

# Rules of thumb for a successful collaboration

Lessons learned from six Dutch NGO's five-year collaboration in the Girl Power Alliance – by Helga van Kampen/NewHow



## Girl Power Alliance





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## Introduction

From 2011 till 2015, six Dutch NGO's have worked together with their partners in 10 countries to promote Equal Rights and Opportunities for Girls and Young Women. The alliance members were Child Helpline International (CHI), Defence for Children-ECPAT Netherlands (DCI-ECPAT), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI), Plan Netherlands (who was the lead applicant), and Women Win (WW). The members started exploring and designing the program from 2009 onwards. The Girl Power Alliance (GPA) was officially established in 2011.

After 5 years of collaboration, the GPA members wanted to look back and learn lessons from what had worked well and what could have worked better. To unravel the learning process and understand it as well as possible, the GPA chose to make a case study of the partnership<sup>1</sup>.

Overall objective of this case study was to identify what generic lessons could be learned from the GPA partnership 2011 – 2015 which are relevant for future forms of cooperation. The study focused on the process of the development, management and moving-on phase of the GPA – what it took to broker relationships, catalyse change and build robust collaborative processes, and what led to the decision to move on, i.e. to continue, change or finalize the partnership.

Although the GPA is multilayered and has implemented programs in 10 countries<sup>2</sup> and many lessons can be learned on the different levels and in the different countries, this review focuses on the collaboration of the Dutch Alliance members. This case study covers a range of views from various stakeholders and partners in the GPA, notably those involved in the (daily) management and implementation of the core partnership (Country Support teams, Dutch Steering Committee, Board of Directors, Girl Power Desk) and draws attention to areas of interest for those at the forefront of creating new mechanisms for providing sustainable and inclusive development. The results reflect the views and advice for the Dutch alliance of the GPA partners in other countries and other stakeholders.

The follow-up Partnership Review also builds on findings from the mid-term Partnership Review in 2013. It is based on the analysis framework used during the partnership review in 2013.

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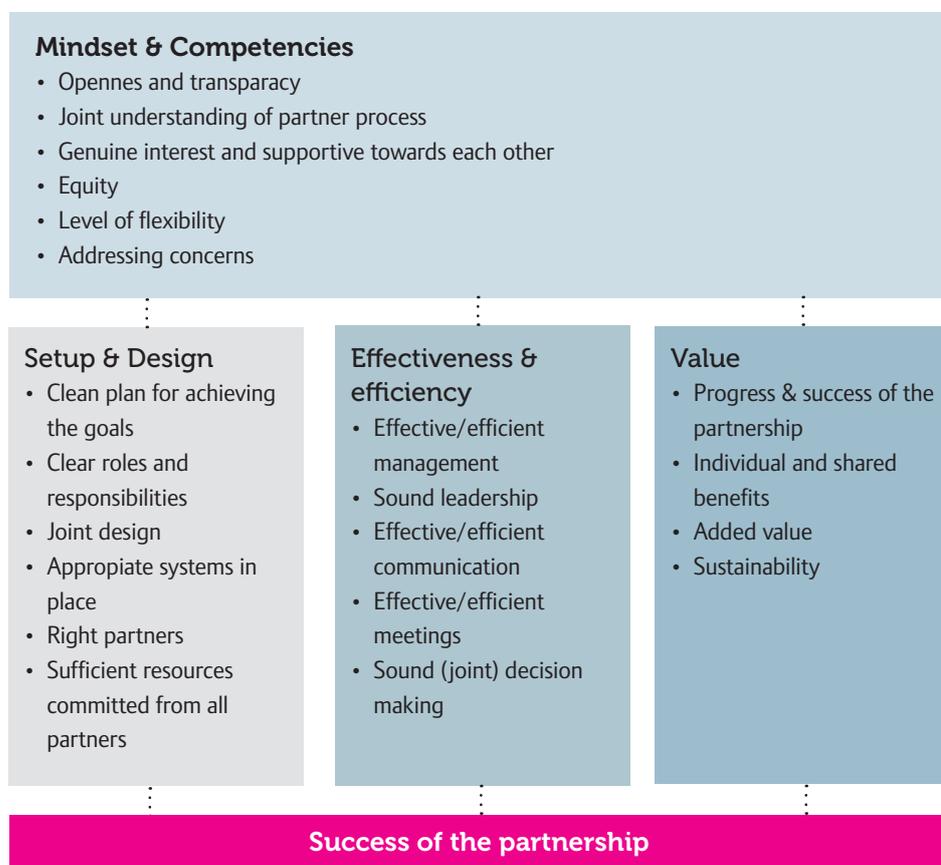
1 'Partnership case studies are processes and products that enhance creative and critical thinking about the value, performance and impact of a partnership' Sasha Hurrell, Sehr Hussain-Khaliq, Ros Tennyson Case study Toolbook, p. 10: Definition developed by participants at the Case Study Project workshop, Cambridge University, February 2005

2 GPA Program countries: Bangladesh, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Zambia.

This review describes the lessons learned in each of the distinct phases of the lifetime of a partnership: the set-up and design phase, the daily operations and the moving-on phase. It also looks at the overall collaborative mindset and skills and the added value of the partnership. For each phase, a number of important milestones, partnership accelerators, and inhibitors will be described and lessons learned formulated. The report contains the following paragraphs:

- Set Up and design
- Daily operations (effectiveness & efficiency)
- Moving-On
- Added Value

The overarching category of this analyses framework is 'collaborative mindset and competencies'. Examples and lessons learned in this specific category will be integrated in the other categories.



## Methods

The methods used for this case study were a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods, such as desk research, kick-off group meeting, survey, individual and group conversations, and a feedback meeting. After the desk research, a kick off meeting took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2015, in which the review plans were shared with a core group of people involved in the management and operations of the GPA. The aim of this kick-off was to look at the proposed set-up, aims and objectives together, and decide which respondents to include in the survey and the interviews. Furthermore, relevant indicators for added value were explored. Input from the kick-off was used to fine-tune the survey and topic lists for the different individual and group conversations.

In total, 83 participants responded to the survey. A high response, given the fact that this partnership is almost at an end. There was good coverage of the various countries and member organizations. Below are two graphs with the number of respondents per country and per alliance member organization.

To dig a bit deeper into the lessons learned for the people involved in the alliance, individual and group interviews were held. In total, 29 people were interviewed. Respondents were up-front and open about their experiences in these meetings.

Finally, a feedback meeting was organized to share the findings, validate the lesson learned and jointly indicate which lessons were useful to share with a broader audience.

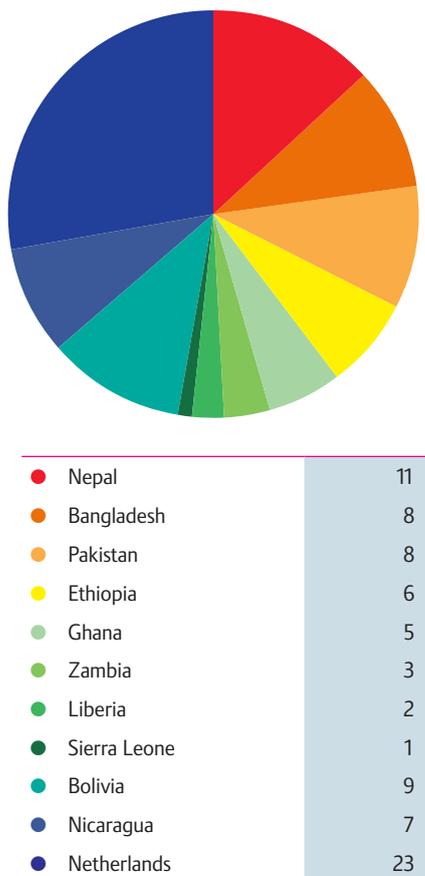


Figure 1. Survey respondents per country

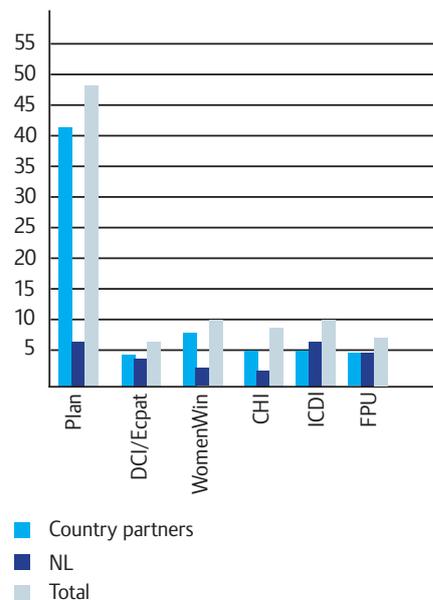


Figure 2. Survey respondents per alliance member.

## Girl Power Alliance

The GPA was formed under MSF II. MSFII was the grant framework from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2011-2015) for Dutch Civil Society organizations working systematically to achieve a sustainable reduction in poverty. The overall aim of the MSF II framework was to contribute to the establishment and strengthening of Civil Society in the South, as a building block for structural poverty reduction. The MSF framework encouraged Dutch CSO's to apply as a consortium. In the application process, extra points were rewarded for a consortium approach. In total, € 2.125 billion was earmarked for the provision of grants within this framework.

The first application deadline was 1 March 2010. Alliances were asked to submit detailed plans<sup>3</sup> and baseline studies per country before 30 June 2010. In November 2010, applications of 20 alliances (67 Dutch CSO's) were granted. These alliances cooperated with 4000 Southern partner organizations in developing countries<sup>4</sup>. GPA was one of these alliances.

The complementarity of the six alliance members was seen as a good match to target girls worldwide: Plan combines a strong presence at the community level with constructive institutional actors relations. Child Helpline International is in a unique position to feed the program with information on the children and girls affected and to strengthen local protection networks. DCI-ECPAT brings its expertise on lobbying and advocacy and on legal support to victims. With its kids news programs, FPU contributes to a greater awareness of girls' issues; ICDI contributes with its vast research capacity and WomenWin engages girls through sports as an empowerment tool<sup>5</sup>. The alliance members agreed that, in essence, their diversity in approach and expertise should make for an integrated approach.

Together, the six Dutch CSO's applied for € 90.000.000 under MSFII. In November 2010, the Girl Power alliance received news about their MSFII grant. After the MSF assessment and a first budget cut, GPA initially heard that they would receive € 58.725.985,00<sup>6</sup>. Based on a final budget reserve early 2011, the final amount was set at € 52.093.404,00<sup>7</sup> (57% of the requested budget).

The GPA has since been implemented in Africa (Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Zambia), Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan) and in Latin America (Bolivia, Nicaragua). The programme's overall objective: to build and strengthen civil society to ensure equal rights and opportunities for children, with a specific focus on girls and young women in the ten programme countries. Four key strategic areas are:

- Protection against violence and abuse;
- Access to (post-primary) education;
- Socio-political participation;
- Economic participation of girls and young women.

Furthermore, GPA focuses on capacity building of local partner organizations and on civil society development.

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3 The requirements for application on the 1st of March 2010 were: Activity plan 2011, Budget 2011-2015 (overall and per country), concept monitoring protocol, learning agenda and the programming of the evaluation. Additionally detailed base line studies needed to be developed per country and submitted by June 2010.

4 Source: <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/subsidies-voor-ontwikkelingssamenwerking-en-europa/subsidies-maatschappelijke-organisaties/medefinancieringsstelsel-2010-2015-mfs-ii>

5 GPA Annual report 2014

6 Letter Ministry of Foreign Affairs 'MSF Beschikking Plan Nederland', 10 November 2010

7 Letter Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Begrotingvoorbekhoud', 19 January 2011

### Some characteristics of this alliance:

- As stated in the partnership agreement between the Dutch GPA members, the intention is to add value by combining the diverse approaches and expertise of the various member organizations and to have an 'equal' partnership. Plan is ultimately responsible for reporting to the Ministry;
- There is a substantial difference in size between the big lead applicant and other alliance members;
- Some members participated in one MSF alliance, others in more (2-5);
- The Dutch partnership is facilitated by the Dutch Girl Power Desk, in the target countries by CSC;
- It is a multilayered (complex) partnership, with collaboration formalized in MoU on the Dutch level;
- On the program level, the steering mechanism is run by BOD, DSC & Country Teams and bilaterally between the alliance member and the partner in the target country.



Figure 3: Overview GPA countries, partners and budget

## Lessons learned

Lots can be learned if we reflect on the lifetime of this GPA partnership. In fact the lessons learned may give the impression that the partnership didn't function so well. But this is not the case. GPA definitely functioned and the GPA achieved great results. Dutch members and country partners were committed and worked very hard to make the best of it. But this partnership –as many other partnerships- also was challenging at times and GPA members liked to understand better what the partnership inhibitors and accelerators were and what the added value of the partnership was. Exactly these things are explored a bit further in this partnership learning review.

In the following paragraphs we look at the most important lesson(s) learned in each of the distinct phases of the partnership cycle: 1) the set-up and design phase, 2) the managing and implementation phase, and 3) the moving-on phase. In these paragraphs, there are also some examples and lessons learned from the overarching category in the analysis framework, 'collaborative mindset and skills'. The last paragraph looks at the added value of the partnership. For each phase, a number of important milestones, the partnership accelerators and inhibitors will be described and lessons drawn.

## Set-up and design: How it all started

Let's rewind. How and why was this partnership established? What was the main driver for all partners to commit to this partnership? And, looking back, what are the most prominent lessons learned in the set-up and design phase of this collaboration?

### The importance of getting to know each other and creating a joint understanding

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**Lesson 1: Take time and have courage to explore diversity, collective understanding and individual drivers extensively at the start. If you commit to a partnership, take ownership and responsibility. Donors: consider investing in the scoping phase.**

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No doubt, the most important lesson from this 5 year collaboration is that getting to know each other better at the start and taking time to create a better understanding of the partnership itself, is crucial for a successful collaboration.

About 50% of the survey respondents comment on the fact that more time is needed for the starting phase. This was mirrored by the response in the interviews. Even more so when the survey data of this review is compared with the partnership survey data of 2013. Now - at the end of the partnership - partners indicate even stronger that the set-up and design phase is very important and could have been longer/more intensive (the average score of the appreciation of the Set-up and Design dropped from 7,03 in 2013 to 5,63 (scale 1-10) in 2015).

Taking more time to scope the possibilities at the start may not sound like rocket science – and of course it isn't. But, surprisingly enough, it is often forgotten or perceived as difficult when the deadline for entering a proposal is tight, when donor requirements don't allow taking time for it, or when large interests are at stake. Donors should consider to allow time for this phase in order to allow for solid alliance building.

Looking back at the starting phase of the GPA, it is clear that potential MSF II funding was the main driver behind getting around the table in the first place. In the first place, the initial phase was perceived by all GPA members as a game of musical chairs. The whole Dutch NGO sector danced around each other, lingering in order to calculate their chances in the MSF II framework. Some partners were talking with several alliances, others focused all their energy on one potential alliance. GPA alliance members felt that this was a stressful period. It required a lot of man hours and thinking without any guarantee that the other would become a partner or that the grant would be received.

Although the potential funding was a clear incentive for all partners involved in the Girl Power Alliance to get around the table and check each other's readiness to partner up for MSF II back in 2010, there was another strong collective motivation: the focus on children's rights and the protection of girls and young women. This was a strong motivation the six GPA partners had in common. As explained above, alliance members also felt they could all add unique value to this collective focus from their respective areas of expertise. So they all jumped in: the Girl Power Alliance<sup>8</sup> was born.

A lot of time was spent on agreeing on the overall objective, the governance structure that would be needed and on who would participate in which committee. And, of course, meeting the donor requirements was pretty demanding. Detailed budget plans and baselines per country needed to be developed in a short time. Working out the details of the collaboration on paper took a lot of time. Relatively little time was spent on getting to know each other. All in all, it put a lot of pressure on the then still fragile GPA collaboration.

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8 The Girl Power Alliance was first called the Child Rights Alliance who carried out the Girl Power Program. Later on, the name was changed to Girl Power Alliance as it seemed logical to emphasize the focus on girls and aligning the name of the alliance with the program would avoid confusion.

Despite the stress during this period, all GPA members worked very hard to make it all happen and were positive about starting the alliance. It certainly helped that the alliance members already started exploring this potential partnership since 2009. There was a good atmosphere. But, looking back, members also realize that it is very important to invest more time, particularly in the aspect of really getting to know each other and creating a deeper understanding of each other's organizational drivers, approaches, programs, financial systems, etc.

**Box 1: Organizational drivers for collaborating in the GPA**

Often the organizational drivers to partner up are not explored, as many NGO's find it hard to put these on the table. These are things like:

The lead partner, Plan Nederland, was recovering from image damage in the early years of 2000 and the fact that they did not receive any funding under MSF I. Plan did not consider itself as a 'desirable' partner back in 2010, and was therefore happy to work with a number of smaller partners. The smaller partners, like WomenWin and ICDI felt this collaboration provided a great opportunity for them to work through a big international organization and with the Dutch government. DCI-ECPAT indicated that this provided them with the opportunity to expand their network, and improve their track record and visibility in the development sector. CHI and FPU also committed to other consortia as they felt they could add value to these other consortia too. CHI entered into one other alliance and FPU in five alliances.

These incentives were very real and important for all members, but nevertheless remained undiscussed. Not opening up about these drivers limited the opportunities for GPA members to support each other in achieving these individual organizational drivers. In fact, by not opening up about these drivers, the drivers were sometimes used against each other throughout the lifetime of the GPA partnership.

Apart from digging deeper into the diverse organizational drivers, there is also the matter of diversity that is worth exploring further when setting up a partnership. As is widely recognized, the added value of partnering primarily derives from the fact that all partners contribute their unique approaches and experiences. Diversity is seen as a precondition for successful collaboration and innovation<sup>9</sup>. GPA stressed in their plans that their complementarity was a strong collective driver to collaborate. And indeed, the diversity of GPA members has been important and has provided the right platform to address gender inequality nationally and internationally. As some of the respondents put it: it brought surprising perspectives, added value to understanding & engagement, combined multiple strengths, and helped to find out how to reach the unreachable. Survey and interview results underline the potential added value of diversity in the GPA.

At the same time, diversity was also a clear partnership inhibitor within the GPA. A number of examples that kept cropping up (in the partnership review in 2013 and again in 2015) were the fact that a disproportionate time investment was required from the smaller organizations, the fact that FPU sometimes works with commercial partners and only provides support for 18 months, the fact that CHI did not fund their partners in the South but provided a different type of support to their networks, and the fact that Plan worked through their country offices and how this impacted the efficiency of the collaboration. This caused quite some turmoil within the GPA in the Netherlands and also at country level. And although the differences in approach were addressed at different times, these challenges of diversity kept cropping up as examples of partnership inhibitors throughout the five years.

It is not uncommon for partners to agree to partner up, based on quite different underlying assumptions and different understanding on what diversity means in practise. It is also not uncommon that partners can be quite surprised to discover this discrepancy at a relatively late stage in their partnership, or even that this discrepancy is in fact too great and makes partnering really difficult. Exploring diversity right from the start at the different partnership levels, is therefore very important as it will help build a solid base to start out from. And it helps to take a well informed decision about whether or not to enter into a partnership in the first place.

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9 By John Kania & Mark Kramer FSG/Stanford: Large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, yet the social sector remains focused on the isolated intervention of individual organizations. - See more at: [http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact#sthash.9hQPUWoQ.dpuf](http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact#sthash.9hQPUWoQ.dpuf) [2011]

According to Jonathan Huye and Jeff Weiss<sup>10</sup>, there is something else underlying the issue of diversity. Exploring and dealing with diversity requires us to challenge the deep discomfort with differences and conflict we all tend to have. Also, there is the mistaken belief, held by many of us, that an approach, format or management strategy that works well within one organization will work equally well in a partnership. “Blaming partners because they do things differently ultimately drives conflict underground. They erode the partners’ ability to make use of the very differences that prompted formation of the alliance in the first place”. It is no surprise that this also happened to the GPA to some extent.

Another area that needs to be dealt with are the expectations of the various members. Often, partners have very different expectations, for instance on how to partner, on what can be expected of each other, on who will take on the lead role, etc.

#### **Box 2: Expectations about the partnership**

Interview respondents mentioned that they felt that for some members (like Plan Netherlands and FPU), the GPA was more peripheral. Apart from GPA, they participated in other alliances and carried out more large grant programs. For other members, like ICDI or CHI, GPA was quite daunting as GPA provided them with the opportunity to continue, or upscale their programs. This created different expectations which often were not discussed.

Also, some alliance members valued joint field visits and put in time and effort to make them happen, whereas others operated much more individually and focused mostly on their own activities. This difference in expectations was also seen in what was expected of the lead role. Plan felt that leadership should be a collective responsibility, whereas other members felt that Plan should have taken much more of a lead role. These expectations often go hand in hand with negative judgements that undermine the collaboration.

From 2009 onward, the Dutch members spent some time discussing the differences in approach but somehow it was not enough. The differences were brought up in the survey and in the interviews as limiting factor by Dutch respondents. At country level this exploration phase was not used sufficiently either. Country partners therefore found it initially hard to understand how this collaboration would function in their country and even harder to understand the differences between the Dutch partners.

Exploring expectation, diversity and organizational drivers at all levels in all countries helps to create a strong foundation for collaboration. It is important to realize that exploring these issues not only requires time – not only here in the Netherlands but also at country level - it also required the courage to go beyond the initial feeling of discomfort we all tend to have when confronted with differences. It requires a collaborative mindset and skills – a deep interest in the other partners and an ability to imagine how differences can be used to build something new, rather than just confirming the status quo.

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10 Simple Rules for making Alliances Work; Jonathan Hughes and Jeff Weiss, Harvard Business Review ‘OnPoint’, November 2012.

## The influence of changing donor requirements on the collaborative process

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**Lesson 2: Sudden changes in donor regulations or other external changes can put a partnership under extreme pressure. It requires careful alliance management to facilitate a participatory decision making process and recognize the temptation for partners to take up defensive positions.**

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Apart from the fact that more time could have been spent on getting to know each other, the start of the GPA went relatively smooth. All alliance members worked incredibly hard to comply with the donor requirements.

Usually, the scoping phase is meant to broaden the options, to come up with new ideas, and to think about new approaches and innovative solutions. The level of detail required by the government, however, created the opposite effect: it caused partners to think in limitations rather than in undiscovered options. The other thing that caused partners to think in limitations and take up a defensive position were the budget cuts.

On the 10th of November 2010, the GPA was informed that they would receive around 67% of the budget they had applied for. Of course, the GPA were happy that their application was (partly) approved but this also meant that the GPA partners had to go back to the drawing board to figure out how to deal with these budget cuts and how to adjust the detailed plans and country budgets. It was no surprise that, at the time, all GPA members wanted to make sure that 'their' programs would stay afloat. Hard negotiations were the result.

The extra budget cuts of another 11.27% announced early 2011<sup>11</sup>, again caused real turmoil. Again the individual interests of the various member organizations were at stake. Decisions needed to be taken about which programs to keep running in which countries and which to cut. This was especially difficult because all members had invested so much time to come to this joint detailed plan. These measures drastically influenced the partnership. Partners instantly dug their heels in and started defending their own interests rather than embracing the collective ambitions of the GPA.

All Dutch alliance members indicated that, in the beginning, this specific donor measure changed the relationships between partners and undermined the collective efforts. Nevertheless, the GPA members were able to hold together under this pressure and managed to work through this phase. To a large extent this happened by entering into pragmatic negotiations in which all organizations had to make some concessions to keep everybody happy. It did perhaps not generate the best decisions for the collaboration as a whole but the partnership did not collapse. And the partnership did work.

There are two things important here:

1. Government policies and regulations too often impede rather than improve the conditions necessary for partnerships to function successfully. Strictly defined funding models, emphasis on detailed plans, budgets and annual reporting, and sudden budget cuts as happened within MSF II all create obstacles to achieving collective results. Donors should be much more aware of the consequences of particular measures and donor regulations on collaborative efforts. Of course, government means are always potentially subject to budget cuts as the political reality can be fickle. However, governments should put more effort in communicating and facilitating potential changes in subsidy regulations, for instance by exploring different standard subsidy requirements<sup>12</sup>.
2. NGO's tend to follow donor regulations without argument. There is a tendency to fall back to donor recipient relations. Very few NGO's or alliances enter into a dialogue with the government about hindering regulations, whereas courageous dialogue with the government could really help shape new donor requirements that better fit collaborative practise.

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<sup>11</sup> Begrotingsvoorbehoud – letter of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to announce the decision on the 11,29% budget cut for all MSF alliances. [19 January 2011]

<sup>12</sup> One example is the new 'dialogue and dissent' framework. The Dutch government is experimenting with a different approach, based on the Theory of Change, in which steering does not focus on activities but on the desired changes, which allows for more flexibility.

It is not the governance model that drives progress but the approach

**Lesson 3: Go beyond formal governance structures to encourage collaborative behaviour. Co-create governance models that focus on engagement and keeping all informed. Include a few partnership indicators and use these as a steering/engaging mechanism.**

How best to govern a partnership is a question many partnerships struggle with. Which structures are needed and helpful to move an alliance along? When does a partnership have too many committees and when too little?

In the early days of alliance building, GPA members spent quite some time on designing an appropriate governance model and deciding who was needed from which organization in the different committees.

‘Everything had an administrative focus’ – Dutch alliance member

GPA chose a multilayered and governance model (see figure 4.). Furthermore, GPA chose a collaborative governance model in which all Dutch members were equally represented in each committee. Additionally, a partnership backbone structure was established in the form of the Girl Power Desk.

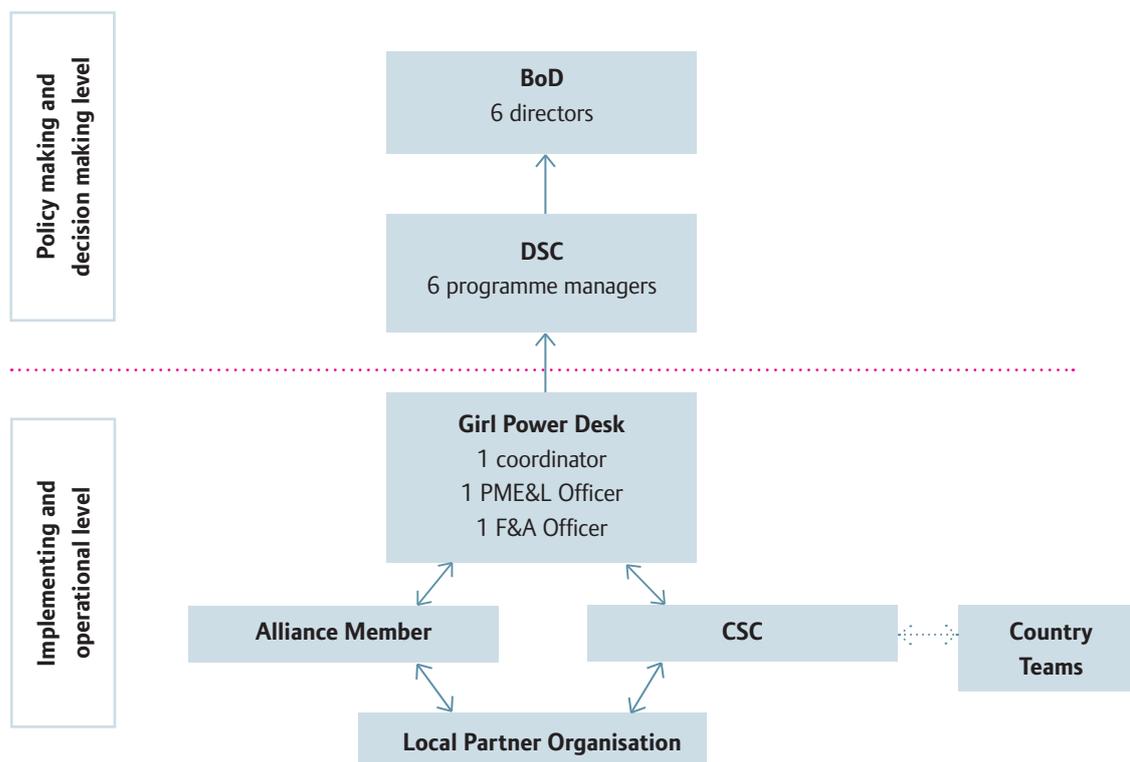


Figure 4. GPA Governance model<sup>13</sup>

13 GPA operational manual

The GPA was governed by the Board of Directors (BoD) and the Dutch Steering Committee (DSC). Furthermore, the GPA had Country Teams, chaired by Plan Netherlands, and established a Girl Power Desk (GPD). On paper, the role of the GPD was to be the alliance secretariat and to coordinate reporting, organize joint meetings, write notes and accommodate joint activities.

On the country level, each Dutch member had a bilateral relation (often supported by a bilateral contract) with their local partners. Also, there was some form of collaboration between the local partners in the countries, governed by a country steering committee (CSC). Although the cooperation in each country was not formalized in a contract, the CSCs were established to encourage alignment and cooperation between the local partners involved. In the operations manual of the GPA the role of the CSC was formulated as follows: CSC's are responsible for the implementation of the Girl Power programme in the country. Local partner organizations remained financially accountable to the Dutch alliance organization(s) funding their Girl Power country project(s).

CSCs had no mandate as such, but in some countries like in Ghana the CSC tried to agree on a common budget for the CSC and overarching collaborative efforts. However, this was not standardized and therefore never really took off. Formally, the CSC had no mandate but as they were held responsible for the implementation of the GPA program, many CSCs started doing planning together and requested progress updates. For local partners, who were contracted by and formally accountable to their Dutch counterpart, this was in some cases confusing. Who did they have to communicate what to? Most partners dealt with it quite pragmatically and all in all the governance structure worked out okay. But at the same time there is room for improvement.

### **Box 3: Alliance governance structure**

Many respondents expressed (already in 2013 and again in 2015) that the alliance governance structure was quite complicated and top-heavy.

*'The concept seemed right on paper but proved too complicated in practice. A 360 review beforehand could help to see problems much sooner.'* – Dutch interview respondent

The structure chosen indeed required a disproportionate amount of time from the smaller organizations. Country teams started functioning as regional teams. Also, some partners started to wonder whether the partnership governance structure shouldn't mirror the share organizations have in the program. In the GPA, Plan had the biggest share (70%) and FPU (20%), the other four organizations together held 10% of the budget.

Apart from the capacity challenge of dealing with different sized organizations, this governance model faced another challenge: the decision making process was perceived as slow, sometimes no decisions were taken, or not followed up on. This governance structure did not help the partnership to take decisions in time, and in such a way that all partners felt appropriately informed and everyone assumed full responsibility. For instance, many respondents commented on the fact that decisions were not taken at the right level or postponed. Two examples that were often mentioned are the fact that the communication plan never took off and that the planning of the learning agenda meeting at the end of 2015 remained up in the air.

But the flip side is that none of the partners took responsibility to make these things happen. The question is perhaps not so much which structure is fit for purpose but on how to create engagement and inclusion best.

It was interesting to note that some of these comments already came up during the partnership review in 2013. And although some changes occurred (such as the gradual shift from country team meetings to regional team meetings), the feeling remained that the governance model was still not fully fit for purpose. The following areas for improvement were mentioned by respondents:

1. Respondents felt that there was a lack of information-sharing between the different committees and structures. Somehow the information flow from the countries to the BoD and vice versa faltered, according to the respondents. Furthermore, there was a lack of steering information on the partnership level. Yes, there was monitoring information available, but only on program or project level. There was no information that helped to steer the complex partnering process, nor was it clear who's role it was to steer this process.
2. All respondents expressed that the GPD really helped to guide and encourage collaboration and helped the partnership move along all through its lifetime. This is interesting as the GPD was not set up to govern, control or steer. The GPD did not have any formal decision-making or steering mandate. Yet this was the structure that helped the partnership along most and created collaborative advantage, according to all respondents. "If it weren't for the GPD, there would have been no collaboration in the first place."
3. The Southern partners furthermore indicated the need to be much more engaged in the design phase to co-create a 'governance' model needed to support the alliance in their particular context. The Country Steering Committee structure that was chosen – in most cases led by the Plan Country office – worked well in some countries, but in other countries felt somewhat forced, took quite a lot of time to get established or was not fit for purpose. In Zambia, a rotational CSC secretariat was chosen and in Nepal it was led by another organization. In either case it hasn't been easy to figure out which leadership structure would work best.

There are a few lessons to be learned with regard to the governance structure:

- Size matters. When partner organizations differ in size, this may require a different governance model. In this situation, having many committees may for instance not be the best solution.
- Engagement matters. Focus less on control and steering and more on support and on how to keep partners well engaged and informed. Engage the various partners right from the start, also in designing a governance model. Agree on which partnership indicators can be used to steer the collaboration throughout.
- Inquiry matters. Judgmental attitudes undermine collaboration. Encourage and demonstrate an inquiring, open minded attitude in the partnership. This acknowledges that in a complex and interdependent relationship, difficulties are usually the result of actions (or inaction) of both sides. It also helps to find solutions that recognizes and builds on different views rather than pushing one perspective.
- Flexibility matters. If the partnership is slowed down because the decision making process proves too long or is unclear, be pragmatic and flexible and change it.
- Context matters. Within a complex multilayered partnership, different governance models may well coexist. In the case of the GPA, a CSC could for instance work well in one country but another system, such as an alliance manager, or a country lead organization, perhaps would have worked better in another country.
- Expectations matter. Bear in mind that all partners may have different preferences and experiences. Explore these differences and come up with systems that are appropriate for that particular partnership.
- Assess the efficiency of a chosen model or format on a regular basis and see if changes are needed.

Another element that was mentioned a lot with regard to the governance structure and systems that were put into place to manage the alliance, was the complicated monitoring framework. Some respondents mentioned that the format didn't fully fit their program, and although it initially was co-created, it was perceived as a format imposed by Plan or as a requirement from the ministry rather than as a helpful tool to steer and drive progress.

## Managing and maintaining the partnership

This section looks at the daily operations of the GPA. What were the most important lessons learned in this phase of the partnership?

### The Girl Power Desk

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#### Lesson 4: A good backbone structure, a solid understanding of partnering by all participants and skilled partnership brokers are the fuel of a partnership

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An important lesson mentioned by almost all Dutch alliance members was, as mentioned in the paragraph above, the importance of the Girl Power Desk (GPD). This was considered a stable and constant factor that helped build and move the alliance forward throughout the partnership. According to the Dutch members, the GPD was much needed to facilitate the collective efforts, organize getting various people together regularly, encourage joint learning, oversee the overall program and budget, aggregate information for the annual report, etc. The question ‘to what extent the GPD helped and moved the collaboration along during the different phases of the partnership’ scored the highest of all questions in the Dutch survey with a 7.14 (out of 10). Respondents also mentioned the role of the Country Team leaders. Publishing updates, informing the members on developments and simply showing an interest in the work of the various members also has been mentioned as a helpful factor in the collaboration.

#### **Box 4: the Girl Power Desk lubricant of the alliance**

An important element many respondents mentioned was the fact the alliance office understood what was needed to help drive progress in an alliance and to broker efficiently:

*‘Having a broker is so critical. It helped us in moments when it was hard. Also with things like shifting budgets’ – interview Dutch alliance member*

*The hard work and the patience, integrity and gently steering has been perceived as incredibly valuable. – interview Dutch Alliance member*

*The Girl Power Desk is a beacon within the alliance. It has been there throughout the 5 years with the same person responsible. It was the backbone of the alliance. – survey Dutch Alliance member*

The ideas that came out of the survey and the conversations on how to strengthen a partnership brokering office further were:

1. More collective ownership and support for the GPD was needed and more enthusiasm for the activities they organized. Although most alliance members felt that the GPD had been understaffed, little was done to address this.
2. The lack of communication strategy and capacity was key. Although this was signaled, the communication strategy never took off. Joint ownership over the alliance communication is considered important. The GPA summit would be a good moment to jointly celebrate and communicate successes to the wider public.
3. GPD should ask more questions about for instance the annual reports the partners submitted to the GPD.
4. The location of a backbone structure influences the feeling of neutrality. Despite ongoing attempts to stress that the GPD was not Plan, the fact that the GPD was situated at Plan (consequently regarded as Plan) and that the GPD represented Plan sometimes at alliance meetings made it difficult for alliance members – including Plan – to perceive GPD as neutral.
5. The Girl Power Desk had no decision making power or clear mandate. Some alliance members felt that the Girl Power Desk should have had a mandate whereas others felt that it shouldn’t. All agreed that more capacity had been needed at the Girl Power Desk. A crucial element, mentioned by almost all Dutch respondents, was the facilitating and supporting role of the Girl Power Desk.
6. An alliance structure and partnership brokering capacity in a global partnership are key but need to be developed further in order to help a partnership move along at all different levels. Key tasks for such an

alliance structure are:

- Emphasizing and regularly revisiting the common agenda
- Co-creating a shared measurement system on the process of collaboration
- Encouraging mutually reinforcing activities, joint learning etc.
- Communication

The following framework is an example of how these tasks can be carried out at the different levels in a partnership:

	Global	Regional	Local
<b>Common agenda</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drive and fund strategy development process</li> <li>• Act as facilitator of the common agenda</li> <li>• Prioritize countries/places for interventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support countries in creating regional/local strategies and funding (by translating global strategies and by giving regional input to global strategies)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give input to regional/global strategies and translate global strategy into local strategy and activities</li> <li>• Align existing plans/activities</li> </ul>
<b>Shared measurement and joint learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-create a shared measurement system that is fit for purpose on national level (on program results and partnership level)</li> <li>• Aggregate, interpret and share data</li> <li>• Discuss data and identify learnings</li> <li>• Provide support to regional/local partners and brokers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-create a shared measurement system that is fit for purpose on regional level</li> <li>• Discuss data and identify key areas for learning</li> <li>• Facilitate learning across countries/regions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-create a shared measurement system that is fit for purpose on local level</li> <li>• Discuss data and identify key areas for learning</li> <li>• Facilitate learnings across partners</li> </ul>
<b>Mutually reinforcing activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilize and coordinate actors at the global and regional levels</li> <li>• Raise funds to support activities</li> <li>• Support implementation</li> <li>• Inquire about specific needs of the different layers in the partnership and agree on appropriate activities to meet the needs</li> <li>• Encourage joint visits/trips etc.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilize actors at local level.</li> <li>• Agree on partnership selection criteria.</li> <li>• Coordinate activities, convene partners</li> <li>• Raise funds to support local activities</li> </ul>
<b>Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage communication and knowledge sharing within the partnership. Agree on what internal and external communication needs are.</li> <li>• Encourage and demonstrate openness and transparency and an inquiring mind set.</li> <li>• Ensure strong communication channels between different layers in the partnership. .</li> <li>• Create and maintain a sense of urgency and continuously engage partners, external stakeholders and funders</li> <li>• Advocate for policy change</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage communication and knowledge sharing among local partners and sharing of relevant information with regional / global level</li> <li>• Promote external communication with different stakeholders</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from the framework in Stanford Social Innovation Review – Shaping global partnerships for a Post-2015 world – 2014

A simple solution to move a partnership along is creating and finding the time to meet regularly, talk, exchange ideas and undertake joint activities.

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**Lesson 5: Partnering takes time. Investing in getting to know each other, and organizing joint meetings, field visits and reflection meetings is crucial for a healthy partnership.**

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GPA members all agreed that face-to-face meetings within the GPA were very valuable. Face-to-face meetings and regional activities enhance the quality of relationships. Partners felt that in-person meetings help to build trust and joint understanding, the very foundation of developing strong and more meaningful relationships. Partners also highlighted the significance of joint field visits and annual reflection meetings. Furthermore, the country partners in particular considered the learning agenda helpful in building relations and focusing the joint learning.

A shared observation here is that these meetings did indeed help to smoothen the partnership process and create a better collective understanding. Many respondent indicated that the added value of the GPA lied in learning and sharing information and experiences. This was perceived as very valuable for the partner organisations themselves. However, it is not clear to what extent these joint events, meetings and joint learning contributed to greater results for the beneficiaries in the program countries. We assume –most likely rightly so – that joint learning does help to boost results on the ground. But, so far, there is no monitoring information available on the effect of learning and sharing on results or solutions for beneficiaries on the ground.

Another thing respondents indicated is that they perceive partnering as an add-on to their ‘normal tasks’. To partner effectively, respondents say more time is needed to be able to understand each other better, to carefully craft contracts in which the needs of all partners are taken into consideration, to meet often enough, to plan field visits together, to fill out extra reporting formats, etc. To make alliances work, sufficient capacity to work on the alliance process is needed. This is something that should be recognized and taken into account before entering into a partnership. It is also important to include partnership requirements (skills and tasks) in job descriptions or function profiles, to make sure there is appropriate time and recognition for the tasks that need to be done in a partnership. Investing in collaborative skills and insights is important to build up the right capabilities to make alliances work.

Some respondents also mentioned that working in the same area would create room to exploit the collaboration further and make partnering easier and more natural.

“If you implement programs in different geographical areas, it is sometimes hard to see how to create added value.” – Dutch interview respondent

## The importance of agreeing on what to communicate to whom

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**Lesson 6: Internal and external communication plans are important elements of successful partnering.**

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As far back as 2013, GPA partners indicated that a communication plan was important. During the start of the GPA, FPU was going to take up this task, but due staff turnover within FPU, the GPD took up the responsibility of drafting a communication strategy. However, the communication plan never was implemented, and although all partners stressed the importance of such a joint plan, no one took up responsibility to really get it going. An issue deriving from the lack of a communication plan was for instance the fact that while many emails regarding GPA were circulating internally, others felt that communication was lacking.

External communication was not very clear either. Southern partners, for instance, expressed the need for a Girl Power logo, but Dutch members felt this was not necessary. Some countries developed their own logo as they felt it was important for them to be seen as part of an international alliance to strengthen their advocacy power.

The need for and interest in joint communication seemed to vary and therefore it became hard to make progress in this respect. A clear communication strategy remained 'hanging in the air' and for this reason it is seen by many as a missed opportunity.

#### **Box 5: Agreeing on internal and external communication**

Some partners commented on the fact that there had been opportunities to communicate about the GPA, but that these were missed because they conflicted with other priorities of alliance members or none of the partners felt the urge to really push for it. An example here is an event at Dam Square in early 2015 where some alliance members seized the opportunity to communicate about the GPA. This did not take off, as two of the alliance partners had different priorities. Plan, for instance, wanted to focus on their overall campaign 'Because I'm a girl' and FPU did not favour overall GPA communication as they were working in five alliances. Other partners saw the event at Dam square as a great platform to communicate about the GPA efforts and successes and felt frustrated.

Good communication is crucial for successful partnerships. This holds for both internal and external communication. However, what partners perceive as good communication may differ. The issues surrounding the logo for the Country partners and the GPA event at the Dam Square are just two examples. Also, the question what to communicate to whom (internally and externally) often has no straightforward answer, and is therefore something that needs to be explored and jointly agreed upon.

## **Moving on and sustaining results after 2015**

The moving-on phase is the last phase of the partnership. In this phase, partners look at how best to sustain the outcomes after the partnership is finished. This paragraph looks at the lessons learned in this specific phase of a partnership.

### **Moving on needs careful management**

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**Lesson 7: Include moving on and sustaining the outcomes discussions right from the start and design a clear moving-on process.**

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All partners agreed that when the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the new strategic partnership framework 'dialogue and dissent', this had a tremendous influence on the collaboration between the GPA members. On 9 October 2013, Minister Ploumen sent a letter to parliament regarding the collaboration in the Dutch civil society sector. In it, she referred to her memorandum "Wat de wereld verdient" of 4 July 2013. The letter elaborated on the framework that had been presented in the earlier memorandum. One of the things that became clear at that stage was, that there would not be a next MSF III in which existing alliances could apply for new funding. After 2015, there would be a new focus on lobby and advocacy. The new framework was only published on 14 May 2014.

The period between October 2013 and the beginning of 2015 was characterized by insecurity about the future. Some GPA partners desperately wanted to apply as a consortium for the new framework 'dialogue and dissent', others felt that the present consortium might not have the right composition for the next framework.

**Box 6: Moving On requires transparency**

Respondents characterize this as a period in which the lack of transparency drained all their energy. The question who would be in or out and who would decide on this paralyzed the alliance. Of course, all members knew that this 'moving-on phase' was inevitably going to happen, but nobody really knew how best to deal with this. Also, the feeling that other GPA members were at the same time scoping their options for future collaborations under the new financial framework created a lot of insecurity and even suspicion. It fueled the human tendency to assign blame to others when things are unclear.

*"We were not asked to partner and that was difficult". – interview Dutch Alliance Member*

*"Plan didn't communicate at all" – interview Dutch Alliance member*

The moving-on phase of the GPA is clearly perceived as a period that held back further collaborative progress. An important lesson is that a proper moving-on process can help create more clarity and help to maintain the level of trust needed to work together. Such a process can help create clarity on what is or is not desirable, when decisions will be taken, and what information is needed for all organizations to come to a decision on whether to partner or not. Now all partners were either waiting to be asked to partner or already talking to other potential partners for the period after 2015, or both. Partners were not open about their strategies or fears either. This reduced the level of trust, ongoing communication and engagement. During the feedback meeting, one of the board members said: "We should have taken a clear joint BoD decision back in 2014 to not continue with GPA. That would have given room and 'permission' to all members to scope other options." Now there was no clear decision, nor a jointly designed process to come to that decision. This reduced the level of openness and communication among the various members during that time.

What made it even more difficult was that partners did not discuss 'moving on' throughout the lifetime of the partnership. And the dynamics that started to work during this moving-on process caught people by surprise. A reaction to this was the tendency to assign blame to others. Collaborative competences (such as checking assumptions, dispassionate analysis, an inquiring mindset, envisioning new opportunities) could really help create movement and new solutions rather than frustrations and gridlock.

The leaking/lack of energy caused by the new framework was also mentioned by many Dutch members and partners in the countries. Country partners also mentioned that they truly hoped that Dutch alliance members would build on what had been established by the GPA. They feared that the results which were achieved would not be sustained. In some countries, the GPA partners committed to continue working in this alliance after 2015. In some countries, like Zambia and Bolivia, plans are being made to continue working in the Girl Power Alliance. Plan Nederland and DCI-ECPAT are presently looking at how to build on GPA successes in the new alliance with Terre des Hommes under the 'dialogue and dissent' framework. Other alliance members are also looking for opportunities to sustain results.

It would be worthwhile to map the different moving-on scenario's and see how the present GPA alliance members and partners – even if they all go separate ways – can still play a role in helping to sustain GPA's results after 2015. This could be done by integrating successful GPA outcomes and approaches in other programs, offering support in mobilizing resources to sustain some of the GPA 'pearls', opening up potential funding networks to local partners or by communicating about the successes. The final GPA event is a good example of the celebration of joint successes that can help to scope potential follow up. It is important to include local partners in these moving-on discussions.

## Added value and results

Unlock the collaborative potential

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**Lesson 8: Explore and identify added value on the organizational level, the partnership level and the level of beneficiaries at the start. Monitoring added value will help to increase added value during the lifetime of the partnership.**

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Perceived progress is up to speed in all result areas in the GPA. Some result areas ('capacity building' – average score 7,1 and protection – average score 7) score slightly better in the survey than others ('education' – average score 6 and 'economic participation' – average score 5,1).

Although the results are up to speed, many survey and interview respondents expressed that more could have been achieved. (The average survey score of the Dutch partners on whether the collaboration led to the synergy expected was 5.56 on a scale of 10). The interesting thing here is that, despite the fact that the alliance members did not agree on what exactly was understood with synergy and added value, there was nevertheless a feeling of disappointment.

And perhaps this feeling is right. Looking at the results, it is clear that progress is up to speed but the question remains whether these achievements could not also have been realized without the alliance. The answer is that most achievements are indeed results that also could have been achieved alone. The reason is that this is strengthened by the chosen alliance model – in which each alliance member carried out activities through their own line and with their own local partners. As a result, most of the time the alliance members worked on their own projects and carried on with business as usual.

*'We worked on islands and didn't make enough use of each other.'*

A different alliance model with an alliance budget in stead of dividing the pie, or which allows more room for innovation and alternative approaches could help accelerate synergy and added value. Monitoring and steering on synergy and added value throughout the lifetime of an alliance is important, not just to get more insight in progress but also to increase the level of synergy and added value. Despite the fact that more could have been achieved, there are some great examples within GPA of how, by joining hands, the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.

### **Box 7: Added value of the GPA**

In Bangladesh the age for child marriage is 18. The new president wanted to lower this age to 16. Joint lobbying of, amongst others, the GPA has contributed to the fact that this plan of lowering the age was abandoned.

Another example on a more local level was the fact that a young girl was to be married but that this was prevented through joint forces of the GPA. FPU TV items in which the Child Helpline number was shown, prevented a young girl from getting married. "With regards to early child marriages in Bangladesh and Nepal, the southern partners of FPU have made several items for their news for kids program to create awareness. In one case it led to tips of a marriage that was about to happen, but could be prevented by the authorities." – Dutch Survey respondent

Lastly, many country respondents mentioned that participation in the GPA gave them a stronger voice, enabled them to influence policy and helped them to work out a more integrated approach to the empowerment of girls.

The average score of all countries on the extent to which the alliance added unique value to their organization was 8.2 (out of 10). For the Dutch alliance members this was 6.36.

Very few alliances specify at the start what added value partners like to achieve and for whom. Therefore it is

often not quite clear what added value means and whether it is created or not. In GPA interviews and from the survey response it became clear that many partners interpret added value as gain for their own organization. The thing most mentioned in connection with added value is for instance learning from each other's approaches, knowledge and experiences. Other things mentioned are the opportunity to upscale activities or to gain access to bigger networks. So far, few alliances monitor on added value and the extent to which collaboration creates value for the beneficiaries.

## Final remarks

The information in this case study report provides a snapshot of the GPA lessons learned after 5 years of collaboration. GPA has made significant progress in its objective to support people, in particular young women and girls. A lot can be learned by reflecting on the lifetime of the GPA. The GPA members were dedicated to gaining a better understanding of partnership inhibitors and accelerators and how to use these insights to strengthen future collaborations.

The challenges that GPA faced are to some extent common to every partnership. Challenges that demand a high degree of interdependence between organizations that sometimes can also be competitors. This requires careful navigation between individual and collective goals and efforts, actively leveraging significant differences between partners' strengths and operating styles and the ability to inquire rather than judge. It also requires organizations to come out of their comfort zone and shift their thinking from 'what does my organization need to succeed' to 'what does this alliance need to succeed'. It isn't a coincidence that partnerships are sometimes called 'vehicles for change'.

This case study was not designed as an academic exercise but rather as an interpretation of data, working through the analysis framework combined with own assumptions, observations and experiences. I hope it will give those involved an opportunity to reflect on the functioning of the GPA, to be happy with the alliance's achievements so far and instill growing confidence in working on future collaborative challenges.