Working in and with large partnerships:
Exchange Hub of EC supported DEAR projects
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This paper …

… provides a summary overview of the discussions and outcomes of a workshop with 30 participants from 14 different countries, involved in 15 European Commission supported DEAR projects.

The Exchange Hub …

… provided an opportunity for participants to exchange and discuss their experiences of working in (large) organisational partnerships on DEAR projects. The intention was to draw conclusions from those discussions that will be useful to other organisations in developing and implementing their partnerships.

The Hub was organised to identify general experiences and impressions of participants, followed by more detailed discussion of the specifics of each of the 15 projects represented at the event.

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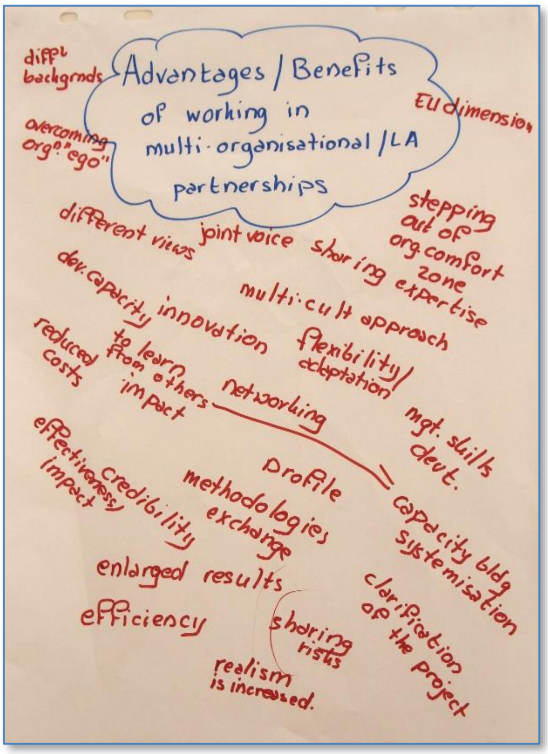
1. Advantages of working in organisational partnerships

An initial brainstorm of what participants saw as advantages or benefits can be summarised under the following headings:

- **EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY**:
  - Aspects of project work can be allocated to those organisations best placed to carry them out (because of their skills, experiences or other resources). This also supports operational cost reductions.

- **INNOVATION**:
  - Contacts with others forces individual organisations to step out of their comfort zone
  - Learning from others, for instance about different methodologies and approaches – and combining that learning – supports innovation across the partnership

- **PERSPECTIVES AND REALISM**:
  - The different backgrounds and experiences of the partners improve the realism of the project
  - Partnerships across the EU require a multi-cultural approach bringing a wider range of perspectives
  - Discussion between partners helps to clarify project intentions.



- **CAPACITY IMPROVEMENT AND AMPLIFICATION OF RESULTS**:
  - The contacts, geographical reach and resources of all partners together is greater than that of an individual organisation. By drawing on this the impact of the project is increased.

- **CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT**:
  - Learning from each other supports the growth of capabilities in each of the partners.

- **CREDIBILITY AND PROFILE**:
  - Wider range of organisations improves the credibility of what the project has to say
  - Partnership helps to improve the profile of individual partners
  - A greater range of organisations amplifies the message of the project.

2. Organisational partnerships: challenges

On the down-side of working in large partnerships participants noted the following:

- **DEVELOPING SHARED UNDERSTANDING, VISION, OWNERSHIP, IDENTITY AND TRUST:**
    - Developing trust between partners from different countries and backgrounds takes a lot of time (sometimes more than a three-year project can provide)
    - Significant time needs to be invested before the project can start implementation, meaning that the practical time available for implementation is reduced (when compared with projects involving a smaller number of partners)

- **ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS AND BURDEN**:
    - The relative internal administrative and coordination costs of partnerships increase, possibly exponentially, with increasing numbers of partners
    - Project administration costs are shifted from the funder (i.c. the EC) to the project
    - Large partnerships tend to involve the need for more complicated bureaucracies
    - The required duplication of tasks across all partners makes the work less efficient

- **COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION:**
    - Time required for coordination, communication between partners and management of the project is significantly increased in larger partnerships

- **CONTEXTUAL/CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**:
    - Taking into account differences in contexts and cultures within which the different partners work, make planning and implementation more complicated
    - The way in which agreed project rules are interpreted or adhered to can vary significantly between partners operating in different cultures

- **CORE PARTNERS AND PARTNERS ON THE PERIPHERY**:
    - In a large partnership not all partners will be able to be equally involved. This leads to a core group of drivers and another group on the periphery of the project
    - Different partners tend to have different (quantities and qualities of) resources available for the project, increasing the risk of creating core and periphery partners

- **MONITORING AND EVALUATION**:
    - Creating M&E systems that are meaningful across the partnership and are supportive of learning by *all* partners becomes significantly more complicated

- **RISKS**:
    - Although risks of the project can be shared to some extent, they are also increased when e.g. one partner does not deliver on its agreed contribution or when a partner decides to leave the project. Finding solutions for this is time consuming – particularly if and when it requires EC approval (e.g. when a partner change is suggested)
    - With an increasing number of partners involved, the ability of the lead partner in managing and taking full responsibility for the project is reduced

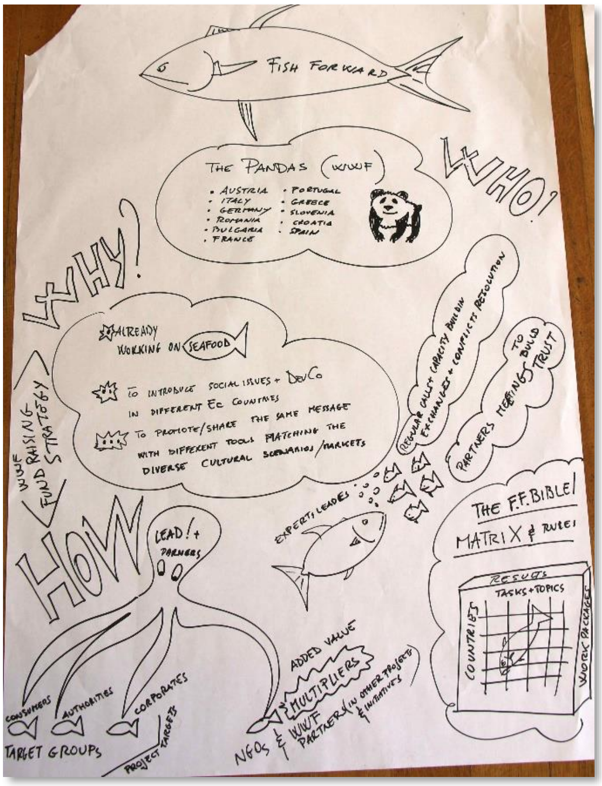
3. Partnership structures

Participants were asked to sketch out the partnership organisation of their project, focussing on:

- The kind(s) of organisations/LAs involved in the partnership;
- The reason(s) why these were made part of the partnership;
- The way of working between the partners.

Results were shown on flipcharts.

The following attempts to collate the information provided and organise it under a number of headings. [This was done after the workshop.]



Partners: who?

Partners tend to be selected for one or more of the following reasons [no. of participating projects for which this appears to be *explicitly* the case]:

- **AFFINITY/EXPERIENCE** with the project's theme/issue [7/15];
- Collaboration in a **PREVIOUS PROJECT** [6/15]
- Geographical **LOCATION** (e.g. to enable spread across EU member states) [6/15]
- Experience of the project's **APPROACH** (e.g. Global Learning, Education, Advocacy, Campaigning, Lobbying) [5/15]
- **COMPLEMENTARITY** (of experiences, resources, skills) [5/15]
- **CONTACTS** with the intended audiences/ participants (e.g. schools/ teachers, policy makers, industry) [3/15]
- Being part of an **INTERNATIONAL 'FAMILY'** of related organisations (such as alliances of national WWF, or CEE) [2/15]
- Providing **LEGITIMACY** to involvement with the theme/issue [2/15]
- **REACH**, either national or local depending on the issue and objective(s) [2/15]

Partnership: structures

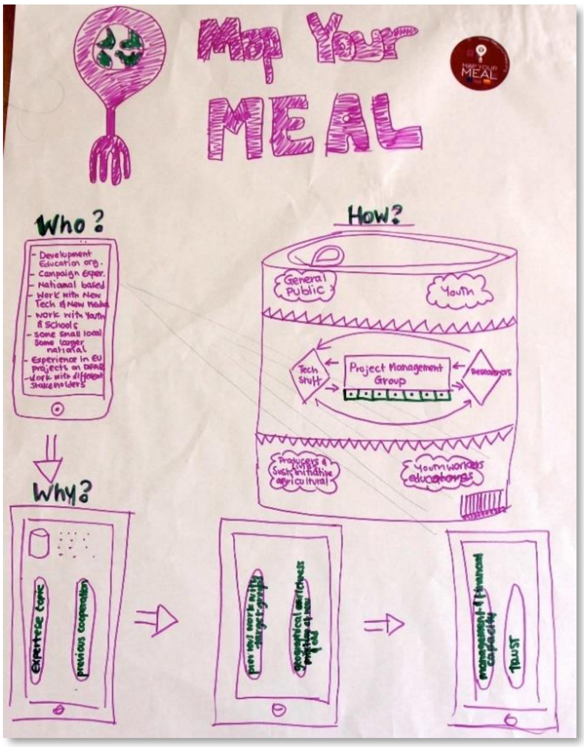
OVERALL PROJECT MANAGEMENT

- All-partner overall planning group - with implementation delegated as shown below
- All-partner management group (led by the lead applicant) – with or without sub-groups as shown below
- Steering group representing range of partners or bringing together lead partners for specific themes, tasks or audiences as below (led by the lead applicant)

SUB-STRUCTURE USING ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING

- Theme/issue focussed working groups (led by one of the partners)
- Task focussed working groups (led by one of the partners)

- Audience/participant focussed working groups (led by one of the partners in collaboration with the lead partner)
- Delegated leadership on and responsibility for aspects of the project by one of the partners
- Delegated leadership on and responsibility for activities taking place in a particular country to one of the partners



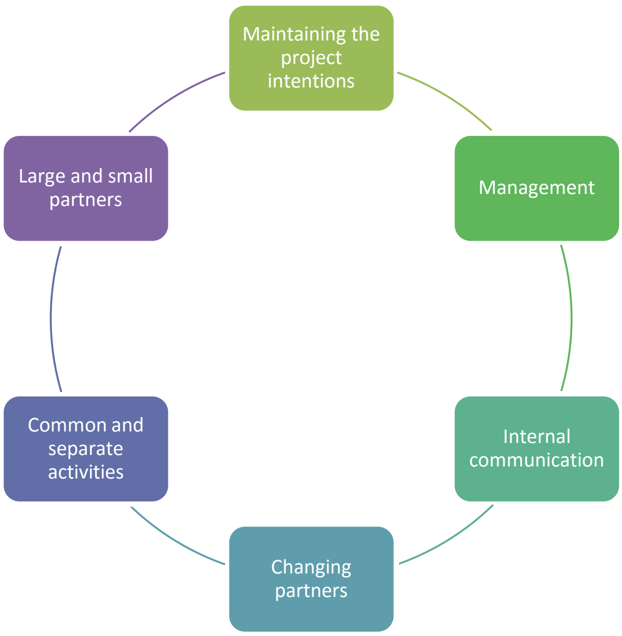
Making the partnership work

- Use of **FACE-TO-FACE** meetings – primarily for planning purposes:
  - Involving all partners: usually once or twice per year
  - Involving specific partners/project staff for planning specific aspects, themes or activities: once or twice a year or when required/foreseen in plan
  - Lead applicant or peer partner monitoring visits to partners
- Use of **TELEPHONE CONTACTS AND CONFERENCES** (via Skype or other means) – for both updating and planning purposes:
  - Either involving all partners, e.g. monthly
  - And/or one-to-one between lead and specific partners – either regular or when necessary
  - And/or involving members working on a specific aspect/audience group – regular and/or when required
- Use of **DOCUMENT EXCHANGES** – for administrative/financial, planning, review, info and document sharing purposes. For example using:
  - Google Drive
  - Shared calendar (e.g. on Outlook)
  - Drop-box
  - Other on-line platforms
  - Regular (monthly or quarterly) internal project newsletter: summarising project developments and plans

4. Key issues in projects involving large partnerships

Participants identified issues that were specifically pertinent to their individual project. These issues were then grouped with similar ones forming the basis for a ‘consultation session’ with colleagues from other projects: to identify possible resolutions to the issue or steps towards resolving the problem.

The problems that were identified can be grouped under the following headings:



Maintaining project intentions

How to maintain a common vision when national, organisational or other factors interfere?

Suggestions included the following:

- In planning the project: ensure that management structures and processes, and the plans themselves, are adaptive and allow for creativity when needed
- Improve the project/project staff's communication skills to fit the project's messages to the new situation:
    - if necessary, reframe your message to fit the new situation[1]
- Postpone (or delete) aspect(s) of the plan
- If the interfering factors affect one or a few partners only: use partner exchanges/peer visits to identify possible resolutions
- Develop common understanding of the problem by using a systematic evaluation of the partners' Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT analysis[2]) to identify possible responses:
    - also use a Situation Analysis[3] as a means to identify other opportunities in the external environment that relate to the project theme

Management

How to manage those over whom you have no formal authority?
How to address an under-achieving or under-contributing partner?

Suggestions were as follows:

- Use an 'activity blog' and quarterly and annual reporting to keep all partners' aware of each other's contributions (i.e. in a subtle way 'naming and shaming')
- If there is a persistent problem with a particular partner: establish contact higher up the hierarchy in the relevant partner to discuss the problem

[1] For example, see: http://relevance.com/blog/message-framing-the-art-of-persuasion/ or https://wildgeesefoundation.org/programmes/reframing-the-message

[2] Explanations of SWOT analysis can be found in many different places. For one example see: https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_05.htm

[3] For instance, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situation_analysis

- Create workgroups with an identified lead and an identified budget to be responsible for the delivery on an aspect of the project (i.e. give the partner in question not only the responsibility to deliver but also the financial means to make it happen)
- With persistent under- or over-contributors: re-assign work across the partnership
- Keep under-achievement in perspective: there are likely to be other partners who over-achieve!

How to ensure that everyone delivers on agreed formats, timetables, etc.?

- Where possible use formats, etc. with which partners are already familiar
- Be clear about the purpose of each format or tool. Don't assume that others will know this.
- Use techniques such as those suggested above

Internal communication

What are intra-project communication tools that work

- Make sure that partners understand and use communication tools that have been agreed
- Use e-mail and e-mail lists for communication on specific aspects
- Use telephone and internet tools: Skype, WebEx, GoToMeeting, etc.
- Use separate calls with different groups of partners, rather than all-partner telephone conferences. Report decisions/updates via an e-mail newsletter to all partners.

Changing partners

How to deal with a change of partner or when one of the partners leaves the partnership

Much of the discussion on this topic focussed on the fact that it takes the EC a long time to approve changes in the partnership structure and set-up. A number of the following suggestions are as much, or more, addressed to the Commission as they are to project (lead) partners.

- During the project: reassign work (and budgets) across the partnership wherever possible to ensure planned work carries on
- In the project proposal explicitly address how possible partner changes will be dealt with. Include the suggested action in the project contract discussions between the EC and lead partner
- During the project contract negotiations between lead partner and the EC: include a certain level of change in the partnership as allowable in principle and not requiring pre-implementation agreement by the Commission, e.g. based on particular criteria which the new partner would have to meet. This would mean that the lead partner would not have to wait for formal approval from the EC before making such a change
- If changes to the partnership are significant (i.e. greater than that covered by the two points made above): the EC to organise a supportive monitoring visit to the relevant project to develop jointly agreed resolutions to the problem.

Common and separate activities across the project

How to include activities that are carried out by one or a few partners, as well as joint activities that involve all partners?

How to involve all partners in joint activities?

- In the project's overall workplan include calendar time when joint work will take place and when not
- Create ownership of joint activities by spreading the leadership of joint activities across different partners. Do not assume that joint activities should always be led by the lead applicant
- Use planning templates that can be used in planning and reporting on all project activities (joint as well as separate)

Large and small partners

HOW TO MAKE PARTNERSHIPS REAL FOR LARGE AND SMALL PARTNERS?

Although this is not always the case, large partner organisations/LAs tend to have more resources available for work on a project than smaller partners. This can easily lead to an 'in-group' closely involved in driving the project, and an 'out-group' of those who are or who feel less engaged - thereby undermining the whole notion of 'partnership'.

- Have all partners (large and small) input into the overall plan and direction of the project on an equal basis
- At the start of the project analyse which partners have particular skills, DEAR experiences, power relations with the external environment, etc. that can be brought to bear on the project
- Explicitly use the implementation of the project as a means to improve capacities and capabilities across the partnership
- Assign the lead of specific areas of project work to partners across the partnership

5. Monitoring and evaluating the partnership

Participants suggested the following as useful approaches in monitoring and evaluating the partnership:

- During regular reporting on project activities and project progress include time for a short questionnaire (e.g. via SurveyMonkey) on how the partnership structure and process is working
- Use an external evaluator/critical friend for the duration of the project to also obtain information from partners on the operation of the partnership, and to help partners in self-reflection on their ways of working and collaboration with others
- Develop at the start of the project indicators that identify the intended/wished for qualities of the partnership and have regular assessments/feedback from across the partnership
- Provide ongoing feedback mechanisms to all partners, e.g. via blogs
- Include assessment of the partnership and its ways of working as a regular item on the steering groups/all-partner meeting agenda.

6. In conclusion: recommendations

In a final session participants suggested that the following were particularly pertinent in organising, managing and implementing a partnership.

- ✓ Identify what each partner wants to 'get out of' participation in the project: ideally during the project design phase, or otherwise at the beginning of the project. Check e.g. annually if the project partnership is helping in this
- ✓ Give time for * partners to get to know each other, and for * joint planning: ideally already at the proposal development stage
- ✓ Ensure that individual partners and the partnership collectively know that they are all responsible for understanding the project's requirements, including familiarity with the project proposal and the contract with the EC: a 1 or 1½ day session on this, involving all partners, is not a waste of time, particularly not if the session also starts to develop simple reporting and assessment mechanisms and formats that meet the requirements

- ✓ Develop financial reporting structures/formats that are robust and can deal with unforeseen changes in plans
- ✓ Use an external evaluator/critical friend to help in reflecting on the partnership structures and processes
- ✓ Aim to develop consensus across the partnership on key aspects of work and ways of working
- ✓ Use simple templates that provide the information that is needed to show project progress

And finally two recommendations addressed at the European Commission:

- In future Calls for Proposals: include a Lot that is open to partnerships that are already successfully working together on an EC co-funded project to continue their work with a follow-on project. [This would address the point that was made by many participants, namely that it takes a long time – and certainly more than 3 years – for partnership members to become knowledgeable of each other, trusting of each other, and highly effective.]
- In future Calls allow applicants the time and other resources to get to know each other in the project inception phase. [Current criteria in the DEAR Calls are focussed solely on achieving the project's objectives and results, ignoring that for this to be possible partners need to develop a mutual understanding and trust.]

Further information

There is a growing range of publications and approaches that can help organisations and LAs in the setting up, development and implementation of project partnerships. In the development and DEAR sectors national associations of voluntary organisations, and international associations such as CONCORD and PLATFORMA will usually be able to offer advice and suggest appropriate approaches.

There are also a number of commercial and not-for-profit consultancy firms that support the development of partnerships. Internet searches will give more details of these, of publications that are relevant, including of resources and ideas that are freely available.

Feedback on the Hub

After the Hub participants were invited to provide feedback on the event. 16 responses were received giving average scores to aspects of the event as follows (with 1= low and 10=high)

Aspect	score out of 10
Extend to which participant expectations of the workshop were achieved	8.5
Extend to which the objectives of the workshop were achieved	9.1
Extend to which the workshop was relevant to participant's work	8.4
The appropriateness of methodologies used during the workshop	8.9
Quality of facilitation provided by the DEAR Support Team	8.8

The value of European Commission staff participation in the workshop	9.0
The quality of logistics support provided by the DEAR Support Team (arranging travel, accommodation, etc.)	9.1
The success of the workshop as a whole	8.8

Suggestions to take into account in future workshops included the following:

- To organise an event such as this at the beginning of a project cycle (rather than towards the end as was the case for many of the participants)
- Make the event longer (by e.g. another half day) to give more time for exchanges between projects
- To enable central booking (e.g. of accommodation) for all participants
- In addition to notes taken on flipcharts (as was done at this workshop) also have notes taken on computer: to be shared electronically with all participants immediately after the event
- More attention to budgeting and the use of sub-granting in partnerships would have been useful (N.B. a separate workshop on the use of sub-granting is planned for the autumn of 2016)
- To enable project managers to meet regularly to discuss these issues
- Have more EC Task Managers attending events such as this (only one Task Manager took part on this occasion)
- For Commission participants to be more assertive and confident in expressing opinions about the requirements of the Commission (instead of referring to colleagues who are not present, or of referring to documents)
- To give more attention to what the European Commission and Task Managers have learned from (the organisation of) previous projects

Participating projects

Project	*Website*
Media 4 Development	media4development.blogspot.com
S.A.M.E. World	http://edu-kit.sameworld.eu/
Fish Forward	http://www.fishforward.eu/
Don’t Waste Our Future!	http://www.dontwaste.eu/
Map your Meal	http://mapyourmeal.org/
EAThink	http://eathink2015.org/en/
Hands on the Land	https://handsontheland.net/about/
Table for 9 Billion	
Supply Cha!nge: Make Supermarkets Fair!	http://supplychainge.org/
Financing Development & Developing Finance	http://bankwatch.org/
Change your Shoes	http://turc.or.id/news/change-your-shoes/about-us/
Tax Justice Together	https://europa.eu/eyd2015/en/tax-justice-together
The Future We Want	http://www.overdeveloped.eu/en/
Stop Mad Mining	http://www.ceeweb.org/stop-mad-mining/
Make Fruit Fair!	http://www.makefruitfair.org.uk/