

Partnering for Parity: Strengthening cross-sector collaborations that advance the status of women and girls

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Partnering for Parity

Cross-sector partnerships that address complex global challenges such as gender inequality are crucial to accelerate the pace of change and make progress toward the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But such partnerships frequently encounter challenges relating to governance, accountability, strategy, and resourcing, ultimately undermining their effectiveness. Our work with public-private partnerships has identified the steps successful partnerships take to avoid such pitfalls; the lessons we share here can help other organizations looking to partner for parity.

Partnerships between organizations from different sectors have been on the rise in recent years as a vehicle for addressing complex and pressing global challenges. Such collaborations could accelerate the pace of change by bringing together people and organizations with diverse skills, experiences, and resources to coordinate efforts and tackle common challenges, from eradicating malaria (for example, the Roll Back Malaria Partnership) to expanding Africa's agricultural sector (the mission of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa). Indeed, the 17th SDG focuses explicitly on increasing the number of multistakeholder partnerships and their effectiveness.

Gender inequality—the subject of the fifth SDG and a theme that arises in most of the other SDGs—is ripe for this approach. It is increasingly acknowledged by leaders across sectors that the severity of the global gender gap has major negative economic and social consequences. Our own research has found that gender gaps are pervasive the world over and the opportunity cost of the global gender gap amounts to \$12 trillion per year in foregone GDP. Closing the gap requires significant progress on issues as broad-ranging as violence against women, access to contraception, and women's labor-force participation. Gender inequality is complex by nature; it cuts across all sectors, interlinks with other areas of development, and requires solutions from many actors including those in government, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Consider efforts to increase the number of thriving women entrepreneurs as just one example of the need for a coordinated multistakeholder approach. To make progress, governments need to reform policies that inhibit women's property rights and impede their access to markets; companies need to design and market financial products for women; and NGOs need to raise women's awareness of opportunities for self-employment, while helping them develop their workforce capabilities.

There are many examples of attempts by individual actors to tackle gender inequality. Governments are focused on reforming policies and strengthening their implementation and enforcement. NGOs focused on women and girls strive to expand their advocacy as well as their delivery of programs and services. Today many companies are committing themselves to empowering women not only in their own ranks but also among their suppliers, their distributors, and within the communities they serve. If these individual efforts were conducted in tandem, imagine the multiplier effect that would accelerate progress toward gender parity.

Partnership pitfalls to avoid

In theory, partnerships are the obvious approach for tackling the multifaceted issues of gender inequality. In practice, they are highly challenging to design and make effective. In our work with public-private partnerships, we regularly come across a number of stumbling blocks, which include the following:

- **Governance.** Designing the governance model of a partnership that is both high-functioning and creates a voice for all partners involved in decision making is no small feat. Partnerships often struggle to balance equity and a preference for consensus-driven decision making alongside the expectations individual partners have about their roles—not to mention a desire to be efficient and effective. There are a number of thorny issues to address. For example, should the core funder(s) have greater sway than other partners over decisions? How can one structure the governance model so it represents all partners but also ensures there are clear lines of decision-making authority to enable rapid progress? How is it possible to make sure that the individuals representing the various partner organizations or constituent groups have the necessary capabilities to contribute effectively to the partnership’s governance? In many cases, progress stalls or partnerships underperform because their governance does not enable expedient, high-quality decision making.
- **Accountability.** No single organization or person is responsible for the success of a partnership, which means there can be significant diffusion of responsibility and a lack of ownership. Most partnerships lack mechanisms to hold their participants responsible for carrying out their commitments, and are left relying largely on the goodwill of members and the hope that all will pull their weight.
- **Resourcing.** Many partnerships struggle to secure dedicated resources that enable people to commit themselves fully to their work and thereby have significant impact. Resourcing is ad hoc, the time people spend on the work of the partnership is fragmented, and there is little follow through. As a result, progress tends to be slow.
- **No “multiplier effect.”** It is common for partnerships to fail to achieve the desired multiplier effect of collaborating—becoming greater than the sum of their parts. Each partner simply does what they would have done independently, and therefore the power of working with others does not materialize.
- **Failure to sustain momentum.** Partnerships typically launch with a “bang” and plenty of activity and resources that create early momentum. But all too often that momentum dissipates. The people involved and strategic priorities may change, or impact takes longer than expected and energy wanes.

How partnerships for gender equality are cracking the code

Despite these challenges, there are a number of cross-sector partnerships dedicated to tackling gender inequality that share some common elements of best practice, which help avoid the pitfalls we have described:

- *Drive commitment from the top.* The buy-in and active involvement of the senior-most leaders of the constituent organizations helps to ensure that the partnership has the resources and momentum needed to make progress.
- *Keep it simple—have a single, measurable goal.* Establishing a clear, simple mission for the partnership that member organizations can rally around is essential for its success. It allows members with diverse agendas, skills, and experiences to focus their energy and resources. A partnership should only have one goal rather than a laundry list of objectives. Ideally, that goal needs to be quantified, time-bound, and specific to enable progress monitoring and avoid changes in scope.
- *Establish a clear value proposition for all members.* A compelling rationale is required to get partners involved and maintain engagement. Successful partnerships tend to have candid conversations about the mission and strategic priorities of each constituent organization in the early days when the collaboration is being designed and defined. These conversations establish what value each partner is likely to derive from being involved in a particular role. Forcing members into roles that are not suitable for them will undermine their incentive to engage in a sustained way, and derail the long-term success of a partnership.
- *Find and deploy the unique strengths of each partner.* Partners do not need to contribute identically—nor should they. The strongest partnerships mobilize a range of distinctive strengths, types of expertise, and resources that unlock the power of the collaboration. While access to diverse skills often arises naturally when partners come from different sectors (government, nonprofit, for-profit sectors, and so on), or from different industries (financial services and consumer products, for example), identifying opportunities to combine those skills in a complementary way requires careful planning and design of initiatives.
- *Clearly define the operating model for the partnership.* Partnerships involve a great deal of work if they are to achieve impact. There are meetings and conference calls to coordinate, communications to sustain among partners at all levels, and follow-up to ensure that partners take action. Ideally, there should be a small group of people at one or more of the partner organizations, or a formalized “secretariat” that may be independent or sit in on a partner organization, and dedicate most, or all, of their time to managing and mobilizing activities.
- *Conduct rigorous monitoring and evaluation.* At the outset, partners need to align on a game plan and resourcing model to ensure monitoring and evaluation of their progress toward the established goal. Measuring impact and mapping cause to effect to determine which interventions are working is especially challenging when so many different parties are involved; it requires careful upfront planning to align on a clear measurement framework. Without a regular and accurate read-out on the partnership’s progress, it is difficult to know when strategic course corrections are needed.

Cross-sector partnerships in action: Addressing gender inequality together

FAMILY PLANNING 2020 (FP2020)

The global family planning community came together to form the FP2020 partnership, which focuses on a single, clear, quantified goal—giving 120 million women and girls access to contraception by 2020 in the world's 69 poorest countries. The partnership is composed of governments, civil-society organizations, multilateral organizations, donors, the private sector, and the R&D community. The partnership focuses its work in four areas: creating country-level support, promoting data use and performance management, sharpening the focus on global advocacy, rights, and youth, and facilitating dissemination of knowledge and evidence. The partnership is supported by the Track20 Project, which provides biannual updates on progress toward the 2020 goal. As of the beginning of 2016, 30 million additional women and girls gained access to contraception, prompting the partnership to both celebrate its impact to date and redouble its commitment to accelerating progress toward the 2020 aspiration.



CHEFSACHE

This partnership, whose German name translates as “CEO priority,” is a network of 20-plus German leaders from industry, science, the public sector, and the media who are committed to making gender balance a top management priority (McKinsey & Company is a member of this initiative). Each organization has chosen a top executive or board representative who participates in internal meetings and represents the initiative at external events, thereby serving as a strong role model within their organization and beyond. Each of the partner organizations has dedicated working and communications teams that meet four to six times per year. This clearly defined and dedicated capacity has enabled Chefsache to mobilize rapidly in pursuit of its objectives.

The partnership has also established alignment of members around a single, common goal. At the first meeting of the year, the members agree on a single topic to address over the course of the next 12 months; previous themes include unconscious bias and flexible work arrangements. The chosen theme is then cascaded into work streams, which are supported by smaller working groups. Individual organizations conduct pilots to test specific initiatives, which are measured against predefined success metrics. At the end of the pilot process, successful initiatives and lessons learned are shared across member organizations, and Chefsache publishes a study on the lessons that emerged for each theme.



DREAMS

This \$385 million partnership has a clearly defined goal—achieving a 40 percent reduction in new HIV/AIDS infections among adolescent girls and young women by 2017 in the ten sub-Saharan African countries that accounted for more than half of all new infections among these groups globally in 2015. DREAMS is supported by the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), Girl Effect, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Johnson & Johnson, Viiv Healthcare, and Gilead Sciences. In pursuit of its single goal, DREAMS is delivering a core package of evidence-based approaches that go beyond the health sector by empowering girls, reducing the risk of sex partners, strengthening families, and mobilizing communities for change. The partnership also supports 55 organizations (selected from among 800 applications) in their creation of innovative programs that address unmet needs not covered by the core package. This Innovation Challenge is supported through an additional \$85 million contributed by the partnership.



NEXT 3B

The goal of this partnership is to realize the economic and social potential of the next three billion people gaining access to the Internet through replicable and sustainable support (McKinsey & Company is a member of this initiative). Next 3B has created a broad suite of solutions, from programs that provide low-cost or free Internet-enabled phones and device training to apps that help users derive maximum benefit from connectivity. The pilot partners include Mastercard, Brightstar, Trickle Up, Tata Group companies, Waka Waka, and mobiActivation. There is a deliberate effort to use the strengths of each partner and have each make a tailored contribution. Some partners fund the initiative; some develop apps; some provide training, advice, and mentorship; and some are responsible for the last-mile “entry point” into communities.



No one type of institution will be able to tackle the highly complex issues of gender inequality. Only cross-sector partnerships can achieve the step change in progress that is needed. The challenge is to ensure that partnerships for parity are designed and developed in ways that are proven to support sustained, long-term impact. The best practices we have described here can provide guidance on how best to overcome challenges and unlock the value that can come from collaborations to advance gender parity. ■

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