2.4 MANAGING AND MAINTAINING

Troubleshooting

USE IT
To help partners deal with partnering challenges as they arise

WHEN
All phases

WHO
Partners together

Challenges and problems are a healthy part of any partnering journey. The more trust and the stronger the relationship, the more committed partners will be to finding solutions. How partners deal with a challenge can strengthen the relationship, and lead to changes that make the partnership healthier, or it can damage or even destroy the collaboration.

Four principles

1 Avoid a blame culture

If you are partly or fully responsible (you missed a commitment or made a mistake), accept it and be transparent. If the problem is in a partner's domain, respect them: keep an open mind rather than jumping to blame.

2 Build a common understanding

- Partners may not share the same information, and each interprets what it has through its own lenses: assumptions and confirmation bias, then context, trust, technical skill and culture.
- Agree as much as possible on the observable facts.
- Challenge all assumptions, theirs and yours.
- Understand both your lenses and how they cause understanding to diverge.
- Agree the root causes as far as you can, and where you disagree, be clear exactly where and why.

3 Make it a joint problem

A problem for one partner is a problem for the partnership. Even if it seems to sit with one partner, structural or capacity issues may stop them solving it alone. Working on it together, openly and positively, can produce more innovative solutions, extra resources or a redesign that tackles the underlying issue.

4 **Learn from the experience**	Put measures in place, such as stronger early warning or communication, so it does not happen again.

Common partnering challenges

Challenge	Prevention	If it happens
Ever-changing personnel. Individuals are critical in representing partners. When they leave, you may have to rebuild the relationship from scratch, even remaking the case for the partnership.	Spread relationships across several people (for example two representatives per partner) and a wider network of champions. Agree a handover protocol for as soon as a change is known.	If you are new: don't judge too quickly, respect the history, invest in the relationship and ask lots of questions. If your counterpart is new: take them through the whole journey, from why the partnership began to the value it creates for their organisation.
One partner not delivering. Working together for the first time, much is taken on trust. Non-delivery compromises others' investment.	Good project management with light-touch monitoring, so issues surface early.	Find out why: commitment, resources, competence, external or political problems? Solve it together, for example through capacity building or another partner supporting the role.
Global partnerships failing in-country. Agreements made globally struggle where local organisations lack the commitment, interest or resources.	An open culture in which partners feel able to report implementation problems.	Treat the local partnership as its own entity, and take local actors through a full process to rebuild it around their interests, capabilities, resources and desired outcomes.
Too many partners. More partners can bring scale, but also complexity, cultural differences, competing timescales and governance burdens.	Base the partnership on the local context and interests.	Run a light-touch review of where value is created and whether it could be delivered more efficiently. Consider a smaller core group taking decisions, with the wider group advising and implementing.

Our challenge

What happened (agreed facts)	Root causes	What we will do together	How we prevent it next time

Adapted from The SDG Partnership Guidebook (Tool 5, p.86). © The Partnering Initiative. More tools at thepartneringinitiative.org/resources/type/tool/