

Sustainability Partnerships: Moving from Goodwill to Action

A Guide to Creating
Meaningful Partnerships for Sustainable Development



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by
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Executive Summary

Partnerships are playing an increasingly significant role in working towards sustainable development. While much information exists about the value and benefits of partnerships, there is not yet a source of broad information that accounts for the lessons learned through partnerships around the world. This document highlights some of the important lessons learned through Canadian and international partnerships, and presents general guidelines for creating partnerships that represent the movement from goodwill to action.

A review of Canadian and international experiences with partnerships demonstrates that sustainability partnerships involve consideration of the following:

Different Partners

Prior to entering a partnership, it is important to recognize the capabilities, roles, and limitations of potential actors. The public, private and non-profit sectors are three general categories of likely partners. It is important to be aware of how each sector can contribute to a sustainability partnership.

The *public sector* includes various orders of government, Special Purpose Bodies and government-related agencies and institutions. This sector can provide a leadership role in policy and regulation to enforce sustainable development. Governments can also create infrastructure and supports necessary for the success of other sustainable development efforts. However, sustainability partnerships should not replace government commitments and responsibilities, or involve the transfer or shifting of responsibility from governments to other sectors.

The *private sector* includes multinational corporations, private ventures, and specific sector institutions and associations. This sector often partners with other sectors in order to tap into new markets and provide capital and expertise. When working with private partners, the goals of sustainable development should be articulated in terms that are familiar to the business community. In addition, it should be stressed that economic activity should not degrade or destroy human and natural resources. Furthermore, caution must be exercised to ensure that private partners do not use partnerships to instill false legitimacy and to pursue goals that do not contribute to sustainable development.

The *non-profit* sector includes a range of actors from large corporate non-governmental organizations to small, community-based residents associations. This sector can provide education and assist with capacity building in order to facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge, which is an important building block in reaching sustainability. Partners from the non-profit sector are often essential in efforts to assist marginalized people and to advance the causes of environmental stewardship, human rights, and good governance. However, the non-profit sector often has limited resources compared to the private and public sectors. Through better coordination and meaningful partnerships the potential of non-profits to achieve significant outcomes and the greatest impact will be increased.

Choosing a Partner

Potential partners should have a common vision, including a common understanding of sustainable development and a shared goal for the partnership. Partners should also have mutual trust and a communication agreement. In addition, partners should ensure that there is an appropriate balance between what each organization can bring to the partnership and how each organization will benefit. This requires that partnerships include

benefits that are not only financial, but also provide mechanisms to strengthen skills, collaborate, and engage a wide range of stakeholders. All partners must make a clear and demonstrated commitment, and understand the risks associated with the partnership.

Partnerships can vary in size and scope and should be designed to reflect the combined capacity of the partners. But regardless of the size of the undertaking, every partnership must be a meaningful commitment to sustainable development, complete with clear, applicable, and attainable objectives.

In order for partnerships to be carried out successfully, partners should create an official partnership agreement that clearly describes the objectives of the partnership, a timeline, and the commitments and responsibilities of each partner, in addition to a detailed action plan. It is essential that partners remain focused on the primary goal, and monitor and report progress regularly.

Challenges and Knowing when to Terminate

While all partnerships will encounter challenges, some may experience difficulties that are too great to overcome and can ultimately lead to failure. It is important for partners to acknowledge challenges and recognize when it is appropriate to terminate a partnership. Partnerships may fall prey to strong external influences when well-organized commitments in are not in place between partners. Warning signs of potential failure include focusing too much on differences and not enough on commitments, becoming inefficient when organizations are not flexible enough to work efficiently with their partners, and attempting to replicate other partnerships that are very context specific.

Partners should be aware of the challenges that are unique to working with the public and private sectors, as well as those that may be experienced by all partnerships.

Ensuring Accountability

One of the most important aspects of a successful partnership is accountability. Partnerships should involve effective internal and external communication so that activities are transparent and accountable to both to the public and the partners involved. Accountability is based on strong integrity, and accountable partnerships include binding contracts, either actual or symbolic, which enforce the commitments of partners. It is important that all partnerships include provisions for making the partnership and its commitments known to the public, as well as meaningful opportunities for public participation and engagement.

Evaluation and Measurement

Meaningful partnerships are designed with an appropriate system of evaluation and measurement established at the start, for the duration of, and after the partnership. Evaluation criteria should be significant and reflect the goals of the project. Outcomes or achievements of the partnership should be made widely available so that ongoing feedback can be solicited to continuously improve the partnership.

The guidelines outlined in this document are a general framework that should be tailored to address the specific objectives of different partnerships. There is considerable room for further research on specific partnerships and the lessons learned from these experiences.

Introduction

At global, national and sub-national levels, partnerships play an increasingly significant role in working towards sustainable development. Non-negotiated partnerships and initiatives to implement Agenda 21 are an important element of the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development that took place in Johannesburg from August 26th to September 4th 2002. Such partnerships include stakeholders like national and sub-national governments, non-profit organizations as well as the private sector. Citizen or community involvement is also emphasized as a critical component to sustainable partnerships.

Yet, despite the World Summit success in forming partnerships, there is much debate over the credibility and/or legitimacy of such partnerships in achieving sustainable development, as there is no mechanism other than self-regulation to monitor the ongoing progress and outcomes of collaborative efforts. Moreover, many organizations present at the WSSD are concerned with the emphasis on Type 2 outcomes and view this as a result of government failure to turn prior commitments into action. Type 2 outcomes refer to voluntary "Partnerships" between any combination of businesses, communities, governments and NGOs that are not negotiated by governments, while Type 1 outcomes are negotiated and agreed to by all governments.¹

As an important contributor to this debate, CIELAP partook in *Partnering for Sustainability*, a conference held in Toronto in April 2002. The conference provided a forum to present and discuss some of the partnerships in which Canada has entered. Including partnerships with other governments, industry and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), CIELAP's submission paper outlines the value of partnership, the characteristics of successful partnerships, and the major challenges and risks facing partnerships for sustainability. A checklist of important points to help guide the success of future partnering initiatives was developed by CIELAP.

The experiences of Canadian and international partnerships provide examples of what makes a successful partnership and of the value of partnerships to sustainable development efforts. However, there is a lack of general information on creating, maintaining, and ensuring the accountability of sustainable partnerships. Therefore, the following report has been developed, based on experiences with sustainability partnerships, both in Canada and internationally. The guide for partnerships presented here builds on the work of CIELAP and provides information on how to move from goodwill to action, thereby making partnerships meaningful. It is important to remember that this report provides a general guide to partnerships, and that any partnership framework should be tailored to respond to the particular issues the partnership is attempting to address.

Sustainability Partnerships Defined

When defining Sustainable Development, the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy requires that:

“Social equity and environmental quality be integrated with economic development in all aspects of decision-making, at all scales, and across the three sectors of business, government, and civil society.”²

The realization of sustainability necessitates the use of new and innovative tools that enable participatory decision-making that is consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive. Partnerships are increasingly considered as a useful tool in working toward a common goal of sustainable development.

Sustainability versus Sustainable Development: What is the difference?

It is important that partners understand the difference and links between sustainability and sustainable development. The Sigma Project, a partnership between the British Standards Institution, Forum for the Future, and AccountAbility, provides a useful discussion of how sustainability and sustainable development are connected:*

Sustainability may be defined as the *“capacity for continuance into the long term future”*. Thus, anything that can continue to operate or occur on an indefinite basis is sustainable.

Sustainable development is the process by which we move towards sustainability. The most widely used definition of sustainable development was published in the Brundtland Report in 1987:

“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

* For more information on the Sigma Project please visit <http://www.projectsigma.com>

Further definitions of Sustainable Development and guidelines with particular respect to partnerships were provided at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002.³ There, it was recognized that partnerships are not a substitute for commitments by governments, but rather a reinforcement of commitments through concrete action. Partnerships should also allow for wider stakeholder participation through a bottom-up approach, and focus on the strengths of each partner instead of being donor-driven.

Other guidelines recognized that partnership frameworks should be flexible to allow for creativity, while parameters should be implemented to ensure economic, social and environmental dimensions during implementation, and monitoring of progress. In addition, the need for better multi-stakeholder approaches, ownership and accountability was noted, as well as community level involvement during both design and implementation phases of partnerships.⁴

Why Partner?

Successful partnerships can shape strategic alliances for meeting goals of sustainable development by drawing on the expertise and experience of organizations from across businesses, governments and civil society. Such diverse groups can pool their complementary resources, knowledge and skills to jointly address complex social problems.⁵

CIELAP's Approach to Sustainability Partnerships

There are potential benefits to be shared by each sector involved in a partnership:

Public Sector: Partnerships can be a mechanism for both improving the public sector's own activities and for promoting greater accountability all around.

Private Sector: For the private sector, partnerships can aid in cost-sharing, new market share, and improving existing performance, financial or otherwise, that would not occur if the partnership did not exist.

Non-Profit Sector: Partnerships with NGOs, as well as NGOs and communities, can foster capacity building as well as knowledge networks through increased access to resources, human capital and community empowerment. For NGOs to be effective, they can no longer function in isolation. This is especially true for many NGOs in the South, which currently function in a vacuum in their own countries as well as abroad.*

*Canadian Council for International Cooperation "Conversations with Southern Partners: The Search for Meaningful Partnerships" www.ccic.ca/volsector.htm

In their *Strategic Plan 2002-2005*, CIELAP demonstrates a progressive approach to working towards the development of environmental law and policy.⁶ As part of the Sustainable Policy Solutions Program, CIELAP has committed to building alliances and networks with academic and consulting fields, local community organizations, federal, provincial, and local governments, relevant private sector interests in agriculture and industry, and aboriginal and faith communities.⁷ Through their efforts to encourage a multi-stakeholder dialogue on issues of sustainability, CIELAP has generated the following information on partnerships:

Partnerships enable parties with diverse interests, concerns and expertise to collaborate. Such collaboration aids in achieving sustainable development because it requires that decisions be made considering environmental, social and economic concerns in a more holistic manner.⁸

Partnerships facilitate new understanding, trust and respect between traditional adversaries. These are the building blocks that will allow parties to work with, rather than against, each other to broaden perspectives.⁹

Partnering provides for the concentration of relevant expertise and the potential to better define problems, identify options, and address priorities. Such a cross-pollination of skills and resources also enables more integrated, multidisciplinary and comprehensive decision-making.¹⁰

Partnerships capture a wide range of interests because each partner can articulate different perspectives on problems that may otherwise not be represented when organizations work in isolation.

Different Partners

There is a vast array of players from the public, private and non-profit sectors who contribute to sustainable development. When entering into partnerships, it is important to know who these players are and what they do, in addition to other important considerations that are sector specific.

Who are they?

- ✓ **Public Sector: various orders of government, Special Purpose Bodies and government-related agencies or institutions**
- ✓ **Private Sector: multinational corporations, private ventures, specific sector institutions or associations**
- ✓ **Non-Profit Sector: ranges from large corporate NGOs to small, community-based residents associations**

Public Sector

The public sector ranges from different orders of government at the national, provincial and municipal-levels, which include arms-length corporations or Special Purpose Bodies such as various Boards of Education or Public Transit Commissions.

Private Sector

The private sector includes a variety of different stakeholders such as multinational corporations, private ventures, and sector-specific leaders and associations like the Canadian Securities Institute or the Automotive Parts Manufacturing Association of Canada.

Non-profit Sector

A non-governmental organization (NGO) can involve larger, incorporated organizations that exist for educational or charitable reasons on local, national and global scales, and have shareholders or trustees who do not benefit financially. However, the non-profit sector is also comprised of voluntary citizens' groups that can be organized at the smallest local level, such as neighbourhood associations and community based NGOs.¹¹ Many NGOs play an integral role in education and capacity building of citizens and other groups, which is necessary for achieving sustainable development.

What do they do/ What can they do?

- ✓ **Public Sector: Provides a leadership role in policy and regulation to enforce sustainable development; can also provide support**
- ✓ **Private Sector: Partners with other sectors to tap into new markets and provide capital and expertise**
- ✓ **Non-Profit Sector: Provides education and capacity building to transfer skills and knowledge**

Public Sector

The public sector often engages in large international partnerships, usually between national governments or a federal government and large NGOs. Many of the WSSD partnerships are at the global scale and involve various actors from the public sector such as the *Global Alliance for Building Sustainability (GABS)*, which includes Environment Canada, and the *Global Village Energy Partnership*, in which CIDA and Natural Resources Canada are involved.¹² Whether global, national or local, public sector partnerships often involve the government taking a leadership role in policy and regulation to enforce sustainable development.

The public sector also participates in smaller partnerships nationally, provincially, and locally, with business and/or the non-profit sector. An example of this is the *City of Hamilton's Action 2020 as Part of Vision 2020*. This project is funded and supported by the City of Hamilton, but it includes the empowerment and involvement of community groups.¹³ Governments of all levels can support partnerships through financial and political commitments, and by creating a climate in which partnerships are encouraged. This may involve the use of policies, incentives, and infrastructure support.¹⁴

Private Sector

In recent years, Canada has experienced a greater emergence of partnerships with the private sector through public/private partnerships (PPPs), which are becoming a popular financing tool for local and provincial capital projects.¹⁵ Although very difficult to generalize, PPP's are often appealing because of the growing demand for new public facilities and infrastructure in larger Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) across Canada. Public funds have traditionally paid for such projects. However, due to the recent downloading of service responsibilities and general economic hardship faced by many municipalities, partnering with the private sector allows access to a variety of capital markets and expertise that would otherwise not be available.¹⁶ For the private sector, partnerships of this nature are advantageous because they allow entrance into new markets, while spreading the risk and often resulting in tax incentives and/or better provision of services.¹⁷ It is important to recognize, however, that a PPP is not necessarily a sustainability partnership.

Non-profit Sector

The non-profit sector involves task-oriented groups with a common interest. NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions such as bringing citizens' concerns to governments, monitoring policies, and encouraging political participation at the community level.¹⁸

Through partnerships, the non-profit sector can play a vital role in sustainable development by providing analysis and expertise, in addition to capacity building that increases the skills and assets of poor people or advances the causes of environmental stewardship, human

rights, and good governance.¹⁹ The transfer of skills and knowledge is an important building block to reaching sustainability.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play a significant role in sustainability partnerships at the international level. In particular, Northern NGOs can bring a different perspective to Southern NGOs, to enable more dialogue as equals and to give Southern NGOs and their communities exposure to new ideas and experiences. Likewise, Northern NGOs can also learn from Southern NGOs. In addition, Northern NGOs have a role in education in the North, where there is a challenge to overcome perceptions of poverty and environmental degradation as acute problems that exist only in the South.²⁰

Important Considerations

- ✓ **Public Sector: It is always important to question the types of partnerships and agreements in which governments engage. Partnerships should not replace government responsibilities.**
- ✓ **Private Sector: The concept of Sustainable Development must be articulated in terms that are familiar to business leaders.**
- ✓ **Non-Profit Sector: Through better coordination and meaningful partnerships the potential to achieve significant outcomes and the greatest impact is increased.**

Public Sector

It is always important to question the types of partnerships and agreements in which governments engage. For example, do the commitments, targets and timetables that governments endorse through partnerships place sustainable development more centrally in policy debates?²¹ Partnerships involving the public sector should not be token activities. Rather, they should reflect strong commitments to actively promoting sustainable development.

Another important question to ask is: Can government partnerships strengthen local governance, including less formal alliances among the poorest people? Government partnerships should reinforce leadership and the ability of governments to fulfill their obligations to the public. In this respect, it is essential that government partnerships have objectives that are inclusive and accountable to marginalized people, and contribute to social development in addition to economic and environmental development.

Furthermore, public sector partnerships should be able to provide the rationale and support for credible, action-oriented, multi-stakeholder initiatives.²² Government commitments should establish infrastructure, policies, and other supports necessary for the success of sustainable development efforts initiated in other sectors. This will allow diverse stakeholders the opportunity to work together to develop effective sustainable development solutions.

Finally, partnerships undertaken by governments should always be assessed to ensure that these activities do not include the replacement or shifting of responsibility from the government to other sectors. Partnerships should not reduce or weaken government obligations.

Private Sector

If sustainable development is to achieve its potential, it must be integrated into the planning and measurement systems of business enterprises.²³ When working with the private sector, the concept of Sustainable Development must be articulated in terms that are familiar to business leaders. This involves the adoption of business strategies and activities that meet the needs of the enterprise and its stakeholders today while protecting, sustaining and enhancing the human and natural resources that will be needed in the future.²⁴ These strategies recognize business's dependence on human and natural resources, in addition to physical and financial capital. They emphasize the fact that economic activity must not degrade or destroy these natural and human resources.²⁵

Co-operative approaches between government and the private sector offer a promising way to solve many sustainable development problems by creating opportunities for suppliers of 'green consumers', developers of environmentally safer materials and processes, firms that invest in eco-efficiency, and those that engage themselves in social well-being.²⁶ However, specific challenges need to be addressed to make these partnerships effective, credible and accountable. Regulation or the warning of increased regulation plays a necessary role in motivating industry to remove impediments to sustainable development.²⁷

Non-Profit Sector

In some cases many NGOs work on the same issues, thus they inevitably compete for publicity and funding. Through better coordination and meaningful partnerships with other in the non-profit sector, the potential of NGOs to achieve significant outcomes and the greatest impact will be increased.²⁸ As mentioned previously, NGOs play a very significant role in education and capacity building, not only through public engagement and participation, but also with many different private and public partners.

The non-profit sector has skills, expertise, and other resources that both the public and private sector may desire, such as foreign contacts and the capacity for effective community liaison. NGOs can aid in teaching other sectors new ideas and encourage the examination of new ways of working together that stretch beyond the goal of raising funds. However, such alliances require a strong element of trust.

One main consideration for NGOs entering into partnerships is that they usually have more constraints and limited capacity in comparison to the private or public sector. NGOs are frequently limited by financial constraints or the regulations of funders, thus, they must know and remain accountable to their constituents in order to build or maintain credibility. In addition, NGOs should ensure that clear communication, accurate information, and direct consultation of decisions are always upheld when entering partnerships. The non-profit sector should be selective of partners and develop sensitivity to how political influences may affect the objectives of the partnership.²⁹

Choosing a Partner

One of the most crucial steps in a partnership is the initial choice of partner. Partnerships may be undermined before they even begin, if organizations do not take preliminary planning steps to ensure that the parties involved are well suited to collectively engage in a partnership. Potential partners should ensure that they have a common vision and an understanding of the benefits that may be realized through the partnership, and be able to demonstrate that they can make a strong commitment.

The Common Vision

Potential partners should have:

- ✓ **A common understanding of sustainable development**
- ✓ **A common goal for the partnership**
- ✓ **Mutual trust**
- ✓ **A communication agreement**

A Common Understanding

Organizations must share a common vision and a compelling motive to work together in partnership. Thus, potential partners should first determine if they have a mutual understanding of sustainable development and share an understanding of how the economic, social, and environmental realities of sustainable development relate to each other.³⁰

In addition, partners should discuss not only how they define sustainable development, but also what constitutes a significant contribution to sustainable development, and how this may be accomplished through a partnership. This will provide grounds for building a common goal for the partnership.

A Common Goal

Partners must understand each other's objectives.³¹ This includes a clear agreement as to what goals will be accomplished through the partnership, and how goals can be met. Appropriate partners should be able to clearly outline the rationale for and objective of the partnership. An explicit delineation of responsibilities for each stage of the proposed partnership is also critical before making commitments. This can aid each party's comfort level and awareness of both the advantages and disadvantages of the potential partnership.³²

It is important, however, that even when both partners have a common goal, a partnership reflects the diversity of ideas and viewpoints held by the partners. Each partner's stance reflects its own interest, and this difference in interest should be used to formulate solutions that reflect careful consideration of diverse opinions and perspectives.³³

Mutual Trust

Trust between partners is essential for a successful partnership. Participating organizations must be willing to undertake meaningful work with each other, and to work together as partners.³⁴ This requires a commitment to open dialogue, and the discussion of problems and concerns, as well as the trust that partners will carry out their commitments. Trust between partners helps to ensure that partners can focus on the primary partnership goal, instead of on differences and uncertainty.

Communication

Choosing partners with the same inclinations toward mechanisms of communication is essential. Furthermore, communication should occur not only between partners, but also with other stakeholders and parties, including the public. Partners should indicate whether they are interested in free and open communication and if they are comfortable with how decision-making will occur. All involved must be willing to communicate the results of their partnership not only to the members involved, but also to others.³⁵

Identifying the Potential Benefits

Potential partners should:

- ✓ **Ensure an appropriate balance between what each organization can bring to the partnership and how each organization will benefit.**
- ✓ **Design partnerships with benefits that are not only financial, but also provide mechanisms to strengthen skills, collaborate and engage a wide range of stakeholders.**

Striking an Appropriate Balance

A successful partnership involves the collaboration of diverse partners, each with a unique capacity to contribute to the partnership. The strengths of each organization and the extent to which each organization can contribute should be identified at the onset. This includes recognition of strengths and capacities beyond financial resources.

A Range of Benefits

Partners must be aware of the potential benefits associated with partnerships. These may include increased capacity, financial rewards, greater accountability, and opportunities for knowledge and skill building.³⁶ In a partnership of diverse organizations, some partners may have to contribute to the capacity building of other partners that may be less equipped in certain areas.³⁷

Each organization should disclose what resources, tools, and support they need from other partners in order to begin collaboration and to meet their own objectives.³⁸ Partnerships should be designed and *agreed upon* to ensure that each organization will be able to contribute in a meaningful manner, and will receive benefits fairly.

Making a Commitment

- ✓ **The risks associated with the partnership should be clear and understood by all partners.**
- ✓ **There must be a clear and demonstrated commitment from all partners.**

Understand the Risks

Whenever entering into partnerships there are risks to be assumed. Therefore risks should be made as explicit as possible, and all parties involved must clearly state whether they are willing to take on the same risks as others. Some risks involved with partnerships include fragmentation and weakening of commitments due to a lack of focus, or the possibility of financial loss. Further risks are discussed below in *Challenges and Knowing When to Terminate*.

Demonstrate a Commitment

All partners should demonstrate a clear commitment to action and leadership.³⁹ Each partner should be able to demonstrate that they can provide adequate time and resources to the partnership. Partners should also ensure that all are in agreement with and can truly live up to financial commitments.

Defining the Framework

Partnership Scope

- ✓ **Partnerships should be designed to reflect the capacities of each partner.**
- ✓ **Regardless of the size of the undertaking, the partnership must be a meaningful commitment.**

Partnership Design

There are many forms of partnership in which organizations may engage. Some partnerships can be lengthy undertakings with high task specificity while others will be more general projects with low task specificity. In previous work CIELAP has described how partnerships may be categorized according to the degree of difference in partnership vision and the nature of the task and organization of the partnership.⁴⁰ While there are many possible structures for a partnership, it is essential that the structure of each partnership reflects the capacities and diversity of the partners. The scope of the partnership should be appropriate to the time, resources, skills, and other tools available to the partners. Table 1 provides a description of some different forms of partnerships, their common characteristics, and important considerations that should be made prior to entering such a partnership. This table is only a brief summary of examples of partnerships; many other partnerships may be created.

Making a Meaningful Commitment

Partners should consider their combined capacity and design the partnership to make the most efficient use of available resources. Some partners will be able to commit to large tasks while others will only have the resources to undertake small projects. What is important is that any partnership, regardless of its size, reflects a meaningful commitment to sustainable development. The objectives of a partnership should be attainable goals, rather than symbolic or token actions. In addition, it should be clear that the partnership makes a contribution to sustainable development efforts. There should be no ambiguity about the significance and applicability of the partnership goals and objectives.

Table 1. Examples of Forms of Partnership

Form of Partnership	Description	Important Considerations
Knowledge Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners work together to address common problems related to sustainable development. • Goals include strengthening capacities, developing solutions, providing opportunities for members from different sectors to learn from each other, sharing information in order to inform policy development, and generate recommendations for decision-makers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The objective of knowledge networks should be to move beyond information transfer in order to build useful relationships and to inform stakeholders outside the partnership. • Knowledge networks must aim to engage and inform diverse stakeholders: decision-makers, researchers, and the public. • These partnerships must include mechanisms or tools for effective communication.
Coalition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse partners work together on topics of common concern. • Partners often engage in proposal writing and government lobbying. • Objectives often include advocacy and raising awareness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to the diversity of partners, coalitions require strong organization to ensure that partners remain focused on overall goals and responsibilities.
Specific Project or Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners work together towards a common measurable goal, such as emissions reduction or the implementation of a system. • Involves clearly articulated goals and a well-defined action plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Such projects are often lengthy and require extensive collaboration between partners. • Support from government can greatly assist these partnerships.
Umbrella Alliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The partnership forms to address one broad topic or issue. • Partners can form sub-partnerships that address different issues related to a main partnership goal. • Umbrella alliances typically involve several partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive organization and communication is required to ensure that objectives are meaningful and that they are efficiently addressed.

Making an Agreement

- ✓ **Create an official partnership agreement that clearly describes the objectives of the partnership, a timeline, and the commitments and responsibilities of each partner.**
- ✓ **Develop a detailed action plan.**

Official Partnership Agreement

An official document can be used to define and guide a partnership and ensure that each partner is aware of their role and commitments. One example of such a document is the Memorandum of Understanding, such as that used by the *Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership* (GHESP). This partnership is a joint venture between the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, The International Association of

The *Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership* has combined the strengths of four main institutions/organizations that include UNESCO, University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, Copernicus Campus, and the International Association of Universities. Each has a very specific task that becomes almost a project on its own, but the projects come together and all contribute to a common goal.*

* www.unesco.org/iau/ghesp

Universities, Copernicus Campus and University Leaders for a Sustainable Future. The Memorandum of Understanding for the GHESP lists the partners, the type of partnership, the rationale for the partnership, and the major responsibilities and project areas of each partner.⁴¹ The primary goal of the partnership, as well as specific objectives for meeting this goal, is outlined here. The document is dated and states the time period for which it will continue to be in effect. The Memorandum of Understanding has been signed by all parties and thus has been agreed upon by all partners. Such a document is an important step in ensuring that the partnership involves a clear commitment and a common goal.

It is useful to include provisions for evaluation and progress reporting in the official partnership agreement. The method and timeline for monitoring and reporting progress should be made clear. A partnership agreement should also define the norms, standards, and other common understandings that will be used for the partnership. Budgetary guidelines⁴² and provisions for decision-making should also be clearly outlined in any partnership agreement. In order to avoid conflict of interest, it is important to ensure that those who will be spending financial resources are not those who will be defining the budget. In addition, every partnership agreement should include details specific to the type of partnership; the components of an agreement outlined here are general and may change depending on what is appropriate for the partnership in question.

Important Components of a Partnership Agreement

- Primary Goal
- Short term objectives
- Long term objectives
- Timeline
- Budgetary guidelines
- Responsibilities and commitments
- Provisions for decision-making
- Guidelines for monitoring and reporting progress
- Terms and conditions of evaluation
- Room for flexibility and innovation

It is imperative that any partnership agreement allows for flexibility and innovation. This will not only account for unforeseen circumstances and challenges, but it will also promote continuous improvement within the partnership.⁴³ The support of innovation allows for creative problem solving and for new solutions to sustainability issues to be created.⁴⁴

The Action Plan

An action plan builds upon the initial partnership description outlined in the partnership agreement. It is a valuable tool, as it defines how the goal or goals outlined in the partnership agreement can be met through the fulfillment of specific objectives. In addition, it states how each partner will contribute to the partnership objectives.

The action plan for the GHESP clearly states that it “reflects the objectives set forth in the memorandum of understanding.”⁴⁵ The GHESP action plan also identifies a lead partner for each action item, which may be a useful strategy in partnerships in which each partner will specialize or concentrate in one particular area. A deadline or timeline is outlined for each action item in the GHESP plan, which is a useful tool for ensuring that appropriate time is allotted the partnership as a whole, and that partners are aware of the time commitment involved with each specific partnership objective.

An action plan can take many different forms, and it should be tailored to reflect the partners involved as well as the nature of the partnership. For example, in a document similar to an action plan, *the United Kingdom Offshore Operators Association (UKOOA)* has outlined over sixty specific sustainability strategy commitments, which are grouped into general commitment areas. Each specific commitment is clearly stated, followed by a description of progress, which includes achievements and difficulties encountered.⁴⁶ Partners should ensure that the action plan is created so that it reflects the context of the partnership and will be a useful tool for guiding the partnership.

Carrying Out the Agreement

Partners should:

- ✓ **Remain focused on the primary goal.**
- ✓ **Monitor and report progress regularly.**

Remaining Focused

The Canadian experience with Sustainability Partnerships demonstrates that a successful partnership requires a “laser beam” focus on the partnership goal.⁴⁷ A clear and detailed partnership agreement can help to ensure that partners remain focused on their primary goal. As the partnership proceeds, it is important that partners devote adequate time and resources to the partnership.⁴⁸

Monitoring and Reporting Progress

At the Johannesburg Summit it was recognized that monitoring and evaluation of partnerships is necessary to ensure that commitments are being met.⁴⁹ For some partnerships, progress can be monitored and reported regularly according to guidelines established in the initial partnership agreement. This type of arrangement is suitable for partnerships involving one main project. Other partnerships may be broad in scope and be comprised of a number of smaller projects. In such cases it is useful for separate monitoring mechanisms to be implemented for each project, so that each project will be evaluated in the most appropriate manner. In other instances, some combination of project-specific monitoring mechanisms and a broad partnership monitoring mechanism may be required. An example of how this occurs is *The International Partnership for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions*. This partnership is an umbrella alliance in which partners can form sub-partnerships that address different issues related to the main partnership goal. The framework of the partnership encourages the development of monitoring mechanisms for each sub-partnership, in order to address the diversity of issues and actors involved in the main partnership, as well as the eventual creation of an overall partnership monitoring mechanism that links the partnership to the general monitoring of the WSSD follow-up.⁵⁰

Challenges and Knowing When to Terminate

Considering that partnerships are comprised of actors with diverse interests and perspectives, some challenges are inevitable. On the one hand, weaknesses can be overcome if they are made explicit and given appropriate attention. On the other hand, early recognition of more severe limitations may signal when to terminate an unsuccessful partnership before it ends in failure.

Working with the Public Sector

Public Sector Partnerships should recognize that:

- ✓ **Partnerships do not replace government commitments and obligations.**
- ✓ **Gaps exist in influencing policy at the local, national and international level.**
- ✓ **Regulatory frameworks can motivate partnerships, but also act as impediments.**

Some critics suggest that the sustainable development agenda is faced with a “crisis in implementation” and that governments must strengthen their role to fulfill their obligations and commitments toward sustainable development.⁵¹ Although partnerships can be valuable, they do not and cannot replace government commitments and obligations. In addition, there are often gaps between problem solving at the local level and the ability to influence policies. Successful partnerships should be able to communicate progress to national decision makers, and to inform the international community of their work.

Another challenge to partnerships can be the regulatory framework within which they develop. This can include local, regional, and national regulations as well as international agreements and laws. These regulatory frameworks can motivate and facilitate partnerships, but it must also be recognized when they stand as impediments.⁵² Sustainability partnerships may not be successful if they exist in a framework that does not support the goals and objectives of the partnership.

Working with the Private Sector

Be cautious of private partners that:

- ✓ **Use partnerships as a guise to lobby against industry regulations**
- ✓ **Make claims towards “collaboration and cooperation” to instill a sense of false legitimacy**

Private-public partnerships, especially those involving transnational corporations, often create concern around private sector bias, where the interests of industries and communities are diametrically opposite.

Procedures are required to deal with such conflicts that risk the legitimacy of partnerships. This is especially emphasized when the monitoring of these arrangements are left to each individual partnership.*

*Sustainable Development Issues Network: Taking Issue: Questioning Partnerships www.sdissues.net

Some private sector actions towards sustainable development claim to bridge networks of companies from around the world to ensure that the commitment and contribution of business for sustainable development is well understood.⁵³ Yet, critics contend that the main purpose of such initiatives is to lobby against international regulation on the activities of transnational corporations.⁵⁴ When entering into private sector partnerships, parties should ensure that such groups are not using a guise of “cooperation and collaboration” to instill false legitimacy.

Other Considerations

Signals for Potential failure:

- ✓ **Falling prey to strong external influences when well organized commitments in are not in place between partners**
- ✓ **Focusing too much on differences and not enough on commitments**
- ✓ **Becoming inefficient when organizations are not flexible enough to work more efficiently with their partners.**
- ✓ **Attempting to replicate other partnerships that are very context specific**

There are many other aspects of partnering that should be considered before parties decide whether or not such an arrangement is appropriate. For example, partnerships can fall prey to strong external influences that may be political, financial or even religious. Unless a partnership is well organized and has firm commitments in place, such pressures can significantly crack the partnership's foundation. Proper initial planning and structured decision-making can support partnerships under stress.⁵⁵

Likewise, focus may often veer off the original goals of the partnership. Due to the diverse agendas of different partners involved it is possible for the partnership to become unproductive if members focus on the differences between the partners or on issues not involved in the partnership.⁵⁶

Many partnerships also become inefficient when organizations are not prepared to be flexible and adaptable in their own internal business processes in order to work more efficiently with their partners. Furthermore, those entering into partnerships in hopes of replicating the success of others must realize that partnerships are very context specific and may not fit well into other settings with different organizations.⁵⁷

Unsuccessful Partnerships: A Hypothetical Example

Many partnerships can start off on the wrong foot when funding is the main driver. In some cases NGO's in the North are given financial incentives to partner with NGO's in the South. Unfortunately if groups partner primarily for the sake of funding they may fail to clearly establish or understand each parties' vision, resources available and commitments:

A Canadian NGO engaged in partnership with three other non-profit groups involved in local economic development in Indonesia. The Canadian and local Indonesian NGO's shared a common goal of increasing the power of farmers in poorer rural areas where land rights have been an issue for decades.

The local Indonesian NGO was promoting cocoa farming as a way to support local farmers. However, the first issue of concern arose when a government official was integrated into their group, which is not always ideal in developing countries. Coupled with the fact that this official began to undermine the work of the NGO, timing and commitment became an issue. The local NGO was not sure if they could meet the goals and timelines requested by the other partners.

The biggest difficulty emerged when all three groups realized that they had clashing visions and definitions of sustainable development. The price of cocoa is extremely volatile which leaves cocoa farmers vulnerable to market fluctuations. As well, cocoa farming alone is not sustainable as it depletes croplands over time. A more sustainable approach to meeting the needs of the community would have been planting diverse crops and engaging in activities such as composting and crop rotation to lessen such potential adverse effects.

Unfortunately the local NGO concluded that they did not have the knowledge or resources to promote anything more than cocoa farming and thus it was agreed by all members involved to terminate the partnership after three months.

Lessons Learned

Ensure that partnerships are not formed with funding as the fundamental commonality. All parties involved should disclose their goals and definitions of sustainable development, as well as their resources available and levels of commitment. If this is done correctly from the outset, then all actions undertaken should feed into these goals. It is problematic if partners have conflicting objectives that are overshadowed by a common desire for funding.

Ensuring Accountability

Just as checks and balances are required to keep society on track to a more sustainable future, there is a need for a system to protect the interests of all sides equally. Accountability is essential to carrying out meaningful partnerships. It requires both monitoring and a means of enforcement. A lack of accountability makes a fair partnership impossible. Partnerships on issues where the members share a common goal in forming networks to consolidate can build a larger force towards sustainable development. However, the key component of a successful meaningful partnership is that partners must be mutually accountable with respect to the issue on which the partnership is based.⁵⁸

Examples of tools for, and measures of, accountability are provided below. One of the most important aspects of accountability is ensuring not only public consultation and participation, but also other forms of public engagement.

Tools and Measures

Accountable Partnerships Include:

- ✓ **Effective internal and external communications that make activities transparent and accountable to both to the public and the partners involved**
- ✓ **Binding contracts, either actual or symbolic, that enforce partners commitments**
- ✓ **Strong integrity that acts as an example and holds other organizations accountable to the same goals of sustainable development**

One way to build accountability within a partnership is to develop effective internal and external communications strategies. Partnerships that make their activities and outcomes transparent to the broader public increase their accountability to not only external parties impacted, but also to the partners themselves.⁵⁹ Likewise, transparency in this case is not an incentive, but rather a disincentive toward misconduct and bad publicity that acts as a powerful a tool for accountability.

As mentioned in above in *Carrying Out the Agreement*, signing a contract can also act as reinforcement of commitments within the partnership. As well, contracts can detail different alternatives and courses of action to take if potential problems do arise. In some cases, it may be useful to have a third party involved to witness and bind contracts where funding and other financial concerns are involved.

Successful Accountability Measures

The CARE coalition of NGOs and corporations built a network strong enough to hold the government accountable to the central principle of promoting renewable energy in Canada. This accountability brought in other partners including provincial governments that made more companies accountable to the principle by providing incentives.*

* Alex Hill, Environmental Project Officer, Alternatives, Phone Interview. March 24 2003. www.alternatives.org

Despite useful tools and measures, the most fundamental contribution partners can make towards accountability is integrity. When different groups enter partnerships where each side can be confident in the other's integrity, they are able to increase their power to hold others accountable to the same principles. In other words, successful partnerships between corporations and NGOs can be used to hold other institutions accountable to shared goals of sustainable development.⁶⁰

Engaging the Public

Accountability includes:

- ✓ **Provisions for making the partnership and its commitments known to the public**
- ✓ **Meaningful opportunities for public participation and engagement**

Making Partnerships Known to the Public

Engaging all relevant stakeholders in dialogue is a key part of fostering appropriate solutions for sustainable development. It is essential that partners acknowledge the public as an important stakeholder in any sustainability partnership.

However, many citizens currently dislike the fragmentation and sense of isolation that often characterizes the way public concerns are addressed.⁶¹ People need room for exploration in the public arena: opportunities for fact-finding, listening, testing ideas, and figuring out what they believe and how they feel about a concern.⁶² This requires a range of options for people to consider and work through. The public also has a right to know all sides of a debate behind public concerns, which requires the opportunity to develop an awareness of activities and impacts of new partnerships between various sectors, as opposed to simply being informed that a partnership has formed. If the opportunity to develop full knowledge is lacking, people may feel blocked from public engagement. In such cases any potential for real accountability to the public ceases to exist.

Meaningful Opportunities for Public Participation and Engagement

The most accountable partnerships incorporate equitable representation from all stakeholders. However, even with good intentions, some aspects of the public interest continue to be excluded when they are directly impacted. Depending on the partnership, some of the following groups require better engagement:

- Voluntary associations and networks
- Women's groups
- Youth, elderly, disabled
- Homeless populations
- Marginalized ethnic groups, including visible minorities and indigenous populations
- Unions and chambers of commerce
- Farming or housing co-operatives
- Neighbourhood associations
- Religious organizations

There are many ways in which a partnership can become accountable to the public. Public engagement requires that one or more steps have been taken to ensure that citizens have been considered as valuable stakeholders. Engagement can include education, consultation, and participation. The latter represents the opportunity for citizens to become directly involved in a project or process.

Conversation plays a central role in the way in which citizens relate to public issues. Through conversation people learn from one another and problem solving can occur.⁶³ Through more conversations with the public, parties undertaking new partnerships will begin to recognize how

citizen's lives are truly affected by their actions. When engaged, people bring their whole lives to the table, including past and present experiences, their minds and emotions, their individualism and search for commonly held values and aspirations.⁶⁴ Although engaging citizens can be like walking a tightrope of competing factors, it can also provide those entering into partnerships a deeper understanding of, and therefore accountability to, public concerns over sustainable development.

The following points provide various techniques that can facilitate public engagement in ways that may be more meaningful than traditional public hearings and deputations:

- Engage local groups in problem-solving activities like design charrettes for planning initiatives or community consultation workshops. In return, such groups can provide feedback that is necessary to enhance the overall performance and effectiveness of public agencies.⁶⁵
- Listen for how people approach public concerns. What is their starting point they use initially to describe their concern? Then understand what lies beneath this and try to discover what connections people make between and among public concerns and why?⁶⁶
- Use the same language people use to describe their concerns to describe the partnership, its activities, outcomes and potential impacts.⁶⁷
- Help people make important connections that they may not make on their own.
- Understand what creates authenticity in public discourse from citizens' perspectives, and not just from that of experts, technicians, and elites.
- Include the public in the evaluation process.
- When meeting with the public, ask people about things that may seem unrelated to the project objectives, for example what they value or see as problems in their lives and communities. This can generate a better understanding of the public perspective and also help to identify new issues that may be addressed through the partnership.⁶⁸
- Provide citizens with information before and during a project, not simply after decisions have been made and implemented.⁶⁹
- Engage the public by taking on the role of educator and allowing citizens to have access to important information about projects that may affect them.
- Be aware that some people may view sustainable development efforts as a threat or roadblock to financial and other forms of prosperity. It is important to inform people that sustainable development is a positive concept that encourages social, environmental, and economic activity that can flourish and prosper over the long term.⁷⁰

Evaluation and Measurement

For any partnership to remain meaningful, evaluation and measurement of success should be conducted regularly. An appropriate system for evaluation must be established with clear indicators by which to measure the success of the partnership.

Measurement from the Outset

Meaningful partnerships have:

- ✓ **An appropriate system of evaluation and measurement established at the start, for the duration of, and after the partnership**
- ✓ **Outcomes or achievements made widely available so that ongoing feedback can be solicited to continuously improve the partnership**

Meaningful partnerships will have mechanisms for evaluation built into the original plan. Some initial questions to ask include:

- What are the primary questions or objectives involving sustainable development to warrant such a partnership? In other words, what is the partnership trying to answer or achieve and what are the expected outcomes?
- Is it easy to measure? Is it costly? Is the project important enough for certain resources to be allocated?
- Is there a process for continued monitoring and review once projects are complete?⁷¹

One way to ensure effective accountability and evaluation methods is to make results available to the public and other parties or sectors affected. By doing so, partners make their projects responsive and able to be modified and improved based on findings and feedback.⁷²

Appropriate Criteria

Meaningful partnerships have:

- ✓ **Evaluation criteria that is significant and reflects the goals of the project**

Partners must ask what exactly it is that they want to measure, and attempt to define criteria that are in accordance with the stated goal of the partnership. This will allow partners to determine appropriate indicators. Partners should also recognize any supplementary and complementary goals that may require specific evaluation criteria. In addition, it is not just enough to develop criteria, but partners must prove that such criteria are important. This can be achieved by demonstrating measures differing in some way from before or without the partnership. In other words, try to isolate the effects of the partnership if possible by doing a comparative of before and after.⁷³

Concluding Remarks

The guidelines presented here highlight some of the important lessons learned from Canadian and international sustainability partnerships. Careful selection of a partner, identification of goals, recognition of risks and challenges, and the adoption of appropriate standards of accountability and measurement are important steps in the partnership process. Equally important is that each partner is aware of their own capabilities, as well as the capacity and limitations of their partners.

The public sector can play a leadership role in the areas of policy and regulation, and can also provide vital support to other organizations working towards sustainable development. However, sustainability partnerships should not be used to replace government commitments and responsibilities. Partnerships should not involve the transfer or shifting of responsibility from governments to other sectors.

The private sector can often offer technical expertise and financial resources. It is important that when working with private partners, the goals of sustainable development are articulated in a way that is familiar to the business community but also acknowledges that economic activity should not degrade or destroy human and natural resources. In addition, caution must be exercised to ensure that private partners do not use partnerships to instill false legitimacy and to pursue goals that do not contribute to sustainable development.

The non-profit sector can provide education and assist with capacity building in order to facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge, which is an important building block in reaching sustainability. Partners from the non-profit sector often play a vital role in assisting marginalized people and advancing the causes of environmental stewardship, human rights, and good governance. It should be recognized that the non-profit sector often has limited resources compared to the private and public sectors.

Consideration of the issues and partnership components presented in this report can help partners to develop meaningful and appropriate commitments to sustainable development, and to move from goodwill to action. It is important to remember that these guidelines represent a general framework for approaching partnerships, and that each partnership should be developed as context-specific in order to respond to the problems at hand.

As partnerships have an increasing role in sustainable development efforts, it is important that they are continuously monitored and evaluated, and that valuable lessons are shared. There is considerable room for more research on the experiences of Canadian and international sustainability partnerships. Further study could build upon the general guidelines discussed here, and provide a more in-depth analysis of different types of partnerships. Through continued research and information sharing, the efficiency of partnerships may be developed, and partnerships can become a more effective means of working towards sustainable development.

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