

framework

# **PARTICIPATING IN A CONSORTIUM**

## **GUIDANCE NOTES FOR FIELD STAFF**

Prepared for FARM Africa and Self Help Africa

by

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## CONTENTS

1. Introduction	p.3
2. What is a consortium?	p.3
3. Why participate in a consortium?	p.5
4. 8 Key areas for reflection:	p.6
▪ Identifying the opportunities	p.7
▪ Establishing the relationship	p.7
▪ Risk assessment & due diligence	p.8
▪ Framing the relationship	
<i>a. Building a shared understanding of what makes for an effective consortium relationship</i>	p.9
<i>b. Clarifying expectations</i>	p.10
<i>c. Agreeing roles and responsibilities</i>	p.12
<i>d. Establishing the 'architecture'</i>	p.13
<i>e. Managing disagreement and conflict</i>	p.13
<i>f. The Memorandum of Understanding</i>	p.14
▪ Communications	p.14
▪ Resourcing the relationship	
▪ Reviewing the relationship	
▪ Exiting	
5. Lessons learnt	

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This short paper aims to share some of the lessons learnt from the experience of the formation and functioning of the consortium composed initially of FARM Africa, Self Help Africa and Africa Now<sup>1</sup>. These organisations came together in 2010 to successfully apply for DFID Programme Partnership Agreement (PPA) consortium funding. This paper is produced primarily for field staff of the consortium organisations, with a view to facilitating a more widely shared understanding on the consortium and its processes, as well as providing some guiding elements for the development of consortia in their own countries.

The formation of a consortium has, as its driving force, the search for a common aim and clear, shared set of programme objectives which the organisations collectively wish to achieve. In the case of this consortium, these were defined in the planning of the PPA proposal submission. However, alongside these programme discussions focused on what they were going to work on, the consortium members were clear that it was important to invest in discussing and agreeing on how they would work together. This paper aims to share some key elements of this aspect of the consortium relationship – the *process dimension*.

The paper is structured around the following:

- What is a consortium?
- Why participate in a consortium?
- Key steps in starting, managing and ending a consortium
- Lessons learnt from this consortium experience

## 2. WHAT IS A CONSORTIUM?

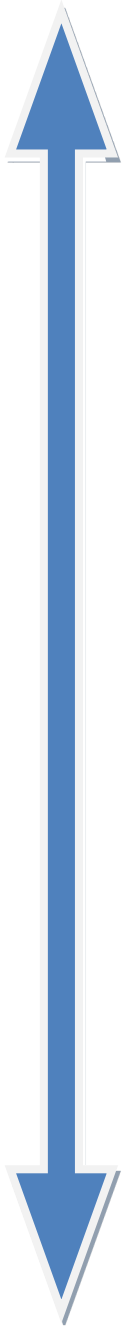
It is generally understood that relationships amongst organisations take many different forms. Some are more formalized expressions of commitment than others. There are different models and ways of expressing this diversity of relational forms, and the model below may be of help in locating the specific form that is being referred to by the term 'consortium'.

Generally speaking, a consortium is understood to be an association of organisations which is formed to carry out a joint venture, which is often time-bound. It would tend to have the characteristics of the most formal type of relationships, as depicted in the diagram below.

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<sup>1</sup> Early in 2011, due to internal reasons, Africa Now withdrew from the consortium. In August 2011, Self Help Africa purchased Africa Now's ethical business services (EBS) division which then became part of the Self Help Africa group and was launched as Partner Africa in November 2011. Partner Africa has its own separate charity registration in the UK. Its head office is in Nairobi, Kenya. Partner Africa is now part of the consortium under the umbrella of the Self Help Africa group. Partner Africa is not a separate signatory to the consortium agreement..

**More Formal Relationship**



**Inter-organisational relationships**  
Contractual relationships  
Driven by funded projects delivering results  
*Useful for:* addressing complex policy issues (local, regional or global) which need the collaboration of many different stakeholders

**Institutionalized Relationships**  
Legally recognized entities  
with structures and systems to manage projects and attract funding  
*Useful for:* scaling up projects, innovation

**Relationships with some 'formal' elements**  
Common objective, name and collective identity, norms for decision-making, governance structures, sometimes also a secretariat  
*Useful for:* external legitimacy, synthesizing learning, mobilizing for joint action, doing research

**Informal Relationships**  
Self governing: members develop ways to arrive at agreements; dependent on informal leadership  
*Useful for:* developing knowledge and practices, advocating change, exchanging information

**Networking**  
Loose ties, information exchange, reciprocity, flexibility, trust  
*Useful for:* connections, quicker reactions to opportunities, access to diverse information and experience

**Less Formal Relationship**

### 3. WHY PARTICIPATE IN A CONSORTIUM?

There are three different ways of answering this question about the motivation to form a consortium:

- a. As recognition that there are things happening around us which we need to respond to, and for which purpose the consortium form of relationship is the most appropriate:

FARM Africa/Self Help Africa/Africa Now recognised that agriculture and small-scale farmers were increasingly seen as vital to development in Africa – especially in rural areas. There was a great deal convergence between the strategies of the three organisations and potential to learn from each other and collaborate more closely. Self Help Africa had undertaken research and advocacy work in the past with FARM Africa and was considering a merger with Africa Now. Each realised that the likelihood of securing Programme Partnership Arrangement funding from DFID was unlikely as individual organisations. They understood that an application as a consortium would be a path to fulfil the potential of increased reach across sub-Saharan Africa.

- b. It is possible to further clarify the motivation by identifying the benefits that can be obtained by working in this way:

For the FA/SHA/AN Consortium, the benefits that were originally identified included:

- ✓ Obtaining a greater scope, influence and reach in the work
- ✓ Combining the expertise of the different organisations
- ✓ Obtaining strategic funding for core work

- c. It is important to acknowledge that there are challenges that will need to be addressed during the process.

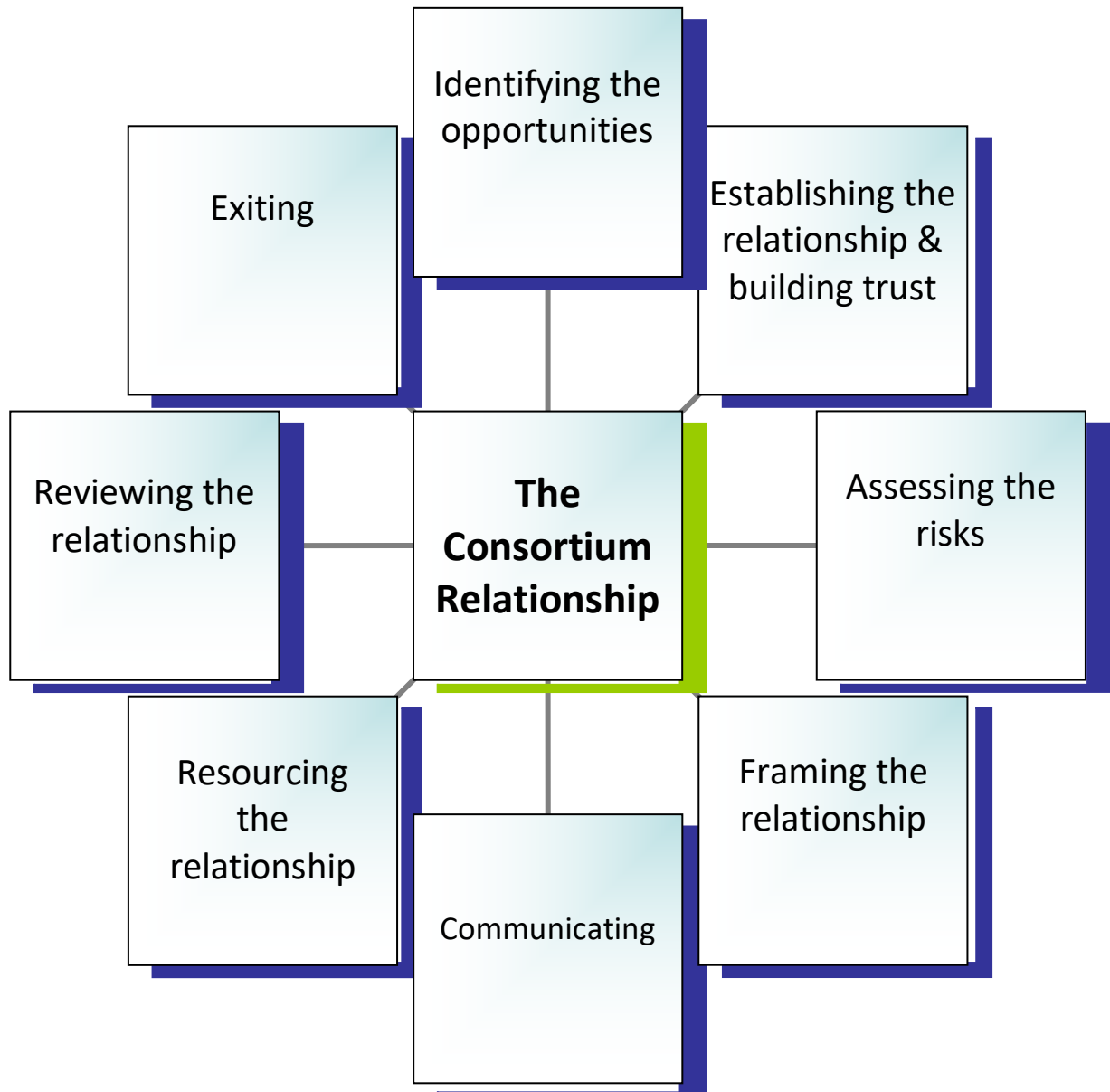
The team involve in taking the initiative forward recognised that there would be challenges in the process of developing the consortium:

“It was important that we went into the process with our eyes open. All of us had had bad experiences in past collaborations and partnerships and we wanted to avoid repeating the mistakes. We had to be open with each other and have clarity on what we wanted to achieve and why we wanted to work together.”

Early in the process, once it looked like the consortium would be funded, the value of having an external facilitator was recognised as a means to ensure that all partners had clarity from the start.

#### 4. KEY AREAS FOR REFLECTION ON THE CONSORTIUM RELATIONSHIP

There are 8 key areas where it is important to be aware of different factors which can help in the establishment, nurturing and exiting from fruitful consortia relationships:



The 8 areas are connected but do not necessarily follow a linear path. So, for example, it may be that the identification of new opportunities for forming different combinations of organisations within a consortium may emerge at any point in the existing relationship. Another example may be that risk assessment takes place as an ongoing exercise, during the lifespan of the consortium.

Each area for consideration is presented in a little more detail below:

## **1 – Identifying potential consortium opportunities & partners**

It is helpful to consider this as an integral part of overall programme or organisational strategy development. As part of the 'scanning' or 'mapping' activities which often take place during such exercises, it is worthwhile bearing in mind that it may be possible to identify potential partners and sources of funding for a joint venture which would best be operationalised by a consortium model.

Other moments, or processes, when the potential to form a consortium may be identified could include:

- Formal tendering processes which are open to multiple actors collaborating in a joint venture
- Grant schemes
- Exercises which are focused on identifying potential funding opportunities for a defined programme, and which could incorporate a specific point about Consortia funding possibilities.
- Within ongoing relationships with other organisations working in the same field, whereby there is the identification of an interest and willingness to proactively seek resources together and enter into a formalised joint venture.

## **2 – Establishing the relationship/building the trust**

Experience shows that this step needs time. It may be that the consortium is composed of organisations that do know each other and have 'partnered' in various initiatives previously. However, entering into the more formal consortium structure and joint venture is a further step which requires acknowledging and investing in. Sharing relevant organizational information, and being open and encouraging of questions from potential consortium partners will all contribute to starting on a healthy footing.

### **Our consortium experience:**

Once the consortium members had decided to invest in the building of the relationship and had contracted an external consultant to facilitate the process, a first workshop was held. The workshop objectives included the following:

- *To contribute to an increased and shared understanding of the characteristics and capacities of each of the consortium organisations.*

Participating organisations were asked to prepare a presentation to each other, based on the following guidance note:

*“The objective of this session is share information about each consortium agency and collectively identify some key organisational factors which will need to be considered during the lifetime of the consortium.*

*These may be individual organisational strengths which the consortium should really be drawing on. They may be weaker areas or challenges which the organisation is facing and which all of the consortium agencies should be aware of, and work together to address or effectively manage in order to reduce any potential repercussions. “*

The presentations covered aspects such as organisational values, culture and long term strategy; information on structure (indicating which kinds of decisions are made where); strengths (what they are proud of); weaker areas (what they are working on to improve) and information on pressures that they may be under currently/in the near future e.g. restructuring. Reflection and discussion after the presentations identified a number of strengths to draw on, and things to be aware of, during the lifetime of the consortium.

### **3 – Risk assessment and due diligence**

Assessing and managing the risks that form part of consortium working is a necessary area for consideration. The kinds of risks to bear in mind may include:

- ? Financial
- ? Risks to reputation/brand and credibility
- ? Risks of having limits put on a consortium member’s individual freedom of action
- ? Being co-opted to other relationships

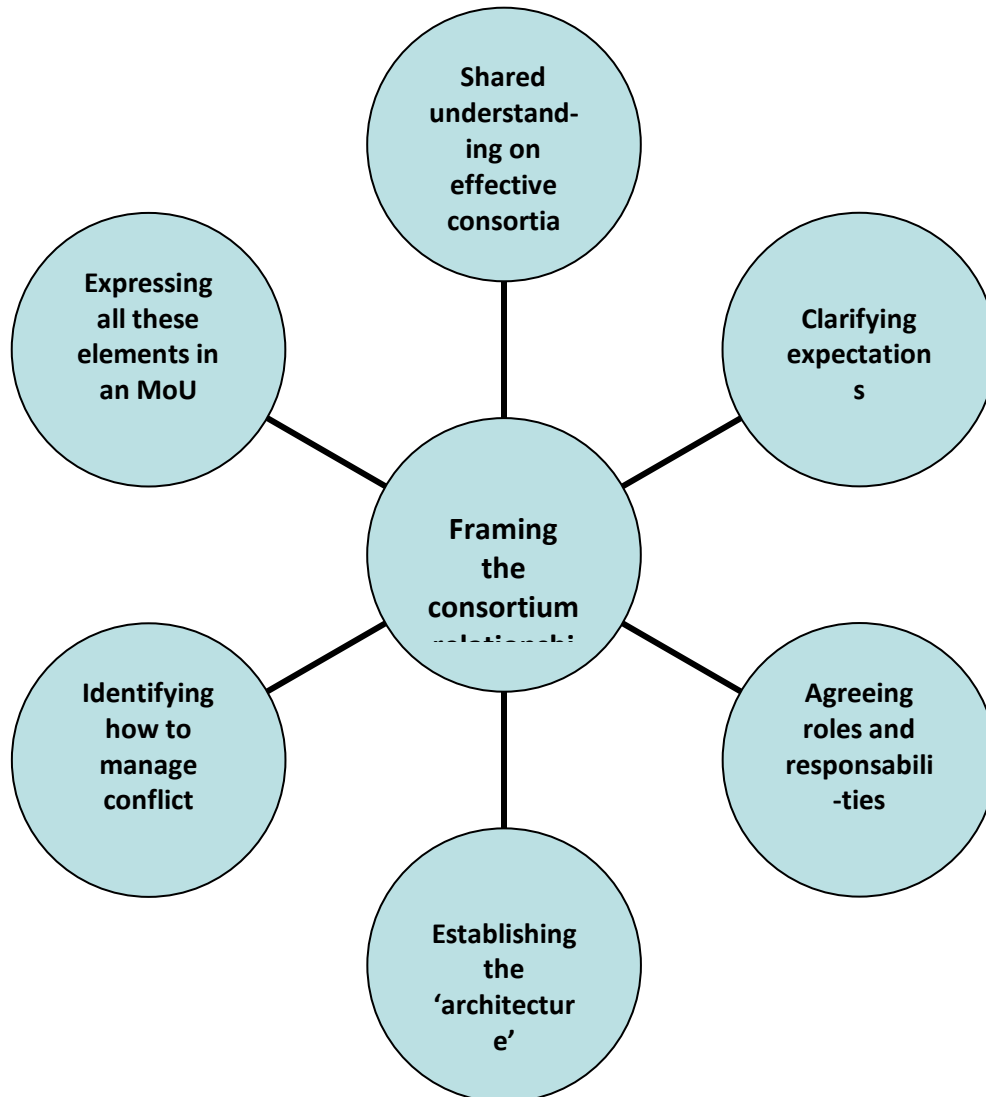
It is important to be clear on the steps to take regarding the assessment of risk, and the actions to mitigate and minimise their impact if they were to materialise.

Due diligence is a term which generally is understood to refer to the formal process of carrying out an investigation into the financial, managerial and administrative systems and practices in place. It normally includes a review of formal audits and reports, and takes place before the signing of formal contracts or other written documents of commitment.



#### 4 – Framing the relationship

This is probably at the 'heart' of the process of forming and nurturing the consortium relationship. It can be considered to contain the following elements:



a. Building a shared understanding of what makes for an effective consortium relationship

There is plenty of literature available on what makes for effective collaborative working, with some specific materials focused on consortia. However, it is most helpful to start from the realities of the organisations on

the ground. It is important to tap into relevant experiences of the consortium members, drawing on their collective reflections to identify some key characteristics for effective and healthy consortium relationships.

### **Our consortium experience**

Before the first workshop, the consultant carried out a number of interviews of members of staff of the consortium organisations. The reflections on past experiences were summarised and presented to the participants at the first event, and the following were identified as key factors for consideration:

Firstly, the key characteristics of effective & healthy consortia were identified as:

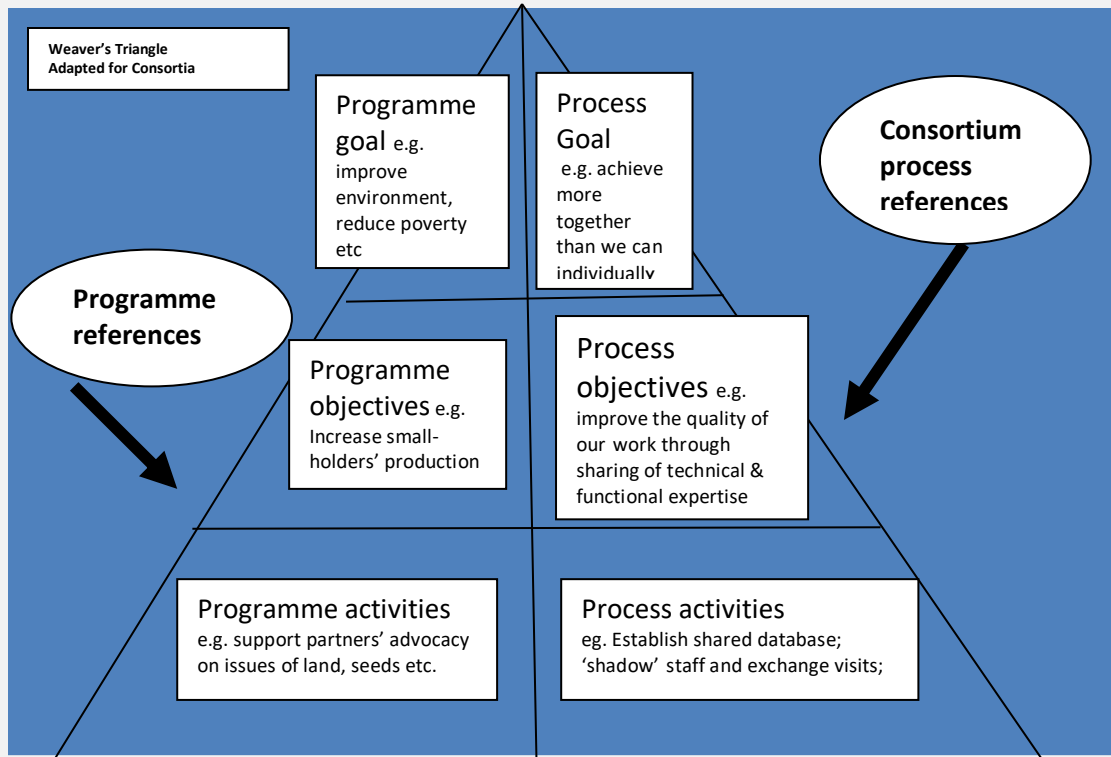
- ❖ Investing time at the beginning to clarify expectations, outcomes, information on each partner etc.
- ❖ Clear MoU that is regularly reviewed
- ❖ Regular, appropriate & clear communications, of diverse types
- ❖ Timely reporting is essential
- ❖ Positive interpersonal dynamics and behaviours
- ❖ Recognition of different organisational dynamics/processes
- ❖ Trust

Secondly, the things to watch out for:

- ❖ Engagement of field staff
- ❖ Impact of multiple change processes
- ❖ Staff turnover
- ❖ Field teams understanding of each other's wider organisational dynamics
- ❖ Honesty about real nature of individual programmes/projects/initiatives
- ❖ Seeing this as 'just' involving programme people

### b. Clarifying expectations regarding the joint venture

Whilst members of a consortium may dedicate a great deal of time and effort in ensuring clear *programme* expectations (aims, objectives etc), there may be less recognition of the advantages of clarifying the *process* expectations. The use of a tool like the adapted Weaver triangle (below) can help in drawing out and making explicit the desired goal, objectives and activities of the *process* of the Consortium relationship, as well as those of the programme itself. It aides the simultaneous expression of what you want to do together alongside how you will do it:



The experience of the consortium in identifying the 'process' side of the triangle produced the following output which was then incorporated into the Memorandum of Agreement:

<p><b>OVERALL AIM (of consortium process):</b> To become, and be recognised as, leaders in supporting smallholders (our niche)</p>
<p><b>PURPOSE:</b> With the PPA resources achieve more together than we can individually (as between two we have a critical mass, and the two have a shared vision)</p>
<p><b>OBJECTIVES:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To improve the quality of our work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- through sharing of technical and functional expertise and experience;</li> <li>- using evidence to improve learning.</li> </ul> </li> <li>- To manage the grant effectively</li> <li>- To leverage additional resources (both individually and jointly)</li> <li>- To seek the most efficient ways of working (increased efficiencies, decreased duplication)</li> <li>- Proving the model of consortium working</li> </ul>

c. Agreeing roles and responsibilities

There are different functions that need to be fulfilled when operating as a consortium implementing a joint venture. Examples of these include:

- *Consortium 'secretariat':* agreement is needed regarding which organisation will take on the role of facilitating the ongoing work together e.g. organising meetings; ensuring communication flows etc
- *Member liaison representative:* each consortium member organisation has a named individual who acts as the key liaison with the 'secretariat' and with each other.
- *External liaison with donor/funder of the joint venture:* whilst it is advisable for all consortium members to participate in key donor-related meetings and events, it will help smooth relationships if there is one organisation which takes on the lead for the liaison function.
- *Overall contract management:* it is likely that this responsibility would be taken on by the lead on donor liaison, but this needs to be clear and agreed by all concerned.
- *Facilitation of working groups or thematic clusters etc:* if these exist, then agreement will be needed with regard to which organisation (and which individual within them) will take on the lead for which working group, thematic cluster, community of practice etc.

#### d. Establishing the 'architecture'

Another way of understanding consortium relationship 'framing' is related to the structures that are put into place to facilitate its internal functioning. This consortium 'architecture' may be as simple or complex as desired – the main concern should be to make sure that it is *appropriate* to the size and purpose of the joint venture. It is important make connections between peers across the consortium and the 'architecture' should aim to reinforce and develop the interaction. However, it is wise not to overcomplicate matters by putting into place too many sub-committees or working groups. Be realistic about how much time is really available to invest in participation in the different internal consortium bodies.

##### **Our consortium 'architecture':**

- A *Steering Group* with oversight responsibility, meeting quarterly and including the CEOs of each consortium organisation
- An *Operational Group* meeting at least quarterly (more frequently at the beginning) and including key programme, finance and donor liaison staff from each consortium organisation
- *Country Coordination Groups* established to ensure sharing/coordination on the ground in those countries with in-country presence of consortium organisations
- *Working Groups* were not seen as permanent fixtures of the 'architecture' but would emerge and be disbanded as required. The one exception to this was the Monitoring and Evaluation group, which was seen to be required for the lifespan of the joint venture. Other areas initially identified as potential for working groups included Policy, Research, Advocacy and Communications.

#### e. Identifying how to manage disagreement and conflict

Whilst there may be a great deal of goodwill and positive commitment in the early phases of establishing the consortium, it will be important to think ahead about possible scenarios where the picture is not so positive. Identifying how potential conflict and actual disagreements will be handled by the consortium members is a critical piece of the collaborative 'jigsaw'.

One element for consideration is about ensuring clarity on who are the decision makers at any point of the joint venture. A second element is about being clear how disagreements will be addressed, resolved and in the worst cases, enter into an 'escalated' dispute resolution process. The degree of formality in resolving conflict must be considered, and a decision taken regarding whether the consortium members wish to establish some kind of mediation process and/or have recourse to formal legal dispute resolution.

Whatever is decided upon regarding appropriate processes for managing disagreements and conflict should be included in the written Memorandum of Agreement.

f. Framing the above in a written document – the Memorandum of Understanding

Any written document which describes how the consortium relationship will be managed can serve as a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). However, it is important to be very clear regarding the degree of formality required and whether there is the desire to use the written document as a legal reference for compliance purposes. According to the answer, different people will be involved in drawing up the MoU and the final product itself will take on a different 'tone' in language and presentation. It may be possible to combine a more formal Contract (laying out the contractual obligations of all parties to the joint venture) with a more 'process oriented' Memorandum which captures the 'framing' points identified above.

A typical, non-contractual Memorandum of Understanding may include the following sections:

- *Background* to the joint venture: why the consortium was established; history of the relationships; summary of vision/mission of the member organisations etc.
- *Aim and Objectives of the consortium*: the 'triangle' of programme and process elements. This section may also include consortium Principles regarding how the members wish to work together.
- *Roles and Responsibilities*: including a clear indication of any 'lead' roles taken on by any organisation.
- *Consortium structure*: the 'architecture' including references to informal working groups where appropriate; decision making processes.
- *Communications*: both internal and external.
- *Managing disagreements and conflict*
- *Monitoring and evaluation*: how the consortium aims to collectively monitor and review progress both in terms of the implementation of the joint venture *and* the consortium relationship itself.

## **5 – Communications (internal and external)**

The fifth area relates to how the consortium members communicate with each other, and with the external world.

Effective internal communications require prior agreements to be established regarding:

- what communications are expected to be produced (content and form)
- by whom
- for whom
- how frequently

One of the key factors identified by members as contributing towards healthy and effective consortia was:

*Regular, appropriate & clear communications, of diverse types*

**Some reflections on our consortium experience on internal communications included:**

- The importance of ensuring communication flows from the field are in tandem with key consortium meetings, for reporting and PPA management purposes.
- Recognition of the need to monitor the flow of communication about the programme content, for internal sharing and learning purposes (one of the consortium process objectives)
- Agreement that the Operational Group agenda would have a standing item for reviewing internal communications

In general, it may prove helpful to have a specific **consortium communications strategy**, which reflects these internal considerations and also includes guidance on external communication.

This guidance is likely to be composed of the following elements:

- Central principles that will guide external communication
- Practical notes on external communications (e.g. logos, house style, visibility, sign-off procedures)
- Key messages to be included in external communications
- Guidance on 'whose voice' is to be conveyed in the communications
- Communications in moments of 'crisis'

The establishment of a central coordination group for communications may be worth considering, especially if there is expected to be a large amount of external communications initiatives.

## **6 – Resource implications**

Ensuring an effective and healthy consortium does indeed have resource implications. The most obvious of these is to ensure that funds to cover consortium working costs (meetings, communications etc) are included in the overall joint venture budget. The most critical resources however, are the people involved in making the relationship work. In order to guarantee that a consortium has appropriate human resources in place, the following action points are recommended:

- a. Include broad consortium responsibilities in job descriptions, and ensure key relevant competencies are reviewed during recruitment for posts that are likely to involve engagement in consortium working. These are competencies such as strong communications and negotiation skills; adaptability, good judgement etc.

- b. Include specific responsibilities within annual performance objectives, and ensure that the supervision/line management process includes regular review of performance in this area.
- c. Ensure senior management engagement from the outset. There needs to be 'buy-in' from the leadership and moral support provided to staff responsible for the operationalisation of the relationship.
- d. Consider the value of using an external facilitator at key moments in the life of the consortium (e.g. set up phase, mid-term review and final evaluation).

## **7. Reviewing the relationship**

It will be important to simultaneously review both sides of the Weaver triangle regularly so that there is clarity not only on the progress being made towards the joint venture programme goal and objectives, but also the goal and objectives in the consortium relationship.

Flexibility in the relationship will be required as events evolve, and efforts should be made to ensure that consortium members are bringing each other along together – avoiding a situation where one may be running ahead with a 'good idea' or going off in a different direction from the others.

The key approach is mutual accountability – if consortium members are striving for a relationship of equals, then accountability goes both ways. Reviewing the relationship includes being open to discussing differences in approach as they arise, making them part of the agenda to look at regularly i.e. not leaving differences to fester and potentially grow unmanageable.

## **8. Ending the Consortium relationship**

It helps to discuss this point early on in the relationship and possibly even include references in the Memorandum of Agreement. Being clear on the lifespan of the joint venture, and any possible options for extending the relationship, will help to manage expectations. Being transparent about the kinds of things that may draw the relationship to an early closure will also enable the members to avoid confusion and facilitate potentially painful decisions.

Since not all situations can be envisaged before, ending the relationship may always need some kind of negotiations on the process, timing and how to handle internal and external communications about exit. Agreeing how you communicate the end of a consortium relationship to external stakeholders is also important.



## 4. LESSONS LEARNT

A year on from the start of the PPA grant and from the date of the first workshops held to establish the parameters for the consortium relationship, the following are some key lessons learnt about the process side of the joint venture:

- *Whilst it is absolutely critical to get clarity on the content side (programme) of the joint venture, the investment in the process side does pay off:*

Having worked on the process objectives of the relationship, when some issues arose in the early set-up phase, there was a good basis of shared understanding about why the organisations wished to work together on the venture.

“If we hadn’t have had that early process, it would have been a lot harder.”

The consortium organisations are moving forward and have obtained a new research grant from ESCRC DfID for further work together. The feedback from the selection panel indicated that they judged the consortium proposal to be a sophisticated one, with good groundwork and good partner input. In the words of one member of the consortium staff involved:

“This happened because we worked together well on this, got the group together. If we hadn’t have had the consortium background we wouldn’t have done this.”

- *It is not all about work. People matter:*  
“Spending social time together was key to building the relationship. Getting to know each other as individuals and finding out more about the organisational culture and how that influences the way people act.”  
These were quoted as building blocks for a healthy working relationship across the Consortium members.
- *Considerations in a context of changing staff:*  
Given the point above, about the importance of building people-based relationships, there are obvious challenges when those people change. There isn’t an instant understanding and trust when new people enter the organisations, and so consideration has to be made about this.  
“It takes time...you just need to make sure that there is an understanding that things might take longer.”
- *Leadership is key:*  
The senior leadership needs to demonstrate and make explicit its commitment to the consortium relationship:  
“...then the ‘doers’ can get on with it, they have the go-ahead.”

It is important to obtain the engagement of the senior leadership teams from the very beginning, rather than bringing them in at a later stage. This enables the key decision makers to be involved in the establishing of the parameters, and agreement around the purpose and nature of any formal written document such as a Memorandum of Understanding. Similarly, if there is a decision to have a Memorandum which incorporates legal requirements, then the individuals who will be responsible for contractual/legal matters should also be brought in to the discussions at this early point, rather than wait until a draft Memorandum is brought to their attention.

- *All parties need to show commitment to put into practice the agreements made, but with a degree of flexibility in the approach:*  
Obtaining 'buy-in', committing to, and actually undertaking the agreed actions is key to building the mutual confidence required for joint ventures. However, alongside this is the need to constantly review these agreements and if something does not happen as initially agreed, build a shared understanding about the changes that happen. "The working groups did not take off in the way we originally thought...we need to review and understand why these changes happened."
- *Communicate, communicate, communicate:*  
The efforts made to ensure effective internal communications have paid dividends in building a positive collaboration. Activities included regular weekly Skype conversations between the individuals responsible for internal consortium liaison; CEO Skype conversations once a month; clear schedules for meetings; timely reporting; effective coordination and dissemination of information from the donor; sharing information about broader internal dynamics or processes.
- *Ensuring field-level understanding and engagement:*  
This has proved more challenging, and is largely due to the fact that there is little 'overlap' of countries where the members have their field programmes. Thus in those countries where only one consortium member is working, the staff have no real sense of a 'joint venture' as such – and more effort is required to build an awareness of the wider relationship between the organisations.