

Rethinking PARTNERSHIPS

BY BRUCE JENKS

What is this "partnership thing?"

Obviously we need to work with partners.

So what? Nothing new in that.

Wrong.

Partnership is not just an add-on, expanding our capacity to do business. Partnership is about the way we do our business.

To work through partnerships is to work from the outside—in. It is to connect, not delineate. It is to create opportunities, not define turf. It is to seek alignment with the external rather than to segment from within.

For several decades, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was an entitlement-driven resource allocation mechanism. It was a child of its time. The implementation rate was its measure of efficiency and volume was its critical standard. Partners were part of the delivery mechanism. It was natural that partners should be defined as disbursement agents. Beyond that partnerships might slow up delivery. Partners were the external face of an internal process.

Today we live in a development environment of goals and results. We measure ourselves on results. Results are achieved due to a set of interconnected activities. The quality of these interconnections become integral to development effectiveness. Partnerships become the internal face of an external process.

In the old paradigm, partners were the transmission belt for transferring information. They conveyed information from where it existed to where it did not. Today open networks are the source of much knowledge. The IT revolution has transformed not only how information is transmitted but also how knowledge is created and the sources of knowledge. In this sense, perhaps most of all, partnership is about how we do our business, not just an add-on.

It is common in business schools to analyze business strategy in terms of the alignment of three principal challenges: the need to secure external support (including guidance), the need to articulate clear goals and values, and the need to ensure the capacity to implement. The successful business strategy is the one that aligns these three challenges. If you think of each challenge as a circle, the successful business is the one in which the three circles largely overlap.

In the old paradigm, partnerships were supposed to allow you to expand your support circle—to extend outwards the reach of the circle. Alternatively, partners could give you additional capacity—they expanded the reach of the capacity circle. When we talk about partnerships representing a new way of doing business, we are identifying partnerships as a key instrument in aligning the three circles.

Partnerships become integral to UNDP's overall change strategy. Partnerships lie at the interface of the circles, they are not merely an add-on to an individual circle. Aligning around partnerships is a force for congruence.

In the old paradigm, 80-90 percent of UNDP's resources were "core" (i.e. non-earmarked resources available to the organization). UNDP sold itself as an organization. Donors invested in a resource transfer mechanism. Today donors invest in results. You cannot produce results without effective partnerships. Seventy percent of resources today are "non core" (i.e. resources earmarked for specific purposes or countries). Non-core is a partnership around a set of specific results.

Succeeding in a non-core environment requires that the culture of partnership be driven into the heart of the organization. In the UNDP of the future, resource mobilization will have to be grounded in an effective partnership strategy. This has far-reaching implications. It requires that we improve our listening skills, that we connect, we share and we report.

Our partners range from governments (both recipient and donor) to civil society, private sector, academia and of course our own colleagues in the UN system. But the point I would like to stress is that partnerships must start at home. In my view the greatest single challenge faced by UNDP today is to break down internal barriers. I believe staff should be encouraged to work up to 20 percent of their time outside of their bureau, and outside their offices.

Mark Malloch Brown established the Bureau for Resources and Strategic Partnerships, effective 1 January 2000. We in the bureau do not believe we have exclusive rights over any specific partnership. We see ourselves as change agents and facilitators. We see our role as connecting, aligning and then moving on. For the first time there is one place in the organization whose principal function is to nurture partnerships. Our biggest challenge will be to secure an environment where connecting and aligning are not interpreted bureaucratically as intruding. This is a major "cultural" challenge and that is why I believe starting at home provides a good "reality" check.

I was brought up on the management principle "the buck stops here." I am trying to start from scratch again because in today's world "the buck starts here." ■

Bruce Jenks is the Director of the Bureau for Resources and Strategic Partnerships, UNDP.

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