



# Partnerships and Capacity Building

A Guide for Small and Diaspora NGOs

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November 2012



The Common Ground Initiative is co-funded by Comic Relief and UKaid, and managed by Comic Relief



# Introduction

Partnership and collaboration with other NGOs are no longer (if they ever were) a peripheral add-on to an organisation's main work – for most organisations they are central to the way in which they pursue their mission and objectives. A partnership that works well can produce results which inspire and surprise, while one that is struggling can drain energy and resources from the organisations involved.

This guide shares information, tools and tips that can help small and diaspora organisations strengthen their partnerships and capacity building work. There is much material available. This guide highlights some key points, but we encourage you to delve deeper by following the links and references provided.

The toolkit starts by outlining the benefits of partnerships and the values which underpin partnership work. It then examines different stages of a partnership and the tools, approaches and good practices that could help your partnership at each stage. The final section brings together some 'top tips' for successful partnerships and some thoughts on capacity building with partners.

## 1. What is partnership?

At its simplest, a partnership is when two or more organisations work together towards a common aim. In the NGO world, partnership is frequently "...understood as a code word to reflect humanitarian, moral, political, ideological or spiritual solidarity between non-government development organisations in the North and South that joined together to pursue a common cause of social change."<sup>1</sup>

Within any definitions there are different types of partnership, each with different levels of commitment, resourcing, and power relations. It is, therefore, not surprising that differences in expectations between partners can lead to misunderstandings and conflict in the partnership. However, not all relationships are partnerships and nor do they need to be.

**Common challenges** faced by small and diaspora organisations in managing their partnerships:

- Balancing values of solidarity with the need for accountability to donors
- Ensuring acceptable and timely monitoring and reporting
- Different agendas and project vision of partners
- Balancing unequal power relationships
- Creating opportunities to learn from partners
- Communication
- Project management at a distance
- Tensions caused by partners juggling the needs of different donors
- Managing changing systems/practices with established partners
- Different working cultures
- Transparency
- Building trust
- Sustainability of projects

Source: PLP Partnerships Workshop September 2012 and participants' registration forms

<sup>1</sup>Fowler, A., 2000, "Partnership - Negotiating Relationships, Occasional Paper, No. 32, INTRAC, Oxford. Free download: <http://www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=54>

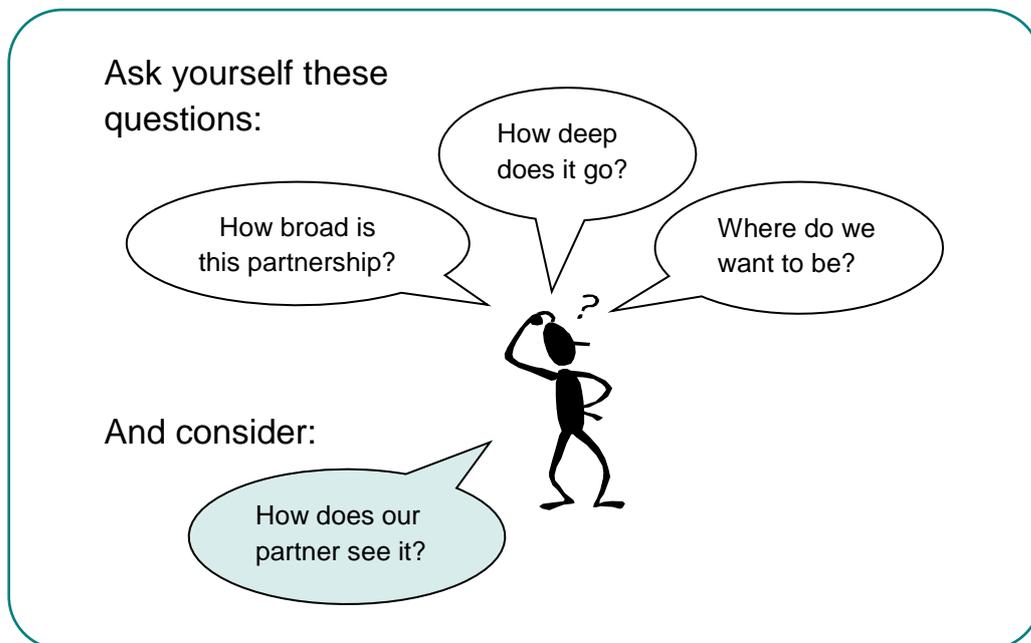
## 2. Why work in partnership?

Partnerships are key to our capacity to promote change. Amongst other things, they can lead to:

- **greater impact of our work:** through partners we can mobilize more resources, influence different sectors of public opinion, increase our reach, and work with new networks and groups (our partners' partners);
- **stronger organisations:** building and strengthening both 'north' and 'south' based organisations through solid relationships, trust and good communication;
- **increased legitimacy:** more use of local knowledge, projects appropriate to the context, including a diversity of voices, and a greater local ownership of work (not seen as a 'northern' initiative);
- **greater effectiveness:** partnerships provide opportunities to learn from each other and improve the way we work;
- **more negotiating power** with donors, local government and powerful stakeholders;
- **greater participation** of people living in poverty.

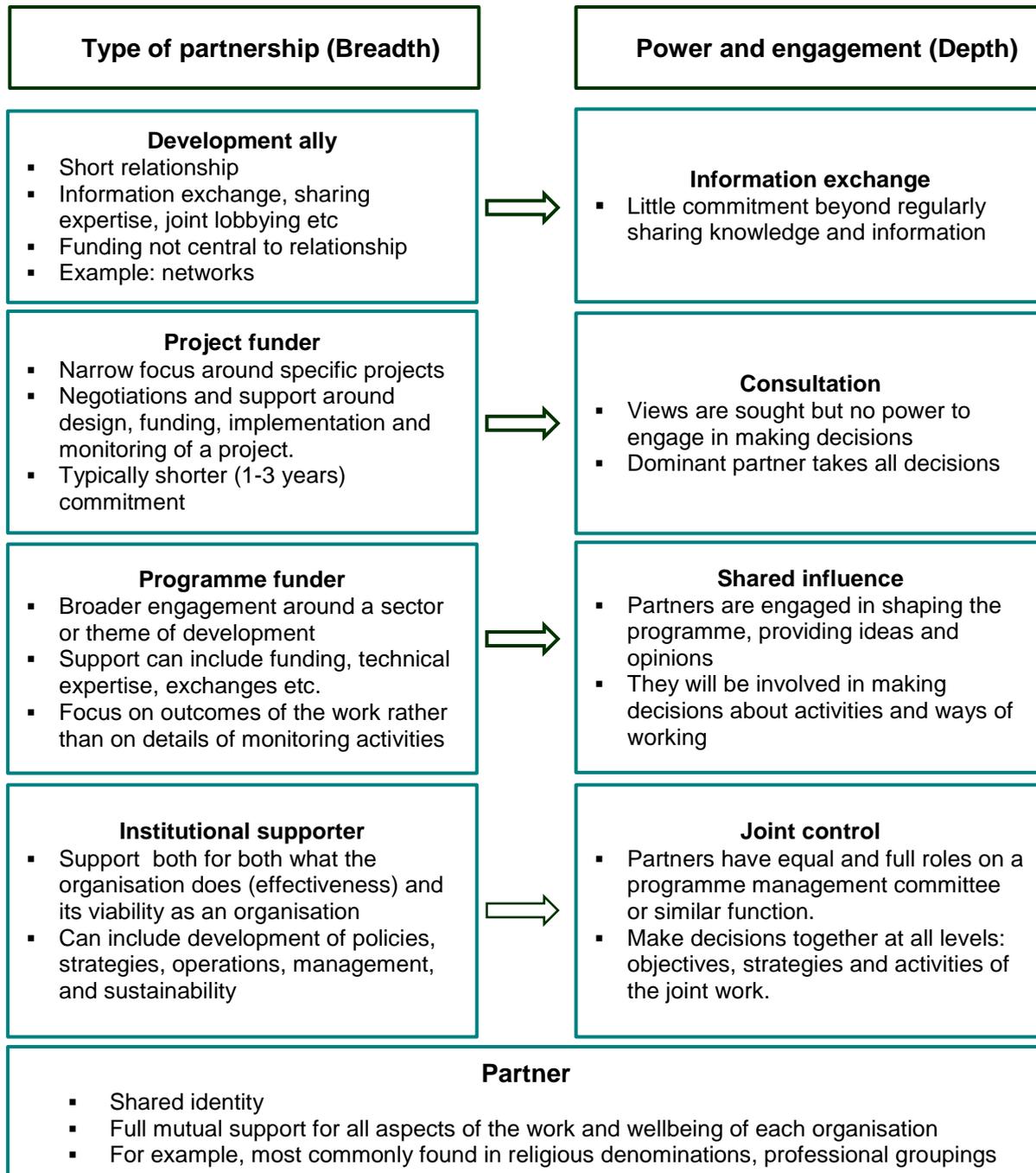
## 3. A tool for thinking about partnerships

A mental model<sup>2</sup> is useful to think clearly about what kind of partnership you are looking for with any particular organisation and to check that you see it the same way as your partner.



<sup>2</sup> Based on Alan Fowler (previous page)

It can also be useful to think about the types of partnership being developed and what this can mean in terms of a partner's power and engagement. The following table shows how it may look in theory:



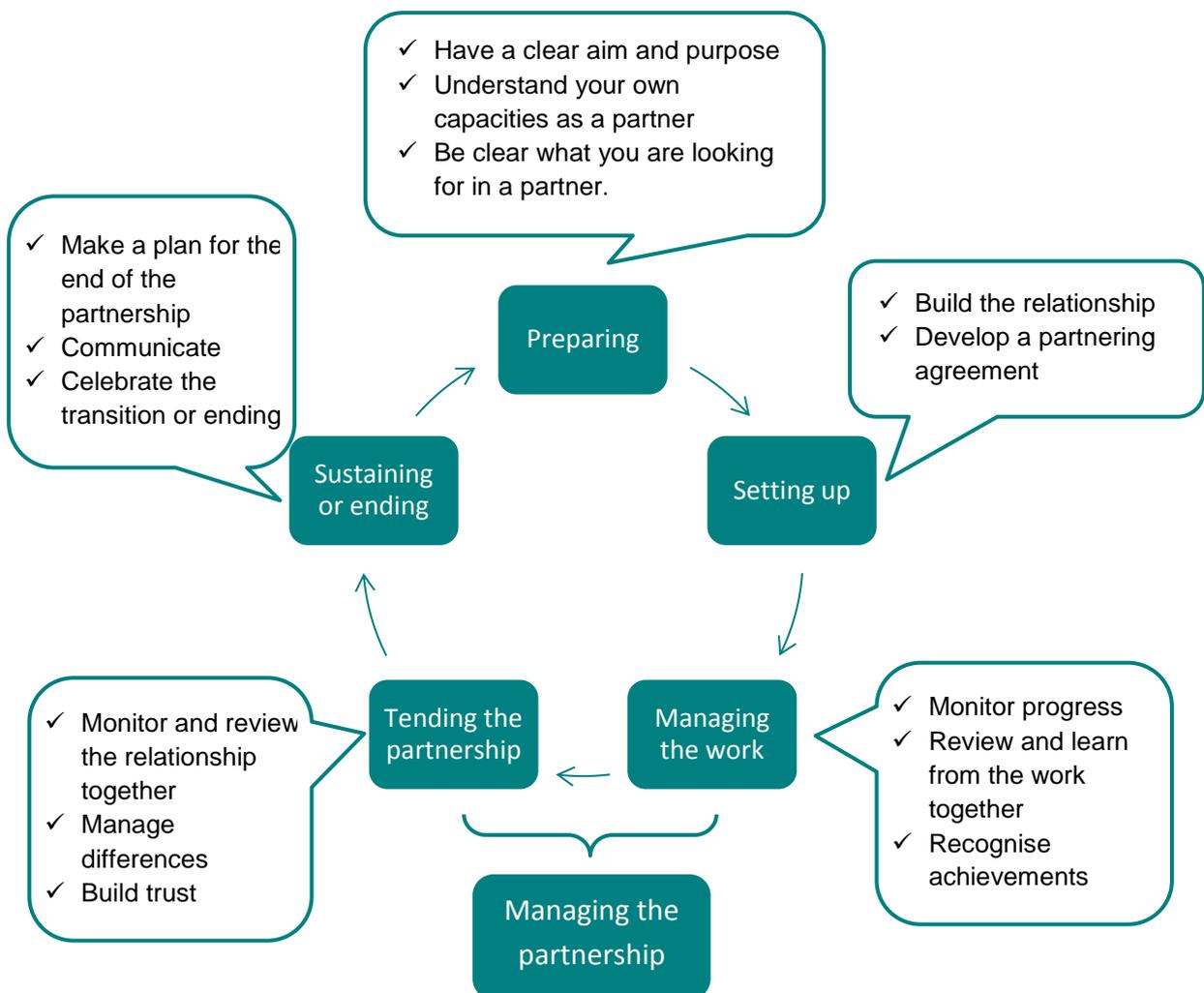
There are different (and increasing) rights and obligations involved with each of these types of partnership. One way of addressing (if not redressing) power issues is to discuss and negotiate the depth and breadth of your relationship with partners.

The focus of partnerships is often on the work being done together, or the project being carried out. It can be difficult to create the opportunities to shift the focus onto the relationship and to take time to understand each other's needs.

**An idea for how to use the model:** discuss with your partner where you are now, and where do you both want to be. What would this involve in practice? How will you get there? Some ways to help you move forward in this are explored in the sections in the rest of this guide.

## 4. Stages of Partnership – Overview

Thinking of a partnership in different stages is another useful model to have in mind because at each stage there are different tasks and priorities needing attention. That's not to say that all partnerships will follow this template, each will follow its own pathway. The following diagram highlights key stages in a partnership and some things to focus on at each stage to build and maintain an effective partnership.



## 5. Stages of a Partnership

In this section we will look at the four stages in the life of a partnership.

1. Preparing for partnership
2. Setting up a partnership
3. Managing a partnership
4. Exiting or closing down a partnership

### Examples of the added value of a Partnership

- Advocacy in the UK and globally by the UK partner
- Long term objective/view
- Catalyst for change in both partner organisations
- Knowledge transfer

Source: PLP workshop flipchart

*The names of tools that are in bold text in this section are described in detail at the end of this toolkit.*

### 5.1 Preparing for partnership

Laying solid foundations for working in partnership means:

- **Being clear about what is the added value you want from a partnership** and why, and what you can offer to a partnership in terms of resources, skills, contacts, and people. The [WWF Partnership Toolbox](#) suggests using their Organisational Context Tool to help think these things through and prepare for other stages of partnership;
- **Understanding your own capacities as a partner.** It can be very illuminating to get feedback from your existing partners – what do they value about you as a partner? (You can also use a Capacity Assessment Tool like [PQASSO](#); or a **SWOT** analysis);
- **Knowing what kind of partner you are looking for:** a common source of friction is not having shared values or organisational culture. Make a list of what is important to you in a partner and what you will look for (behaviour, attitudes to communities, competency, systems etc.);
- **Looking widely for potential partners:** a good partner is not necessarily among 'the usual suspects'. There could be community organisations, faith-based groups, or NGOs who have a low profile. Take time to ask different people and ask in the community you want to support (e.g. at health clinics, primary schools, places people gather) – who do they feel is an effective organisation?

#### Checklist of questions when identifying partners

1. Are our mission and values compatible?
2. What sort of organization is it – aims, activities, roles?
3. What else does it do beyond the joint project we are considering?
4. Do you know key facts about the background and links of the organization and its leaders?
5. Is there a degree of personal trust, based on knowledge of the organisation's track record, credibility and public image?
6. Where does their funding come from and what conditions are attached?
7. Will the cooperation contribute to our goals?

## 5.2 Setting up a partnership

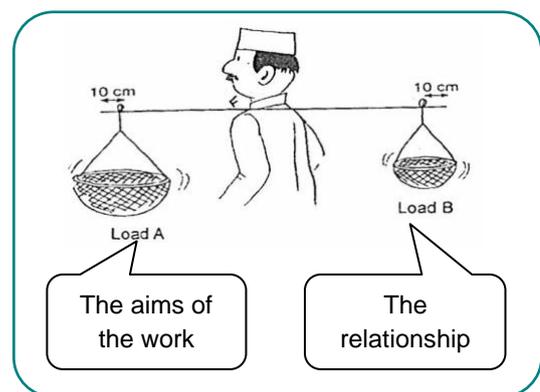
As one workshop participant commented: “*The process of reaching an agreement/MOU is really important*”. Getting to know another organisation at a distance is challenging. There is often not enough time during visits to build up more than a formal knowledge of each other. Several workshop participants emphasised that each situation is different and there is no one solution to setting up a partnership. Having said that, here is a process which others have found useful in getting a partnership going:

- i. Visit your potential partner (both offices and project) and be open about your purpose. It is essential to be up front about your mission and values and to be clear about what information you need from the prospective partners. Being open and encouraging questions from your potential partner will contribute to starting on a healthy footing. Take note of their concerns and motivation.
- ii. If practical, invite the director and senior staff to visit you.
- iii. Meet informally with the director to review and feedback your thoughts so far. Agree next steps (if you both want to proceed).
- iv. In agreement with the director, have an initial meeting with their trustees to explain your ideas, set out a possible process for drawing up an MOU/agreement and give them the opportunity to ask you questions.
- v. Share with your prospective partner the Partnership Agreement Tool in the [WWF Partnership Toolbox](#)<sup>3</sup> (pages 10-15) or the MOU format you are using. Agree the headings that are relevant to you and add any others as necessary. Give them time to consider the different areas. Prepare your own responses.
- vi. Agree a date for a meeting to discuss the agreement.
- vii. Hold the workshop/meeting over one or two days. Allow time for meals and socialising.
- viii. Once the agreement is drafted, give time for relevant members of staff in both organisations to be consulted and for the agreement to be discussed line by line. MOUs are often skimmed over and poorly understood by the staff who have to actually do the work.
- ix. Involve trustees/managers in final approval of the partnership as necessary.
- x. Celebrate your new partnership (more meals and socialising)!

## 5.3 Managing a partnership

There are two key elements of managing a partnership: 1) making sure you are achieving your aims while, 2) also nurturing the relationship between you. These need to be kept in balance.

For example, a partnership that is achieving a lot will tend to generate good feeling, confidence and trust between partners. But if this goes too far and all the energy goes into work and meeting



<sup>3</sup> The WWF Partnership Toolkit is free to download from: [http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/wwf\\_partnershiptoolboxartweb.pdf](http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/wwf_partnershiptoolboxartweb.pdf). Pages 10-15 contain an excellent partnership agreement tool which can be used to “help organisations prepare for and develop the key elements of a negotiated partnership”.

objectives, then communication and relationships may be neglected and frictions will appear. In the opposite situation where the relationship is going well but little is being achieved, the motivation and morale of the partnership will eventually be affected.

#### a) Monitoring progress of the joint work

Reports and field visits are the ground rock of your partnership, how you handle these can set the tone for your relationship. Here are some things that have worked for others:

##### **Do**

- Take time to discuss a report (lots of time and effort went into it)
- Use this as an opportunity to build trust by showing you value what your partner is doing
- Meet with your partner's whole team to discuss a report, inviting reflection, analysis and learning
- Focus on what is going well and why
- Ask open questions
- Discuss sensitive issues in an informal/off the record way, if possible in person in a relaxed setting
- Be pro-active in sharing relevant information (e.g. from donors or other agencies)
- Celebrate achievements!

##### **Don't (!)**

- Thank them for their report, then file and forget about it
- Phone out of the blue to analyse at length who is to blame for all the report's shortcomings
- Send the report back with red pencil all over it
- Fly in and out on a 3 day visit with back to back meetings saying you're in a rush to go somewhere else (giving the impression you have more important things to do)
- Cut off a suggestion of a meal together by saying you have to get to bed early to get through all the work tomorrow!

#### b) Monitoring and nurturing the partner relationship

It is easy to get caught up in our aim of making a difference and focussing only on our joint work. Like a married couple who plan a regular evening out without their children, nurturing a partnership needs time to be set aside and planned in advance.

*Time for nurturing a partnership needs to be set aside and planned in advance.*

Building trust is key to a relationship because only when partners trust each other will they be able share what is really going on.

An NGO worker in Nepal comments that:

*"It was extremely important to establish a sense of trust between myself and the Board, which took many months and involved much tea-drinking, suppers in each other's homes and chatting about our families and life in general. Although this initially challenged my Western definition of 'productivity' ... I soon realised that this was time very well spent... In the long run, such 'relationship building' was a very important part of helping to ensure that the Board would receive my observations as constructive..."*

This story and other tools and approaches to understanding trust, power and relationships are in the brilliant [Barefoot Guide to Working with Organisations and Social Change](#) Chapter 3.

A more structured tool to talk about your relationship is in the Partnership Monitoring Tool on page 21 of the [WWF Partnership Toolbox](#). This includes not just a checklist of what to talk about but a range of ideas for how to go about having the conversation. Both the WWF tool and Barefoot Guide are free to download.

Make a space in the relationship to manage conflict as you go along – expect to discuss differences in approach as they arise, make it part of the agenda to look at regularly, do not leave differences to grow unmanageable. One approach that helps to transform conflicts is described in Tool 2 (*Backing up from 'wants' to 'needs'*) at the end of this guide.

Communication is the lubricant that keeps the engine of partnership running. PLP workshop participants came up with a number of web-based tools to help communication at a distance. These are described in Tool 6 at the end of this guide.

### c) Trouble hotspot: Reports

A recurring issue raised by a workshop participant (and many others):

*How real is the partnership? A significant issue, especially for reporting, arises when despite having a good working relationship with the southern NGO, if at the end of the day the partner does not prepare reports in a timely manner, then the UK partner has to step in and ensure it is done...*

(PLP Workshop participant)

Many partnerships struggle with reporting. If this is true for you, and reports are late or poor quality, try these strategies:

- Jointly prepare a work breakdown plan for the reporting process then draw up a **GANTT chart** (see Tool 1) so that realistic timings and who is responsible are clear and agreed.
- Plan a phone call two weeks before a report is due to discuss progress with collecting data and to help analyse the information or clarify ideas.
- Share with your partner an example of what you consider a really good report, so they can see what you are aiming for.
- Find an opportunity to talk to the person in an informal setting and try to understand the blockages from their point of view – is the data late? Are they not used to writing? Are other commitments taking too much time? What help do they need from you? Then make a plan to address the underlying issues.
- Breakdown to a simple data format so that the information needed is clear.
- Increase reporting to monthly so that it is done in 'bite sized' pieces.

## 5.4 Exiting or closing down a partnership

If you've made a partnership agreement, you'll probably have included a section on how and when the partnership is expected to end. Even so, it may be a difficult time for both organisations and needs careful planning and, where possible, joint decision-making. Not all endings are painful; this is also the time for celebrating the achievements of the partnership, and for looking forward to whatever will take its place.

Exit strategies need to be discussed with partners to manage expectations and gain clarity on why, how and when partnerships will come to a close. A good exit strategy is based on transparency about the priorities for each organisation from the beginning and strong mutual goals.

Options include:

- Defined fixed term (e.g. 3 years, length of programme/project);
- Defined goal (e.g. when 'x number of midwives have been trained');
- Defined conditions (e.g. when the partner organisation is legally registered; when donor funding is not renewed);
- Mutual agreement, at any time.

Extra care is needed if the decision to end the partnership is one-sided and perhaps unexpected. Work together on a plan to manage the change and especially:

- Be honest and transparent about what is driving the end of the partnership;
- Give time for your partner to find a new funder;
- Communicate and consult with staff and other stakeholders;
- Help the organisation to find other sources of funding (working with a local consultant and/or using tools such as a [Resource Mobilization Guide](#)).

## 6. Capacity Building

### 6.1 Capacity building with partners

The starting point in any capacity building initiative is deciding what the capacity building is for. For example, is it to enable the organisation to lay a secure foundation for the future or to ensure that it can produce the right kind of reports for the donor?

Successful capacity building (CB) thinks about the needs of the organisation as a whole, and how the 'bit' of capacity that is being developed contributes to its overall effectiveness. Models of organisations help to picture this (see below).

CB often starts with some kind of assessment of an organisation's capacities, using a tool with a system of scoring. There are a number of tools available, including for example PQASSO and Bond's ['health check' tool](#). These tools help to identify strengths as well as weaknesses, to prioritise areas for CB, and to track progress.

As important as the tool used, is the process for using the tool. An assessment can make your partner feel vulnerable. If possible, plan and agree with your partner/s the process for the assessment, its purpose (will funding depend on the result?), who will lead the process and how the results will be used and shared. Consider a mutual process where they get a

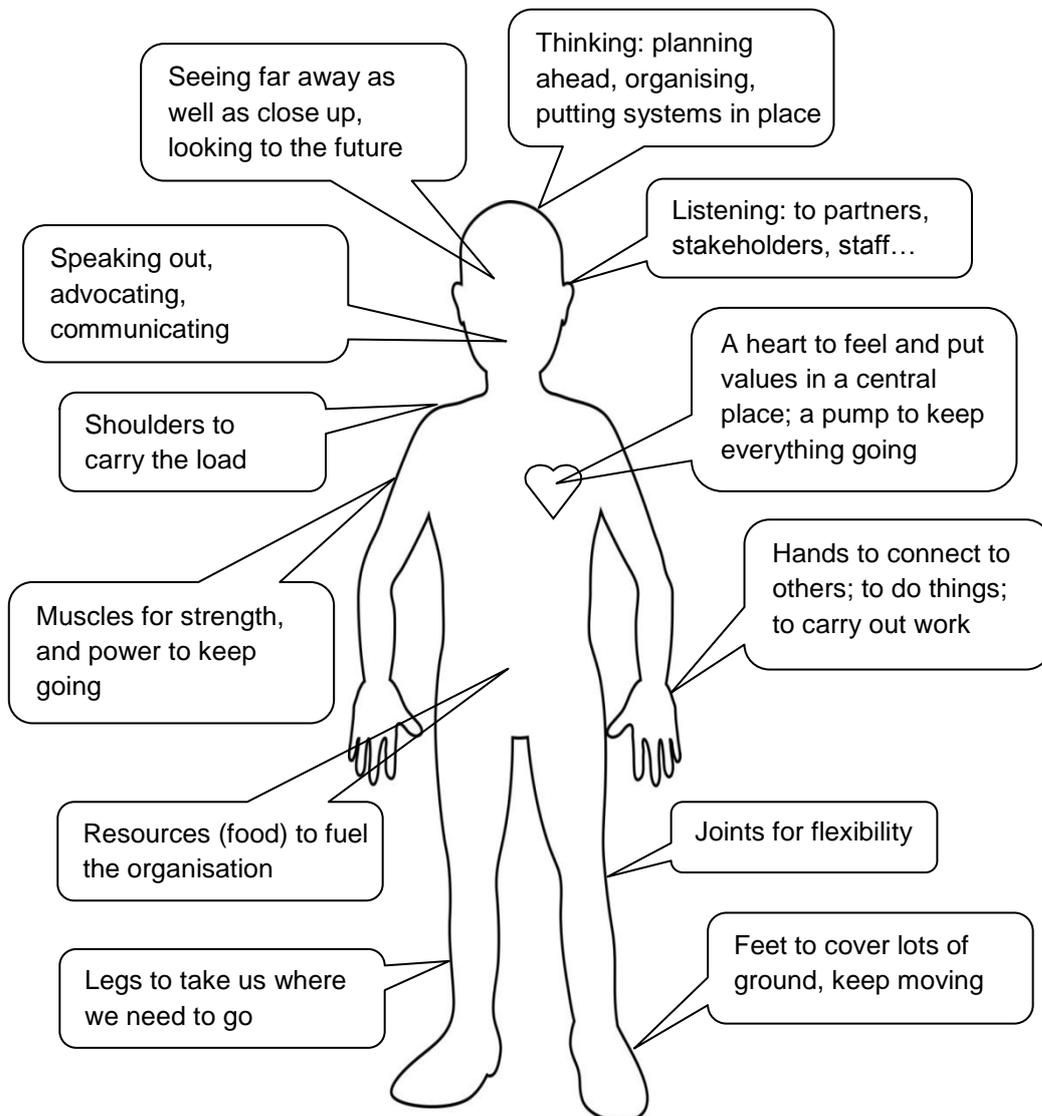
chance to assess you as a partner for example, using the [Keystone Development Partnership Survey](#).

### a) Using models of organisations to think about capacity building

Models give us a way to visualise and talk about our organisation. When used with partners, models can be helpful to create a shared language for thinking about what capacities are needed, and for what reasons.

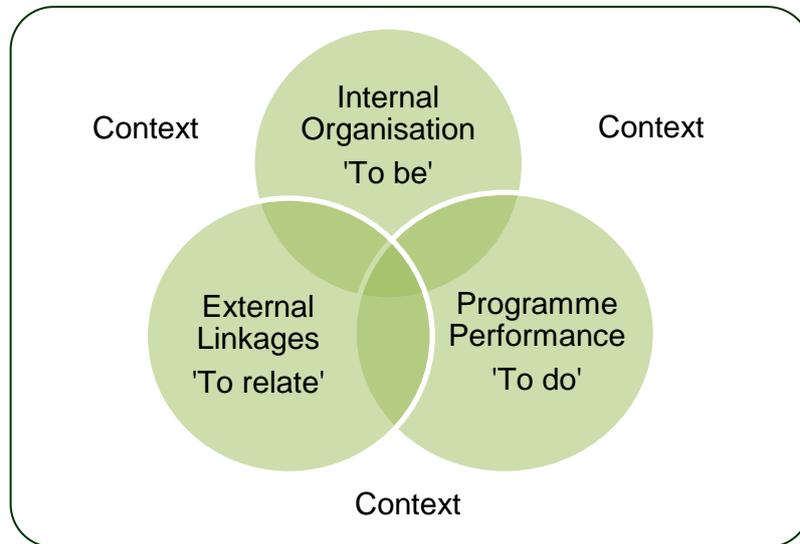
#### **Model of an organisation as a person:**

Thinking of an organisation in this way highlights how all the parts of an organisation need to work together and work well in order to be effective. Use this as a group exercise with partners to label different parts of the body according to how they see the parts fitting together, and the different contributions each part makes. You can also discuss which functions of the 'body' are working best, which need strengthening, and which are not 'well connected' with the others.



### The three circles model:

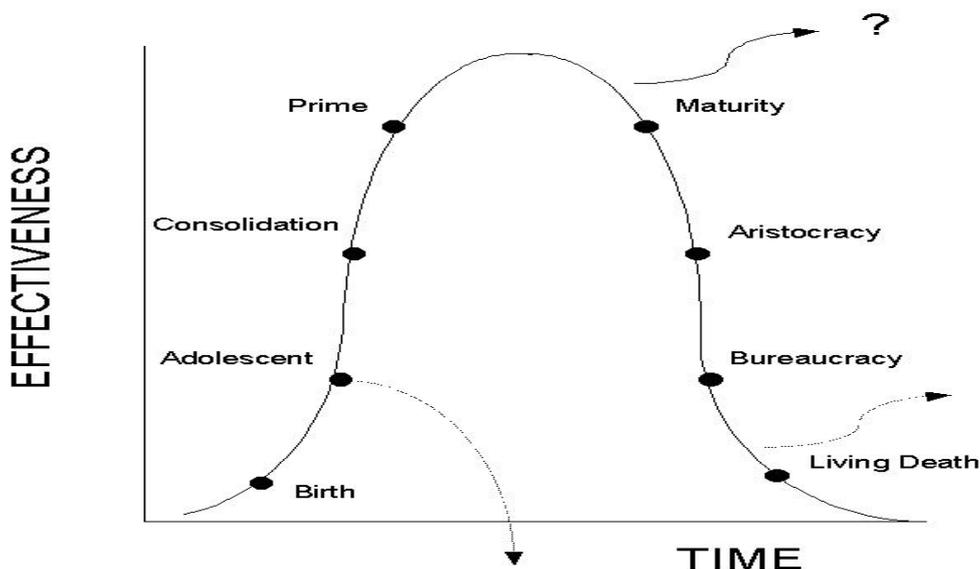
Another way of looking at an organisation is to think of the three main areas of capacity that it needs in order to be effective: an effective internal structure (mission, values, systems, etc.); good programmes (making a difference for beneficiaries, skilled staff, resources); and, external links (with donors, stakeholders, media etc.). All of these need to be appropriate for the context the organisation works in.



Capacity building needs to consider all three kinds of capacity since they are inter-related. An organisation may focus exclusively on building capacity for programme planning or report writing and forget the need to also build its own internal systems. A problem in one area may actually be due to poor capacity in another 'circle'. For example, poor project management might be because of a lack of capacity in involving beneficiaries ('to relate'), and not because of a lack of project planning skills.

Organisational assessment tools are often based around versions of the three circles model.

### The Lifecycle Model (see Tool 5 below for more details):



You can think of an organisation as moving through different stages of its life cycle: At each stage, different strategies for building capacity will be appropriate. For example, at 'adolescence' organisations can be very innovative, but dependent on a founder-figure. At this stage an organisation will need to focus on the transition to a broader leadership structure in order to grow in effectiveness. On the other hand, when an organisation has passed its prime, it may stick to old routines and inflexible approaches which make it less effective. Capacity building strategies at this stage would seek to help the organisation look at new ways of doing things or strengthen its capacity for learning.

Each of the three models illustrated above can be used to start discussions with partners about their (and your) respective strengths and weaknesses, and priorities for capacity building.

## 6.2 Capacity building with community based organisations (CBOs)<sup>4</sup>

Building the capacity of informal community groups throws up some different challenges to building the capacity of more formally established organisations. By definition, CBOs have informal structures, are often not registered, usually run by a small volunteer committee, and have little funding. They are also strongly embedded in a community, often led by informal community leaders, and operate in a fluid, informal way. The members of the group and volunteers can also be the beneficiaries of the organisation (examples are women's groups, lobbying movements or sport associations).

Strengths of CBOs often include:

- clarity on the organization's vision and identity which provides a source of energy in difficult times;
- leadership which is strong and inspiring and yet democratic and enabling;
- strong personal relationships, within the CBO, with the community, and with other stakeholders;
- good at mobilising resources in kind (services, gifts, volunteers etc.);
- effective networking.

There is a risk in capacity building with CBOs that trained people may leave to get 'proper' jobs. Sometimes, leaders may not distinguish between themselves and the organization – with a risk of unethical leadership.

Questions to ask ourselves when working in CB with CBOs:

1. Are we recognising CBOs' strengths or making them feel undermined for not being 'up to standard'?
2. Are we trying to help these groups develop and professionalise or are we working to help them have greater impact?
3. How can we make the process open-ended and flexible so that it is always relevant to the CBOs' needs?
4. How are we helping CBOs to develop the capacity for reflection and learning?
5. By formalizing CBO structures are we actually contributing to increasing capacity?

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<sup>4</sup> Based on a 'thinking paper' for an INTRAC conference on Civil Society & Capacity Building: *Organisation Development with CBOs* (working in South African townships) by Schirin Yachkaschi, November 2006 (available on request, please email: [info@intrac.org](mailto:info@intrac.org))

## 7. Conclusion and Practical Tips

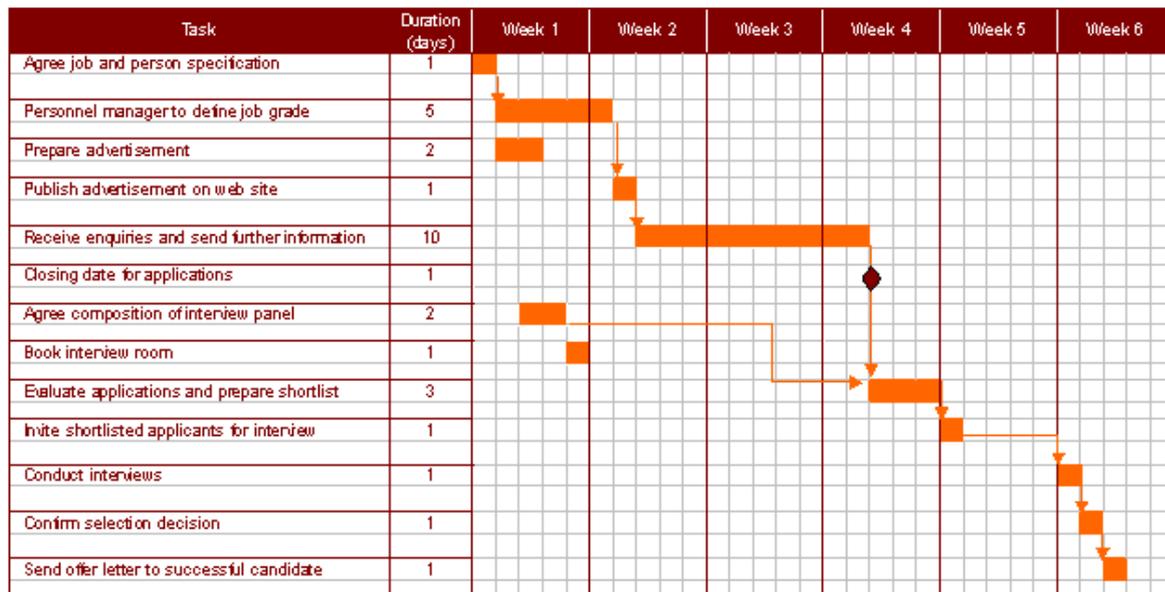
Partnerships are not a soft option! With care and resources though, a partnership should enable you to transform the lives of people you could not otherwise reach. The tools in this guide give you lots of ideas and practical things to do to find your way.

Here are a few 'top tips' for successful partnerships:

- Make your plans achievable.
- Make your partners' needs a priority: this has disproportionate influence on building trust as it shows that you care about them through practical actions, rather than just words and agreements.
- Share the same level of information about your own organisation as you ask of them. Let them make choices about what information they get, rather than acting as a 'gatekeeper' and only allowing through what you think they need. They may need more context, different contacts, other sources etc. Showing that you are being open and not trying to control their access to information will build trust.
- Plan outings, social events, meals, and celebrations to get to know people, as well as more formal meetings to discuss the partnership. Celebrate partnership birthdays, anniversaries, achievements, and endings.
- Invite feedback on how you are doing as a partner. Recognise that there are many things that you can learn from your partner. Identify together areas where they can build your capacity.
- Build relationships across a range of people in each organisation: trustees, managers and staff. This makes your partnership less vulnerable if a key person leaves.

## Tool 1: GANTT chart

A tool for accurate planning of a sequence of tasks



### Steps:

1. Draw up a list of all the separate steps or tasks that need to be done to achieve the objective – this could be a whole project, or could be a small part such as a monitoring report.
2. Put them in order of what needs to be done first before the next task can start.
3. For each activity estimate how long it will take (in days or weeks).
4. Draw up the chart showing the sequencing of tasks (e.g. when building a house you can't start on the walls until after the foundations are finished)
5. If possible, involve the main people who will be actually doing the work to check that all the activities, days and sequence are described as they see it. It may be at this stage that you discover that there are blocks in the sequence you weren't aware of, which are holding up the activity.

### Example:

When doing a GANTT chart for a reporting process you start with the writing of the first draft and end with the date the report needs to be submitted to the funder. In the middle are target dates for various people to review the report and opportunities for revision. When the GANTT chart is discussed with the staff member responsible, she points out a problem; she is often unable to start work on a draft because field staff have not given her the raw data on time, or some data is missing. As a result of this analysis, you can go back a step and work with field staff to address the issues of timely data collection.

## Tool 2: Backing up from 'wants' to 'needs'

### A tool for transforming conflict

When discussion of a problem seems to be going around in circles, it can be extremely helpful to shift discussion from what you want, to what you need.

Example:

Stating our positions on a decision sometimes makes it appear that there is a conflict e.g. a decision on where to hold team meetings:

Finance Person: *I want our team meeting to be held in our field office every month.*

Team Leader: *Team meetings should be in head office.*

The two positions seem irreconcilable. Whichever decision is taken one side will win and the other will lose. But if we ask about the needs we may get a different picture:

Finance Person: *I need to save money on travel and when field staff all come to the head office it gets very expensive.*

Team Leader: *I need the field staff to come to head office regularly because there is a lot of admin for them to do here.*

When stated in this way, the problem can be solved creatively to meet the needs of both sides:

- Team meetings alternate between the field and head office with extra time allowed for admin work when the team meets at head office.
- Team meetings happen in the field office, and the admin person goes to the field to get admin issues sorted out.
- Meetings are held at head office but team members cut travel costs by using public transport and staying one less night at head office.
- Team meetings are held at head office, but take place every 6 weeks instead of monthly.
- Etc...!

This is not a compromise (where both sides give up something); it is an inclusive solution which satisfies the needs of both.

Source: adapted from pp. 227 in Sam Kaner's *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, Josey-Bass, 2007

## Tool 3: The partnership timeline

### A tool for understanding each other's perspective, and recognising achievement

The purpose of the timeline is to develop a shared understanding of the history of a partnership and the significant events that have shaped its development.

What makes a timeline exercise particularly powerful is that it can be a shared group experience where all participants, no matter how new to the organisation, can contribute. For facilitators and for participants new to an organisation it can be a very valuable (and quick) way of building an understanding of a partnership's development from the perspective of the people in both organisations. For all participants it can help to build a richer understanding of the partnership and to see each other's perspective.

The timeline can be general or have a specific focus, such as, the work of a particular programme or team or in a specific geographical area. The timeline can also be determined by start date and finish date.

#### Steps:

1. Set up the timeline by fixing to a wall a roll of paper or sticking flipchart sheets together to make a paper about 1 metre high by about 4 metres long (though it can be longer if you are covering a long period of time or there are lots of participants).
2. Mark a horizontal line from one end of the paper to the other about halfway down the paper. Decide on the length of period you want to cover in the timeline. In the example below it is from 2000 to 2007. Mark the years along the line. It can be useful to allow more space for more recent years (as it is likely that people have more to say about the partnership's recent history). It can also be useful to mark the months of each year on the line.



3. List on a separate flipchart sheet what the participants should write on the timeline. You may wish to include any of the following (or add your own ideas or the ideas of participants):
  - Achievements
  - People (joining and leaving)
  - Key decisions e.g. the introduction of new organisational policies, organisational restructuring, taking on new areas of work
  - Important documents
  - Changes (intended and unintended) e.g. new organisational leaders, changes in staff morale
  - Outside influences e.g. changes of government policy, funding crises
  - Other events (planned or unplanned)

4. Provide every participant with a marker pen and ask them to gather round the timeline. Encourage everyone to make their contributions and to talk to each other as they do so. The idea is to get a 'buzz' of interest around the timeline. Allow about 20 minutes for the participants to write their comments on the timeline.
5. Open up a discussion to clarify comments, check the accuracy of the timings, discuss the sequence of events and draw out any interesting comments, encourage questions of clarification and the sharing of insights or surprises.

If possible, keep the timeline accessible throughout the meeting and encourage participants to add items whenever they wish. Try to refer back to the timeline during the intervention so that it becomes a point of reference for participants.

Example:

*"I have used two parallel timelines to help two partner organisations explore their working relationship. They each worked on a timeline drawn to the same scale and then added 'flash points' to show when the relationship was tense. We brought the two timelines together and explored the good times and the 'flashpoints'. What was immediately obvious was that the two organisations identified some different 'flash points' showing a difference in perception that opened up a very useful discussion!"*

Adapted from Bruce Britton, INTRAC

## Tool 4: SWOT Analysis

### A tool for preparing/reviewing a partnership

SWOT analysis is used to identify an organisation's strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities and constraints (or threats) it faces in the external world.

In the context of partnerships, SWOT analysis can be used to:

- assess your situation in preparation for starting a partnership, or
- jointly review your partnership (in this case the SWOT's focus will be 'the partnership' rather than either organisation)

Strengths and weaknesses are internal to the organisation. Opportunities are attractive arenas for action which the organisation can respond to because it has some special advantage or contribution to make. Threats are unfavourable trends or specific changes in the external environment that could lead to stagnation, decline or the demise of an organisation or a part of it. Strengths and Opportunities are enabling forces – they increase the chance of an organisation achieving its goals; weaknesses and threats are resisting forces – they prevent (or at least make it difficult for) the organisation to achieve its goals.

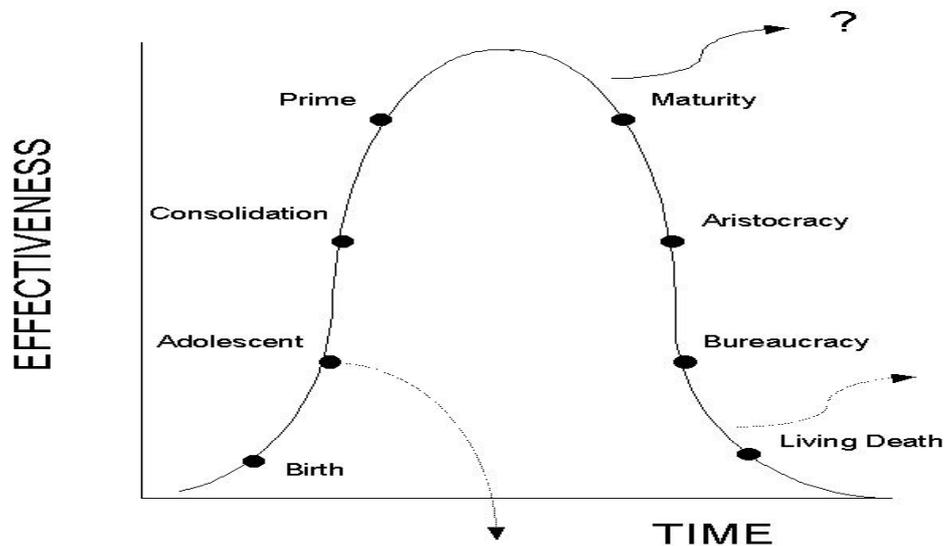
The SWOT analysis can be made more systematic and useful if it is preceded by a Portfolio Analysis and/or other ways of collecting relevant information rather than just a brainstorm of what is 'in people's heads'.

	<b>Positive (Enabling Forces) →</b>	<b>← Negative (Resisting Forces)</b>
<b>Internal</b>	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>External</b>	Opportunities	Constraints

Source: 'Strategies for Success' by Hilary Barnard and Perry Walker, NCVO, 1994.

## Tool 5: The Organisational Life Cycle

A tool to help understand an organisation's needs for capacity-building



Thinking about an organisation's birth, growth, maturity and decline is easy to relate to. The descriptions below give an outline of the characteristics of organisations at each stage in their life cycle, their strengths and also their weaknesses. Thinking about our organisations in this way gives us a way to explore where we are now in our own life cycle and consider whether the model offers us any insights into what our capacity building needs might be.

The general idea is that organisations get more effective as they mature, and then risk becoming stuck in their ways and losing effectiveness.

Although it looks like it from the model, decline is not inevitable! The point is that to stay at a high level of effectiveness, an organisation needs to keep learning, reviewing its work, changing, responding to new needs etc. Regeneration is possible at most places along the curve.

How to use the tool:

Working with a group of staff/trustees of the organisation, describe the model, explaining briefly the characteristics of each stage in the life cycle. Discuss where you think your organisation is in its life cycle, what are the challenges associated with this phase, and how they could be avoided or remedied.

### **Birth/Infancy**

(Danger: Aborted idea/infant mortality. Solution: reality testing, inexpensive support)

Many organisations start with a dream: one person or a small group meet together and decide they want to run a programme or provide a service for the community. In the early days they do everything themselves, running the activities, raising funds, writing reports. Decisions are often taken collectively and many, if not all, of the staff are volunteers.

### **Adolescent Crisis**

(Danger: Founder's trap/divorce. Solution: directive board, rekindle the fire)

As the organisation grows and becomes more successful, it inevitably experiences “growing pains”. New staff must be recruited. The founders often try to control every aspect of the organisation, but such control becomes less and less feasible. There is a need to “de-personalise” the leadership of the organisation, have a greater direction from the Board and standardised administrative systems. Some founders are unwilling to let go and the resulting crisis can tear the organisation apart.

### **Consolidation**

If the organisation comes through this crisis successfully, it often devotes its resources to establishing a sound management and administrative base. Personnel policies are institutionalised, financial management systems are established and priority is given to long-term planning and co-ordination.

### **Prime**

This leads on to a new stage when the organisation finds itself in its most effective period: clear goals, well-established support systems and committed staff.

### **Maturity**

(Danger: vision/enthusiasm lessens. Solution: reorganise, decentralise)

The effectiveness is still there and in fact, the programmes may be at their most effective. But, the vision and commitment starts to lessen. Ideally, the organisation needs to “renew” itself, re-engage with its vision, keep in touch with and learn from the people they are working with, decentralise, move back into the “prime” stage. If it does not...

### **Aristocracy (Therapy)**

The decline will begin (the seeds of decay!). The efficiency will still be there and the organisation will probably keep its good reputation over time. But the organisation will gradually lose contact with reality. The enthusiasm and creativity will disappear. Serious problems will occur but these will be ignored or hidden. These underlying problems will have to be dealt with (therapy). Any revival will have to be dramatic and is often associated with a change in senior management.

### **(Early) Bureaucracy (Surgery)**

Sooner or later the aristocratic organisation will be hit by bad news that something is wrong: major sources of funding may refuse further support; the media may launch an attack; users may band together to protest. People start to fight and search for scapegoats. The better people, since they are feared, are fired or they leave on their own while others hang on long after they cease to perform a useful function. If the organisation can continue to get funding, it moves into the bureaucratic phase where the vision has disappeared, the programmes are secondary and the emphasis is on forms, procedures and paperwork. Everything must be put in writing. Any revival has to be traumatic and radical surgery is needed; otherwise...

### **(Living) Death (Caretaker)**

The organisation will lose the confidence of its constituency and donors. It will die although some bureaucracies never get there; they just go on and on and on...

## Tool 6: Web-based tools to communicate and work at a distance

All of these, with the exception of 'Basecamp' offer a basic service for free.

### **Skype** [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)

Free phone and video calls to anyone with a computer and internet connection. Make free phone calls all over the world, have several people talking together, give a live presentation watched by several offices all for free. There's no excuse anymore for not talking!

### **Drop box** [www.dropbox.com](http://www.dropbox.com)

Share long documents. Have the latest versions always updated. Access documents online wherever you are.

### **Survey Monkey** [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)

Build and design a survey, send it out, and have the results summarised and analysed. This is a great tool for canvassing opinions, preparing a workshop, asking for feedback etc.

### **Google docs (now Google Drive)** [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

Sharing documents. Work together to edit or write a document – you can see everyone's contributions at the same time. Upload a document and share it with others. You need a gmail account to sign in.

### **Doodle** [www.doodle.com](http://www.doodle.com)

Easily agree meeting and travel dates. You set up a poll with a number of dates/times, Doodle sends it to the people you want, they simply write their name and click their choices and you can see right away the best time for the majority. Simple and quick.

### **Moodle** [www.moodle.org](http://www.moodle.org)

Online training tool. Create your own courses, materials, videos and hold learning seminars online. It can be tricky to learn how it all works however there are books available that can help you learn to use it.

### **Yahoo groups** [www.yahoo.co.uk](http://www.yahoo.co.uk).

Different ways to use this for learning and sharing: upload documents and research; discussion forums; create mini-groups of three or so people (mixed groups of UK staff and partner staff) who pick an article then discuss it through Skype once every few months.

### **Basecamp** [basecamp.com](http://basecamp.com)

(NOT free) Project management software and tools online.

## Resources

Barefoot Collective (2009) *Barefoot Guide to Working with Organisations and Social Change* (free download + other resources from [www.barefootguide.org](http://www.barefootguide.org))

Brehm, Vicky (2004) *Autonomy or Dependence? Case Studies of North-South NGO Partnerships*, INTRAC (<http://www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=319>)

James, Rick (2001) *Power and Partnership? Experiences of NGO Capacity Building*, INTRAC (<http://www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=349>)

Kaner, Sam (2007) *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition  
Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Pearson, Jenny (2011) *Creative Capacity Development*, Kumarian Press

Rod Sterne, Deborah Heaney and Bruce Britton, (2002) [The Partnership Toolbox](#), WWF

Tennyson, Ros (2011) *The Partnering toolbook*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, The Partnering Initiative (free download and other resources from [www.thepartneringinitiative.org](http://www.thepartneringinitiative.org))