

Illustration by Christine Harrison

ARE CONSORTIA A GOOD WAY FORWARD?

My experience in Kenya – by Dunstan Macharia

This paper seeks to highlight the challenges that can be experienced when managing consortia and to propose possible solutions. Consortia are becoming increasingly commonplace and have distinct differences from the usual partnerships. Consequently, there is a need for clear guidelines on how to manage them. Oxfam faces challenges in this regard because its traditional ways of working in partnerships are not always agile enough to respond to this new model of working.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

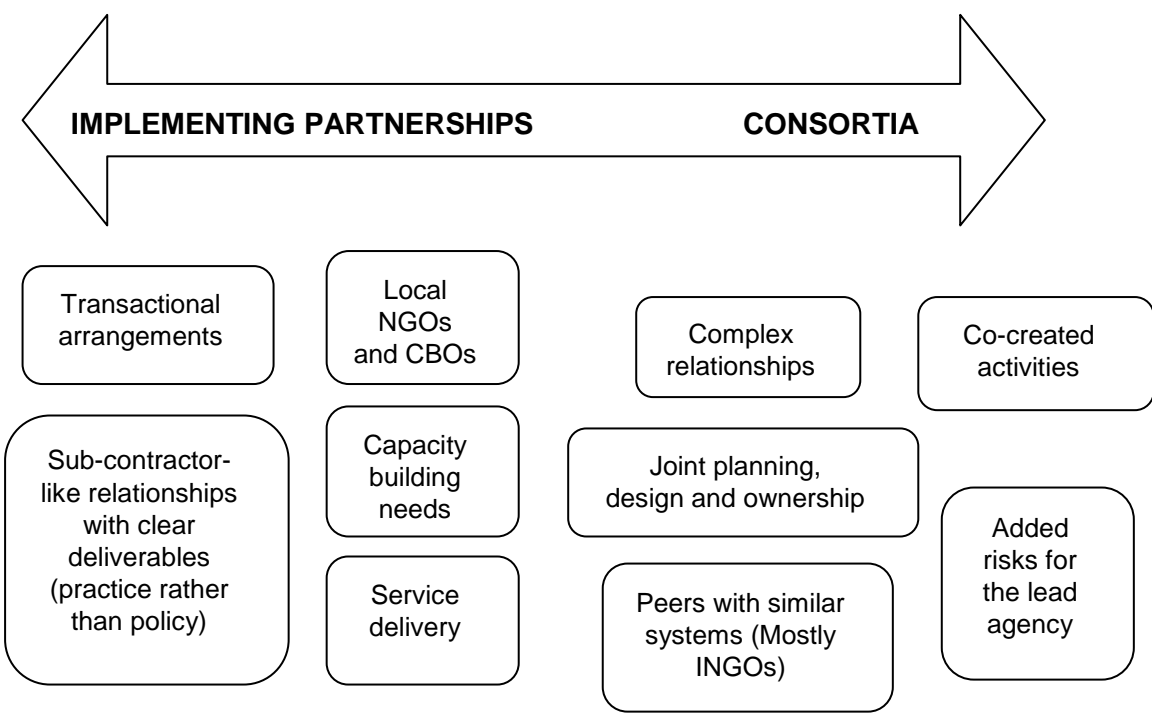
Dunstan has over 10 years' experience in grants management, specifically in the areas of budget administration and controls, programmes management, implementation of donor agreements and contracts, and capacity building of civil society organizations in financial compliance and management systems. He holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA, Accounting) and a BA degree, both from the University of Nairobi, Kenya. He also holds a Certified Public Accountant (Kenya) certificate and a certificate in Project Design, Monitoring and Evaluation. In his current role with Oxfam as Partnership Finance Officer, he ensures that partnership policy requirements are observed in all of Oxfam's engagements with project partners it funds. The role provides a bridge between programmes and finance by providing leadership and direction for effective grants management support to Oxfam staff and Country Programme Partners. He has been in the role for the last four years and eight months.

PARTNERING FOR IMPACT SERIES

To do the work it does, Oxfam works closely with partners at all stages of the programme, in all kind of contexts: humanitarian, influencing, development, etc. But what does it mean for our staff? Each day brings new challenges and opportunities, so how do they do it? Following a reflective and productive writeshop¹, this Partnering for Impact series was developed to share and explore learning from experienced practitioners about what it takes to “work well in partnership”.

1 WHAT IS A CONSORTIUM?

A consortium can be defined as a grouping of organizations that jointly participate in the design and delivery of a particular objective. The focus is not only on joint delivery, but also on joint design and hence, shared ownership (of both risks and responsibility).



Pros and cons of consortium funding mechanisms

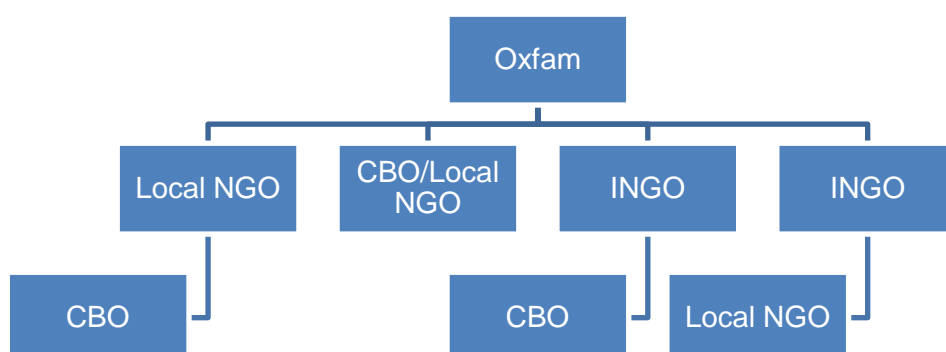
Pros	Cons
Sectoral coordination	Delays in decision making
Geographic coverage	Heavy administration costs for the lead agency that are not always fully covered by the funding
Leveraging of existing expertise across members	Poor monitoring and reporting oversight

2 THE CASE OF THE LA NIÑA CONSORTIUM

The La Niña Consortium was formed in February 2011 in response to the 2010/11 food security crisis that affected the Horn of Africa. The aim of the consortium in 2011 and 2012 was to support communities living in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) of northern Kenya to cope and recover from the crisis, as well as help them prepare and plan for future crises. The consortium continues to build on emergency response activities by investing in strengthening the resilience of people with longer-term support, especially targeted at women and children in the ASALs.

The consortium was initially composed of five international NGOs who came together to implement an integrated multi-sectoral programme, synergizing their different strengths and competencies. The partners included Oxfam (consortium lead), ACTED, VSF Germany, VSF Suisse and VSF Belgium. In 2012, Concern Worldwide also joined. The consortium had extensive experience in integrated humanitarian interventions with longer-term objectives to address the problems of poverty and vulnerability of pastoral communities in the ASALs. **Each partner brought an area of sectoral expertise to the consortium, with learning, innovation and technical capacity shared with all partners across the targeted counties.** The consortium's multi-sectoral expertise ensured a holistic approach to programming, which is vital to strengthen community resilience.

The structure of the La Niña consortium:



What went well: achievements

- **Trust was built** with some of the partners. As a result, one of the partners has asked Oxfam to take on the coordination role of the consortium they are leading. It would be interesting to see how Oxfam coordinates a consortium where it is not the lead.
- Partners had **confidence in Oxfam's ability to lead on donor reporting**, i.e. on consolidation and providing explanations to the donor.
- The county government stakeholders interviewed perceived that **all partners were able to act fast and respond to demand**, particularly when compared to experiences with other consortia.
- The country directors of each consortium partner (INGOs only) formed **a board, which met periodically and provided strategic oversight**.
- Working as a consortium of NGO partners with different technical competencies, geographical coverage and local partnerships created the potential to **implement resilience building programming in ASALs at scale**. Each consortium partner brought its own particular expertise and extensive experience gained from working directly with vulnerable communities in the ASALs.

What went less well: some challenges

- The current partnership assessment tools are not appropriate for international partners (such as consortium partners) since the focus is mainly on capacity building needs. We need **an assessment tool** that recognizes we are working with experienced partners who do not necessarily require capacity building, but with whom we want to partner due to complementary expertise, geographical complementarity, etc.
- There was some **observed tension** between the decisions taking place in Nairobi (at head office) and their implementation in the field.
- There was a lack of recognition within Oxfam of the **workload required from the support functions**, especially finance, and a lack of investment in the same. This became quite evident during a financial audit by the donor, which was a very involved and stressful process due to the limited resources Oxfam had to support it.
- While there were established ways of working, there were **no existing terms of reference for the secretariat**, and reporting lines back to the board were viewed by some as inadequate.
- While Oxfam was the lead agency, its **leadership could be challenged** when its implementation of activities in the field was not satisfactory.
- When the consortium was initiated, all partners had more or less the same strategic intentions – humanitarian response and service delivery. Over a period of time Oxfam and Concern **shifted their strategy into a more influencing and campaigning role**. This shift created tensions between consortium partners. Some partners continued working in the traditional way even though the context had changed. This led to compromises, adjustments and frustrations, and

it was realized that the consortium was not moving forward and individual partners were not able to achieve their strategic objectives. Even after trying to address each of the issues, the consortium was still experiencing problems and it was dissolved through consensus. The decision was made at a board meeting.

3 LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the partnership finance officer for Oxfam in Kenya, I provide grant management support to a broad spectrum of partners. From my experience, I would make the following observations and recommendations to overcome those challenges:

- There cannot be a uniform way of managing the different types of relationships. Currently we have two consortia where Oxfam is the lead agency and another where Oxfam is an implementing agency. The consortium members are predominantly INGOs, and beneath them are their local implementing partners, who are local NGOs.
- The main challenge Oxfam faces in managing these relationships is that its partner management requirements, especially as defined by our finance policies, are not suitable for managing consortia. Oxfam's capacity assessment tools, for example, are best suited to local NGOs who may be having capacity challenges, but not INGOs whose management systems and ways of working are similar to Oxfam's.
- In this model, Oxfam preferred to be the lead agency, but it is unclear if the benefits thereof were weighed against the risks and expected investments in capacity.

Challenges and recommendations

Challenges/risks when working in consortia	Recommendations
Rigid business processes, capacity assessment requirements and inappropriate tools and templates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply business processes more flexibly, e.g. encourage self-assessments and joint feedback sessions. • Design assessment templates for INGOs and other non-traditional partners.
Substantial workload for support functions (finance is usually a shared resource)	<p>The lead agency should conduct a thorough internal capacity assessment and accurately determine what capacity will be required, especially within support functions.</p> <p>Organizations should not always rush to be the lead agency if they have not invested in it.</p>
Conflicts and disputes	<p>Sign collaboration frameworks, as well as funding agreements that clarify governance and management structures, and ways of working.</p>
Incompatible organizational strategies over time (organizational strategies evolve over time and this needs to be monitored)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a periodic assessment of the partnership to determine if the reasons behind its formation are still valid. • Be aware of changes in strategic orientation of any member and have appropriate governance structures and review processes that enable the consortium to respond accordingly.

NOTES

¹ A 'writeshop' is an intensive, participatory process that brings together experts and process facilitators under one roof to produce simple, user-friendly materials in a short period of time.

© Oxfam GB May 2016

This case study was written by Dunstan Macharia. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Jan Bouwman, Audrey Lejeune, Chrissy Campos de Oliveira, and Yo Winder in its production. It is part of a series of papers and reports written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

Illustration copyright Christine Harrison: <http://www.christineharrisondesign.com/>

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email programme learning team at programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. Email policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk.

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB under ISBN 978-0-85598-724-4 in May 2016.
Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 20 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit www.oxfam.org.