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Factors Influencing Donor Partnership Effectiveness

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Rationale for the Tool

It is widely recognized that the knowledge gained from research can help developing countries climb out of poverty. For nearly 40 years, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has championed this idea and has established partnerships with close to 150 donors, foundations, and international development organizations.[1] These partnerships enhance donor coordination and leverage additional funds to promote innovation and sound research in developing countries.

Collaboration among donors is becoming increasingly popular in the field of international development. International funders are dedicated to solving the most intractable problems. Donor harmonization is very much part of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (March 2005), adhered to by international organizations and bilateral aid agencies. For their part, foundations are more and more reaching outside their organizations to share strategies, knowledge, and resources with other grantmakers with a view to achieving greater impact as well as economies of scale. To date, however, very little has been written and published regarding collaboration among funders.

> ### Key Points
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> · The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) produced six case studies on jointly funded programs related to the environment, global health, and information technologies in developing regions around the world.
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> · A two-dimensional tool probing eight factors that influence donor (funder) partnership performance and interinstitutional communication was developed and used in conjunction with a Partnering Process Model to guide the preparation of the case studies.
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> · The case studies demonstrated that communication is important externally, that is, among donor partners, and internally, that is, within the various divisions of IDRC. With the use of this tool, it was possible to observe how communication may influence the success of partnerships.

Partnering is a key element of the IDRC business model and culture. IDRC makes the distinction between collaboration and partnership. Whereas collaboration is defined as working together, a partnership[2] is more of a formal type of collabo-

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[1] IDRC's mandate is to support researchers and innovators from developing regions of the world as they find new ways to improve health, reduce poverty, and promote democracy. For example, the Centre's support has helped Tanzania reduce child mortality, Bolivia resolve deadly conflicts over water, and poorer parts of Asia connect to the Internet. IDRC has also funded cutting-edge work on private sector development and competition policy.

[2] Other definitions are the following: "Partnerships are an inherently challenging way of getting things done—by definition they require at least two actors, presumably with different interests and strengths, to cooperate in order to identify ways to use the unique strengths of each to accomplish a goal that is compatible with the objectives of both organizations" (UN Global Compact Office, 2007); and "an alliance between organizations from two or more sectors that commit themselves to working together to undertake a sustainable development project. Such a partnership undertakes to share risks and benefits, review the relationship regularly, and revise the partnership as necessary" (Tennyson & Wilde, 2000).

ration: "A partnership is cross-sector collaboration in which organizations work together in a transparent, equitable, and mutually beneficial way towards a sustainable development goal and where those defined as partners agree to commit resources and share the risks as well as the benefits associated with the partnership" (The Partnering Initiative, undated).

> *The main objective of the study was to systematize lessons learned and improve partnership processes; it was not an audit or an evaluation of the various collaborations.*

At IDRC the management of a donor partnership rests heavily on subject matter experts and project managers of a given program. It also relies on the work of many technical and administrative staff from other areas. Much of the knowledge related to the key elements of partnering has been acquired through practical experience and ongoing refinement. This knowledge has accumulated over the years as IDRC's partnerships have increased in volume and complexity.

In an attempt to capture and structure this rich yet undocumented partnering "know-how," a framework paper on why, how, and when IDRC collaborates with other research funders was developed at the end of 2007. The internal document, "Partnering by Design" (Partnership and Business Development Division, IDRC, 2007), served as a precursor to this article as it generated requests for more structured information on the actual workings of partnerships. In essence, there was an interest to know "what works and what doesn't?" The decision was made to prepare case studies of co-funded projects to respond to these questions and to provide a better documentation of various aspects of partnering.

This article will describe the creation and application of the analytical tool that was used to carry out the case studies. In doing so, it will explore how it was developed and applied and what was learned from it. We envision that this article will be pertinent for practitioners in cross-sector partnership and for those who share an interest in evaluating partnerships with a view to building robust and innovative projects.

Given that the overarching purpose of the study was one of corporate learning, the scope of the study was limited to IDRC staff and did not include the collection of data from donor partners. The dissemination of case material was intended as well for internal use as the interviewees were assured of the confidentiality of the exercise. Thus, the article focuses on the tool and its uses rather than on the actual description of the six case studies.

How the Tool Was Developed

The main objective of the study was to systematize lessons learned and improve partnership processes; it was not an audit or an evaluation of the various collaborations. The secondary objective was to facilitate internal discussion and encourage staff to give greater attention to the management of relationships with donor partners.

Two research methods were used to guide its case study research. The first was the exploratory process conducted to develop the tool, and the second related to actual application of the tool for the data collection and analysis of findings. The methodology used to guide the study included the following:

- A literature review.
- The creation of a tool to guide the gathering, compilation, and analysis of the information.
- The selection of representative collaborative projects or cases.
- A desk review of documentation.
- The preparation of a questionnaire.
- Interviews with staff from each partnership.
- The drafting of case studies, and their summaries, and their review by interviewees to cross-check for accuracy, clarify, fill gaps, and receive general comments required for finalization.

- The preparation of a comparative review of the findings of the six case studies, and
- Internal dissemination and discussion of the studies' findings.

The study was designed and coordinated by IDRC's Partnership and Business Development Division, with the assistance of a researcher having significant experience in international partnerships.

At the start, a literature review from the collaboration field was conducted to map existing models and approaches. The concept of "partnership effectiveness"[3] was found to garner significant attention in the literature. Particularly insightful and influential to the study was the Wilder Foundation book *Collaboration: What Makes It Work* (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001).[4]

The Two-Dimensional Tool

Because IDRC was unable to find an existing tool that would meet all of its requirements, it was necessary to create its own model. The tool was mostly based on IDRC's own experience and tacit knowledge, but initially derived from both the Wilder Foundation and project management models.

The new tool facilitated assessment of selected partnerships through (1) a series of *factors* that influence institutional and interinstitutional communication and, consequently, partnership effectiveness and (2) the specific *stages of partnering* to understand when each factor came into play.

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[3] For the purpose of the study, a partnership is effective when collaboration leads to achieving and going beyond the agreed-upon goals and objectives that brought the partners together. All the factors included in the study exert some form of influence over the partnership. This can be either negative, which can undermine partnership effectiveness, or positive and supportive of the efficiency moving toward achieving the shared goals.

[4] The Wilder Foundation developed a framework using 20 factors that influence the success of collaboration between nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and other organizations. These were grouped into six categories: environment, membership characteristics, process and structure, communication, purpose, and resource.

First Dimension: The Factors of Influence

The first part of the two-dimensional tool identifies eight key factors that influence partnership effectiveness: *partnership roots, complementarity, level of commitment, equal footing, risk management, terms of engagement, governance and decision making, and communication.*

When developing the first dimension of the tool, an initial set of factors was selected and circulated for consultation and validation within IDRC. As a result, eight key factors were chosen to analyze each partnership case. The eight factors reflect issues that the organization wanted to probe further and better understand:

- *Partnership roots:* the degree to which a partnership is influenced by aspects of the external and internal organizational environments, political interest, and partners' reputation and experience in the field, as well as previous collaboration.
- *Complementarity:* the fit and consistency among partners' vision, interests, implementation approaches, and program priorities.
- *Level of commitment:* the extent of preparation for and engagement in meetings, the involvement of senior staff from each partner organization, and the existence of champions who spearhead the initiative.
- *Equal footing:* the degree to which partners maintain an equal position or standing in relation to other partners, whereby no single partner is dominating or being treated as an executing agency.
- *Risk management:* the extent to which risks related to a partnership or relationship are identified and assessed, whereby mitigation measures are put in place and monitored.
- *Terms of engagement:* the establishment and definition of roles and responsibilities, administrative procedures, terms of reference, and contractual arrangements that guide the overall implementation of the joint program of work.
- *Governance and decision making:* structures and bodies set up to provide strategic advice and program oversight, and to determine the decision-making processes.

FIGURE 1   IDRC Donor Partnership Model
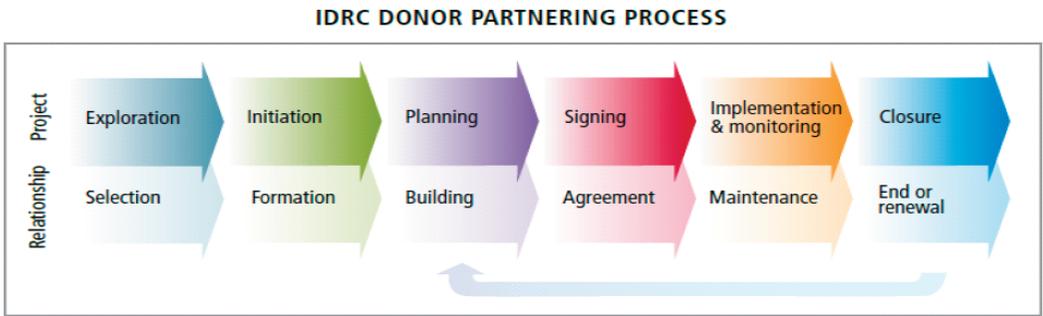
St-Pierre, 2008

- *Communication:* channels used by partners and staff to send, receive, and share information to convey opinions to influence decision and actions.

Second Dimension: Temporality—the Partnering Process

The second part of the two-dimensional tool addresses the influence each factor has at various stages of the partnering process. According to the literature on collaboration, the factors themselves are not novel, but the incorporation of temporality is (Balloch & Taylor, 2001; Bassler & Smith, 1997; Bloomfield, 2004; Catley-Carlson, 2004; Dyer, Powell, Sakakibara, & Wang, 2006; Ertel, 2001; Hughes & Weiss, 2007; Kaltoft, Boer, Chapman, Gertsen, & Nielsen, 2006; Mattessich et al., 2001; Nielsen, 2007).

Although each partnership is distinct and follows its own unique development pathway, IDRC's experience has shown that a typical donor partnership evolves through six general stages.[5] This Donor Partnering Process model (see Figure 1) helps describe the various steps involved in developing a partnership with other donors. The model also provides a set of concepts and common language for staff and partners, which allows for more effective communication.

The first part of the model is very close to the standard project management steps, but it also

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[5] For a complete description of the IDRC Donor Partnering Process see http://www.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/12348131371IDRC_PARTNERING_CYCLE_English_(2).doc.

contains an additional set of parallel arrows dealing with relationship management. Managing the relationship is key to the entire process and requires a continuous effort from partners to maintain open and regular communication. This special attention can result in partners pursuing their relationship beyond the duration of their common project and seeking future opportunities for innovative collaboration.

The various parallel stages can be defined as follows:

- *Exploration:* opportunities for collaboration are identified, potential partners are qualified, risks are identified and assessed, and a decision to work with one or more partners is made (selection).
- *Initiation:* partners usually develop their working relationship (formation) by agreeing on goals, scope, and core principles that will provide the basis for their activities. A concept note, feasibility study, or terms of reference are developed.
- *Planning:* partners typically agree on the parameters of their collaboration (building) and design a detailed program of work. The full project/program proposal is elaborated, including information on the governance and decision-making structure.
- *Signing:* negotiations are concluded and parties sign a formal document (agreement).
- *Implementation and monitoring:* the various plans are implemented, monitored, and adjusted to ensure that the objectives are met. Some form of "stock-taking" of the relationship should also occur (maintenance).

- *Closure:* following acceptance of the final report, the partners evaluate the project and the relationship. Partners also make decisions on the future of the initiative, that is, whether it should be extended, institutionalized, or terminated (end or renewal).

How the Tool Was Used
Case Studies
Six active partnerships administered by IDRC were selected to reflect a wide variety of donors, programming areas, and regions of the world. Partners were established or new, representing bilateral aid agencies, multilateral organizations, foundations, and the private sector. These partnerships had distinct levels of funding ranging from $1 million to $40 million, under single and multiple donor arrangements. Furthermore, some of the partnerships had been in operation for as little as two years, whereas others were in operation for up to 13 years.

The following partnerships were chosen for the study:

- Environment   Bilateral   Africa
- Health   Canadian   Global
                Consortium
- Technology   Private Sector,   Global
                Bilateral
- Health   Foundation,   Latin America
                Multilateral
- Knowledge   Multilateral   Middle East
  Management
- Environment   Bilateral   Asia

Application of the Tool
The next section demonstrates the applicability of the tool in assessing the eight factors at different stages of each partnership. The researcher responsible for conducting the study was given access to more than 125 relevant project documents. Data were collected between April and August 2008.

The interview questions were developed in consultation with staff. Several iterations were required to ensure conceptual clarity. The questionnaire contained general questions and reflections

on the partnership, followed by a long list of questions relative to the different factors for each stage of the partnering process. It was designed to be applied in a tailored fashion, depending on the nature of the partnership and the role of the person being interviewed.

Some 45 interviews were conducted, and data from their subset contributed to the case studies. Although the studies were written up simultaneously, the validation and finalization took approximately three months. The final summaries were released in December 2008.

Usefulness of the Tool
This section discusses the benefits of using the tool through a series of key outcomes, outputs, and findings. It also outlines the analyses that were made possible through the application of the tool.

Outcomes: Greater Attention to Partnership Management
The process of conducting this study raised awareness within the organization about the complexity of partnerships and the influence that various factors can have on partnership effectiveness. IDRC staff gained a new perspective on relationship management; that is, their focus had previously been on the overall management of project performance.

The case-study write-up provided a collective story quilted from different team perspectives and documentation. Some interviewees indicated that the rendition of the partnerships brought novel elements to light, and the different perceptions regarding the workings of some factors provided opportunities for internal discussion. The tool development and case-study process even at this early stage had already been useful as a form of organizational learning and improvement.

Outputs: Documentation to Sustain Learning and Practice
The study generated comprehensive information from the six case studies, including key observations and a comparative analysis. Shorter versions of the case studies were also produced, in addi-

tion to the annotated bibliography on a selection of literature on collaboration. A list of key lessons for each factor was also prepared. All these documents were posted on IDRC's internal Web site to facilitate access and use by staff.

A document describing different governance and management structures along with a series of detailed terms of reference for different committees and bodies was drafted to facilitate partnership design and implementation. This was a direct response to the recommendation to pay close attention to the governance structure during the early stages of planning to avoid ambiguity leading to potential conflicts and inefficiencies.

> *Aspects of partnership roots, such as political interest, corporate level encouragement, reputation, and the extent of previous collaboration, were important at the development stage.*

The outputs captured the tacit knowledge and experiences of IDRC staff and have enabled IDRC to draw lessons from them. The results were presented to senior management, and the Partnerships Division can now use an evidence-based approach in its daily partnering activities.

Findings: New Knowledge for More Effective Partnering

Overall, the study revealed that (1) *communication* is a cross-cutting factor and (2) some factors are more influential than others during certain periods of the partnering process.

(1) Prevalence of the communication factor. Although all factors were clearly found to make an impact in one way or another, *communication* overlapped the others. For example, *equal footing, partnership roots,* or governance factors all influenced, and were affected by, the level and

nature of communication that existed between partners. When the communication experience was positive, it seemed to ripple out into other factors; when it was negative, it exerted a pervasive influence among other factors. In either case these influences could spill over to other collaborations with the same partner.

During the development stages of a partnership (which encompass exploration, initiation, and planning), *communication* proved to have a strategic influence on the success of the partnership. Communication was found to be very good with donor partners, as well as with other players within the organization (e.g., administration, legal, finance, and evaluation). The study clearly showed that considerable time and effort must be devoted to the partnership to get it right.

As well, aspects of *partnership roots,* such as political interest, corporate level encouragement, reputation, and the extent of previous collaboration, were important at the development stage. These issues remained a concern during implementation, particularly if there were shifting priorities within a donor partner's organization, or if the *level of commitment* with the donor resided primarily with one or a few contact persons, or at the working level rather than with higher levels of management.

Upon implementation, many challenges were associated with changes in staff tenure. For example, the loss of a champion or key staff member at a partner organization was found to create breaks and gaps in the flow of information and communication. This clearly demonstrates the importance of cultivating institutional relationships. Furthermore, a greater documentation of institutional memory was noted as being essential to facilitate continuity during staff changes or transition periods. The study found that regular interaction or visits to partner organizations were vital to sustain interest and ensure that decisions are made in a timely fashion.

When comparing all six cases, team effort within IDRC was found to be invaluable during the work-intensive partnership development stage.

Once implementation begins, the multidepartment support becomes very loose, if not disbanded, and the partnership is carried forward by a small group of subject matter experts. There is merit in anticipating staff skills and abilities needed for team work and ensuring availability of the "start-up" team throughout the duration of the partnership.

On a different note, the study showed that the implementation phase offered opportunities to further communicate and engage with the partner about other potential collaborations.

In addition to the series of key findings outlined above, it was noted that partners operate under a set of pressures that may be distinct from each other. As such, results emphasized the importance of anticipating and planning for public relations and communications strategies that take into account co-funders' needs at different moments of the process. Furthermore, open and frequent interaction with partners was found to be vital to sustaining interest, trust, and engagement.

This study was an interesting and useful intellectual exercise, but more importantly it was a driver for change. It brought about changes in very

practical aspects of partnership management and led to action.

(2) Changes in factors' influences through the partnering stages. The partnership effectiveness tool allows for improvement in the management of relationships within large donor partnerships. The novel contribution of this tool lies in the importance it gives to temporality, as illustrated in Figure 1, and the implications this has on how the eight factors work together. The study found that small clusters seemed to dominate others during different stages of the partnership.

During the exploration, initiation, and planning phases (front end), the six cases showed that aspects of *partnership roots, level of commitment* among partners, *equal footing,* and c*omplementarity* were among the most prevalent factors.

For the stages of signing, implementation, and monitoring, *risk management, terms of engagement, governance,* and *decision making* seemed to exert more influence than others on the effectiveness of the partnership. The partnerships where this cluster of factors exerted a positive influence were those in which front-end investments had been made. As each partnership is different,

TABLE 1 Partnership Effectiveness Matrix

Factors influencing partnership effectiveness	Stages of donor partnering process					
	Exploration	Initiation	Planning	Signing	Monitoring and implementation	Closure
Partnership roots	+	+	+		−	
Complementarity	+	+	+			
Level of commitment		+	+	+		+
Equal footing		+	+	+	+ −	
Risk management			−	−	+ −	
Terms of engagement			+	+	+ −	
Governance and decision making			+	+	+	
Communication	+	+	+	+	+	

however, it can only be recommended to identify factors that appear to exert the most influence on each partnering stage and keep a strategic eye on future needs.

A concrete example. The matrix and following explanation above (Table 1) attempt to demonstrate the relationship between the stages of the partnering process and the factors of influence, drawing on an example of a flagship initiative with a bilateral donor for an environment-focused program. As in most joint endeavours, the factors exerted positive and negatives influences that strengthened and undermined the partnership at different times. The use of broken lines among the matrix cells illustrates the interaction among factors and that they tend to work in clusters.

The partnership started off extremely well, and part of this was due to strong *partnership roots* and *complementarity.* The government of the bilateral donor had environment as a top political priority, and the issues addressed by the partnership were of international concern. Both IDRC and the partner had strong reputations as supporters of development research.

> *Part of making the tool actively useful lies in raising the comfort level of staff in addressing the relationship side of a partnership.*

The partnership was also strong in terms of the *level of commitment.* Much time was dedicated to ensure that both partners shared a common understanding of the set of research issues, goals, priorities, and implementation approaches that built on their specific strengths. Further, senior managers in both organizations were involved and supportive. The *terms of engagement* factor was also positive as demonstrated by the early investment in defining the governance structure, as well as respective roles and responsibilities.

A thorough *risk identification and assessment* was not done in the early stages, which led to time delays during project implementation, and had a straining effect on the relationship. As well, even though the *level of commitment* remained high, there was some erosion of *equal footing,* partially due to the unexpected political demands.

Upon the approach of project closure, both partner organizations have made strides in exploring future collaboration building on the experience of working together and the results of the initiative.

Conclusion

This article discussed the development and use of a two-dimensional tool to help examine and assess the effectiveness of the management of donor partnerships. The condition of temporality, not in terms of duration but of sequencing, was an innovative feature of the tool. Also unique was the inclusion of relationship management as a key feature of the partnering process.

With the use of this tool, it was possible to gather information in a coherent and systematic manner to suit the needs and corporate culture of IDRC. It showed clearly that the *communications* factor has an important and persistent influence on partnership health throughout the stages. The two dimensions of the tool also highlighted the success and challenges experienced at each stage of the partnering process as some factors' influence is affected by temporality. Finally, it provided for a more accurate analysis of each case and made it possible to conduct a comparative analysis of the six case studies.

The tool and the case studies also served their purpose by contributing to corporate learning. This home-grown evidence has already strengthened some of the current practices and will continue to be used and discussed. Part of making the tool actively useful lies in raising the comfort level of staff in addressing the relationship side of a partnership. The participatory nature of the case study method provided a framework to think and communicate more effectively about relationship issues. Also, planning for partnership manage-

ment requires a thorough analysis of staff skills and long-term availability.

The tool adds to the literature regarding partnerships by allowing partners to gauge the effectiveness of their relationship throughout the various stages of their engagement. Further, there are many other potential applications of the tool. A list of tips and best practices related to the factors of influence will be developed. The tool could also be converted into a standard template for the ongoing monitoring of partnerships. Discussions are underway to use it to further develop the risk assessment framework to improve the identification and management of risks associated with interinstitutional collaborations.

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