

Developing and Introducing our programme partnership policy



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Learning and reflection from the Sightsavers experience

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1. Introduction

Sightsavers International has recently developed a Programme Partnership Policy, which sets out our key principles and approaches to partnership working. It also guides the way in which our employees work with programme partner organisations.

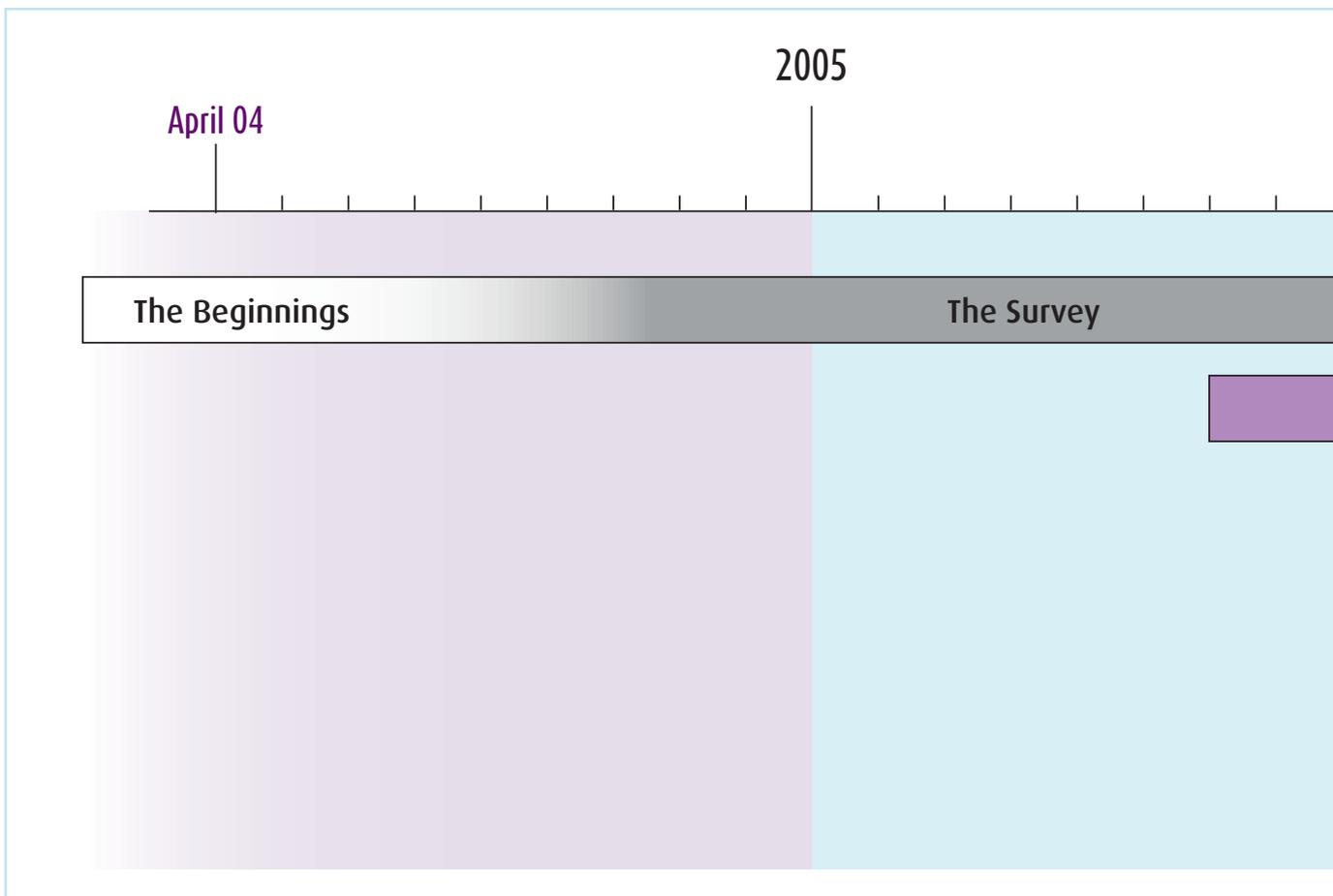
The development of this policy was a major initiative for Sightsavers and reflects the fundamental importance of programme partnerships in the work that we support.

This summary describes the process we followed and attempts to distil our learning; we hope that it will stimulate interest, debate and the sharing of experiences.

If you have any comments, or would like more information, please contact us at info@sightsavers.org

Definition: Sightsavers defines programme partnership as a mutually beneficial and interactive relationship which is agreed for a specific purpose and which works towards a shared goal of positive impact.

Examples of Sightsavers programme partners include governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), disabled or blind peoples' organisations or coalitions, and consortia of partner organisations.



1.1 Summary of the keys to success:

When reflecting on our learning, we identified five recurring themes which we suggest are the keys to success in a process such as this.

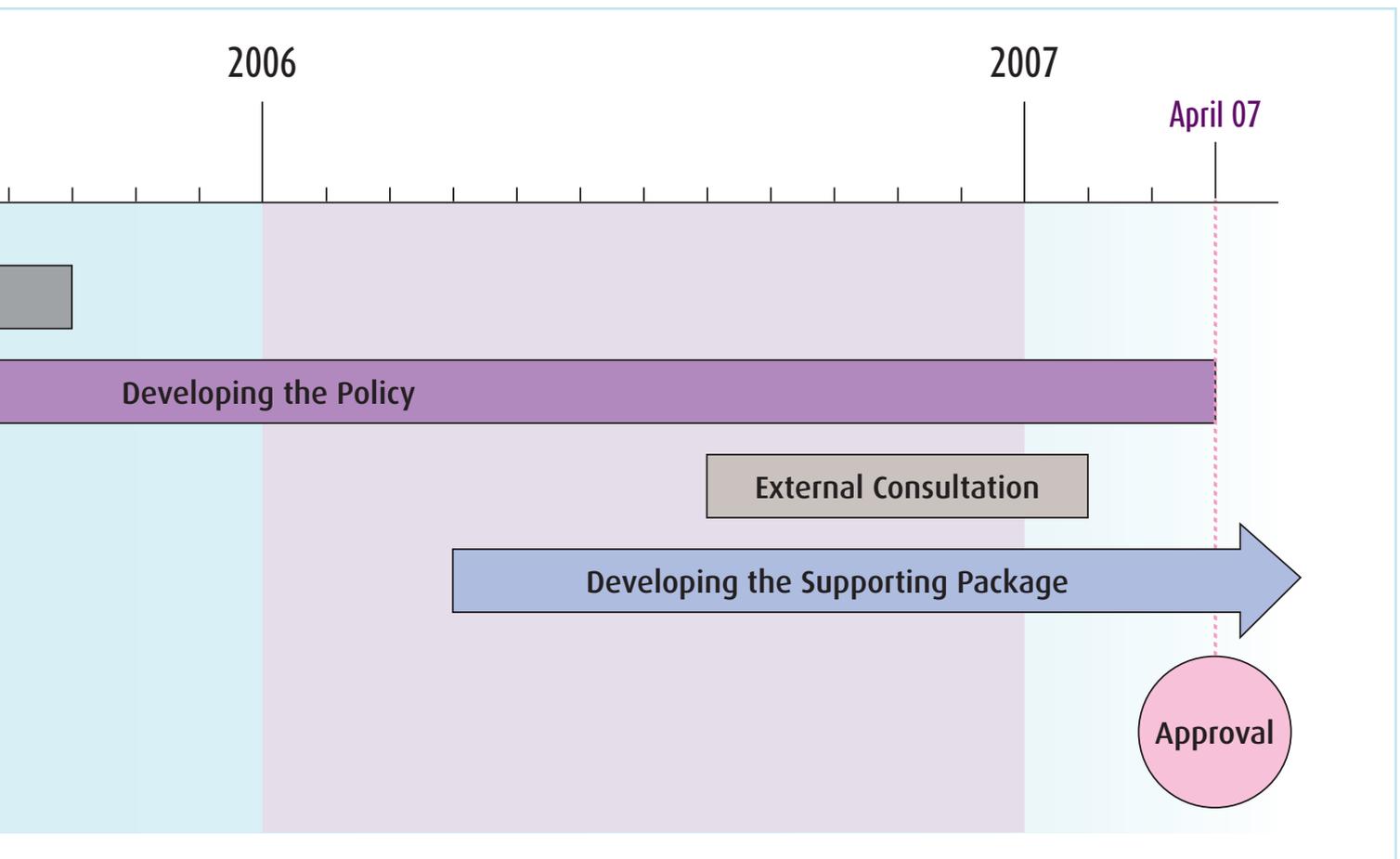
Investment of resources: taking time to justify the need, to establish a sound process and to get the buy-in of key stakeholders; also willingness to commit necessary funds

High-level sponsorship: ensuring that key decision-makers are informed of progress, are happy with it, and are involved where appropriate; this promotes a smooth process and the prioritisation of work related to the initiative

Communications: providing clear and comprehensive communications at every stage – setting messages in context and managing expectations for next steps; ensuring that all stakeholders get the same messages. Also open acknowledgement of any concerns.

Participation: involving different stakeholders – employees at all levels and partners – in relevant parts of the process; actively seeking to bring different stakeholder groups together; respecting and using suggestions; exploring any concerns expressed and taking action to address them.

Integration into other initiatives: incorporating the process into other organisational initiatives and relevant employee work plans; keeping the bigger picture in mind; aiming for alignment with other processes/procedures and seeking adjustment of other organisational procedures and approaches in light of the new policy.



2. Towards an organisational policy

Working in partnership with local organisations has always been a key feature of Sightsavers approach and, over time, there has been an increasing emphasis on more equal collaboration with our partners, above and beyond the provision of funding.

In 1999, we developed an initial Partnership Development Framework, which described our current range of programme partners, our increased focus on partnership development and capacity building, and the types of activities that could support this.

Our 2001-3 Strategic Plan identified the need to review this framework and decide whether to develop it into a formal programme policy. The review would examine how employees and partners viewed our programme partnerships, and the extent to which the Partnership Development Framework was being implemented.

2.1 The Attitudes to Partnership Survey

To encourage both Sightsavers employees and programme partners to speak openly about these issues, it was decided that an independent consultant should carry out an 'Attitudes to Partnership' survey.

However, there were some concerns about the potential for negative effects. To mitigate this and ensure that the survey did not harm Sightsavers' relationships with partners, the external consultant was selected according to the following criteria:

- previous record of working with Sightsavers and/or programme partner organisations overseas
- experience of working with programme partner organisations in the geographic areas covered by Sightsavers
- good communication skills
- qualitative interviewing skills and experience
- workshop facilitation skills
- availability for the task and flexibility in timing/approach.

Jonathan Dudding of ICA:UK met all the above criteria and was selected to carry out the survey. The process was overseen by Sightsavers' UK policy team.

The **objectives** of the survey were to:

- understand how Sightsavers' employees and partners viewed partnerships in general
- establish expectations around partnership with Sightsavers; i.e. the roles and responsibilities of both partners and employees
- determine whether the expectations of both sides were met in terms of processes and results
- identify the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the relationship, and what may have promoted or impeded it
- understand how employees and partners saw Sightsavers' approach to partnership evolving in the future.

The **scope** of the survey was to:

- include Sightsavers' implementing, rather than strategic, partners. Implementing, or programme, partners are generally defined as those with whom we have a written agreement, and who receive funding.
- include approximately 10 partners from each of our four regions

- represent a cross-section of the types of partners we were working with; i.e. governmental, non-governmental, large, small, old, new.

The **methods** used in the survey included a mixture of workshops, group discussions, individual conversations and in-depth interviews.

Learning Point: **Conducting the survey**

- The time taken early on to justify the process, secure the necessary funds and gain the buy-in of key senior colleagues, was invaluable; not just for the survey itself, but for the policy development process overall.
- A jointly developed, clear and comprehensive terms of reference for the survey was crucial.
- A diverse research team was beneficial. Our team included a mix of genders, cultural backgrounds, languages and professional skills.
- It was important to be flexible with the timing of fieldwork etc. This allowed the survey to proceed without conflicting with other regional priorities.
- A standard letter was sent to all participating partners to introduce the survey, its purpose and approach. Along with consistent messages from Sightsavers' employees and researchers, this promoted clarity of communication and helped to manage partners' expectations.

The **survey data** was analysed according to the ideas and information gathered from Sightsavers staff and partners. The intention was not to compare the data with external models of partnership, but to assess it in light of the thinking and expectations of the people involved.

Following the analysis, a comprehensive **survey report** was produced. This provided the policy team with detailed information to support the development of not only a new policy, but also the supporting package of materials. The report was sent to key regional colleagues and they were asked to share it with partners.

Learning Point: **Sharing the report**

- **Managing expectations:** Some programme employees were concerned about sharing the report with partners and, in particular, about creating expectations for immediate change. To counter these concerns a letter from Sightsavers UK office was bound into the front of the report, explaining the status of the report, setting out the forthcoming policy development process and making it clear that there would be no immediate changes to ways of working in partnership. The executive summary was also translated into local languages for partners less familiar with English.
- **Time for reflection:** Despite the above, few responses were received from partners and employees. We concluded that the importance of the topic, combined with the density of the report, may have made the task seem intimidating, especially as staff were very busy and insufficient time was allocated for reflection and discussion with others.

2.2 Key survey results

Discussions about partnership relationships were new to most partners and most Sightsavers' employees. However, the opportunity to do so was welcomed and the survey exercise led to increased awareness about partnership amongst employees and partners.

The survey results provided a lot of useful, detailed information about how employees and partners thought partnerships should look, and the key factors that could support the development of these partnerships. This information informed the development of our policy principles and approaches, and is summarised below.

Purpose, benefits and characteristics of a 'good' partnership

For Sightsavers and its partners, the end **purpose** of partnership is to create:

- a greater positive impact on people's lives
- improved programmes to achieve that impact
- stronger local institutions to continue to deliver programmes.

The **benefits** identified include:

- both parties maximising the use of resources
- making use of each other's networks and expertise
- being stronger as organisations through being better connected, having a higher profile and learning more
- delivering better informed, more sustainable programmes with greater community involvement.

The **characteristics** of such partnerships were identified as:

- shared vision, values and ethics
- transparency and accountability
- flexibility and adaptability
- shared commitment and ownership of purpose
- collective responsibility for process and outcome
- respect and trust
- mutual support and joint learning
- an equal relationship

Key factors contributing to the success of a partnership. These were identified and divided into four themes:

- **Consistency:** a set of principles and values to underpin and support local variations in practice. Working practices that reflect these principles and ensure that partnerships are compatible with their wider context.
- **Management of power:** good recognition of issues relating to power, particularly where Sightsavers is providing funding. Effective management of these issues to prevent an unequal relationship, with the risk of reduced accountability and reduced ownership by partners.
- **Mutual understanding:** having a strong sense of openness, transparency and equity, based on quality communication, and on Sightsavers and partners understanding of each other. Also the presence of the spirit of partnership (i.e. going beyond the mechanics of the relationship to something stronger and more lasting)
- **Commitment to partnership and partnership development:** shared determination to see mutual strengthening of, and benefits for, both Sightsavers and partners. Having a

shared level of commitment to the practice of the principles of the partnership.

Overall, the Attitudes to Partnership survey provided:

- a snapshot of the current state of partnership working
- a framework for the current assessment and future development of partnerships
- increased awareness about partnership and a momentum for development and change among Sightsavers staff and partners
- a springboard for the future; providing the evidence, the guidance and the momentum needed for developing the new policy as well as a range of supporting mechanisms: tools, guidelines, induction materials etc.

3. Developing our policy

As a result of the survey, it was recommended that a new policy, together with the necessary guidelines and training, should be put in place to develop and support improved practice. The survey data and report provided the evidence and guidance needed to develop this policy, as highlighted above.

The survey also highlighted an evident lack of awareness of the previous 1999 Partnership Development Framework, which had been developed by a small group of employees and was not accompanied by a formal induction process. In developing our new partnership policy, we decided to take a different approach and invest in a thorough, participatory process with a formal induction phase. This process would involve a range of both employees and partners in the development of the draft, the supporting tools and the guidelines, and in the eventual induction process.

3.1 Gathering our ideas

Prior to drafting our new policy, additional time was spent gathering together our own internal data and ideas. We also reviewed both the wider thinking around partnership and various materials produced by other agencies.

- Literature review: Our consultant reviewed key recent literature on working in partnership in a development context. This enabled us to see how far our survey findings were reflected in current thinking.
- Materials gathering and further analysis: To gain a better understanding of the external environment, we also gathered examples of partnership policies, guidelines, partner typologies, tools, formats etc, from other international agencies, and looked at their approaches, principles and terminologies.

Learning Point: The Partnership Working Group

Partnership is fundamental to Sightsavers' work and of relevance to the whole organisation. We therefore considered it vital that the whole organisation understood the implications of the new policy, not just programme employees.

A Partnership Working Group was established in the UK office, with high-level representation from all 5 directorates. This group enabled the policy team to keep everyone updated with progress and gain important input on how the new policy might affect different parts of the organisation, and vice versus.

3.2 Drafting our policy

Regional employees were keen to keep up the momentum generated by the Attitudes to Partnership survey. Our UK-based consultant was therefore asked to produce an initial draft policy, drawing on his detailed first-hand knowledge from the survey.

This draft was further refined by Sightsavers policy team, drawing on feedback from the survey, the literature review and the information gathering exercise.

The following principles informed the content and shape of the draft:

- the policy should be a standalone document not requiring familiarity with the accompanying guidelines.
- any principle, concept, process or tool that partner organisations might encounter should be referred to even if not explained in detail.
- there would be sufficient information regarding the implementation of the policy to enable partners to hold Sightsavers accountable.
- the language should be simple, clear and concise.
- the policy principles should be named, with brief headings rather than long phrases.

The draft was shared with selected employees and initial reactions indicated that it was too long, too complex and that some of the material would be better included in the accompanying guidelines. Using the detailed feedback and suggestions, a further draft was produced for wider consultation within the organisation and with partners.

Learning Point: The Principles

Previous programme policies had very long principles, covering several different areas. This made them difficult for people to remember and lead to different interpretations of the core meaning of each principle. As a result, a new approach was adopted in the Programme Partnership Policy.

The number of principles was limited to 7 succinct principles, each with a memorable, simplified heading.

Example: 'we emphasise mutual accountability and collective responsibility both in our partnerships and in the work we do together' **was changed to** 'mutual accountability'.

The heading was supported by a short, succinct description:

'Sightsavers and its partner organisations are accountable to each other and also to other stakeholders, including beneficiaries, for their actions, their achievement of impact and their efficient use of a range of resources.'

3.3 Consulting on our draft

Following the above drafting process, a first version of our policy was shared with as many overseas employees as possible, both within programme and finance/admin areas of work. It was also shared with a representative cross-section of partners, including some who had participated in the Attitudes to Partnership survey and others who had not.

As with the survey, we decided to encourage regional ownership of the process by involving them in the planning and implementation of this consultation. We worked with Sightsavers' regional policy employees and they advised that a questionnaire approach would be logistically feasible and most acceptable to our partners.

The first page set out the background to the consultation, gave guidance on completing the questionnaire and explained how information would be used: it outlined the ongoing process for approval of the policy and the likely timeline before a new policy appeared. This helped to manage partner expectations of change.

The questionnaire itself included a mixture of open and closed questions.

In addition to questions on the draft policy, Sightsavers employees were also asked for their opinions on the draft tools, and what they would expect or want to find in the accompanying Guidelines

3.3.1 Questionnaire results

We had an excellent response and received back 52 questionnaires from partner organisations, some completed by individuals and some by groups, and 89 questionnaires from Sightsavers employees

The consultation and the questionnaire analysis were time-consuming, but provided very valuable input for:

- adjusting and fine tuning the policy
- developing the guidelines
- building the case for a proper induction process
- the subsequent design of the induction package
- increasing organisational momentum

Learning Point: **Policy consultation**

We were particularly pleased by the level of consultation responses from Sightsavers finance and administrative employees. Involving these employees and getting their input was key for ensuring a policy which all Sightsavers employees could implement. This collaboration continued with the testing of the tools and the induction process.

3.4 Refining our draft

As a result of the consultation process, the following changes were made to our draft policy:

- the structure of the policy was adjusted and streamlined
- the style and tone were simplified
- areas of misunderstanding were clarified
- perceived gaps were filled (e.g. M&E, working with networks and alliances)
- certain terms were chosen over others (e.g. 'openness and understanding' instead of 'transparency')

Learning Point: **Consulting on draft tools & guidelines**

As part of the consultation exercise, Sightsavers employees were asked to look at draft versions of the tools, and some initial extracts of the policy guidelines. Their feedback informed the subsequent development of these resources and, as a result, little effort was wasted on producing tools/materials that then needed major reworking.

3.5 Getting the policy approved

The final draft of the Programme Partnership Policy was submitted to Sightsavers' Council for approval. It was accompanied by a short paper outlining the package of documents, tools and processes that would support the introduction of the policy.

During the development of the policy, Sightsavers' Trustees had been kept informed of progress through:

- a presentation of the key results of the Attitudes to Partnership survey at a Trustee away day
- keeping the Overseas Programmes Advisory Panel (OPAP) informed of progress with developing the policy. OPAP advises Sightsavers' Council on programme matters.

Learning Point: Approval

By involving OPAP and Council during the process, they were aware of the need for the policy and were kept informed of progress. This ensured an informed discussion and successful outcome when it came to approval.

4. Developing the supporting package

From the findings of the survey and our experience with the previous Partnership Development Framework, it was clear that comprehensive training, tools and guidelines were required to support the introduction of a new policy on programme partnership. This supporting package would assist the induction process, support the implementation of the policy and bring about the desired changes in behaviour and attitudes.

4.1 The Guidelines

The development of the guidelines began in earnest after we had consulted Sightsavers employees and partners on the draft policy. Brief Terms of Reference were developed and shared with key regional staff. It was agreed that the guidelines would provide:

- background to the policy
- explanations of the principles
- practical examples and do's and don't's
- Frequently Asked Questions
- practical tools to support Sightsavers' employees implement the policy

The guidelines continued to evolve during induction sessions for Sightsavers employees.

4.2 The Tools

The tools are designed to support Sightsavers' employees and cover four main areas:

Capacity Assessment Tool (CAT): The findings of the Attitudes to Partnership survey brought renewed requests for a capacity assessment tool. Based on two tools already in use in Sightsavers, and drawing on those used by other agencies (principally IDRC¹ and UNDP²), a new tool was developed. This combined the best elements of other approaches, whilst also reflecting Sightsavers' working context and the approach adopted by the new partnership policy.

Financial Assessment Tool (FAT): The process of developing an effective tool for assessing financial capacity had already commenced in Sightsavers. The demand for such a tool came from:

- the lack of a consistent and systematic approach to assessment
- the lack of guidance around partner support and financial monitoring
- the difficulty of measuring the impact of any support.

Initially the emphasis of the tool had been more on risk and control. However, with the emergence of the new partnership policy and approach, this emphasis changed to one of capacity building and mutual assessment.

Learning Point: Collaboration with Finance

Our global finance team had already started to develop a financial assessment tool, but were very open to working with the policy team to ensure that this tool was aligned with, and became part of, the new partnership policy.

This cross-departmental collaboration helped to raise the profile of the new policy, and to ensure that it was owned and understood across the whole organisation.

Partnership Review Tool (PRT): Unlike the CAT and the FAT, this tool focuses on the relationship between Sightsavers and its partners, rather than the capacity of each organisation. It emerged from a method used during the Attitudes to Partnership survey and, while it was adapted to some extent, it did not require the extensive development process of the other tools.

The framework for partnering: One of the findings of the Attitudes to Partnership survey was that the management of relationships with partners was determined by a series of short-term, programme-focused agreements (Memoranda of Understanding). It was therefore recommended that a new, overarching framework was established. This would allow the partners involved to set out the intent of their partnership, establish the values and principles that inform it, and clearly differentiate the management of the relationship from the management of the programmes.

¹ Enhancing Organisational Performance, Charles Lusthaus, Marie-Helene Adrien, Gary Anderson and Fred Carden, 1999, IDRC, Ottawa.

² The Participatory Organisational Evaluation Tool (POET), developed in 1998.

Learning Point: How far should supporting materials be developed prior to policy approval?

Tools and concepts mentioned in a policy can sometimes evolve and change as they are developed. If the policy is approved before these concepts are finalised, there may be a mismatch with the policy wording. Specific references are then very difficult to change.

Ideally, there would be a significant gap between finalisation of the policy draft and its approval. This would allow tools and supporting materials to be developed in light of consultation feedback. But this is not always possible.

We suggest that the solution is either to have minimum detail about concepts and supporting materials in the policy or, ideally, to be rigorous in examining any conceptual issues and progress them as far as possible prior to policy approval.

5. Introducing the policy

Both the Attitudes to Partnership survey and the consultation around the draft policy confirmed the need for a formal, thorough induction process. The design of this process began at a meeting between the policy team and key regional employees and technical advisors. The outputs of this meeting were then used to design an overall induction process.

The initial approach was for the UK policy team to develop a training curriculum and train selected employees from each region. These employees would then play a training role for employees in their own regions, and also take the lead on introducing the policy to partners.

In practice, each region decided to apply this basic approach slightly differently, but the basic principle of regions taking responsibility for their own induction process has remained intact.

Both the initial training workshops and subsequent regional events provided further learning around introducing the policy to partners, and how the new policy might inform and impact on our working practices. We also received useful feedback and additional input to support the development and refining of the tools, guidelines and framework for partnering.

6. Conclusion

Reflecting on the process so far, we feel that the development and introduction of our new Programme Partnership Policy has been a successful initiative.

Learning from the introduction of previous programme policies, we ensured that this process was thorough and participatory, with emphasis on a comprehensive induction for all staff. On hindsight, some parts of the process were perhaps too consultative, slowing down the overall momentum. However, in general, our approach ensured a sense of ownership of the policy throughout the organisation.

At the time of writing, we are only part way through the process of embedding this new policy into our working practices. The majority of our staff have received their induction training and some regions have started to introduce the policy to programme partner organisations, using the tools and beginning to learn from and further refine these processes. As we continue to monitor the roll out and implementation of our policy, we will begin to see how it affects our own practices and the impact that it has on our partnerships.

We hope to produce two further summaries; the first looking at the induction process for staff, how this evolved and what we learnt from this process, and the second focusing on introducing the policy to partners, putting it into practice across the organisation, and the eventual, anticipated impact that is generated through better partnerships.

sightsavers INTERNATIONAL

Sightsavers' vision is of a world where no one is blind from avoidable causes and where visually impaired people participate equally in society.

We are an international organisation working with partners in developing countries to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equality of opportunity for disabled people. Our work covers four themes: health, education, social inclusion, and community participation and development.

Our core values inform the way we work:

- Blindness is an important cause and effect of poverty. We work with poor and marginalised communities in developing countries.
- We achieve much more when we collaborate. We forge alliances and partnerships to ensure a positive and long term impact on people's lives.
- People should not go blind unnecessarily. We prevent, treat and cure avoidable blindness and promote eye health.
- People with visual impairment should be able to develop their potential to the full. We work with disabled people and others to promote equal rights and opportunities.
- With the right resources, people can find their own solutions. We strengthen organisations and communities to develop practical and enduring solutions.
- Learning and innovation are essential in order to improve the quality of what we do. We underpin our work with the best available evidence and research.
- Our supporters are a key part of the solution. We work together to accomplish our goals.



ICA:UK's mission is to enable people to bring about change in pursuit of a just and sustainable world for all. As a charitable company we seek to build capacity for participation and partnership, through:

- facilitation – helping people to be involved in bringing about change
- training – equipping people with the skills, knowledge and methods to participate and to help others be involved
- consultancy – providing expertise and guidance to help with change
- projects - designing, implementing and supporting national and international projects with partners to promote participation
- action research & development – exploring and testing new ways of involving people effectively

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