Adaptive programming within the Strategic Partnerships

In a series of four events on the concept of adaptive programming, the third focused on adaptive programming within the Strategic Partnerships. The meeting was organized on 17 November 2016 by the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law and PAX. This summary provides a general overview of the different viewpoints and insights that were shared amongst the participants, while respecting the rule of non-attribution.

Framing questions

This meeting focused on sharing operational lessons about the establishment, building and maintaining of partnerships that facilitate adaptive programming in conflict affected areas. Specifically, the meeting aimed for an open and constructively critical dialogue on the needs and capacities for adaptive programming within the context of the Strategic Partnership (SP).

The SP between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provides unprecedented flexibility for program development, effectively setting the stage for adaptive programming. The extent to which SPs can contribute to adaptive programming –and vice versa- depends on the quality of the partnerships between the MFA, NGOs and local implementing partners. Key components of this are the ability to share information and update conflict analyses in a timely and accurate manner; the capacity to manage diverging and sometimes competing views on how to best achieve change in situations of conflict; and a foundation of trust between the donor and the implementing organizations that enables strategic and results-oriented decision making at all levels.

Thus, the following key questions led the discussion:

- How do you practically build partnerships that support adaptive programming, and what are the key elements that make such partnerships effective?
- What is the right balance of decision-making authority between the donor and the implementing organizations in conflict programming, and what is needed to maintain this balance?
- How can the Strategic Partnership actively leverage the knowledge, networks and experience of its members to enhance adaptive programming in practice?

Key takeaways

A presentation by PAX highlighting three practical examples from Sudan, Rwanda and South Sudan that underscored the importance of flexible programming kick-started the debate. The following points of attention aim to foster adaptive programming within the Strategic Partnerships in practice:

Building trusted partnerships risks creating and working with a group of usual suspects

The importance of trust between all parties to a strategic partnership plays out on different levels. Trust is reliant on long-term relationships that have been tested over time. With the SPs, the MFA has shown a higher level of trust in NGOs, which has allowed for a higher level of flexibility of programs. A long-term relationship of trust between NGOs and their local implementing partners enables information sharing on sensitive topics and increases access. However, the risk of working with the same local partners time and again needs to be taken into this account. This may result in local partners becoming overstretched, also due to the high demand of other international organizations, and the neglect of newer voices that do not benefit from lasting relationships. Notwithstanding the importance of durable relationships of trust, NGOs should not neglect the possible identification of new partners.

The uneven distribution of power between partners requires more deliberate, continuous engagement

In theory, the members of a SP have the same goals and objectives. It does however remain important to underline that all members are different entities, and this has consequences. An open discussion about different objectives and interests as well as political realities should be part of each partnership, and all members need to be aware that they will have to work within the boundaries of what is possible. Openness about what can realistically be achieved needs to be put on the agenda, as strategically working together may sometimes just not be possible. Additionally, a better distribution of power between all parties is needed to increase the effectiveness of partnering. This relationship will only change if there is a true intentionality to do so and if there is enough time for reflection. The joint challenge is to figure out ways in which this can be continuously questioned, reflected upon, and improved.

Maximize the combination of unique sets of knowledge and experiences in the Strategic Partnerships

To increase the effectiveness of the SP-model, additional ways in which knowledge and experience can be combined, need to be sought. The combination of the MFA's political leverage and the local network and knowledge of NGOs was mentioned by the participants as added value of collaborating in partnerships. Another example is the possibility for NGOs to assist the MFA in achieving longer-term goals, since NGOs often have a long-term presence in a certain region. In contrast, for political reasons, the MFA is often looking for more readily available results. Partners can contribute to the communication about these results.

Provide clarity about both the operational definition of the Strategic Partnership, and ways to reflect on its effectiveness

The discussion made clear that there currently is no consensus about how the SP improves upon previous arrangements. Several participants argued that it is yet too early to observe clear results. At the same time, there is growing recognition that attention needs to be focused on how to assess the value of the SP. A shared understanding of what the SP is, what its benefits are expected to be, and how these benefits can be recorded in order to assess the effectiveness of the partnership, is essential for this. In order to facilitate collaboration and mutual influence on impact, and to anticipate the need for change, feedback loops on the effectiveness of the partnership in particular need to be built in in programming. The partnership component should be explicitly included in the working plans of all members. This way, experiences and lessons can be shared on an on-going basis on order to improve the partnerships' effectiveness.

Set realistic goals and communicate clearly about these

Participants noted that setting unrealistic goals resulting from trying to justify development funding to Parliament, is a key factor hampering the effectiveness of programming. Instead, a narrative needs to be created through which the public is educated about what can realistically be expected from international development programming. This narrative should be clearly and repeatedly communicated to Parliament and the wider public.

Increased flexibility and freedom come with greater responsibility and potential self-bureaucratizing by NGOs

The SPs have enabled more flexibility and freedom in programming. This change is generally applauded, but also comes with additional responsibility for NGOs and their implementing partners. Organizations are currently in a process of learning how to deal with this increased freedom and authority in a responsible way. This means that the impact of decision-making has to be demonstrated. Insecurity about how to do this may cause organizations to internalize self-imposing bureaucratic tendencies. NGOs need to be self-critical about this, as it risks decreasing program effectiveness.