

Learning package: Knowledge into policy

Lessons learned from a partnership approach

Partnering to Save Lives involved the Cambodian and Australian governments and non-governmental organisations as equal partners. The strengths and limitations of this approach provide guidance for others.

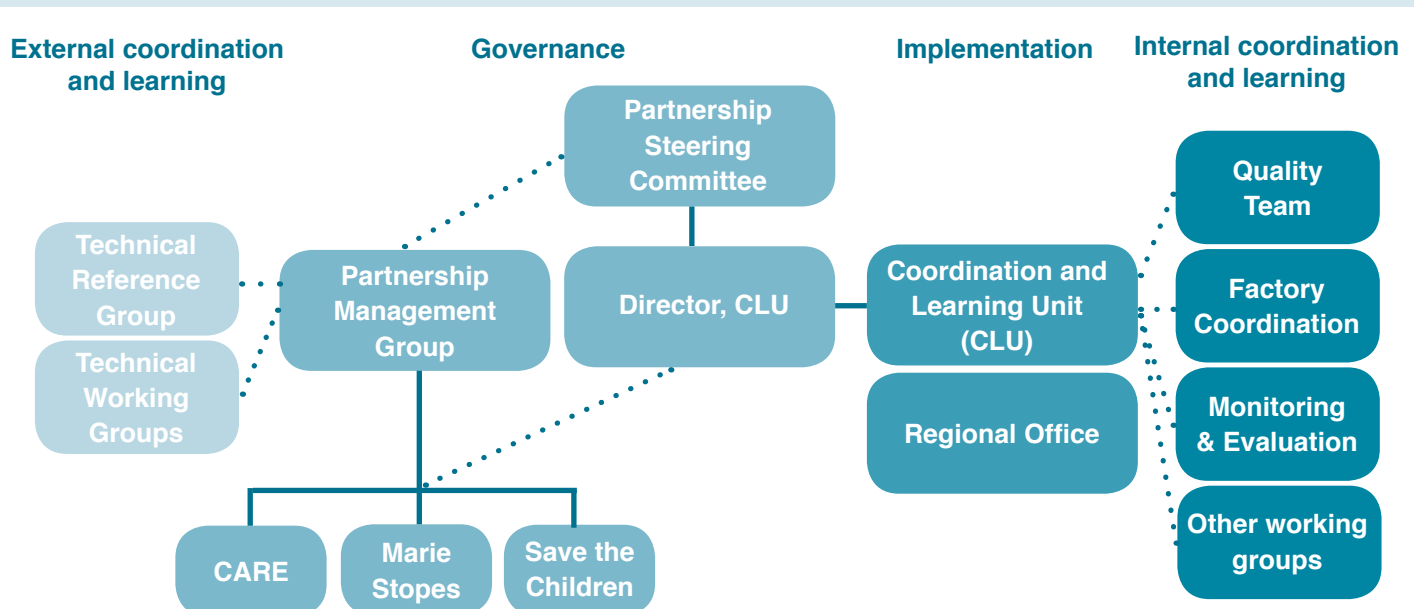
The Partnering to Save Lives (PSL) project was delivered by a unique partnership of the Cambodian Ministry of Health, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and three non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as implementing partners: CARE, Marie Stopes International Cambodia and Save the Children. The partnership approach enabled the group to leverage each partners' strengths and amplify each others' efforts to achieve shared aims.

From the outset, a partnership manual established governance principles and guidelines and collaboration between the partners was evident throughout the project. The Coordination and Learning Unit (CLU) was central to the partnership's structure and coordinated the inputs of all partners, and a joint Partnership Steering Committee, comprising senior representatives from all partner organisations, oversaw the project's strategic direction. This was complemented by a

Partnership Management Group, comprising the three NGOs and the CLU, who jointly addressed challenges as they arose and ensured that project implementation remained on track.

Partners worked together to streamline each others' efforts. For example, NGOs frequently worked with the Ministry of Health, both nationally and subnationally, to implement quality improvement activities in the public sector, including coaching and supervision. Internal project working groups were established with representatives from each NGO and the CLU (depicted in the figure below). These enabled technical harmonisation on quality improvement initiatives, coordination on garment factory programs and monitoring and evaluation activities. Each of these groups met regularly throughout the project, and the whole PSL implementing team was involved in annual reflection and review workshops.

Structure of the PSL partnership:



Strengths and limitations of partnership

During the project, PSL conducted an internal review of the partnership. Members of the partnership at all levels provided input and identified the following strengths and limitations of using this approach:

Strengths

- All partners shared a common goal that enabled synergy between them.
- The partnership enabled shared learning, joint reflection and collaborative planning. Activities such as quality improvement were able to be harmonised across partners.
- The CLU played a vital role and was essential for coordinating, collating and sharing technical expertise, information and resources between partners.
- The partnership was well-recognised by key stakeholders at a national level, which increased the partnership's advocacy power. Multiple partners helped to amplify PSL's voice during advocacy activities.
- Strong communication and positive attitudes among the partners helped the partnership to function.
- The partnership enabled cost savings via shared expenses including research and learning activities and CLU costs.

Limitations

- Although the priorities of each NGO were captured within the scope of the program, the breadth of activities sometimes diffused their focus.
- At times, the CLU experienced challenges due to a lack of formal authority for decision-making and holding partners accountable to their commitments.
- Sharing is beneficial but challenging. While partners were willing to collaborate and share tools and resources, there was still a need for each to protect their respective expertise. This situation was made more complex by the fact that PSL partners at times competed with each other for other funding sources.

Overall, the partnership enabled its collaborators to build upon each others' diverse expertise, experience and strengths, but required significant trust and coordination to do so effectively. The partnership enabled joint contributions to learning, reflection, planning and knowledge sharing to develop harmonised approaches to activities, although at times, the natural tension between partners' own organisational priorities and those of the partnership meant that it was difficult to completely align their approaches.

On the whole, however, the partnership enabled an amplified voice in policy and advocacy discussions, as well as a breadth of activities and coverage, and depth of learning that could not have been achieved by a

single organisation alone. The partnership approach was therefore effective in helping partners to reach shared aims and improve health outcomes for women and newborns.

Recommendations

For similar partnerships, PSL recommends to:

- Clearly define the priorities of the partnership and each partner's specific contribution from the outset. Specify joint activities in the program design.
- Select partners with similar operating models, or promote full transparency to accommodate different operating models within the partnership framework.
- Communicate senior management commitment to the partnership to all levels of partner organisations.
- Establish governance, management and coordination structures with clear terms of reference, including representatives from each partner with decision-making authority.
- Establish a central unit to facilitate partnership, with authority to make strategic decisions and hold partners accountable.
- Develop a brand image that helps recognition of the partnership among key stakeholders.
- Define pathways of communication within and between partner organisations. Establish clear processes for partners to give input into each others' activities.
- Recruit and allocate staff with necessary skills for partnership and reinforce these through performance reviews.
- Clearly document processes to formalise institutional memory during staff turnover.
- Encourage sharing of learning and resources. Enable staff at all levels to learn about the work of the other partners. Set up processes for integrating field learning into central decision making.
- Allocate sufficient resources to the establishment of joint monitoring and evaluation and knowledge management systems.

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Partnering to Save Lives

