



**one world trust**

## NGO Accountability Discussion Series What makes a good partnership?

11<sup>th</sup> March 2005 3 – 5pm

This report is based on the proceedings of a meeting organised by the One World Trust as part of its work with the NGO Accountability Forum, an informal assembly of local, national and international NGOs based in the UK committed to working together to bring about greater accountability within the non-profit sector. The Forum offers its participants the opportunity to collectively better understand, articulate and ultimately, strengthen NGO accountability. It is intended that the discussion and outputs from the meeting will further inform the One World Trust's work on developing a Global Accountability Framework.

The seminar, entitled "What makes a good partnership?", brought together a range of practitioners from a variety of NGOs. The session began with a presentation by Ken Caplan from Building Partnership for Development in Water and Sanitation. A copy of his presentation can be found at: <http://www.oneworldtrust.org/?display=project&pid=12&view=pubs>

The aim of this report is to summarise the key points that emerged during discussion and identify the underlying themes that surfaced. It does not try to capture the discussion in its entirety, neither does it necessarily represent the views of the One World Trust or of each individual participant; it rather provides a synthesis of what was said. The key themes identified were:

1. The need for accountability within partnerships
2. The need to be more specific about partnership language
3. Partnership as an accountability mechanism
4. The problem of mission incompatibility
5. Power and partnerships
6. Partnerships and trust
7. The need for more research into partnerships
8. Evaluation of partnerships

### 1. The need for accountability within partnerships:

Trying to ensure accountability within a partnership is complex as accountability relationships run in multiple directions and between multiple actors. Firstly, the partners of a partnership are horizontally accountable to each other. Secondly, the partnership itself is downwardly accountable to its stakeholders. And thirdly, each partner is downwardly accountable to their individual set of stakeholders. Balancing these different relationships is complicated. An accountability deficiency in one of these relationships can impact upon the others. For example, a lack of accountability in a partnership between an NGO and TNC may result in the NGO being forced to make compromises and concessions that reduces its accountability to its supporters and beneficiaries. Furthermore, a NGO could take actions which are in the best interest of downward accountability in the partnership, but may weaken the accountability to the NGO's individual stakeholders. This suggests that partnership accountabilities are not static, but always evolving.

### 2. The need to be more specific about partnership language:

There is a need to acknowledge and be aware of the many types of partnerships that exist. In this regard our language needs to become more specific. There is a spectrum of partnerships (which vary in formality) from networks to coalitions, multistakeholder initiatives to contracts, joint ventures to new institutions. All involve different levels of risk, interdependence and brand blurring.

The differences in formality of partnerships can have a significant impact upon accountability, for example Public Private Partnerships are usually contractual and therefore have much clearer accountability than say, multistakeholder initiatives,

where accountability relationships are often more ambiguous.

The point was also made that there is often conflation between funding relationship and partnerships. Often the more powerful 'partner' (funder) likes to think it is working in partnership, whereas in fact the beneficiary does not perceive it this way at all.

### 3. Partnership as an accountability mechanisms

It was highlighted that the objectives of partnership can be plotted along two axes: between accountability and innovation, and task oriented and policy oriented (See Ken Caplan's presentation for further details.) In the past partnerships have been principally concerned with creativity and innovation, however recently this concern has expanded to also ensuring accountability. The example was given of South Africa where partnerships had been formed between the public sector, private water companies and NGOs in consortiums to provide water and sanitation services to townships. The roles and responsibilities of all partners were geared towards ensuring the partnership's downward accountability to the poor.

Partnership's role as an accountability mechanism is seen to function through bringing stakeholders together. It is thought that the more stakeholders involved, out of compulsion, the stronger accountability will be. Involvement of civil society actors particularly, has been seen as a way of strengthening downward accountability. However, given the unequal power relations that often exist between partners and their different abilities and capacities to enforce their will, there are questions surrounding this assumption. There is the suspicion that just having multiple actors around the table is not enough to ensure accountability, formal structures and processes need to be in place that facilitate and guarantee that horizontal and downward accountability is ensured.

### 4. The problem of mission incompatibility:

The point was raised that it is very difficult- some argued impossible- for certain actors to operate effectively in partnership given the conflicting nature of their values and mission. It may be problematic when NGOs and TNCs work together for example, because one is driven by profit, the other by values. Their different mindsets may make effective collaboration difficult. It was pointed out however, that there are areas, such as in water and sanitation, where compatibility does exist. In many ways collaboration between sectors on this issue is essential as each brings expertise and capacity that otherwise may not be incorporated.

### 5. Power and partnerships

It was agreed that the issue of power is key to partnerships, and that it is important to unpack why it is that a partner lacks power. Constraints on the ability of partners to contribute effectively to a partnership need to be recognised.

The point was also made that despite common perceptions, the private sector is not always the strongest partner in a partnership. A cohesive civil society and strong politicians can often wield considerable power using different recourse mechanisms like public protest and the media.

### 6. Partnerships and trust

Although it is argued that trust between institutions is the key to an effective partnership, it was suggested that too much emphasis has been placed on this. In reality, there is often little choice of whether or not to work in partnership, thus whether or not a partner is trusted, in many ways, has little influence. In some cases there is actually a strong dislike among partners. In these cases, what is essential is that each partner has respect for the others' contributions and that all involved parties have confidence in the process.

### 7. The need for more research into partnerships:

At the current time we lack clarity regarding the role of partnership and their uses. We are still trying to identify when they are an abdication of responsibility and when they are an effective organisational arrangement for solve complex social, economic and environmental problems. When are the power

differentials too big for a partnership to be effective? These are questions that need to be investigated further for partnerships to reach their potential.

#### 8. Evaluation of partnerships

Discussion also addressed the issue of how to evaluate partnerships and their accountability. What criteria should be used? On what is a partnership to be evaluated? How are the objectives of accountability defined for a partnership? The issue was also raised on how to understand and assess performance when it doesn't reconcile with good accountability and/or governance, or vice versa, if a partnership has solid accountability relationships but is underperforming how should this be interpreted?