Breakout Session B—Keys to Effective PVO/NGO Collaboration

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This session explored essential elements of successful collaborative relationships between PVOs and NGOs and drew upon the experiences of workshop participants to determine which factors facilitate or constrain such collaborative work and under what conditions.

Definition of Terms

To establish a common vocabulary and understanding, the facilitator defined key terms:

- **Collaboration:** A relationship between a PVO and an NGO that enables each to produce development results not achievable by either organization on its own. Effective collaboration is characterized by mutual trust, respect, accountability, and transparency.

- **NGO:** Although applied generically to all non-governmental organizations, for the purposes of this session an NGO was defined as a local non-governmental organization based in a developing nation.

- **PVO:** A term coined by USAID for a U.S.-based, private voluntary organization engaged in international humanitarian and development assistance.

Major Constraints to PVO/NGO Collaboration

- The hierarchical nature of donor-funded collaboration. The one-way, downward flow of money (i.e., from donor to PVO to NGO to the community served) is the overarching constraint on collaboration. While money flows down the chain, accountability flows one way—up. The facilitator recommended that this power imbalance be corrected in collaborative relationships.

- PVO-established structures, procedures, and requirements. In general, larger PVOs place more restrictions on collaborative projects and have inflexible procedures. PVOs can sometimes be as restrictive as donors.

- Efforts to meet multiple goals in a limited amount of time. Tension often arises in a collaborative project when participants expect to meet development goals while simultaneously building organizational capacity. While improving technical capacity is usually an appropriate part of a collaboration, NGOs that desire to improve their organizational capacity within a collaboration are being unrealistic, especially given grants of limited duration.

- There is a real dearth of research on how donor-driven money chains affect NGOs.

Discussion Groups

The facilitator invited participants to share their experiences in coping with and changing hierarchical donor-PVO-NGO relationships. Discussion groups were formed to identify and discuss problems or successes stemming from participants' own collaborative experiences, and to share how problems were resolved or successes achieved.

Participants were also asked to develop recommendations to help donors, U.S. PVOs, and local NGOs to promote equitable collaborative arrangements. Each group received a chart showing the phases of a grant-funded project cycle to help them identify where problems had occurred.

Group Reports – Session 1

- **Challenge:** NGOs can face pressure from a donor to conduct a project in a manner that would compromise the NGO's values. "We must decide whether to choose the money or the value," in the words of one participant. **Recommendations:** Get to know your partner before launching the project. An NGO should make its values clear to donors and PVOs at the outset, then develop long-term relationships based on this understanding. The facilitator noted that this is best carried out at the pre-project phase.

- **Challenge:** Differences can emerge between project expectations and that which actually occurs at the implementation stage due to differences in language, culture, resource constraints, etc. **Recommendations:** "Put the ugly part on the table" and discuss cross-cultural differences or technical issues during the pre-project phase. Have true, heartfelt discussions at the beginning.

- **Challenge:** Disagreement can emerge over who takes the lead, who follows, and how resources will be used, particularly when organizations differ significantly in size. **Recommendations:** Clarify each party's vision for the collaboration at the beginning. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) that is reviewed by each partner's attorney is critical to establishing an equitable collaboration. Establish transparency and accountability through checkpoint reviews at each step of the project.

- **Challenge:** The PVO in a collaboration wants more accountability from its NGO partner. **Recommendations:** Accountability must flow both ways. A PVO must follow the same accountability standards it expects from an NGO and must clarify these standards clearly at the outset. PVOs must demonstrate that they are working as equals before demanding "Western" (donor) standards in technical and financial accountability.

- **Challenge:** An NGO is unable to implement a project as it was designed because it lacks the organizational mechanisms to manage resources and meet accountability requirements. **Recommendations:** Do not rush into a collaboration due to time constraints. The local NGO—and most importantly, the beneficiary communities—should play a major role in project design so that all organizations share the same vision; also, partners must maintain transparency regarding finances, capacity, and the resources each can bring to the table. PVOs may have to strengthen the organizational capacity of an NGO before collaborating on a project.

Additional insights:

- NGOs may have difficulty articulating and advocating for goals.

- Collaborative relationships should promote self-sufficiency, not dependency, so that those who are served can sustain a project's benefits into the future.

- Collaborations will improve when PVOs consider how they can advance their partners' interests as well as their own.

Group Reports – Session 2

- **Challenge:** Many project difficulties can be traced to the lack of effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and the need for organizational capacity building. While M&E is an effective management tool, inexperienced organizations—whether PVO or NGO—may lack the training to conduct this phase of a project. **Recommendations:** Explore your partner's capacity to conduct effective M&E. If the organization lacks the necessary expertise, assist the group in building the capacity.

- **Challenge:** The donor lacks a realistic understanding of project costs and/or the budget fails to accurately estimate costs. **Recommendations:** Estimating project costs can be complicated by factors like exchange rates and lack of supplies that cannot be obtained locally. Organizations must be diligent about estimating budgets according to real-life costs and to convey these costs clearly to the donor.

- **Challenge:** M&E standards are often imposed on the NGO by donors with different requirements and priorities. **Recommendations:** Team with partners who have similar goals.

- **Challenge:** PVO/NGO partners can have conflicting priorities that are exacerbated by pressure to produce results for a donor. This can hinder effective capacity building, which requires time and patience. **Recommendations:** Close collaboration at the beginning of a project is critical and should include personal meetings and effective communication with donors and at the grassroots level. Partners must establish a conflict resolution mechanism in advance that provides for arbitration rather than the granting of veto power to one partner.

Elements of Effective Partnerships

- Choose partners carefully despite time pressure to get a proposal written and the program under way. It is better to bypass a proposal opportunity in order to take the time needed to vet a partner. If possible, perform smaller activities together before signing up for a full-blown project.

- Design projects together, drawing the affected community into the decision-making process and engaging them to discover what they really need and want.

- Negotiate with the donor as a PVO/NGO team to gain as much flexibility as possible.

- Maintain clarity and transparency throughout the project cycle, especially if there are many requirements. Address conflicts and problems promptly to avoid the resentments that occur when difficult discussions are put off. Share budget and overhead information.

- Communicate constantly and effectively. If possible, use the Internet to facilitate communications between the field and headquarters.

- Monitor continuously. Monitoring should be viewed as a management tool and not as a threat. Monitoring responsibility should be shared among NGOs and PVOs and the communities.

- Keep learning together!