

Some observations of working in large CSO consortia

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These observations are on top of the usual memoranda and work principles, and they do not touch upon the usual responsibilities of the lead organizations, which are defined by contracts etc.

Benefits:

1. Working in consortia teaches the organizations to move from competing in the same field, to shouldering each other's efforts to achieve collective effectiveness. Especially when former competitors join in one consortium, the 'organizational friendship' developed will help in winning over 'other common competitors'.
2. Organizational friendship framework is built through the effective 'mix & match' of organizations' prior experiences, staff skills, policies and systems, cultures and values. All of these are transferable and applicable for individual organizational growth, if in addition to implementation of the Projects and activities, consortia plan other joint activities – which sets the stage for effective project implementation.
3. Working in consortia teaches the organizations to strengthen their positions in specific fields rather than engaging in many different fields. However, they know that they can always rely on other strong partners for other fields.
4. Other benefits of working in consortia include enlarging individual organization's networks (both partners and clients) through getting to know the networks of other members of the consortium.
5. While fundraising for additional terms / money for similar programs, it is easier for Donors to trust a Consortium than individual organizations.
6. Individual (especially smaller or newer) organizations often do not enjoy the same reputation or respect as do well established or larger ones, so the Consortia help build a collective reputation or stature.
7. Working in Consortia helps to save resources (time, money) by, for example pooling the resources to develop and implement joint communication efforts (website, reporting, and publications).

Issues to take into account and ways to resolve them:

1. When organizations are invited to join in the consortia by an external actor, they have to merge their experiences, to a certain extent their practices, and follow very specific rules of constructive communication.
2. Organizations are sovereign and at the same time, engaging in consortia, they learn about practices of each other and may undergo some changes.

3. Trust building is a long process: however enthused one is about the consortium project, it takes a long time and specific agenda, emphasis, aim to build trust across the consortium organizations.
4. Trust is important both for admin reasons as well as for the reasons of effectiveness of work. While the project's different strands may be loosely related to each other, the ethical principles of work require from the organizations to have a common/joint strategy and means to make it more effective, in order to contribute to change in such a way that ensures the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts. Therefore, it is important to build in joint undertakings.
5. Trust moves forward fast if people from one organization are invited to take part in the activities of the other: that way they see the importance of work that is being done, appreciate the difficulties that arise, and learn the reasons for their sovereign approaches.
6. Joint undertakings are very much related to communication. It is helpful to set up auxiliary communication systems, such as joint email groups, google groups etc., where leaders of the consortium organizations and/or all staff who work on the project, can receive the same information.
7. Transparency also increases effectiveness: particularly in admin, since very often the issues are about money. Consortia where the big budget is known to every organization and changes are discussed transparently are more effective. In practice/activities, where there may be many know-hows or sensitivities, the more clearly the organization communicates about its plans in advance, during and after their implementation, the better.
8. While organizations are sovereign, they cherish their sovereignty and regard others as competitors or partner/competitors. Those who are ready to change/adjust their practices are more successful in their work in consortia.
9. There are thousands of benefits in increased information exchange and open discussions on everything as opposed to the 'submarine' version, where the exaggerated sovereignty of organizations is the game in town.
10. Some clashes are inevitable; however, there are wonderful examples of organizations that were distant from each other building successful long-term partnerships based on trust thanks to following these rules and to good will.
11. The foundational principles, which guide organizations' work, may be very different from one to another. They are usually discussed in greater depth once cooperation starts, along the project implementation, and if the consortium follows the kind of rules proposed here. Their discussions may bring about their adjustment as well as deeper understanding, or more informed acknowledgment of differences and of the validity of each other's approach.
12. Working in consortium means not caring simply about one's own project. However the boundaries are well defined between different strands, even if administratively there is no collective responsibility and people try to avoid that, there can still be issues of loyalty to the partners, of joint visioning, of mutual support, etc. At the same time, working in a consortium means giving a chance to an organization to move away from its restricted plans, aims, and strategies to open up to a larger, more global vision on the issues of civil society and its possible impact/contribution to change.

13. Do not be afraid of many collective emails. As a rule, it is better to receive information and disregard it than to never have received the information in the first place.
14. Accept your mistakes and omissions as soon as possible, particularly when the issue is about transparency. Fairness of and equality in information circulation is a key to building trust.
15. The dynamics of developing trust might differ between consortiums that were established proactively by the future members of the consortium and those consortiums that were imposed by third parties e.g. the donor.
16. The dynamics of developing trust and openness among members of the consortium is very much predefined by the way the lead member of the consortium positions itself. In the instance that the lead member of the consortium acts in a fair and transparent manner, the chances are high that the other members of the consortium will accept the same rules of the game as a modus of operation in the consortium, as well as, in some rare but successful cases, internalize the rules beyond the consortium.
17. Irrespective of how good the relations between/among the consortium members are, the structure of the consortium almost inevitably assumes delays in communication in situations when one of the members of the consortium needs (urgent) feedback from all the other members of the consortium. The bigger is the number of the consortium members, the higher are the chances that the communication will suffer from delays. To leverage this weakness, the consortium members might decide to include more key team members in communication loops.