2.3 MANAGING AND MAINTAINING

Managing power imbalances

USE IT
To acknowledge and explore sources of power, and design ways to address problematic power imbalances

WHEN
All phases

WHO
Partners together

Power dynamics can significantly affect the relationship, and so the effectiveness, of a partnership. Imbalances are common, especially where partners differ greatly in size and scope, such as international organisations working with communities. Partnerships also sit within a geographic, political, historical and organisational context whose power dynamics may be invisible to outsiders.

A power imbalance is being expressed when one partner, or a group of partners, dominates decision-making or otherwise uses power in ways that disadvantage others or do not serve the partnership's objectives. It undermines equity, the core principle that every partner brings something essential, which buys them a seat at the table and a right to take part in co-creation and decision-making. Effective partnerships centre the lived experience of those closest to the problem.

Poorer decisions

The advice of a "weak" partner with the best knowledge, such as an NGO close to a community or a technical specialist, may not be taken into account.

Less commitment

A partner that feels disempowered will invest less in the partnership.

Unsustainable partnerships

A partner that gains too little net value will eventually leave; one that benefits unfairly creates lasting bad feeling.

Reinforced inequity

Without understanding the power dynamics behind the status quo, a partnership can unwittingly perpetuate the disadvantage of marginalised groups.

Perception and reality. Power comes from many sources, and the perception of power can cause an imbalance even when power is fairly balanced. A government agency may be seen to hold all the cards while its staff know its practical limits; community groups may be seen as powerless yet hold great moral authority and essential social capital. Imbalances matter little where partners' aims are closely aligned and a great deal where they diverge, and an inherent imbalance need not cause problems if the more powerful partners handle it well.

Step 1: Do we have a problem?

Assessment questions

	Yes	No
Is the partnership unfairly skewed to deliver benefits to one partner?	☐	☐
Is one partner dominating decision-making?	☐	☐
Are any partners' views, particularly the voices of those closest to the problem, not being properly heard?	☐	☐
Do any partners show signs of being disempowered, such as not attending or staying quiet at meetings?	☐	☐
Are any partners "doing their own thing" rather than working as part of the partnership?	☐	☐

Step 2: Balance of power

There are many sources of power, most less obvious than money. Score each partner from 0 to 5 on each source. Scores are judgement and perception, and become more valid the more diverse the perspectives contributing. Different types of power are not directly comparable: the aim is open discussion, and to show what each partner brings.

Source of power	Partner 1	Partner 2	Partner 3	Partner 4
Key resources				
Providing a disproportionate share of funding				
Social capital: access to relationships, networks and decision-makers				
Technical resources, including skills, data and legal instruments				
Understanding of the context, culture and history				
Positional				
Able to walk away, or easily find another partner				
Formal authority, moral authority, political capital				
Holding controlling roles: fiduciary agent, main donor contact, running communications, setting agendas				
Human influence and organisational culture				
Confidence, and the ability to communicate and persuade				
Seniority and number of representatives at meetings				
Fluency in the language used, including jargon				
Cultural perceptions of status, such as gender				
Agility to take decisions and move quickly				

Step 3: Manage and mitigate

Aim	Ask	Steps to take
Set up. Acknowledge the boundary choices you make	Who is, and is not, represented in the partnership and its committees? How are decisions made and information shared?	Make your boundary choices explicit, and the consequences for whose voice is heard. Create governance and decision-making that share power. Define each partner's roles. Ensure participants of similar seniority, able to decide for their organisations, are at the table.
Set up. Show the unique value of every partner	What does each partner bring?	Make each partner's unique resources explicit. Acknowledge where specific technical or social knowledge should be paramount in decisions.
Managing. Acknowledge sources of power	What power does each partner hold? What are the explicit and subtle dynamics, and how are they expressed?	Explore the power dynamics openly. Cultivate a partnering mindset: humility, willingness to put the partnership's ambitions first, and readiness to give up some control.
Managing. Actively manage imbalances	How can we support partners and adapt governance to reduce imbalances?	Build the confidence of less powerful partners to own and use their power. Hold meetings in languages all understand, in neutral places, with travel funded for all. Support powerful partners to empower others. Send papers in advance, and make sure every voice is heard.
Managing. Review problem dynamics	Are specific dynamics problematic? What would help?	Include power in regular health checks (tool 3.1). Spot when dynamics become problematic and design interventions, or bring in a neutral facilitator.
Moving on. Know when to continue, and keep the ability to walk away	Should we continue? Are we prepared, and able, to leave if the partnership stops meeting our needs?	Assess the partnership's value from every perspective before deciding to continue, redesign, scale or close. If closing or redesigning, understand and mitigate the impact on less powerful partners.

Adapted from The SDG Partnership Guidebook (Tool 6, p.88). © The Partnering Initiative. More tools at thepartneringinitiative.org/resources/type/tool/