



Partnering agreements: Effective relationship management in complex development programs

By Nicola Nixon and Julie Mundy
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Ever worked on a program in which miscommunications between the donor and the implementing team were costly? In time and money?

In development, a lot of thinking goes into the size, shape, focus and aims of programs of support. Yet there is much less consideration of the skills of the people who implement them and their ability to interact productively. As an increasing amount of management literature emphasizes the importance of understanding and developing 'soft skills' – for want of a better term – development thinking has put much less focus on those interpersonal and relationship management skills that are needed to implement complex, international development programs. Where those skills are considered, too often it is assumed that whether people have the interpersonal skills or don't, they can be developed and maintained. That is a troubling assumption on programs which still tend to prioritise technical knowledge and skills over and above skills such as interpersonal communications, collaboration and negotiation. This is particularly a concern when it is evident to many development practitioners that it is often breakdowns in relationships and communications which stymie otherwise well designed and intentioned programs.

The absence of relationship management skills, and a focus on processes and systems for managing them, is often particularly stark on governance programs. Not only do these tend to be quite high profile (lots of engagements with partner governments, etc.) but they are also relationship intensive. Governance programs require a strategic and well-thought-out approach in order to manage often-competing agendas among diverse counterparts in institutions in which the programs are trying to support progressive change. The risks to

implementation that can result from relationships going awry are considerable and can be costly in time and money, but also in terms of reputation and license to operate. Finding common ground, understanding each partners' individual drivers for engagement, and establishing good communication and management is a priority. The confluence of relationships involved is made more challenging by the engagement of Managing Contractors, who are responsible for project implementation and delivery on behalf of the donor, adding a layer of relationship complexity often ignored.

With a number of complex governance programs or facilities, in 2015 DFAT in Indonesia decided to put the complexity of the relationships involved in implementing those programs at the forefront. It did so by negotiating and re-negotiating a number of 'partnership agreements' between the teams working on the programs. Throughout 2016, a long-term partnership approach was initiated on the [KOMPAK](#), [Knowledge Sector Initiative](#), [MAMPU](#) and MAHKOTA programs.

What's a partnership approach (as opposed to just calling something a partnership)?

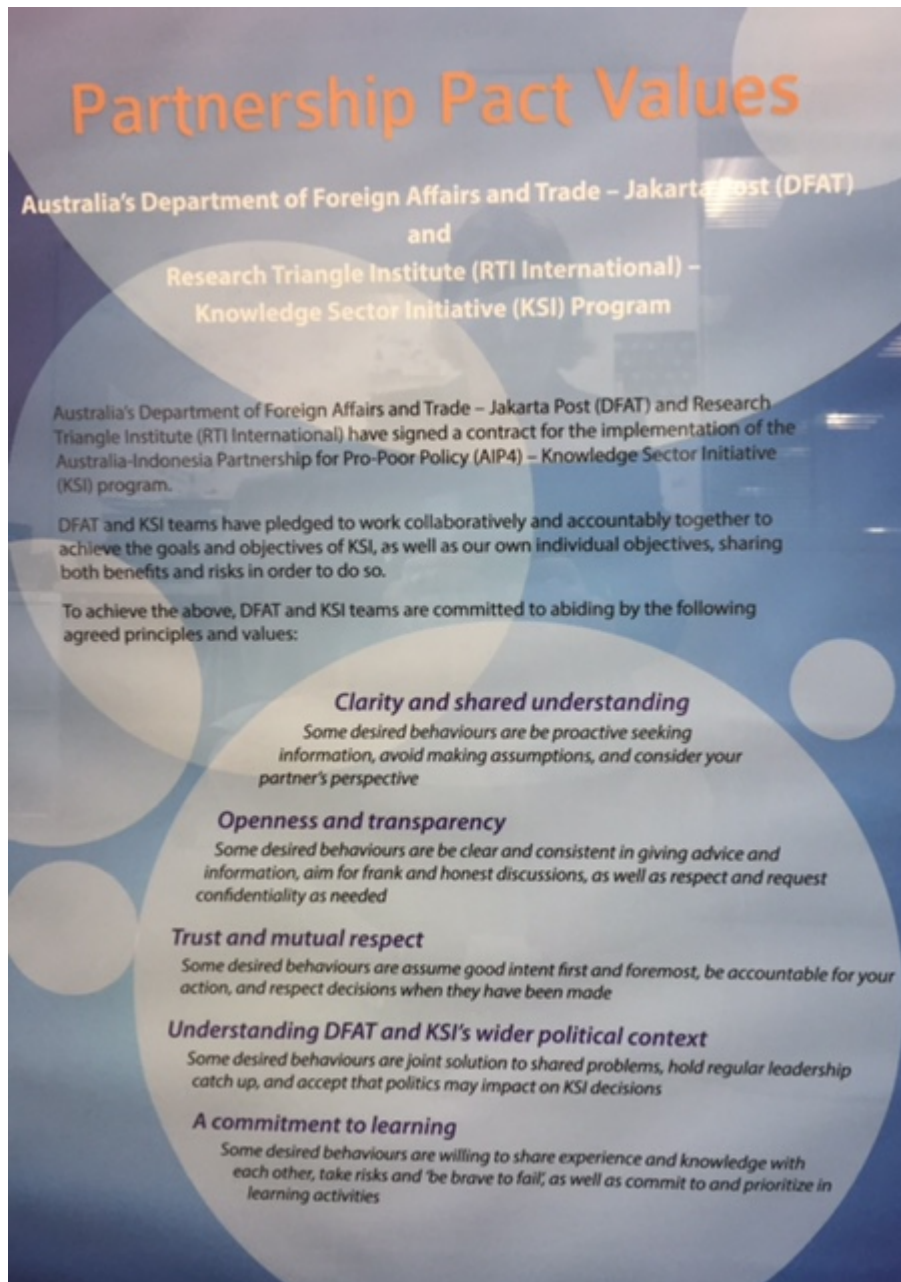
The partnership approach we used follows a partnership cycle framework^[1] and involves a participatory process with a number of key stakeholders – facilitated by an external (and importantly, neutral) partnership broker – to achieve an agreement on principles and approaches to working together to achieve an agreed set of common goals. This can involve contentious issues and differences being discussed and navigated in an equitable environment, which is critical to the trust building which is at the foundation of establishing robust relationships.

It therefore involves both a process and a product, which are equally important. The process differs from that which results in a more traditional contract or grant agreement in that it is created through the facilitated discussion and returned to at regular intervals through for reflection and reinvigoration. The product – the documented agreement itself – also differs from traditional 'get on and do it' approaches to multi-stakeholder programs, as it places a series of principles front and centre of the future joint work programs: equity, transparency, mutual accountability and shared value. A partnership approach supports the 'what' of program design by providing a framework for 'how' partners will work together.

The Partnering Agreement is *not* a legally-binding document. This is important. It is a guiding framework for how the partners to a program will work together to implement an agreed program of work, and sits alongside and in addition to any contract or grant agreement. Ideally, all main parties to the program jointly revisit the agreement at an

agreed interval. In the case of the Indonesia program, they have been revisited every six months or so. They are not unlike other methodologies – TAF’s [strategy testing](#), for instance – that advocate putting resources into regular review and reflection processes rather than the implementation of linear blueprints.

Importantly, in a world of [doing development differently](#), partnership approaches are a tool for managing the risks of highly flexible and iterative programs. By facilitating more open and trusting relationships, as opposed to more compliance-oriented ones, our experience has shown that crises or challenges tend to be resolved earlier and more cooperatively, with everyone taking responsibility for coming up with solutions. Where programs are complex and dealing with often politically sensitive issues, working collaboratively and proactively in this way lessens the chances of potentially damaging and time consuming misunderstandings.



How did it help?

All four programs were rated as good or very good investments in the annual Australian Quality Check process in 2016 and 2017. Obviously a process to structure more effective partnerships is only one component in the success of the programs, but it is cited by all the teams involved as a key success factor.

In December 2016, we surveyed some of the current and former participants on their views of the process. They reported the following benefits:

- More trust and better communication between DFAT and its partners
- A good understanding of everyone's challenges, incentives and constraints
- A forum for discussing difficult topics
- A broad understanding of the resources available to the program, beyond funding
- Better collaboration and coordination between all parties involved, and the other parties not directly part of the agreement.

The success of the approach has encouraged the teams to bring more parties into the process. Two agreements now involve their key partner government counterparts in the regular reflection process and the other two are looking at doing so in the next few months. More partnership agreements are also planned in the Indonesia program on other programs in 2017.

What have we learned?

The focus now is on embedding the approach so that it becomes sustainable, and 'business as usual', focussing on managing transitions in key partner personnel: often a period of both vulnerability and opportunity in any program. What we have also learned is that a partnership approach is not 'set-and-forget' – that is does take focus and conscious attention throughout the partnering cycle to relationships and processes which support those relationships, for programs to be as effective and efficient as they can be.

The investment upfront in scoping out the parameters of partner engagement is essential and can help resolve many differences openly and relatively quickly, by ensuring they are raised and discussed. The approach does not guarantee a trouble-free program – however, what it provides is an agreed framework and reference point to help partners navigate positively through challenging moments which inevitably arise in any complex development relationships. We have seen that, consciously applied, the partnering approach can provide an effective framework within which good development can occur.

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[\[1\]](#) The 'Partnering Cycle' follows 4 stages of partnerships: scoping and building, managing and maintaining, reviewing and revising and sustaining outcomes (www.partnershipbrokers.org)

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