



Managing power imbalances

USE

This tool will help partners acknowledge, identify and explore sources of power and design appropriate mechanisms to address, and actions to mitigate, problematic power imbalances within the partnership.

PARTNERING PHASE

All phases

The importance of power

As we've seen in the second Building Block, the relationship and therefore effectiveness of a partnership may be significantly impacted by power dynamics.

Imbalances of power are common, especially where partnerships involve a combination of partners of quite different size and scope, for instance, international development partners working with communities.

Further, partnerships do not exist in a vacuum but within a context (geographic, political, historical, organisational etc.) in which the power dynamics may be invisible to those unfamiliar with the context.

A power imbalance is being expressed when one partner (or a group of partners) is able to dominate decision-making or otherwise asserts power in ways that disadvantages other partners or are not in the best interest towards achieving the partnership objectives.

One of the core principles of partnering is equity: the idea that all partners are committing resources and bring something essential to a partnership, and that 'buys them a seat at the table'. And that seat brings with it a right to be part of co-creation and decision-making.

Effective partnerships centre the lived experience of those closest to the problem being addressed. This means ensuring that the relevant organisations or communities are able to fully inform the partnership's design, implementation and evaluation.

Power imbalance, when it is manifested, destroys equity and will likely cause poor partnering because:

- **It can result in poorer decision-making.** Partnership decisions should be made based on the best information and experience available. Power imbalances may result in the advice of a 'weak' partner with the best knowledge (e.g. an NGO having very close ties to a community or a particular technical specialism) not being sufficiently taken into account.
- **It reduces commitment.** If a partner feels disempowered, their level of commitment to, and willingness to invest in, the partnership will be reduced;
- **It risks unsustainable partnerships.** Partnerships are about creating value for all the partners. If power imbalances during negotiation results in a partner not gaining sufficient net value, that partner will eventually withdraw. Or if the negotiation results in one partner unfairly and disproportionately benefitting, it risks ongoing bad feeling within a partnership;
- **It may reinforce historical inequities.** Where partnerships proceed without understanding of the power dynamics underlying the status quo, the partnership impact might unreasonably perpetuate the disadvantage of marginalised groups.

Perception vs. reality

Power comes from many different sources (see the power assessment on next page): from the holding of essential resources, including funding, to formal authority.

In many cases, the **perception** of power can be enough to cause power imbalance even if in reality power is much more balanced.

For example, a government agency may be perceived externally to hold all the cards, while their staff are only too aware of their practical limitations. Similarly, community groups may be perceived as (or feel themselves to be) powerless and yet they may carry enormous moral authority and the social capital essential for a programme to be successful.

Perceived or real power imbalances may be relatively unimportant in situations where the aims of all the partners are very closely aligned but very significant where partners' aims diverge. It is also worth noting that just because an inherent power imbalance exist, it does not have to cause problems as long as it is well handled by the more powerful partners.

In most cases, having an awareness of power, and actively managing power dynamics, is essential to ensuring the effectiveness of a partnership.





This tool is structured in three steps. First it helps you to assess whether there is a problematic power dynamic within a partnership. Second, it helps to identify where the problem lies by assessing sources of power across partners. Finally, it offers mitigating actions.

1. Are we suffering from a problem power imbalance?

The assessment below seeks to check if there is an actual or perceived power imbalance being manifested and causing problems.

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS	Yes/No	NOTES
Do you feel the partnership unfairly skewed to deliver benefits in favour of one of the partners?		
Do you feel one partner is dominating decision-making of the partnership?		
Do you feel any partner's points of view (particularly the voices of those closest to the problem) are not being properly heard / considered?		
Do any partners show signs of being disempowered? E.g. not attending, or keeping quiet at, meetings		
Are any of the partners 'doing their own thing', rather than as part of the partnership?		

2. Balance of power assessment

There are multiple sources of power, most are less obvious than money. The table below identifies common sources and invites reflection on each one. Scores are obviously based on judgement and perception, although become increasingly valid with the diversity of perspectives contributing to the scores. Different types of power are not directly comparable. The aim of the exercise is to encourage open discussion about power, as well as to help demonstrate what each partner brings to the table.

	Partner 1 [0-5]	Partner 2 [0-5]
KEY RESOURCES		
Providing a disproportionate amount of funding towards the partnership		
Social capital; access to relationships / networks / decision-makers		
Access to technical resources including key skills, data, legal instruments		
Understanding of the relevant context, culture, history		
POSITIONAL		
Partner is in a position to be able to walk away (the partnership is not that important to them) or to easily find an alternative partner		
Formal authority, informal / moral authority, political capital		
Holding roles with control (e.g. being the fiduciary agent / grant lead; main liaison with a donor; running external communications; agenda setter for meetings)		
HUMAN INFLUENCE / ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE		
Confidence / discursive power / ability to communicate and persuade		
Seniority / numbers of representatives at meetings		
Comfort / fluency with the language(s) used (including organisational jargon)		
Cultural perception of status (e.g. gender)		
Agility / flexibility to take decisions and move quickly		



3. How can we manage/mitigate imbalances?

Phases	Assessment questions	Steps to take to manage/mitigate imbalances
SET UP		
Acknowledge the boundary choices that you make	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who (and who isn't) being represented in the partnership? Who (and who isn't) being represented in the different committees and meetings? How are decisions being made? How is information being shared? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take responsibility for your choices: be aware of and make explicit the boundary choices that you make and the resulting implications that entail on who is being included/excluded and whose voice is being heard Create a governance structure that ensures appropriate representation and shares power <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create decision making structures and mechanisms that acknowledge and share power Define the roles and responsibilities of each partner (as clearly as feasible at each stage) Ensure participants with a similar level of seniority, who are able to make decisions on behalf of their organisations, are at the table
Explore and demonstrate the unique and valuable resources of all partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does each partner bring to the table? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define and make explicit the unique resources that each partner brings to the table Acknowledge where partners bring a specific technical or social knowledge that should be paramount in decision-making
MANAGING AND MAINTAINING		
Acknowledge the sources of power and power dynamics in the partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What sources of power does each partner hold? What are the explicit and more subtle power dynamics between the partners? How are these expressed? Through individuals? Through interactions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge and explore the different sources of power/ power dynamics in the partnership Cultivate a partnering mindset among all the members, underpinned by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> humility to realize others may have more appropriate knowledge / resources an ability to balance and sometimes suppress individual ambitions in favour of those of the partnership willingness to give up control and autonomy of decision-making
Actively manage power imbalances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can I support the different partners to reduce power imbalances? How can I adapt the governance structure/ mechanisms that reduce power imbalances? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build the confidence of partners with less real/perceived power by supporting them in identifying, owning and exercising their source of power if/when appropriate Ensure meetings are held in languages that all can understand; ensure that funding is available to all to be able to travel to meetings; choose neutral places for meetings Support the more powerful partners to adopt behaviours which empower others In meetings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure information is distributed in advance to cater to participants who may need to consult internally or to reflect in order to react and contribute actively Ensure everybody's voice is being heard and encourage the quieter ones or those with less real/perceived power to express themselves
Review and address problematic power imbalances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are specific power dynamics problematic? Are their specific interventions that can help mitigate the imbalance? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that a discussion of power is included in regular partnership 'healthcheck' reviews Identify when specific power dynamics become problematic Design appropriate interventions to address them either internally or bring in a neutral professional partnership facilitator to support the partnership
MOVING ON		
Understand when / when not to continue partnering and maintain your ability to walk away	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When should you/should you not continue with a partnership? Are you prepared and in a position to leave the partnership if it does not fulfil your organisation's and the collective's needs? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work collectively to understand the value of the partnership from all perspectives to determine whether to continue, re-design, scale or close If you decide to close or redesign a partnership, understand the impact on less powerful / vulnerable partners and take steps to mitigate negative impact