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WORKING AS A CONSORTIUM – BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

INSIGHTS FROM THE ENHANCED LIVELIHOODS IN THE MANDERA TRIANGLE PROGRAMME – ELMT/ELSE

Sustainable development is a process of co-production. Consequently, multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) are an increasing feature of development relationships.¹ There are many ways of collaborating, and many applicable principles. Some involve joint contracting. Others rely on collective action as part of the design. Under the general label of MSPs, ‘partnership’ is a common, but often poorly executed, relational aspiration as are alliances and networks.² Consortia are also a frequent preference, in part because one ‘entity’ unburdens donors from managing multiple grants. But little is written about what makes them function well. To help fill this gap, this policy brief draws on findings from a self-assessment and external evaluation of a consortium (Consortium) established by six international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). Box 1 explains the USAID-funded ELMT/ELSE³ program in the Horn of Africa, which brought them together.

CONSORTIA IN DEVELOPMENT WORK

There are no agreed definitions for a consortium. However, by and large, consortia are formed around the principle of *synergy*. That is a formal, time-bound arrangement systematically linking diverse competencies of a group of actors to better reach shared objectives. The synergy anticipated from ELMT’s members was three-fold. First, is in terms of making a substantive advance in *connecting different issues affecting pastoral livelihoods*. Second, was *cross-border coupling of efforts*, such as building relational capacities, for example in conflict prevention and sharing learning. Third, to *leverage complementary experiences and expertise* brought by different actors.

In a politically complex and unstable part of Africa, this ambitious agenda was a heavy load to expect a consortium to carry, especially when the work was to be accomplished within a compressed time-frame of a two year contract. This short duration was defined by donor-imposed limits and also justified by the argument that consortium members were already operational in the region. While true, members had not actually been operating together as a Consortium – this fact proved to be a serious flaw in donor reasoning. Like other ways of organising, consortia do not automatically and effectively function with the stroke of a pen.

Rather, over time trust and collaborative ability increase from interaction between people enabled and constrained by the capabilities of themselves and of the connected entities. What this means in practice can be seen through a set of lenses described next.

Box 1. Enhanced Livelihoods in the Mandera Triangle (ELMT) Programme

The ‘Mandera Triangle’, broadly defined, is the arid/semi-arid area spanning Southern Ethiopia, Northern Kenya and Southwestern Somalia. Its population is highly mobile and pursues predominantly livestock-based livelihoods—and often with minimal reference to national borders. These ‘dryland’ environments are also prone to periodic drought and floods, and occasional conflicts, and have been political and socially marginalized over the years. Furthermore, they have also attracted very little investment as well as having to rely on relief assistance during most crises. USAID/East Africa’s regional office has endeavoured to address some of the challenges faced by the communities living in this cross-border environment by funding a regional, multi-component programme—RELPA. ELMT was the component of RELPA designed to implement activities ‘on the ground’ in this region. Six international NGOs formed a consortium and won the US\$10 million grant to implement a two-year program that specifically aimed to ‘increase the self-reliance and resiliency of the populations living in the drylands through improved livelihoods’.

The ELMT consortium implemented activities in six key program areas: 1) livelihood protection, 2) livestock health and production 3) natural resource management, 4) livelihood diversification and marketing, 5) strengthening customary institutions in peace building and conflict mitigation, and 6) promoting pastoralist’ voices (advocacy). In addition to the six lead members, some 20+ local partners and consultants were also contracted to provide training or implement specific activities in the field. All ELMT partners also shared learning and ‘best practices’ through six Technical Working Groups (TWGs). An ELMT Regional Coordination Unit (RCU) was also established to coordinate between partners, promote cross-border activities and liaise with the donor. (An ELMT program steering committee (PSC) of INGO country directors was envisaged but never initiated.) USAID/East Africa also established a Technical Coordination/Steering Group that met quarterly to facilitate communication and coordination among RELPA components (members). More information about this programme is available at the ELMT web site:

www.elmt-relpa.org

ASSESSING DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATION

Drawing on many sources and experiences, Inter-Mediation International (IMI) provides a six-part lens through which participants reviewed how collaboration is or had been functioning.⁴ Designed with ELMT staff, IMI ran an on-line self-assessment. This stage was followed by workshop on findings of a wider evaluation⁶ and the e-survey results, complemented by phone interviews. What follows is a summary of the six lenses as applied to the Consortium.

Lens 1: Collaborative Context

The lens of collaborative context seeks to assess factors that have brought actors together to achieve something mutual. Typically one looks at the entities involved and the bigger factors in play, such as the focus of the development effort in relation to the geographical setting – in this case pastoralism in the Horn of Africa. The Consortium member organizations were very familiar with this context. However, they were less familiar with the intricacies of Consortium-working in compliance with the contracting requirements of USAID's Regional Office.

The donor-created context generated negative pre-conditions for establishing an effective Consortium. Negotiating the Consortium's Cooperative Agreement (CA) was drawn out, involving the donor deciding on minute details including the numbers of vehicles, types of equipment, staffing requirements and, in some cases, even interfering with recruitments and determining salary levels. Without forewarning, delays due to protracted negotiation led to an insistence that the Consortium start on the day the CA was signed. A start up period was not allowed, yet no NGO will recruit staff until a contract is signed. A repercussion of this insensitive approach to time was almost a year of frustration in resourcing up and 'finding each other' around a yet to be co-created vision of and by the people originally involved who were hardly acquainted.

The collaborative context was also highly charged by over-ambitious expectations of what could be achieved in a remote and marginalised region commonly facing drought and insecurity. Such settings necessitate timely and continual adjustment in where and how programmes are implemented. USAID's refusal to allow a crisis modifier, for example, constrained intentions to bridge the relief-development gap by carrying out early response activities. A third contextual factor was continual donor pressure to demonstrate results across complex linkages, using inconsistent measures. In addition, compliance with contracting requirements significantly delayed sub-grantees' work. Lack of engagement by relevant USAID missions (e.g. monitoring visits) as well as micro-management in some aspects of the program by USAID East Africa (e.g. relating to sub-grants) contradicted the partnership principle intended in a CA, impeding both programme delivery and Consortium effectiveness.⁵

Lens 2: Collaborative Structure

Collaborative structure means both the philosophy behind and the design chosen to work together. Central to ELMT's design was the use of a Regional Coordination Unit (RCU), Technical Advisors (TAs) and Technical Working Groups (TWGs) established for each programme theme. In any collaborative arrangement, the word 'coordination' needs careful unpacking. This involves a collective effort to clarify and mutually agree about the extent to which coordination involves authority to make sure, for example, that members work as agreed by releasing staff on time.

That is, members co-determine if, and to what degree, autonomy is to be ceded to whatever entity is charged with ensuring or tracking that what should happen does happen. However, in the case of the ELMT-RCU, from the outset this clarity was lacking. Results were: frictions about perceived interference in member's internal affairs; high transaction costs to get joint efforts underway; and insufficient leverage on member's leadership to resolve relational problems. Performance and timely reporting pressures on the RCU, transmitted through to members, often exacerbated a 'co-ordination versus management' conflict.

A second design choice was for TAs to be housed in their individual member organizations rather than seconded to the RCU. Consequently, TAs' location and contracted partial time commitment – as low as 8 percent - did not promote adequate focus on ELMT and allowed a channel for subsidizing INGOs other projects. In addition, separating TAs did not foster co-locational synergetic linkages across the six programme components that an RCU placement could have given. As such, an important synergy was lost due to the Consortium arrangement. Nevertheless, later in the programme, TA interactions built up of mutual understanding and trust which started to tilt the balance towards greater sharing and insights about what cross-border work could mean in practice. As one interviewee said: 'over time, a few committed TAs worked around the Consortium design.'

Lens 3: Complementary and Competent Representation

A valued-added of consortia is meant to lie in combining the various competencies that member's bring to the table. This was certainly the case with ELMT members, but less so for sub-grantees who either had low technical capacity or were not sufficiently involved in the Consortium to identify opportunities for shared learning. This situation called for significant attention to capacity development around the six components that required time to become embedded. This process lagged due to USAID's tardy approval of the sub-agreements template and member's own capacity development limitations. Each member took responsibility for a programme component by providing and hosting a regional technical adviser to lead a TWG. This decision created problems when the lead TA was not technically strong or proactive enough to be accepted by the other Consortium members. Guidance from the RCU to define TA roles foundered on the issue of 'coordination or management' noted above. A consequence was

professional frictions, not helped by high staff turnover, requiring new knowledge-based and interpersonal relationships to be formed. This repetition was costly in terms of loss of social capital, not just money.

Lens 4: Understand and Embrace Diversity

Diversity is inherent to consortia. In fact, differences are meant to be a source of added value. If diversity is not appreciated for its development significance, the foundations of a consortium are already shaky. Exploring diversity early on is therefore vital. In terms of the necessary face-to-face exchanges, for ELMT this happened somewhat late. The anticipated process of doing so through implementation eventually worked to some extent, but was hindered by significant staff turnover. Initially, a culture of criticism and confrontation was dominant in the early stages of the Consortium, rather than a culture of support. Later, as trust emerged, better use was made of resources and drawing on people's strengths.

An important diversity to work through stems from asymmetries in power. Although diminishing over time, the early ELMT period exhibited a 'first amongst equals' syndrome amongst member organizations and across TAs. Some Consortium members thought that they had more rights than others, for example, in terms of applying their standards and promoting their own practices. This set a regrettable relational tone that prevailed for some. Here, the ability of an RCU to both 'hold' diversity and mediate power differences is essential. In the ELMT case this capability was present but worked more through 'fire fighting' issues, often associated with donor interference as well as confusion stemming from disagreements between four donor missions. Providing a clear vision and leadership around which member self-mobilisation, accommodation of difference and the benefits of diversity are fully realised.

Lens 5: Collaborative Attitude

In consortia, members' TAs and similar functions act as 'boundary spanners' in terms of their organisations and, for ELMT, also for cross-border operations. That is, in addition to bringing technical competencies they link and 'represent' their INGO into the whole and visa versa. Doing so means 'interpreting' differences in organisational cultures, communication styles, procedures, territorialism and reticence to share information. This relational role is a competency insufficiently recognised or invested in. Consequently, the personal characteristics and attitudes of individuals involved in a consortium matter a lot more than one might think appropriate, but that is the reality of collaborating. Inter-personal and political skills matter.

The 'working around the design' aspect of ELMT is a fair proxy sign of trust-based collaborative attitude. Preconceptions and stereotypes are overcome. Working across boundaries to create a common good becomes self-motivating and self-energising, both vital for effectiveness.

Lens 6: Effective Communication

Collaboration needs good communication, but consortia often face a paradox. Member organisations that would otherwise 'compete' for territory, intellectual dominance and so on are now supposed to connect and share, but without the certainty of fairness in what is contributed versus what is gained. But withholding or delaying information exchange can slacken the pace to the slowest member. Here, late in the day, person to person dimensions of trust in the Consortium overtook institutional self-interest and anxiety about sharing.

The complex setting across three countries, plus the tricky inter-linking of the development interventions, made timely communication critical for good Consortium functioning. The RCU's attention to this requirement with significant effort put into unplanned Newsletters and Bulletins as well as studies, monitoring, evaluation, learning and documentation are good examples of what was needed. This reflects adaptive management which can be adopted with members' support. But, it also requires that funders relinquish a predisposition for top-down control and prescription in advance when unstable conditions require space and for innovation and responsiveness.

INSIGHTS

Consortia 'live' in Stages

Collaboration has a 'natural' path from infancy through adolescence into maturity and closure. This process can be expedited, but seldom circumvented without damage. Contract terms and programme design need to reflect the basic fact that consortia have stages of growth.

Time Matters a Lot

The ELMT experience illustrates many ways in which time impacts on a consortium's effectiveness. Prolonged delays in contract approval stemming from members or donors cannot be compensated by expecting and demanding instant action. Such an expectation reflects an inadequate understanding of organisational processes premised on donor dominance and financial power at the cost of partnership in practice. A short – two year – time frame works as a disincentive for continuity of staff. Together, Consortium members assigned some thirty key people to the ELMT. Yet, due to personnel turnover, only around ten individuals were involved since the start of the project. Many PMs and TAs moved on to less uncertain assignments. Consequently, a learning synergy was undermined. Part-time or under-budgeted commitments of members' staff can also be a false economy. In addition, percentage time commitments for staff are difficult to coordinate and monitor. They can be avenues of potential over-billing, inviting suspicion instead of trust. For normal human reasons of professional development and job security, dual allegiances to home organisation and a consortium are often encouraged by and resolved in favour of the former. Significant 'overtime' by TAs can demonstrate a high professional commitment but at the cost of burn out and creating an incentive to move on.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES

No two consortia are the same. Settings, purposes and memberships are too varied to talk, for example, of best practices. But there are 'rules of thumb' that can act as a guide for reflection as much as for action.

General Rules of Thumb

Every consortium is an experiment that is strengthened by reflecting on 'evidence' as it arises, updating the working hypothesis and experimenting again. Do design enough moments and processes that encourage such joint and self-reflection. Treat collaboration as a work in progress - not an event or set of contracts. Adaptive management should be the presumed norm and enshrined in any agreement.

Effective consortia require adequate relational competencies. This type of capacity is too often assumed but seldom 'measured' or invested in. When negotiating and recruiting, management needs to have a good fix on the relational adequacy of their organization. How a consortium comes into being usually has a strong influence on its performance. A common advice is "to go fast, go slow at the beginning."

Consortia must balance collective expenditure of energy between *what* we are doing and *how* we are doing it. Doing only one of those two tasks for a prolonged period brings trouble. Mutual trust is the core of effectiveness. But collaboration necessarily brings contention or conflict. Openness about power differences and pre-determining how conflicts will be addressed is a prudent topic for negotiation. The lack of appropriate avenues for redress or mitigation of grievances can lead to oppressive relationships, which can then lead consortia to founder.

Design around a 'stages of growth' approach to consortia functioning and performance. Recognise that resource needs for each stage vary considerably.

Pay early attention to and investment in 'induction' through inter-personal exchanges. That is, create opportunities for people to understand and accept the other. Establish important pre-conditions, such as an embodied and shared, rather than an abstract, vision.

Leadership in consortia can be expressed in many hard, compliance and soft, negotiated, ways. Although positional leadership is important, more necessary is a collaborative style and leadership arrangement that can be independent of hierarchy. The critical issue is to co-locate and ensure that responsibility and authority are commensurate, while members pay as much attention to their obligations as they do to their rights.

Advice for NGOs

- Consortia are much vaunted and promoted by donors, but there is inadequate experience of how they work and need to be managed. Therefore, allow adequate time and flexibility for their processes to develop.

- Consortia are as much, if not more, political than they are technical. Be prepared and skilled to work on both dimensions simultaneously throughout.
- Collaboration designed on paper will seldom work as anticipated. Interaction between individuals is the design in practice. Do not underestimate the personal factor in consortium functioning.
- Years of disputes make clear that it is unsafe to assume that written contracts will be understood in the same way. At the start, invest in facilitated face to face clarification of roles and expectations.
- Risk analysis appropriate for projects and programmes cannot simply be applied to consortia. Collaboration calls for a well-thought through risk assessment method and contingency policies.
- Prevent inconsistency and instability in staffing.
- Demonstrate ongoing senior management support and commitment. A positive perception of commitment beyond a bigger budget is critical.
- Establish a grievance/conflict resolution mechanism and process.

Advice for Donors

Consortia and other forms of collaboration are not 'projects' by another name. They are living relational arrangements that become (in) effective depending on how they are initiated, grown and treated. Their management requires adequate resources. Funding rules and how money-power is applied are critical responsibilities calling for specific staff competencies in terms of understanding and supporting organisational processes.

Carefully select collaborative arrangements. They are seldom suitable for short-term programmes. Nor do they necessarily reduce burdens on staff, nor externalise transaction costs, particularly when micro-management is in play. Factor in adaptive management as a standard operating requirement.

References and Resources

¹ <http://portals.wdi.wur.nl/msp/>

² Robinson, D., Hewitt, T. and Hariss, J. (eds), 2000, *Managing Development: Understanding Inter-Organizational Relationships*, Sage, London.

³ In Ethiopia ELMT is referred to as ELSE, while both are collectively called "ELMT" in this Policy Brief.

⁴ www.inter-mediation.org

⁵ USAID, 2009, ADS Chapter 303: Grants and Cooperative Agreements to Non-Governmental Organizations.

⁶ Nicholson, N. and Desta, S., 2009, *Final Evaluation of the ELMT/ELSE program*, ELMT, RCU.

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www.inter-mediation.org