

A Guide to Building International Tobacco Control Partnerships

If we were to ask each group that has signed up for the Global Partnerships for Tobacco Control program what their idea of a "partnership" is, we would probably get many different answers. That's a good thing, because the partnerships will – and should – evolve in diverse ways. But it is important too that we all begin with some common understandings and expectations.

Partnerships should be mutually supportive and beneficial relationships between two groups working together on a common project. While regular communication will play an important and valuable role, to succeed the partnerships will go beyond the "pen pal" relationships. Successful partnerships will identify common interests, devise and carry out a joint project, and ultimately achieve positive results.

It is crucial groups consciously work to insure that their relationships are balanced. The partnership program is not an international mentoring program. While one organization may have more experience in a certain tobacco control area and should impart their knowledge as appropriate, to succeed the relationship between organizations must be two-way. Each organization has a different set of knowledge, experience, and skills, which may be particularly unique given the specific geographical, economic, cultural, and political context in which they work. We can learn a lot from each other.

It is important to emphasize that the partnerships should be rooted in a sense of international solidarity, not charity which tends to lead to imbalanced relationships. Groups should enter the partnerships to help each other, and to push forward the common agenda of promoting tobacco control. Finally, the partnerships are not intended to be a funding mechanism. Essential Action is not a funding agency and it is not our objective, nor in our capacity to fund individual groups associated with the partnership program. Likewise, American and Canada groups – many of which themselves function on tight budgets – are neither expected or encouraged to directly fund their partner organizations.

Some Basic Guidelines for Building and Sustaining International Partnerships

Because each partnership will involve different sets of countries, issue areas, and project objectives, each will be unique and inevitably experience specific concerns that will have to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. There are some general guidelines, however, that should be helpful. Since we know of no other program quite like this one, we assume that all participants have little, and probably no, prior experience with an international partnership of this nature.

Leadership. Partnerships between two organizations require at least two people, one from each organization, who are willing to take on the responsibility of making the partnership work. Part of the leaders' challenge is to find ways to involve other members in the organization in the partnership, so that it is not simply a relationship between two people, but a relationship between two organizations.

Vision. A positive vision of the future can be a powerful motivating force. What do you dream of that drives you to work so hard on tobacco control, day in and day out? A tobacco-free future for all children, in your home country and abroad? A day when lung cancer cases in you and your partner's hospitals will be rare once again? A world where international trade organizations don't treat tobacco just like any other commodity—where people's health is put over the rights of corporations that market products that kill when used as intended? Partner organizations might want to share their visions and then come up with a common vision that defines their interest in working together.

Mutually agreed upon goals. While we have tried hard to match organizations with common backgrounds and project interests, each organization will bring to the partnership their own agenda and goals. This is to be expected. The challenge will be to come up with goals and an agenda that benefit both organizations. If each organization does not feel that it is getting something out of the partnership, it will be harder to keep it going. Each group must have an invested interest in seeing that the partnerships works.

Agenda setting and project planning. An agenda helps give focus and direction to a partnership. What joint activities do you think would suit your partnership? What specific tasks are involved and how will they be divided up? What is a reasonable timeline for getting them done? Sometimes when one organization has a specific local need, they may take the lead on a project and offer their partner a supporting role. Remember, when working on behalf of a partner, let them set the agenda. Agendas evolve over time, and long-term agendas don't have to be established right away. But it is important to have one!

Enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is contagious. If you have it, you'll spread it to others in your and your partner's organizations. People who are excited about the partnerships are more likely to put energy and effort into them and inspire others to do the same. Commitment. Commitment requires a certain level of energy and persistence. Dedicated anti-tobacco advocates often have a lot of projects on their platters. As a result, an international project may not take priority when an urgent local issue comes up that needs immediate attention. Still, your ability to remain committed to the partnerships, despite changing personal demands on your time and energy or unforeseen difficulties associated with a partnership project, are crucial to the long term success of the partnership.

Humility and Balance. Be careful not to dominate your partnership, either by monopolizing conversations or controlling the agenda. The ability to listen is important. Given the different backgrounds partners come from, one shouldn't automatically assume that what works well in one country will work well in another. Be conscious of this when offering advice and acknowledge the limitations of your expertise. Each partner should feel that they have something important to contribute. American groups, in particular, should be aware of paternalism.

Reliability. Can you count on your partner to come through when you need them to dash off a quick letter of support? Can they count on you to respond to an urgent request for information? Responding promptly to requests and diligently following through on agreed upon tasks are important to building trust between partner organizations. A promise to do something without following up, on the other hand, will lead to distrust and frustration. Ultimately, it is your actions, not your words, that will prove your sincerity.

Regular contact. Staying in touch with each other on a regular basis is crucial to building a strong partnership relationship. Regular contact represents a commitment to the partnership. Groups should decide how often, at a minimum, they should communicate and then make a point of doing so.

Pay attention to personal details. While the Partnership Program is focused on strengthening international tobacco control, this does not mean that the only topic of communications between partners must be tobacco! Taking the time to pay attention to personal details is an important part of developing strong interpersonal bonds. A note of congratulations on the birth of a child, a thank you card for being especially helpful gathering data promptly, an email inquiring whether recent severe weather has affected your partner's community, or a letter of goodwill on the occasion of an important national holiday are some of the ways that partners can show that they care about each other. Notes needn't be long. It's the thought that counts!

Flexibility and Patience. Partnerships will inevitably be faced with certain challenges at some point or another. Perhaps it will be a language translation problem. Or a technical difficulty with the phone or fax lines. Or a difference of opinion on how to carry out a project. Maybe a project will take longer than planned or you'll have to put up with the slow pace of international mail, but if you are able to take these difficulties in stride and make do with the resources available, the partnership will go much more smoothly. Whether big or small, most challenges are surmountable with a little flexibility and patience. Part of being flexible is being receptive to new ideas and ways of doing things that differ from your own. It's all in the attitude!

Sense of humor. It's been said that humor is one of the things that translates worst across cultures. What seems funny in one country may be incomprehensible in another. A good sense of humor, however, doesn't necessarily mean understanding and appreciating your partner's jokes. Rather, it is the ability to chuckle instead of getting frustrated when things don't go as planned, to laugh at a cross-cultural misunderstanding instead of getting angry, to smile and work through difficulties that arise. Tobacco is serious problem, but it doesn't mean we have to take life too seriously!

Cultural sensitivity. No existing culture is global. Take an effort to learn more about the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which your partner organization works. While it is impossible to understand where your partner comes from without staying an extended length of time in their country and community and learning to speak in their native language, it is helpful to be consciously aware that their way of doing things may be different than yours. For example, is it important to be on time? Do people prefer friendly or formal communication with someone they have just met? How important is space and privacy? When working cross-culturally, it is easy to misinterpret behaviors. Be conscious of your reactions to issues that come up, as well as how your partner might perceive your own behavior and ideas. Respect your partner and their ideas, and try to avoid imposing your own ideas on them. Related to cultural sensitivity is an appreciation that your partner may operate under very different economic situations. In some developing countries, the cost of sending a letter to the US may equal an entire day's wages. Try not to be too quick to assume anything!

Fun! It's much more enjoyable to work on a project if there is some element of fun in it. So be creative and think of ways to make your activities fun for those involved. Reward yourself with a small party upon achievements, whether large or small.

EXPECTATIONS OF GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP PARTICIPANTS

Our expectations are rather simple, but they require a certain degree of commitment. If you feel that, for whatever reason, you are unable to meet this level of commitment at this moment please let us know. It would be disservice to your partner to begin a partnership and then drop out after a few months. In addition to the guidelines outlined above that we hope you will try to follow, we expect all partners to:

- Get to know each other, using our suggested questions and activities as a guideline
- Communicate regularly
- Treat each other as equals
- Find ways to incorporate your partner into your activities and work in solidarity
- Work on a mutually beneficial joint project