with, the guide briefly outlines the root causes of power imbalances. It then goes on to describe collaboration on an equal footing and summarises its positive impact on MSPs. Further on, it discusses how collaboration on an equal footing can be fostered in different areas (at the individual level, in relationships, in structures and processes, in the cultural context) and presents suitable methods, formats and tools. The last section outlines how individual role bearers in MSPs can strengthen collaboration on an equal footing. References to publications, collections of methods and in-depth texts are listed at the end of the guide.

1. Root causes of power imbalances



MSPs do not exist independently or in a vacuum; they operate under unequal conditions in and between societies. Power imbalances play just as much of a role within MSPs as in international cooperation as a whole. However, the relationships involved are often more complex, since MSPs bring together more and disparate actors who have different power bases, some of which are crucial in specific situations but insignificant in others.

Power imbalances exist in all multi-stakeholder partnerships. The actors involved have greater or lesser resources and capacities with which to pursue their interests. Power disparities exist in particular between stakeholders from the Global South or North and between actors from different sectors of society, for example private sector companies and civil society groups (non-governmental organisations or NGOs).

The imbalance of power between the Global South and North results among other things from historical, economic and geopolitical inequalities. Many developing countries are disadvantaged due to their colonial past and economic dependency. Donor countries hold a dominant position because of their greater access to finance, knowledge and technology.

In a similar vein, companies in the Global North often dominate global supply and value chains, particularly as compared with companies, trade unions and other actors in developing countries and emerging economies. But the North-South gap also frequently affects other stakeholders such as NGOs, women's networks or trade unions in terms of the available funds, size and access to knowledge and technologies.

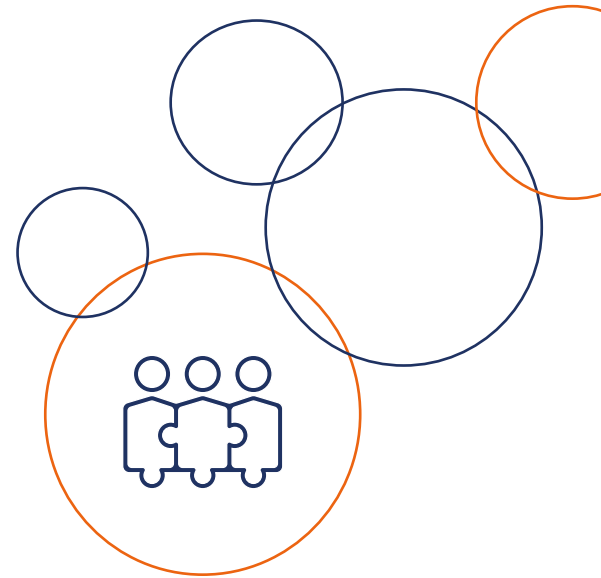
Cultural differences and prejudices between actors exacerbate the power imbalances. Governments and other actors from the Global North frequently project their conceptions of development onto partner countries and the actors located there without giving sufficient consideration to local needs.

There are further influential differences in power between groups, though, as a result of cultural or historical factors and world views. The main characteristics related to power imbalances and discrimination include gender, ethnicity, the level of education, age and economic status.

Power imbalances and discrimination can also be magnified when several of these characteristics occur at the same time. Gender and feminist studies refer to this phenomenon as 'intersectionality'. Different reasons for discrimination may interact and mutually reinforce each other. They should therefore not be considered separately. An intersectional approach focuses on the perspective of marginalised groups and considers how different inequalities interact in order to capture and address them in a holistic manner.

Since many MSPs are established with the aim of fighting social ills and simultaneously overcoming inequalities, it goes without saying that power imbalances should not be considered taboo in MSPs. Their joint analysis and processing forms the basis for fruitful cooperation on an equal footing. This should be done cautiously but clearly and on the basis of values. Powerful actors will often have to first work hard to gain the trust of those less powerful than themselves and will have to relinquish some of their power if equality is to be achieved.

2. What is collaboration on an equal footing?



Collaboration on an equal footing by interest groups with different backgrounds, knowledge levels, power and prerogatives is an important foundation for success for MSPs. That is why Partnerships 2030 has included this characteristic in the [definition of MSPs](#):

‘A multi-stakeholder partnership (MSP) is a type of cooperation with the following four features: **Stakeholders from at least three areas** (civil society, private sector, public sector, academia) work together **on an equal footing through an organised and long-term engagement** in order to **contribute to the common good**.’

But how is that supposed to work when a minister from an industrialised country is sitting opposite the representative of an Indigenous People from the Amazon basin? Or if the CEO of a multinational corporation is meant to cooperate with a small-holder farmer from sub-Saharan Africa? Or if the boss of a European trade union federation is to reach an agreement with the district government of an Asian developing country, the local women’s rights network and a North American professor?

Different actors not only have very different perspectives, they also have many different kinds of influence on the changes a given MSP wants to achieve. They have resources such as political power, money, control over investments, access to innovations, knowledge, skills and abilities, but also media and network presence in different spheres of society. Historical and cultural causes of inequality play a major role here, and it is not enough to get all the stakeholders together around one table. As with conflicts, power inequalities have to be acknowledged and addressed in order to achieve the desired results.

The contribution MSPs can make to the common good is central with regard to power inequalities between stakeholders. Implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is geared to the global common good. This also includes gearing development cooperation to the locally formulated goals of the partner countries, understanding existing injustices, promoting local value creation in developing countries and emerging economies and mobilising local capital for projects, thereby ensuring local ownership of innovations and solutions.

It is never easy to implement collaboration on an equal footing. Even if the more powerful or assertive members of an MSP wish for greater equality, they often find it hard to hold back. In addition, they are often perceived as more important by other members or the secretariat, or there are fears they will withdraw. There is therefore a tendency to lend greater weight to their pronouncements. Less powerful stakeholders are sometimes reluctant to openly contribute their perceptions, needs, proposals and ideas. Added to this, power imbalances between stakeholders continue to exist outside the MSP, even if they can be reduced or controlled within it.

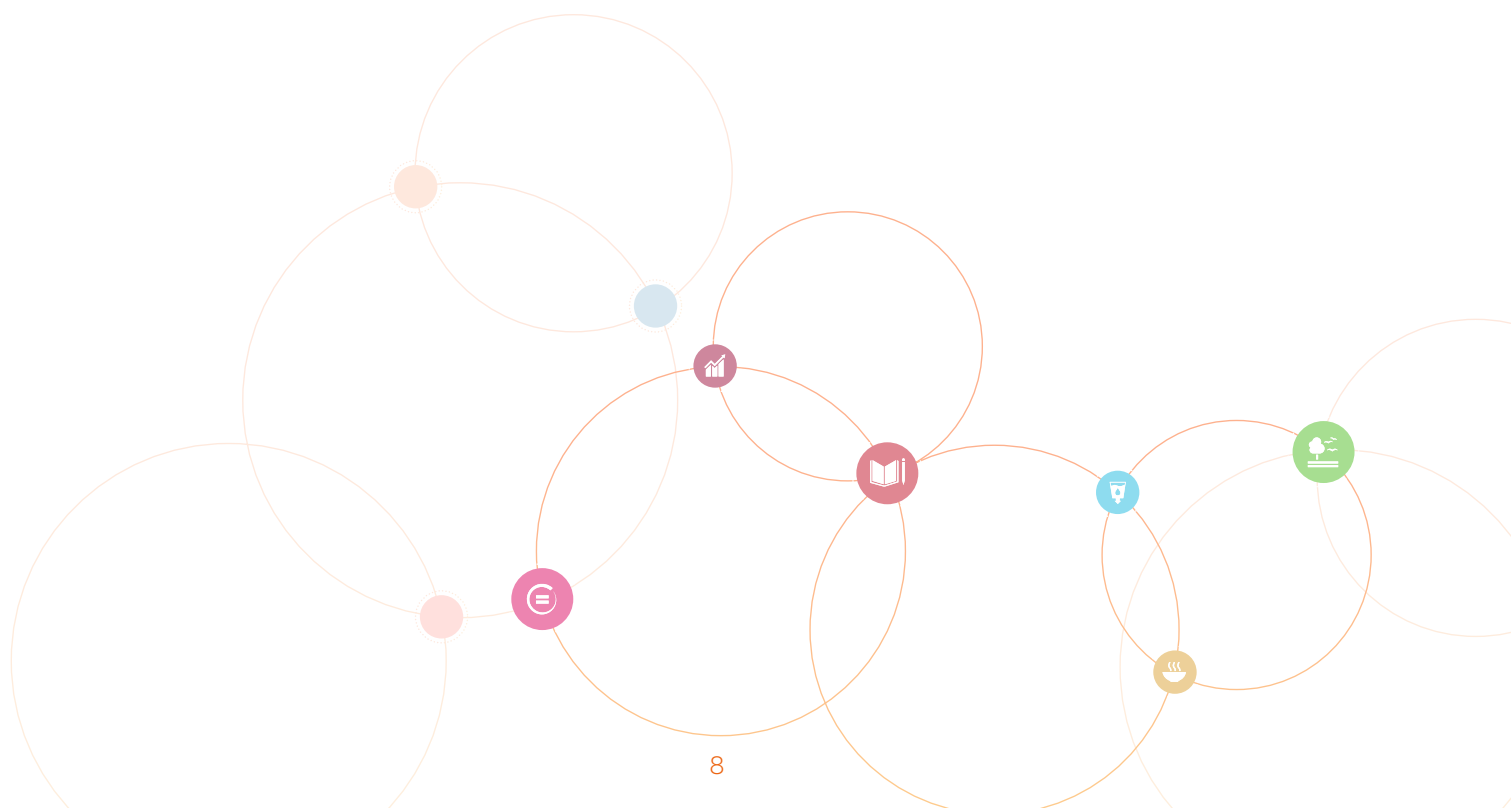
Collaboration on an equal footing is therefore probably a goal that cannot be achieved definitively but one that an MSP must constantly strive to attain. Experience shows at least that many partnerships require repeated support in the course of their cooperation in order to handle existing power imbalances constructively and achieve (more) equality.

Diversity and equality: Collaboration on an equal footing does not mean that everyone has the same knowledge or can contribute the same resources. The partners are different and contribute to the partnership in different ways. Some partners have specific expertise and people will listen more to their advice than to that of non-experts. So the point here is that diverse partners make contributions of equal value in a partnership where all collaborate on an equal footing – rather than making equal contributions. This implies respect for the diversity and different nature of the contributions and integrating them into the partnership's work. The joint will to achieve something for the common good and the observable fact that everyone contributes whatever they can to the best of their ability are key bases for equality in our interactions with each other.

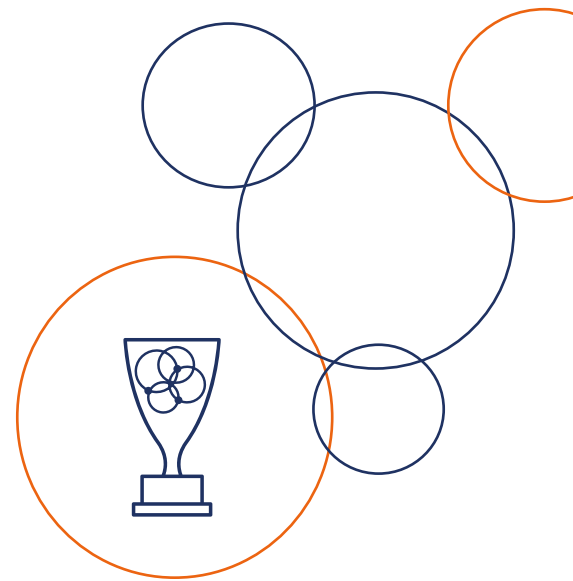
This in turn is a key basis for trust, since **trust and equality** are closely connected. Both create a positive dynamic in multi-stakeholder partnerships by establishing an atmosphere of openness and collaboration that promotes the success of a partnership.

Trust has many facets and is founded on different attributes and observations. Trust may relate to the character and/or skills of a counterpart. In terms of character, we trust in their positive motives and ethical conduct (honesty, fairness and authenticity). Trust in skills relates to the counterpart's abilities, aptitudes and knowledge, the results they have achieved so far and their reputation. We can trust in a person's or organisation's competencies without trusting their character ('they know how to do X but they don't do it or only for their own benefit') and vice versa ('they want the right thing but don't know how to do it').

It is also important to bear in mind that MSPs imply relationships (and trust/mistrust) between the individual members' representatives, the organisations involved and the stakeholder groups represented. The extent of trust may vary and the resulting ambivalent relationships may be challenging for the people involved. Relationships of trust may evolve between individuals whose organisations or stakeholder groups do not trust each other.



3. Why is collaboration on an equal footing so important for an MSP's success?



Both research and proven methods and instruments in the areas of sustainability, international development cooperation and governance underline the importance of collaboration on an equal footing in MSPs. The following aspects are relevant, among others:

Inclusiveness (in the sense of integrating and appreciating diversity), transparency, fairness and trust improve **communication** between partners and increase willingness to cooperate. Communication on an equal footing facilitates the free exchange of ideas and information and therefore makes communication more effective. Among other things, this means that the knowledge and ideas of all MSP actors are taken into account and fed into the development of strategies and activities. A larger volume of more diverse knowledge makes it possible to reach better **decisions**. It also boosts **creativity**. When partners exchange their different perspectives and experience, this may give rise to innovative solutions that might otherwise have been overlooked. Collaboration on an equal footing therefore helps to **leverage more added value from the MSP's diversity**.

It establishes **good long-term relationships** between the partners that are crucial for the lasting success of multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Collaboration on an equal footing with local rights-holders is very important because donors (or the MSP) can only **understand** the situation in the country or among the rights-holders, and therefore **the work context**, if there is an open exchange on equal terms.

Collaboration on an equal footing promotes a sense of **joint responsibility**. All partners contribute to planning, implementing and assessing activities, which makes the partnership more effective and sustainable.

When partners trust each other, they are more willing to **take risks together**. Partners can then try out measures whose likelihood of success is unclear, experiment together with greater ease and learn from mistakes together.

Partnerships that are conducted on equal terms are often **more flexible** and adjustable. Through open communication, partners can jointly react to changes and modify their strategy as required.

Collaboration on an equal footing makes it easier to **identify and solve conflicts** within the MSP. Partners can work together to solve problems, overcome obstacles and achieve their common goals.

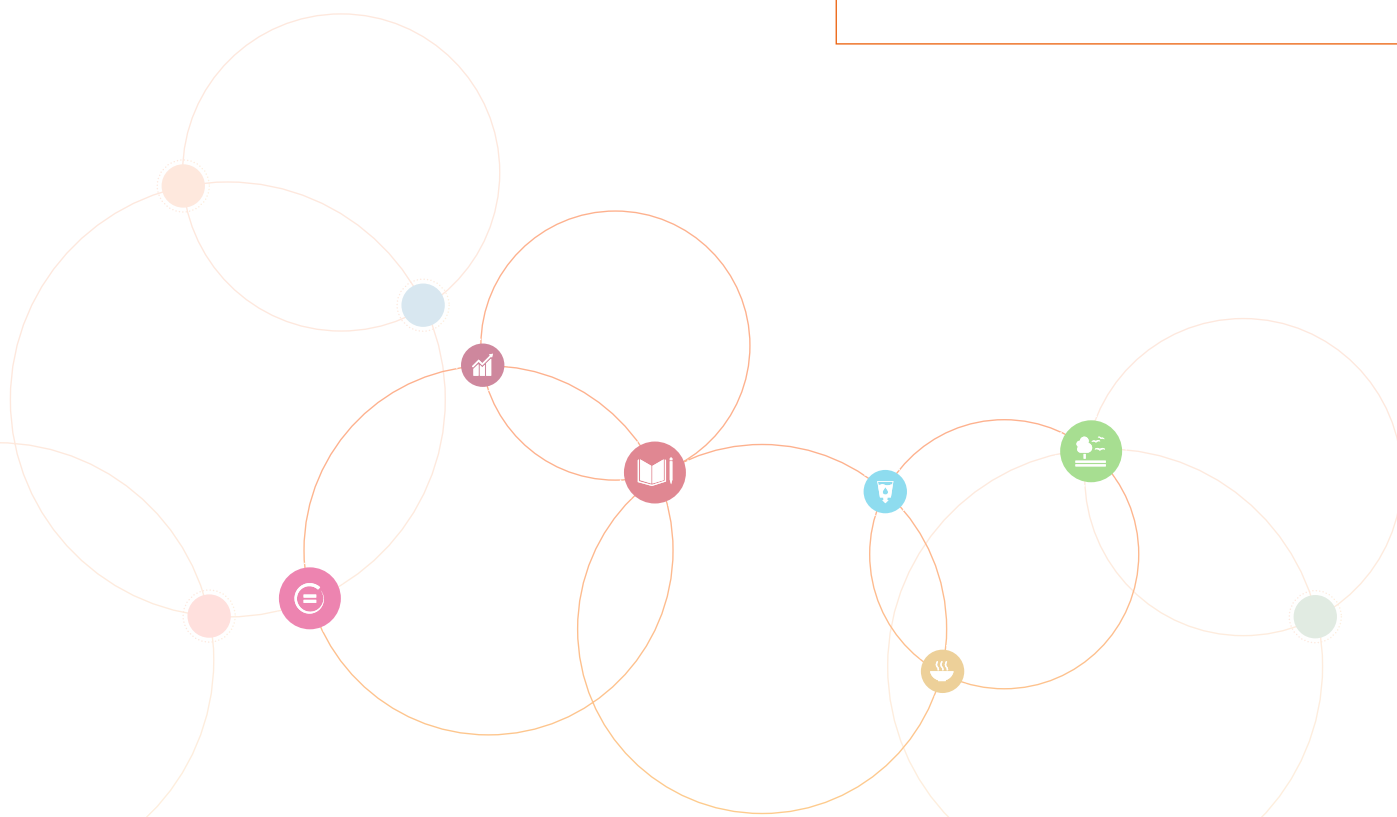
Collaboration on an equal footing helps to ensure that MSPs and their activities are perceived as **legitimate** and justified, both by the stakeholders and by external parties. That is also crucial for the long-term success of the partnership.

Finally, in the long term collaboration on an equal footing in MSPs may help to strengthen the **reputation of MSPs** and make them attractive to groups that were formerly sceptical about them, e.g. marginalised rights-holders that are critical about cooperation with the state or the private sector, also because of the power imbalances involved.

- Collaboration on an equal footing has a positive influence on key aspects and success factors for MSPs. At the same time, collaboration on an equal footing in MSPs contributes to implementing SDG 10 (SDG10 – reduced inequalities).

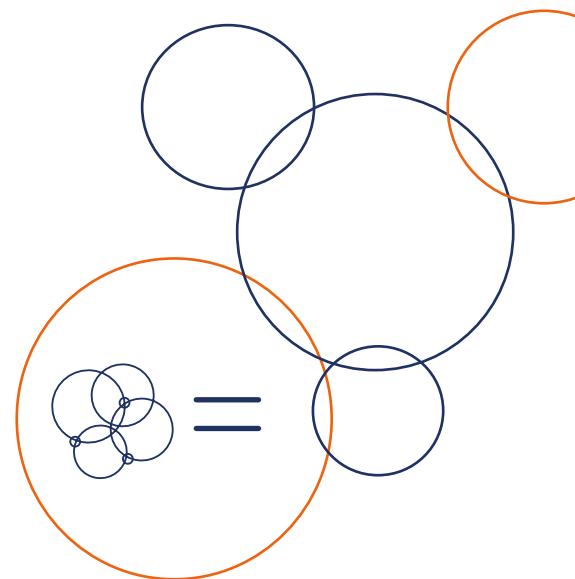


“Leave No One Behind” (LNOB, leave no one behind) is one of the guiding principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It emphasises the obligation to ensure that everyone can benefit from the advantages of sustainable development, regardless of their gender, age, origin, abilities or social or economic status. No one should be left behind due to discrimination or disadvantage and everyone should have equal access to resources, opportunities and services. LNOB calls for targeted measures to support those who are hardest hit by poverty, inequality and exclusion, and ensure that their needs and rights are taken into consideration. For MSPs that means that stakeholder mapping really takes account of all actors and rights-holders and works together with all of them.¹



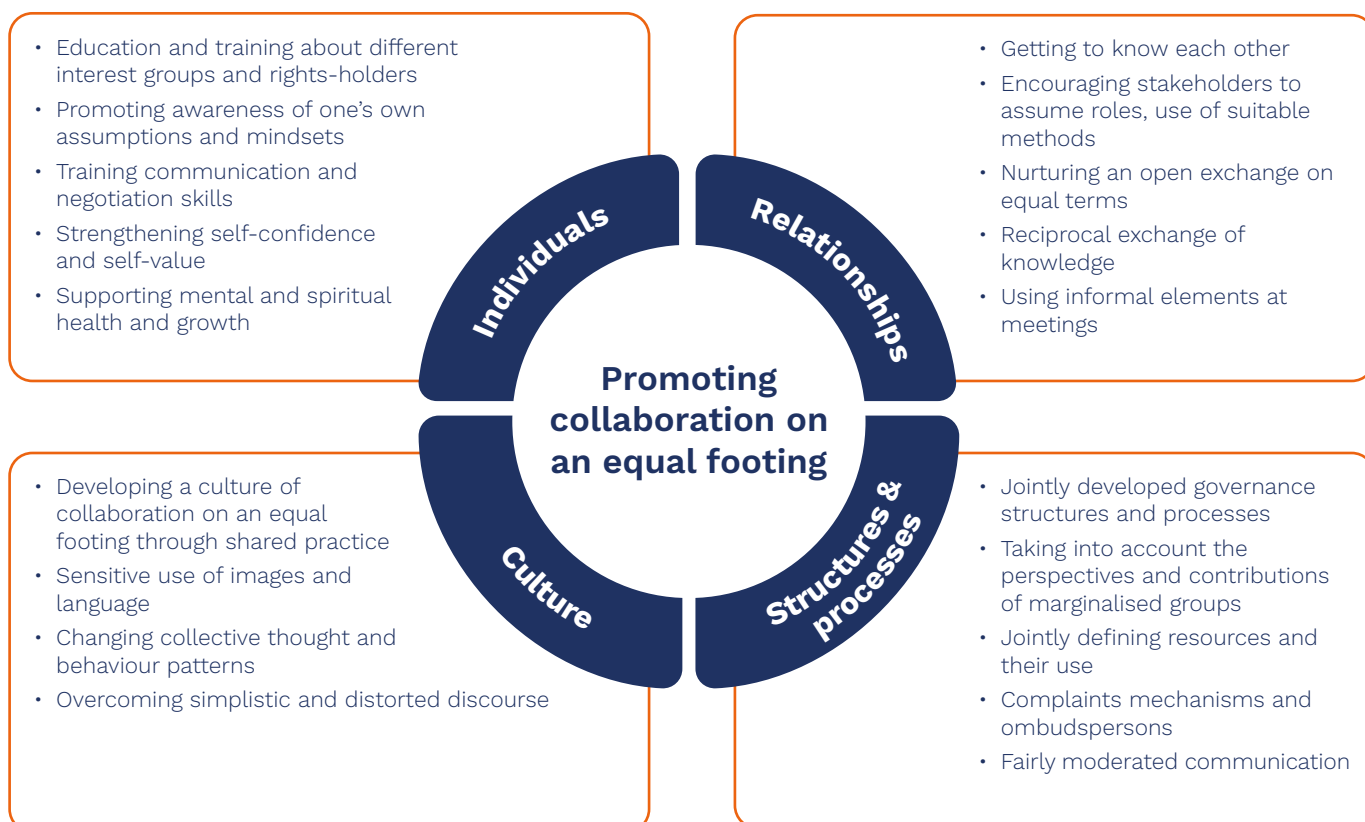
¹ The guidelines entitled [Guidelines: Results of multi-stakeholder partnerships – Social, ecological and economic impacts at the local level](#) (Partnerships 2030, 2024) summarise the results achieved and make recommendations on how cooperation by MSPs, in particular with local rights-holders, can be promoted, e.g. by targeted capacity development and multilevel approaches.

4. Promoting collaboration on an equal footing within MSPs



There are a number of measures that can help to promote collaboration on an equal footing within MSPs and safeguard it in the long run. MSPs should use these measures to specifically address their internal power imbalances. Options range from working to develop the individual capacities of stakeholders, improving relationships within

the MSP and creating suitable structures and processes to establishing a culture of collaboration on an equal footing. These different levels or dimensions may overlap and be interconnected.² The following diagram puts the various approaches into perspective:



² The diagram is based on a model developed in 2007 by Philip Thomas and the Generative Change Community, a network of dialogue practitioners. It integrates two approaches: research into social conflicts and conflict transformation that identifies four dimensions in which changes are required in order to durably resolve conflicts (Lederach et al, 2007), and the four quadrants of Wilber's integral theory (2003). This is used in Thomas's model to explain the dimensions of change, and each quadrant represents a specific dimension, i.e. changes related to individuals, relationships, structures & processes or culture. This approach was used here to summarise different ways of strengthening collaboration on an equal footing.

MSPs should be understood as **learning spaces**. Collaboration on an equal footing is not an automatic process. On the contrary, it must be consciously and specifically established and practised in every MSP. Explicitly recognising this fact and understanding MSPs as learning spaces facilitates the process. It is a shared task. Things don't have to work perfectly right from the start – one can learn from mistakes and errors, and it is easier to pass on one's own experiences so that others can benefit from them.

4.1 Individual level

Actors frequently know relatively little about other stakeholder groups but may have stereotypes in mind or even harbour prejudices. **Education and training** on different interest groups and rights-holders are therefore a key element of MSPs, especially in the initial phase. The best way is to give everyone involved the opportunity to present their work and expectations via the MSP so as to make their knowledge, motives, goals and resources clear to all the others. Enough time should be allowed for questions and dialogue to promote an exchange about the different interests and possible contributions to the MSP. Communication skills (particularly listening) and negotiation skills can be trained and strengthened in order to enable more exchange and negotiation on an equal footing.

At the individual level, it is also important to raise greater awareness of the actors' own **assumptions and mental models**. This includes assumptions about different stakeholder groups or the different rating given to different kinds of knowledge, or about how effectively and efficiently changes can be achieved. MSP stakeholders find it easier to work together on equal terms when they are clear about their own assumptions, thought patterns and moral values. This can be promoted in an MSP using game-based methods, e.g. in role plays or by means of empathy mapping.



Empathy mapping method

This method is used in various areas such as marketing and user experience design to develop a deeper understanding of the needs, motivations, emotions and behaviours of (groups of) individuals. Four areas are typically mapped:

1. What does the person think?
(Thoughts)
2. What does the person feel?
(Feelings)
3. What does the person say?
(Statements)
4. What does the person do?
(Behaviour)

The answers to these questions can be visualised as images on 'empathy maps'. For example, actors can be divided randomly into small groups, each of which creates an empathy map on a board or flip chart for a stakeholder group selected by drawing lots. On the one hand, this makes them aware of the stereotypes they harbour, and on the other, it makes it clearer how other stakeholders feel, what they think and why they behave in a certain manner. If done in a playful and fun way, this exercise often makes people laugh together about the presentation, thus strengthening trust and cohesion.

Good individual **self-confidence and self-esteem** also support the ability to accept and respect other people and groups and their diversity. Diversity and differentness are perceived as less threatening when one is conscious of one's own strengths. That is another reason why it is important to show mutual respect, explicitly recognise contributions and to 'celebrate' together the steps taken and success achieved. All of this strengthens the self-esteem of everyone involved and their cohesion.

Supporting **mental health and spiritual growth** can also be a meaningful component of MSPs and can strengthen collaboration on an equal footing. Mental health comprises aspects such as mental well-being, emotional stability, personal growth and resilience towards stressful situations. Spiritual growth relates to searching for a meaning, values and purpose in life, feeling a sense of connectedness with something greater than ourselves and developing inner peace and calm. Nurturing and fostering these dimensions can be done by meditation, reflection, self-reflection, mindfulness practices and shared rituals. The aim is to cultivate a state of balance, contentedness and growth, which also includes experiencing our connection to the world, nature and the community of equal partners. Sitting silently around a camp fire, talking in twos about meaning and individual reflection exercises in groups are just some of the methods that can be used at MSP meetings.

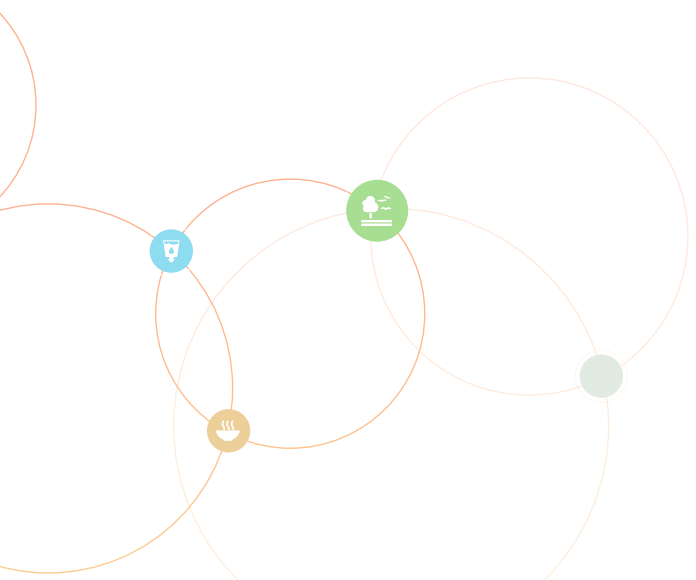
4.2 Relationships

Strengthening relationships between the stakeholders involved is of key importance for successful MSPs. After all, MSPs often bring together many actors who previously had no contact or were even in conflict with each other. There are a variety of methods and possibilities for enabling people to get to know each other and develop mutual understanding and trust, thereby strengthening equality in their relationships.

Getting to know each other is crucial if the diversity of possible contributions is to be really used to make the partnership successful. This helps to dispel stereotypes and prejudices: stakeholders can learn more about the topic of MSPs and possible solutions, and about the resources and possible contributions of the other stakeholders. Getting to know each other also strengthens mutual respect and trust. We can predict other people's behaviour more easily if we are familiar with their interests, motives and objectives.

When designing MSP meetings, **informal elements** should also be scheduled, such as breaks with joint walks, joint trips to visit projects, retreats for executive bodies (see also the guide on **Conflict management**, which also addresses preventing conflict by building trust in the long run). If a meeting starts in the morning, participants should arrive the evening before. This gives them a chance to get to know each other better at dinner and to deepen their relationships.

In order to strengthen collaboration on an equal footing and build trust, all methods that support the assumption of **social roles** are helpful. These are methods that help people to step in each other's shoes and better understand their perceptions, needs, interests and proposals. Suitable methods are introduction rounds in which everyone introduces another person, or systemic constellations and role plays.





Constellations: “Systemic constellation” is a generic term for processes in which members of a system are ‘placed’ in a certain position in the room in relation to the others. This visualises the influence that members have on each other and makes them aware of it. This can also be extended to cover the objectives and success factors of the MSP in order to identify the skills and contributions of the members in relation to the MSP’s objectives. The process can also be used to examine whether all the required partners are on board and all conditions are met for implementing the theory of change and planning its implementation. The method includes identifying objectives, actors, skills and contributions, which are presented together in the given space. Symbols and markings are used to visualise the objectives and the actors with their skills and contributions. Participants then reflect on the order formed in this way in order to identify strengths and

possible areas for development. The method can also be used to make power structures visible.

In order to promote collaboration on an equal footing, it is particularly important for the different contributions of the MSP members to be explicitly recognised. Which contributions and resources (e.g. money, decision-making power, access to media, networks, mobilisation, creative ideas) can interact with each other, and how, to achieve the objectives of the MSP? Looking at a constellation can make it clear that all the different contributions are important, and in what way.

Sensitivity and meticulous professional preparation are essential in constellations so that all participants feel at ease and the results can be used constructively (see also Müller-Christ & Pijetlovic, 2018).

At all meetings and in all processes, an **exchange** should be maintained within the MSP **on an open and equal footing**. This also serves to establish good relationships and collaboration on an equal footing in the long term. The exchange of knowledge should always be reciprocal. All stakeholders have key expertise to contribute and all of them still have something to learn. Various kinds of knowledge should be recognised and used for the MSP’s work.

If the exchange grinds to a halt, or if individual stakeholders dominate the partnership or others withdraw, the management and/or secretariat should take countermeasures. This can be done by means of individual talks to clarify the situation as well as suitable methods and formats for working together in groups, often guided by external moderators.

4.3 Structures and processes

MSPs need structures and processes for governance and everyday cooperation that create equality, even out power imbalances and ensure fairness. These structures and processes should **always be jointly** developed and cover aspects such as representation, decision-making, work planning, financial planning, monitoring and learning processes. These foundations are laid during the initiation and design phases of MSPs, but remain important during implementation and further development to enable learning from actual experience. Participation and co-creation legitimise the MSP and its work, also outside the partnership. Any kind of ‘pseudo-participation’ should be avoided.

The following aspects should be borne in mind, especially when it comes to overcoming historically based power imbalances: Decisions on who is invited to join the MSP and who is not must be taken transparently and jointly. **Inclusion and exclusion** are important decisions that influence power relations within the MSP for a long time to come. Suitable separate rooms and processes should be provided if desired for the participation of marginalised groups.

All partners should be involved in **setting up the MSP governance system** (structures and processes), and all (key) stakeholder groups should be represented in the **decision-making bodies** and processes. Bodies should be constituted such that no single group of stakeholders can predominate. Each partner should have one vote. The secretariat and/or management body should organise fair elections, which should be observed by suitable ombudspersons or all partners together.

Seats can be reserved on the decision-making bodies for specific groups to ensure they are represented. Some MSPs also follow the rule of not allowing any of the partnership's donors to be represented on the highest decision-making body in order to restrict the donor's power to a transparent level.

MSPs should report within their monitoring system on all aspects of participation and co-creation by all stakeholders, especially local rights-holders.

To give all partners the possibility to address any perceived inequalities with regard to trust, **protected feedback channels, complaints mechanisms and ombudspersons** should be used (see also [Multi-stakeholder partnerships and human rights](#)).

MSP members should jointly define the **partnership's resources** (e.g. money, working hours, premises and materials and equipment) and how they intend to jointly determine the use of these resources. This also includes jointly establishing how budgets are developed and adopted, and how further resources can be obtained. Investment in co-creative processes should be firmly mainstreamed.

Decisions in the MSP's various bodies, working groups and projects should be prepared by the submission and discussion of drafts or proposals; **exchange on an open and equal footing** is the most important factor in this context. Everyone should be equally able to take part in this exchange and feel at ease in presenting their positions, interests and asking open questions. **Solutions and knowledge from the Global South or marginalised actors** should be explicitly and proactively incorporated into all of the MSP's activities. Rather than applying universal solutions, the specific contextual circumstances should be taken into account in each case. Stakeholders in the Global South should also be able to initiate and design in-country projects on their own without objectives, methods and members being prescribed.

MSP bodies often aim to achieve a consensus and only take a vote if no consensus can be reached. Experience shows that an exchange on an open and equal footing is more likely to produce a consensus in the sense of win-win solutions, i.e. if the diversity that is typical of MSPs can actually be leveraged. If negotiations or voting do sometimes have to be carried out, they must be fairly designed and facilitated.



In view of the different positions, views and interests of MSP stakeholders, it is essential to have functioning decision-making mechanisms in place, particularly when complex issues are involved. **These practical tips** from Partnerships2030 provide insight into specific initial steps that MSPs and their bodies can take to make their decision-making more effective and efficient. The **agile decision-making tools of ‘collegial leadership’** can make it easier to make decisions on an equal footing.

4.4 Culture of collaboration on an equal footing

In the medium and long term, MSPs can work on creating a culture of collaboration on an equal footing through their ongoing practice in the partnership and by consciously focusing on thought and behaviour patterns. This culture can become a strong and durable foundation within the MSP.

Groups, organisations and areas of society are characterised by collective thought and behaviour patterns. These patterns are often deep-rooted and may pose an obstacle when it comes to accepting other stakeholders’ expectations or accepting new ideas. That is another reason why getting to know each other and building trust are so important. It may help to question established patterns and promote new ways of thinking and forms of behaviour. This makes it possible to react more flexibly, creatively and effectively to challenges.

Overcoming simplistic and distorted discourse means making a conscious effort to adopt more differentiated and balanced perspectives and lifting the dialogue to a level that makes it possible to see the bigger picture. The aim is to promote a more **profound, nuanced discourse** that provides space for different standpoints and complex interactions. By taking a sensitive approach to the language and images used, we can avoid reproducing handed-down stereotypes and power structures. Terms such as ‘capacity building’ or ‘empowerment’ may be perceived as paternalistic because they suggest that stakeholders are to be ‘lifted up’ from a lower level.

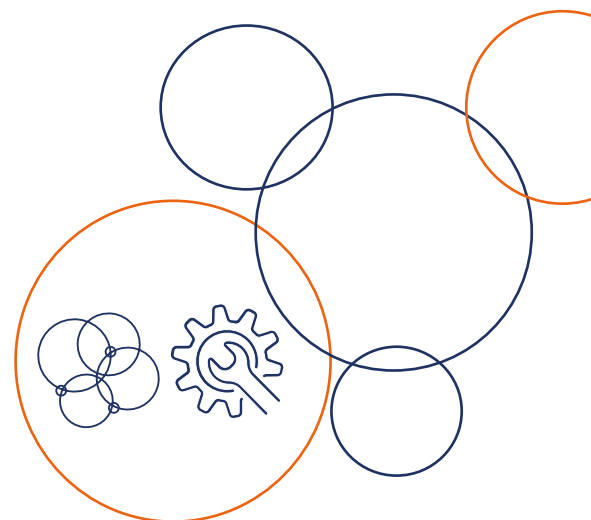
Instead, stakeholders can take a look at historical facts and colonial backgrounds and jointly develop language and images that are in line with collaboration on an equal footing in the MSP.

Rather like committing to gender equality (see also [Gender in Multi-stakeholder Partnerships](#)), MSPs can also develop and publish an explicit declaration on collaboration on an equal footing. The public commitment to involving all stakeholders on an equal basis, especially the local rights-holders, can help to foster an exchange within the MSP when developing the declaration, for one thing, and create useful pressure to meet external expectations for another.



The African Community Conservation Forum 2023, which developed the **Naivasha Vision**, is an interesting **example** of cooperation between very different stakeholders with very disparate levels of power that aims to promote nature conservation projects within a partnership in Africa. In a brief **video interview** with Professor Domenico Dentoni (Montpellier Business School), the director of the Kenyan organisation **Maliasili**, Resson Kantai-Duff, outlines the strategies and methods that were used..

5. Suitable methods, formats and tools



Cooperation within MSPs calls in particular for approaches, methods and instruments that facilitate and support collaboration on an equal footing and further acquaintance between members of diverse groups, both in personal meetings and in virtual cooperation. It is also advisable to use creative methods and visualisations for groups that use different first and working languages. Finally, the methods and instruments should not be too costly since most MSPs have to manage tight budgets.

There is comprehensive literature available including a large number of guides, manuals and web-based compendiums containing methods for working in small and large groups, for instance in the field of educational science and organisational psychology, but also in the increasingly professionalised field of facilitation (for a selection see ‘Methodology and further reading’). A number of methods

and tools have been developed for working in and with large and small groups in order to support and strengthen communication, participation and cooperation on an equal footing. MSPs therefore often employ professional external facilitators.

It is crucial when selecting suitable work methods in MSPs for all stakeholders to have the opportunity to prepare their contributions carefully (possibly after consulting their members), for everyone to have an equal opportunity to speak and be heard, and for the group to make an effort to integrate the different contributions into a shared understanding and shared procedure. This is not always possible, but it is important to make a joint effort before the group selects certain contributions and excludes others, or different working groups are formed to which not everyone belongs.

Use formats, methods and instruments like these:

- Appreciative storytelling
- Open space
- World Café
- Fishbowl
- Four-quadrant method
- Systemic constellation
- Rich picture
- Influence-interest grid
- Visualisation
- Creative methods
- ...

In order to take joint steps like these:

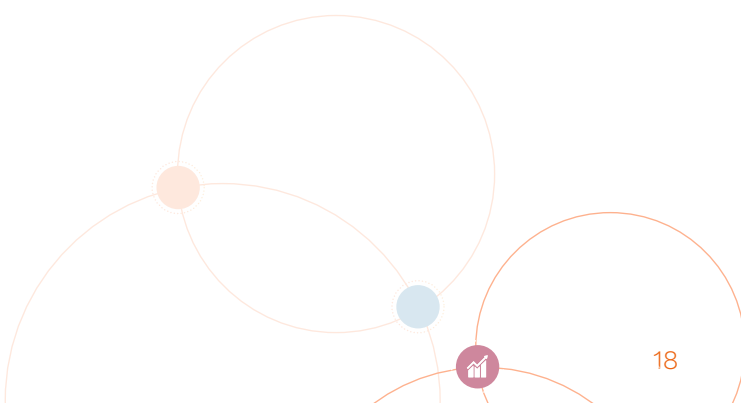
- Develop vision, goals and governance
- Explore the dimensions of change and develop a theory of change or impact narrative
- Understand the system that the MSP wants to change
- Stakeholder mapping
- Stakeholder analysis
- Self-evaluation and learning processes
- ...



... and thereby promote collaboration on an equal footing

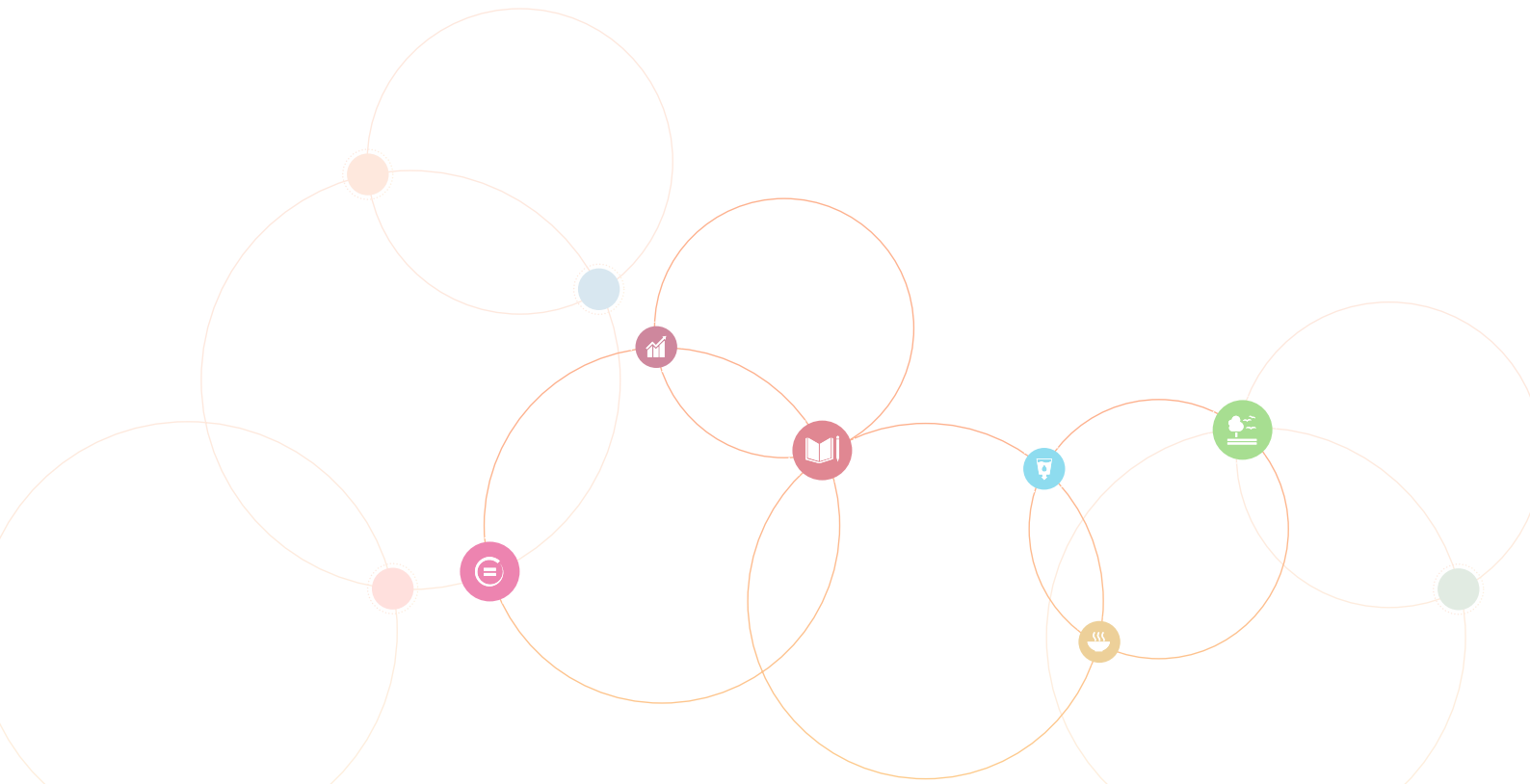
Many facilitators use the following tried-and-tested methods:

- **Appreciative storytelling** encourages participants to adopt positive perspectives by focusing on what works well and sharing this with each other rather than (only) concentrating on problems and challenges. This method is also suitable in an MSP to get to know other people better in the initial phase.
- **Open space** is suitable for addressing complex questions in a diverse group of stakeholders. Self-organisation in small groups produces very positive dynamics and shared responsibility for procedures and results. This instrument is mainly useful in the initial phases of an MSP when the focus is on exploration, problem-solving and planning.
- **World Café** is a simple, flexible format for working in large groups. Dialogues can build on each other in a succession of small groups to exchange knowledge and explore problems and options for action.
- **Fishbowl** facilitates dialogues in large groups. The discussion takes place in a small inner circle while the rest of the group in the outer circle listens and observes. However, everyone can participate actively in the dialogue by going to sit in the inner circle and then leaving it again. This method is suitable for discussing controversial topics and exchanging expertise, especially if work cannot or is not intended to take place in small parallel groups.
- Certain habits are recommended for MSP meetings with small to medium-sized groups, e.g. checking in and checking out. Checking in gives everyone the opportunity to express themselves briefly, about their personal state of mind or current concerns. Checking out at the end of the meeting allows the members to share their thoughts again and offers space for feedback and reflection. Both practices help to promote open communication, enhance partner engagement and ensure that individual thoughts and feelings are considered. A **closing circle** at the end of a meeting or workshop may also be useful.
- MSPs should integrate joint learning into their work right from the start. Partnerships2030 has developed a **self-assessment tool** for that purpose in the form of a checklist. It helps to assess the development status of an MSP. You can evaluate major milestones and developments based on the typical MSP phases and establish whether the respective phase has been completed or what might still need to be developed or strengthened. The tool is supplemented by an agenda proposal for using the tool in the group.
- Joint **exploration of the dimensions of change** using the **four-quadrant method** can help stakeholders to get to know each other and help to analyse problems and possible change strategies of the MSP.
- **Drawing up a shared theory of change (ToC)** calls for open communication and the merging of the stakeholders' different perspectives. There are various methods for doing this, often using visualisations and receiving professional support from facilitators and graphic artists. Partnerships 2030 has developed a suitable tool for MSPs in an action research project (see also **Impacts of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships – Visual and Tool**).



- Various instruments exist for **mapping system(s) and stakeholders** (see for example Brouwer & Brouwers 2017; Retolaza Eguren 2022). This is particularly important when developing MSPs. However, analyses and visualisations of stakeholders or systems can also be repeated in the course of an MSP if conditions change or new stakeholders come on board. Here too, joint implementation on an equal footing is key in order to make sustainably useful contributions.
- The Diversity Charter association has published the **Wheel of Privilege & Power** in German. It is suitable for reflecting on and visualising (a stakeholder's own) power and societal attributions of power based on various characteristics. The tool can be used in a workshop or independently.

Working groups also need **joint areas of work** within an MSP that can be accessed and used equally by all stakeholders. This includes communication channels and digital filing systems, some of which call for strong internet connections and the transfer of large quantities of data, which not everyone can access or afford.



6. Promotion of collaboration on an equal footing by individual MSP stakeholders



Individual MSP stakeholders and partners should help in different ways as part of their tasks and involvement in the MSP to promote collaboration on an equal footing in the MSP.



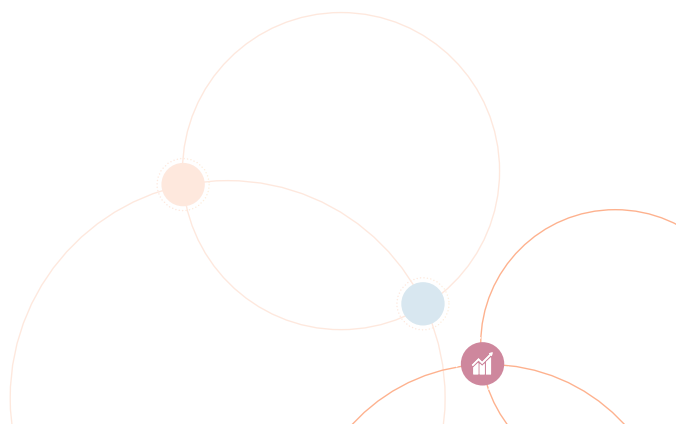
Members of the **management body** (steering group, management board, etc.) should ...

- ... always set a good example and practice respect, trustful relations, attentive listening and collaboration on an equal footing. Members of the management body are generally closely observed by all partners and can achieve a great deal through their exemplary conduct, both within the MSP and in their own organisations.
- ... spare neither time nor effort in getting to know each other well, also informally at personal meetings, retreats, evenings spent together after meetings, and so on.
- ... communicate the nature of cooperation in the management body to the outside world, reflect on and share their experience when getting to know each other to the extent that this is useful for collaboration on an equal footing in the MSP.



All partners in an MSP should ...

- ... develop and nurture a personal attitude of respect, openness and learning with all partners within the MSP and also communicate this in their own organisations.
- ... intervene if other people show disrespectful or dominant behaviour. To do this, one can approach the individuals concerned and arrange to discuss the issue, contact the relevant facilitators, call in the secretariat or management body, or use complaints mechanisms or ombudspersons.





The **secretariat** should...

- ... make sure to involve all partners equally in all areas of the MSP and give consideration to specific conditions (e.g. the communication channels required, the time required for consultation, etc.)
- ... handle governance structures and processes without bias. If individual partners or donors intervene inappropriately or try to exert inappropriate influence, this can be addressed in the management body or possibly with individual members of that body first.
- ... propose and coordinate the use of tools for monitoring and learning. Consideration should be given both to indicators for the achievement of objectives and the quality of relationships (trust, equality). Here is a tool for self-assessment of MSPs.
- ... set up a pool of suitable facilitators who can support the MSP's work at meetings and events.
- ... factor into budget planning the possible costs for measures that serve to promote collaboration on an equal footing and submit proposals to the management body as appropriate (e.g. making acquaintance, retreats, facilitation, monitoring and learning processes, etc.).
- ... have their staff trained to conduct discussions and use facilitation methods, because the secretariat does also carry out many facilitation roles within an MSP outside official meetings.



Many MSPs recruit **facilitators**, usually for specific meetings such as annual meetings or meetings of the official bodies, especially when conflicts arise. Facilitators of MSPs should ...

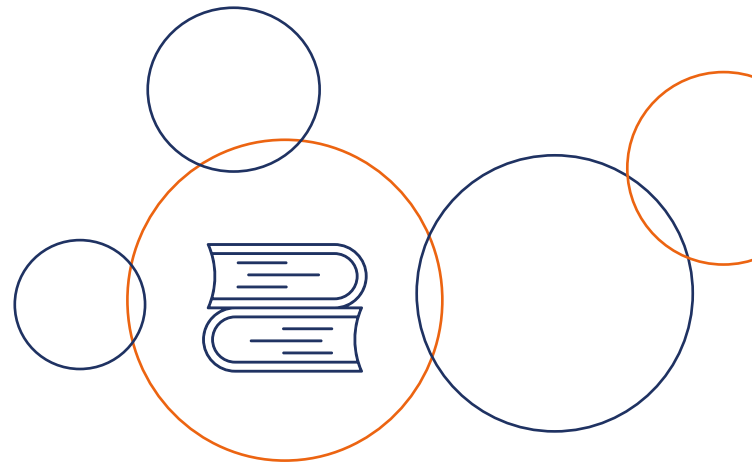
- ... be familiar with the way MSPs work, and with cooperation between different sections of society and the topics covered by the SDGs.
- ... provide specific support for collaboration on an equal footing, use the suitable methods flexibly and set a personal example in underlining the equal value of everyone involved.
- ... make sure that meetings and events also include informal elements of getting to know each other. This is especially important in the initial phases of the MSP, but also later on when new members join the partnership.
- ... be evaluated by the members so that all stakeholders agree with the selection of facilitators and facilitation methods.



Supporters and donors of MSPs should ...

- ... call for governance structures and processes that strengthen collaboration on an equal footing.
- ... integrate processes and indicators into their project evaluations that reflect collaboration on an equal footing.

7. Literature and methods



Quoted literature

Brouwer, H. & Brouwers, J. (2017): *The MSP Tool Guide. Sixty Tools to Facilitate Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships.* CDI Wageningen

Lederach, J. P., R. Neufeldt, et al. (2007): Reflective Peacebuilding: A Planning, Monitoring, and Learning Toolkit. The Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame

Müller-Christ, G. & Pijetlovic, D. (2018): Komplexe Systeme lesen: Das Potential von Systemaufstellungen in Wissenschaft und Praxis. Heidelberg: Springer Gabler

Partnerschaften2030 (2021): *Multi-stakeholder partnerships and human rights.* Bonn

Partnerschaften2030 (2024): *Cooperation in multi-stakeholder partnerships: Conflict management.* Bonn

Partnerschaften2030 (2023): *MSP self-assessment tool.* Bonn

Retolaza Eguren, I. (2022): *Multistakeholder process facilitation. A toolkit.* Leuven: Rikolto

Thomas, P. (2007): Four dimensions of broad, sustainable change. The Generative Change Community: Unpublished manuscript

Wilber, K. (2003): Introduction to Integral Theory and Practice: IOS Basic and the AQAL Map.

Methodology and further reading

The following websites and publications offer access to various work methods for large and small groups that may support MSPs in practising collaboration on an equal footing and building trust:

Germanwatch (2022): *Rechteinhaber*innen wirksam in Multi-Stakeholder-Initiativen einbeziehen.* Bonn / Berlin

Germanwatch (2021): *Erfolgsbedingungen für transformative Multi-Akteurs-Partnerschaften.* Bonn / Berlin

International Association of Facilitators
www.iaf-world.org;

IAF Methods Library
<https://www.iaf-world.org/site/pages/methods-library>

Institute for Development Studies IDS Participatory Methods website

Hemmati, M. & Schmidt, C. (2020): Prozess-Wegweiser Kommunalen Klimaschutz
<https://prozess-wegweiser.de>

Krogerus, M. & Tschäppeler, R. (2023): Zusammenarbeiten. Ein Wegweiser, um gemeinsam Grosses zu erreichen. Zürich / Berlin: Kein & Aber

Liberating Structures
<https://www.liberatingstructures.com>

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) www.ncdd.org, NCDD Resource Centre <https://www.ncdd.org/rc-browse>

Hunjan, R., Pettit, J. (2011): *Power: a practical guide for facilitating social change*. Carnegie United Kingdom Trust

Larson, A.M., Sarmiento Barletti, J.P. (2023): *So you want to host a multi-stakeholder platform? Designing meaningful, inclusive spaces for transformative change*. Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry Centre

The MSP [Global Health Hub Germany](#) explicitly mentions cooperation on equal terms in its [statutes](#).



Further information and support

You can find more information on MSP-related topics on our website: www.partnerships2030.de/en/ and [Our Services – Partnerships2030](#).

Partnerships 2030 will also be pleased to provide individual advice. Feel free to contact us: info@partnerschaften2030.de, phone: +49 228 4460-3539

Authors and acknowledgements

This guide was written by Dr Minu Hemmati. Anna Rabus, in her capacity as a trainee, helped to carry out the extensive research required and to conduct the focus group. Helpful reviews and advice were provided by the entire Partnerships2030 team, especially Mona-Lisa Limbach and Susanne Salz (project management), and by Andrea Bruestle and Lena Keller-Bischoff from the Initiative for Sustainable Agricultural Supply Chains (INA). A draft of the guide was presented at the [CSSI2024](#) conference ‘Power and Inclusion in Cross-Sector Social Interactions’ in April 2024. The draft was discussed in a focus group in August 2024, and we would like to thank all participants who shared their experience and knowledge with us: Dr Angeliki Balayannis (University of Wageningen, The Netherlands); Resson Kantai Duff (Maliasili, Kenya); Berns Komba Lebbie (Land for Life, Sierra Leone); Emilienne de Leon (Global Alliance for Care, Mexico); and Arif Neki (UN Strategic Partnerships & SDG Partnership Platform, Kenya).