

**STOP**

**AIDS**

**NOW!**

**Working together  
for change: making  
developmental  
partnerships work**

Some lessons from the  
STOP AIDS NOW! South  
African partnership



Photo: Getty Images

## Background

**In 2004, STOP AIDS NOW!, a partnership between Aids Fonds, ICCO, Cordaid, Hivos, and Oxfam Novib, was looking for ways to more effectively address the needs of orphans and other vulnerable children in South Africa.**

To do this, the five Dutch STOP AIDS NOW! partners as well as two other Dutch organisations – the World Population Fund and Save the Children Netherlands – identified the following ten South African organisations and asked them to form their own partnership to work on this issue.

- arepp: Theatre for Life
- Catholic Institute of Education
- Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
- God's Golden Acre
- OneVoice South Africa
- Save the Children UK
- South African Scout Association
- Stellenbosch University Adolescent Health Project
- Targeted Aids Interventions
- Twilight Children

The aim of the South African partnership was to discover and promote innovative ways to better serve vulnerable children and to promote child well being. Funding was secured and the resulting partnership – the STOP AIDS NOW! South African Partnership – extended for a period of five years.

Through this experience, we discovered that working in partnership offers many benefits. It can facilitate the sharing of ideas, lessons and resources, build and strengthen relationships among partners, and support more well-informed decision-making. In turn, this leads to improved conditions for the people whose well-being we seek to serve and support.



Because we believe that partnership can be an important vehicle for increasing the effectiveness of developmental work, this document seeks to share what we have learned from our experience about making partnership work. We hope that these lessons can help others who are contemplating starting, strengthening or supporting developmental partnerships, as well as those already actively involved in them.

This is not to suggest that we have the 'answers'. One of the things that we have been reminded of in our journey together is the importance of context: what succeeds in one place will not necessarily prove to be of value in another. However, if you are involved in, supporting or interested in establishing a partnership, the lessons from our experience may help you to avoid some pitfalls and work together more effectively, and more authentically, as you move towards your goal.

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**“If you want to walk fast, walk alone.  
If you want to walk far, walk together.”**

*African Proverb*

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## What is a developmental partnership?

**The term partnership is used to describe different things in different contexts. In this document, we use the term developmental partnership, which we see as being characterised by four things.**

**Firstly, a developmental partnership is a group of organisations which actively work together to jointly address a social or developmental goal.** That goal can be focused or broad; it can be something that can be achieved in a relatively short period of time or through a long-term process. Whatever the goal, however, a partnership arises out of a belief that you will be able to realise that goal better, faster or more sustainably working with other stakeholders than when you work alone.

**Secondly, a developmental partnership is rooted in a commitment to realise its goal through mutual action.** Unlike a network, which has a common goal that members work towards independently, in a partnership, there is shared decision-making, shared action, shared learning, and shared accountability for the outcome. A partnership is more than an informal association; it is built around a framework of mutual delivery.

**Thirdly, a developmental partnership is characterised by a shared set of values and principles which informs**

**its approach to realising that goal.** These values and principles must be evident in the actions and activities of the partners in conducting their shared work and in their relationships with one another.

**Fourthly, a developmental partnership is committed to shared learning.** This means that the members of the partnership constantly seek to improve their practice by reflecting on their joint work, drawing lessons from it, and using those lessons to increase their effectiveness.

The type of partnership that we are discussing – one characterised by a commitment to collective action towards a common social goal, guided by a set of shared values and principles and committed to learning – is often referred to as a developmental partnership.

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**“Individually, we are one drop.  
Together, we are an ocean.”**

*Ryunosuke Satoro*

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## **The benefits of partnership**

**Developmental partnerships offer a range of long-term benefits. These benefits include:**

- **Greater effectiveness.**

Partnerships allow you to combine and build on existing experience, expertise and knowledge. Rather than putting energy and resources into building up new areas of expertise individually, it allows each organisation to contribute their core strengths, resulting in greater effectiveness.

- **The strengthening of individual partner organisations.**

The learning and sharing that happens among partners can have a positive impact on individual partner organisations. In our own case, each partner organisation strengthened their practice based on lessons learned through exposure to, and in dialogue with other partners.

- **Greater innovation.**

If a partnership privileges learning, it can be a space of great creativity and innovation. New ideas emerge through a process of questioning and discussion, are tested, and where they show possibility can be quickly disseminated to, and through, the partner organisations.

- **The building of stronger links within systems.**

This can take many forms simultaneously. For example, a partnership may link grassroots realities and policy processes, rural and urban perspectives, government departments and non-governmental organisations.

In whatever form, at its best, multi-stakeholder partnerships build relationships that result in greater coordination and information-sharing within complex social systems.

- **Joint action and informed decision-making.**

In our experience, the relationships of trust that are built between partners have many benefits. This deepened trust can lead to an increase in informal support for individuals and organisations and a freer flow of information between organisations. In turn, this can facilitate quick and effective joint action and more well-informed decision-making by all parties. In our partnership, as relationships were formed, partners began to contact each other to discuss ideas, to get information, and to request assistance in the process of making decisions. Increasingly, partners put in proposals for joint presentations at conferences. These relationships and networks have continued well beyond the formal life of the partnership.

These benefits combine to create stronger developmental responses and, ultimately, improved conditions for the people whose well-being we seek to serve and support.

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**“Sharing knowledge is not about giving people something, or getting something from them. That is only valid for information sharing. Sharing knowledge occurs when people are genuinely interested in helping one another develop new capacities for action; it is about creating learning processes.”**

*Peter Senge*

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## **Making partnership work**

**For many of us, working in partnership is different from our usual ways of working. Working in partnership requires us to invite others into our work, and to share the details of both our successes and our challenges.**

It requires us to embrace a cooperative paradigm in which we see openness with others as the source of both our individual and our collective success. For many people, therefore, working in partnership – the first time – is a leap of faith. People only become truly committed to it once they see the benefits. It is our hope that the ideas shared below will help you to realise the benefits of partnership as quickly and smoothly and deeply as possible.

We have grouped these lessons into three sections:

1. Preparing the soil:

Lessons for starting your partnership

2. Cultivating growth:

Lessons for working together effectively

3. Sharing the harvest:

Lessons for sharing your knowledge with others

To be clear, our own process did not follow these distinct steps. As the saying goes, we ‘made the road by walking’ and discovered these lessons mainly in hindsight, through reflection on the cause of our challenges. For this reason, while these lessons may be most beneficial to people just starting their own partnerships, they can also assist partnerships that are well-established to address the challenges they face. If you are in an established partnership, we hope that some of these ideas can help you to move away from places where you are feeling stuck and into a greater sense of ease and freedom.

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**“I haven’t a clue how my story will end. But that’s all right. When you set out on a journey and night covers the road, you don’t conclude that the road has vanished. And how else could we discover the stars?”**

*Nancy Willard*

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## **1. Preparing the soil:**

### **Lessons for starting your partnership**

**Perhaps the most important thing that we learned in the course of our partnership is to pay attention to how you begin. The start of your partnership is like the sowing of seeds. Your best crop will not come from scattering seeds randomly around a field and hoping for the best. You need to pay attention to the preparation of the soil – planting at the best time, in the best place and under the best conditions to give the plants the best possibility to thrive. A partnership is similar. There is work to be done to prepare the soil.**

At the start of a partnership, however, it is easy to get carried away by the excitement of what you are, or will be, doing and to assume that the question of how you will work together will get sorted out as you go along. Although it may feel frustrating (why are we wasting so much time when there is so much work to be done?!), we have found that taking the time to get agreement on

the key issues of what you will do and how you will work together will give your partnership the best possible conditions in which to take root and grow. The following may assist you to do that:

### **Agree on who will represent each organisation and how**

In a partnership, it is important to agree who will represent each organisation and how. In our experience, a partnership functions more effectively when organisational representatives combine a high degree of authority in their organisation, a deep understanding of, and experience with project implementation, a commitment to attending all partnership meetings, and the ability to dedicate additional time to the partnership between meetings. This skill set allows decisions to be taken and enacted relatively quickly. It also facilitates the integration of lessons learned from organisational practice into the partnership and of lessons learned within the partnership into the practice of individual organisations. If possible, it is helpful to invite two people from each organisation to participate in the partnership. This makes it more likely that you will get the combination of skills you are looking for in delegates and makes the integration of lessons from the partnership into the work of the organisation more feasible.

The consistent participation of the same delegate, or delegates, from each organisation is also a big advantage, strengthening the relationships between partners and leading to the more meaningful participation of delegates. If a delegate leaves the organisation, it is important that there is a thorough handover to her/his replacement and a conscious effort to integrate her/him into the group.

### **Commit to a clear and shared goal**

Because a partnership consists of different organisations, each with its own specific focus and passion, working in partnership requires a strong, shared commitment to a common goal. While it can be tempting to define this goal quite broadly, and to assume that everyone has the same understanding of what it would mean to achieve it, doing this invites the possibility of tension emerging later on as differences in understanding become evident in practice. Your collaborative work will be more effective if you develop a written statement of purpose, explicit goals and agree up front on how you will evaluate your progress towards these goals.

Making partnerships work is challenging, and a collective commitment to a common cause is often the glue that holds the group together. Where members join a partnership to achieve a specific goal which is



important to them, it is relatively easy to revisit that choice and to remind people of their shared purpose. In cases where members have been selected by an external body, appointed, delegated or encouraged by the promise of funding to work together, it is helpful to clearly define a common goal for your work and to revisit it regularly. In this way, it is possible to craft a voluntary, chosen commitment even within a situation where participation is not wholly voluntary – or did not start out that way.

It is also helpful to agree on some key questions that are related to your goal that you re-visit together at each meeting. Reflecting regularly on these questions – whatever they are – can guide the learning of your partnership and help keep partners focused on their broader goal.

### **Commit to a shared approach**

It is not enough, however, to commit to a common goal. Each organisation has its own approach to the work they do and the approaches of organisations can conflict in ways that make it difficult for two organisations to work together. For example, even with a shared commitment to child rights, an organisation that believes strongly in child participation may struggle to work with an organisation that resists the possibility of involving children in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programmes that affect them.

While organisations are entitled to full independence in their own work, it is important to agree on a shared approach that guides the joint work in the partnership. This might consist of the adoption of a specific methodology, such as a Rights Based Approach, or the adoption of a set of principles that you all agree to follow. This approach will guide you in planning and evaluating your joint work. At the start, it may be useful to invite an outside facilitator to help you craft a shared approach and explore what it means for your partnership in practice.

If you are a donor inviting organisations into a partnership, it is useful to consider your own approach to development and that of the organisations you invite in. Forming a developmental partnership with organisations that have conflicting or divergent approaches may make it difficult to them – and you – to work together effectively.

### **Develop a shared understanding of key concepts and terminology**

In our own case, we literally spent years thinking that we meant the same thing when we used certain words and concepts, only to find out that we understood those concepts very differently. For example, in our partnership we agreed on four key learning areas – which we called learning tracks. At the heart of each track was a hypothesis about how as a nation we can best provide care and support to the huge – and growing – number of children who desire, deserve and who have a right to well-being. Partners were free to join any – or all – of the learning tracks and each track was expected to contribute its learning to the larger group. As we envisioned it, these learning tracks would be encompassed within what we called a broader community of practice of the partnership.

While the learning tracks functioned very well – bound as they were by shared goals, interests and questions – it became evident as time went on that we had very different ideas – and sometimes no idea at all! – about what we meant by creating a broader community of practice, or even the value of doing so. As a result, while the learning track meetings were ripe with reflection and learning, that was far less true of our broader partner meetings. There was a tension between those who saw them largely as project management meetings and those who saw them as a vehicle to build and strengthen the broader partnership. In our case, these tensions were never fully resolved.

Although it may seem obvious, you can avoid a lot of confusion by interrogating your founding documents, exploring what you mean by the language you use and making sure that everyone has the same understanding of the key concepts and terminology that your partnership is rooted in.

### **Invite diversity**

Within the context of a shared goal, values and approach, partnerships benefit from inviting diversity. Diversity can be understood in many different ways, for example the size of the organisation, its specific focus or its location in the system. In general, partnerships lead to richer learning the more elements of the whole system you are seeking to change are included. For this reason, for example, if you are working to improve services to

children and their families, you may want to include the beneficiaries of the system (children and families), grassroots organisations, research organisations, advocacy groups and government departments.

A diversity of experiences and perspectives enriches everyone. It enables each partner to access information and views that are beyond its traditional scope of work and often leads to greater innovation. The sharing within the system also enables cross-pollination, bringing grassroots realities into policy-making processes and using research findings and policy decisions to enrich community-based work.

For this reason it is useful to make conscious choices about who will be included in your partnership, who will not, and why. While it may be impractical at the start to involve all the role players in the system you seek to change, you may want to commit to a programme of active engagement with those outside of your partnership. In this way, you can all benefit from the mutual sharing of lessons and experiences over time.

### **Agree in advance on how – and by whom – decisions will be made**

It is important to agree up front on how decisions will be made, and on which decisions will be made by whom. Partnerships face a range of decisions no different from those faced by organisations – decisions about what to do and what not to do, about how to allocate resources and about who to contract for certain tasks. Within a partnership, everyone needs to be clear about who makes which kind of decisions and how they will be made, by consensus, by majority vote or through some other mechanism.

Of course the process of making decisions is intimately linked to the decisions you make about the structure of your partnership. It is impossible here to go into the various options available to you, but it is important to consider the pros and cons of different possibilities so that the structure you chose best facilitates both the kind of interaction between partners that you want and the realisation of your goals.

### **Make sure your decisions are in line with your values and vision**

The decisions you make – decisions about who does what, decisions about who makes decisions and how, decisions about how you work towards your goal, and decisions about your core principles – actively shape your partnership. To avoid situations like the one described above, it is important to think through the potential implications of your decisions as you make them, and to make sure that they are in line with the values and vision of your partnership.

The good news is that that means every decision making process is an opportunity. An opportunity to revisit your values, an opportunity to recommit to your vision, and an opportunity to ensure that your partnership takes shape in the way you wish.

### **Create a written agreement outlining the roles and responsibilities of each partner**

Partnerships often start with a lot of good intentions and energy, but for a variety of reasons, an imbalance can develop over time in terms of the contribution of various partners. This is not a problem in and of itself – it is realistic that an under-funded community-based organisation may be able to contribute less staff time than a well-funded research outfit – but it can become so if partners have not discussed and agreed on their roles and responsibilities upfront. Doing this – **in writing** – at the start of the partnership can enhance working relationships and provide a reference point to address any tensions that emerge. This document should also include a section on withdrawing from the partnership in case a partner is not able to sustain its participation.

The management of each organisation must sign this agreement so that it is binding on organisations and not just individuals in organisations. In partnerships with a donor it is important to include the donor in this process. Donors and partners need to negotiate – or at least be clear about – the roles and responsibility/-ies of the donor to ensure a good working relationship.

### **Agree in advance on a process for resolving conflict**

Conflict is bound to emerge in your partnership. Managed well, this can be an asset. The testing of ideas against each other can lead to better and more creative ideas. Conflict aired, resolved and learned from can build trust and strengthen relationships between partners. These things only happen, however, if there is a safe container within which conflict can be explored and addressed.





Photo: Adriaan Backer

Within a partnership, it is useful to think about this before conflict emerges and to agree on how the partnership will manage conflict as a constructive force. This may include establishing mechanisms for formal conflict resolution, but should primarily consist of a set of values and practices that will allow you to engage with conflict as a learning opportunity. Regular reflection is particularly useful in this respect as partners learn to see issues from multiple perspectives and to focus on the lessons that difficult situations have to teach them rather than on assigning blame.

### **Incorporate monitoring and evaluation from the start of your partnership**

Just as the goal of your partnership – what you want to achieve – should be clear from the beginning, it is of enormous benefit to develop a plan to monitor and evaluate your progress at the start of your partnership. As partners, you are in the best position to determine what achievements and events will show progress towards the realisation of your goals. Once these indicators have been chosen, you should decide what information you need to gather along the way to provide evidence of progress, and make a plan to collect, share and store this information. It is important to consider what you can best assess within the partnership through information-gathering, reflection and

reporting, and what you may want an outside evaluator to look at. If you do plan to have some aspects of your partnership evaluated by an external evaluator, you will get a far better result if you bring them in at the start of your process and involve them in your activities and reflection as you go along.

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**“The key elements in the art of working together are how to deal with change, how to deal with conflict, and how to reach our potential... the needs of the team are best met when we meet the needs of individual persons.”**

*Max DePree*

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## **2. Cultivating growth:**

### **Lessons for working together effectively**

**Once your soil has been prepared, your energy moves to the process of cultivating growth. In the literal sense, this is the work you do to protect your growing plant from animals who want to eat it, from hail and frost, from bugs and disease. Similarly, as we begin to work and grow together in partnership, it is important to nurture and protect our work. We do this by embracing ways of working together that enrich and strengthen our partnership. We have found some of the following to be helpful in this respect.**

#### **Share responsibility and hold one another accountable**

Partners need to take shared responsibility for the functioning of the partnership. Agreeing upfront on clear roles and responsibilities is the first step in this process. Being able to hold each other accountable when someone fails to respect those agreements is the second step, and often a much harder one for partners to negotiate. It may mean having the courage to raise the question of whether a partner has fully delivered on their commitment to the group. While this is not easy, if the partnership as a whole is to realise its goals, a culture of mutual accountability must be established, nurtured and maintained.

#### **Balance work, relationships and learning**

Working in partnership is an act of balance. According to Chris Corrigan<sup>1</sup>, there are three main, inter-related elements you need to consciously attend to for your partnership to be effective: work, relationships and joint

<sup>1</sup> <http://chriscorrigan.com>



learning. Too often, we focus on the work we have to do at the expense of relationships and learning. Of course, the work is important – it is why we are together – but paying attention to our relationships will help us to do the work more effectively. Relationships of trust allow us to find our way through our differences with greater ease and mean that we are more likely to utilise conflict to enrich our work than to allow ourselves to be side-tracked by it. Learning together strengthens our work by uncovering lessons that help us to become more effective. It is important to regularly reflect on the balance between these elements in your own partnership.

### **Ensure regular face-to-face interaction among partners**

Partners need to meet regularly as a group and can also meet, in between full-group meetings, in smaller sub-groups and through site visits. These face-to-face interactions are essential to strengthening and sustaining the energy of the partnership. They are places where strategic decisions can be made, where learning and sharing can take place and where fresh ideas and inspirations are generated. Funding partnership meetings across geographic distances can be expensive, but in our experience these meetings are the glue that hold partnerships together and it is essential that they are planned and budgeted for.

### **Encourage visits**

One form of interaction that we have found to be particularly valuable is for partners to visit each other; to tour each other's projects, to participate in training programmes, to attend reflection meetings, and to share knowledge and expertise. When these visits are carefully planned and structured to promote learning and sharing between the host and the visitors, they can be an important mechanism for strengthening relationships between partners, and for reflecting and learning jointly.

### **Combine your individual strengths**

In a partnership, people sometimes find it awkward to discuss the relative strengths of individual partners, as though recognising the strength of one partner somehow undermines the strength of others. In our experience, this reticence needs to be challenged. The advantage of a partnership is precisely that it allows you to utilise the relative strengths of different partners. One organisation may have great relationships on the ground and another may have access to policy processes; one may have legal expertise and another may know a lot about health. These are assets of the partnership – and should be recognised and utilised.

It helps to design a process that enables partners to reflect on and share their own strengths and to articulate what they see as the strengths of others. This should be done at least once a year. This kind of appreciative practice strengthens relationships between partners and allows them to acknowledge, celebrate and utilise their respective strengths rather than to mask them.

### **Privilege learning. And plan for it.**

One of the many benefits of partnership is that it allows a diverse group of people to learn together. This learning can take many forms. In partnerships we can learn about ourselves, about the context we operate in, about what approaches are more – and less – effective and about how to form and maintain effective partnerships. Partnerships can be a forum for us to challenge our assumptions and to open up to and experiment with new ideas and ways of doing things. The lessons that emerge and are shared do not only benefit the partnership, but can be taken back to the partner organisations themselves and used to strengthen practice. In this way, lessons and innovations can be shared and replicated quickly. It is not enough, however, to embrace learning as a goal. For learning to happen, it must be planned for. Learning together requires time, it requires skilled facilitation, and it requires commitment, not only from the individual representatives active in the partnership, but from the participating organisations as well.

### **Embrace not-knowing**

Because partnerships are about learning, it is important to embrace curiosity and to invite questioning. Too often we fall into the 'classroom' trap of feeling that we are valued only when we know the answer, when in fact, new knowledge comes from inquiry, from curiosity, from asking the right questions. Learning in partnerships flourishes when questions are valued and when not-knowing is seen as the start of a wonderful adventure. This practice can be enhanced by the use of a skilled facilitator to design and run partnership meetings.

### **Make use of an outside facilitator to guide your reflection and learning**

While many partnerships have valuable facilitation experience within their member organisations, we advise the use of an outside facilitator to guide your reflection and learning. An external facilitator skilled in learning methodologies can assist you to draw out the lessons from your experience and explore how to integrate them into your practice. A skilled facilitator can also help you navigate areas of tension or conflict and turn these into opportunities for growth and learning. Being outside of the partnership, an external facilitator often brings a fresh pair of eyes that can help partners discover new ways of seeing. They can challenge assumptions, introduce new ideas and perspectives and ask questions that help partners to find new insight into the work they do together.

### **Minute key decisions**

It seems obvious, but we cannot begin to tell you how differently people remember the same event. It will save you a lot of trouble if you keep clear minutes of your key decisions. Key decisions can easily be recorded on flipchart paper as they arise in the meeting, and then typed up and circulated afterwards. It is important to circulate draft records within a short time of the meeting, to give partners an opportunity to make corrections and additions, while their memory is still fresh. Attending carefully to the basics, which are easy to let slip, can make a huge positive difference in your work together.

### **Don't forget the fun!**

Make time for fun in your interactions by agreeing on at least one non-work activity per meeting that everyone will participate in and enjoy. While we laughed together imagining a final partnership meeting in Mauritius, the reality is that having fun is both easy and inexpensive. It can be as simple as inserting some fun “ice-breaker” exercises into your meeting agenda, having dinner together at the end of the day, or going for a walk together in the morning. Those relaxed times are as important to your partnership as the time spent in debating decisions; and are often the moments when the seeds of new relationships are sown and watered.

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“Whenever I found out anything remarkable, I have thought it my duty to put down my discovery on paper, so that all ingenious people might be informed thereof.”

*Antonie van Leeuwenhoek*

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## **3. Sharing the Harvest:**

### **Lessons for Sharing Your Knowledge**

#### **with Others**

**Towards the end of our partnership, as we began to harvest the lessons from our work in a more intense way, we started thinking about how others could benefit from our experiences. We have found a range of ways to do this: hosting and presenting at conferences, writing articles, manuals and other publications, making a dvd and hosting visitors from other organisations and countries. In all of these efforts, our aim has been to help others develop their own capacity for action.**

We have found this to be a very helpful lens to use to make decisions about what lessons to present and what format – and language – to present them in. From our perspective, the investment in our partnership of time, energy and material resources can be said to pay off only to the extent that the broader developmental goals that we set out to achieve are met. And there is no way that we can meet those goals alone.

Our own goal as partners – the well-being of children – can only be met through the efforts of a wide variety of stakeholders, both in South Africa and outside its borders. Furthermore, our goal is fundamentally linked to a range of other developmental goals that must also be reached for child well-being to be meaningful, including accessible health care, quality education, and safety and security. In other words, we have discovered that the more we can find ways to gift the lessons that we have learned in our partnership to others, the closer we move to our goals.

While there is no way to predict the lessons that will emerge from your partnership, we are certain that they will be of use to others. To this end, we encourage you to find ways to share your lessons with others. And to find ways to do so that help them to take action. If we all do this, there is no limit to what we can achieve.

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“I live my life in widening circles  
that reach out across the world.  
I may not complete this last one  
but I give myself to it.”

*Ranier Maria Rilke*

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## Conclusion

**Reading this document, I am sure you have picked up the fact that working in partnership is not easy. This is true. The lessons that we share with you were not mainly learned from getting things right. They emerged from difficulty, from challenge, from wading in the water of conflict and struggling to find a way across. There were times when we questioned the value of our efforts, and even our own continued participation. And yet all of us emerged at the end convinced of, and excited by, the value of working in partnership.**

As those of us working in the development field know, this work is never easy. The question, however, is not whether partnership is easy, but whether it is worthwhile. In our experience, the answer to this question is a resounding 'Yes!'. The value of partnership is that it enables us to more effectively deliver support to the people we seek to serve. It makes us better at what we do. It strengthens our hands to serve and it strengthens our voices to demand the changes that need to be made in order to make the world a more just, caring and equitable place to live.

Is it an easy road? No. But we believe that it is one worth walking. Remember that we walk with you. And that we wish you well.