



DONORS & INTERMEDIARIES:

CRITICAL SELF-AWARENESS AND A CONVERSATION GUIDE

14 June 2024



Introduction

This is our second briefing and reflection paper on intermediaries. It contributes to an ongoing critical reflection in the aid sector. The behaviours of notably international aid agencies, acting as ‘intermediaries’ for the funding to local and national actors (LNA), have come under scrutiny, given the international commitments to better support and reinforce national and local actors.¹ Several INGOs have also been developing their ‘localisation’, ‘partnering’ and at times ‘anti-racism’ and ‘decolonisation’ policies.

The first paper [*‘Intermediary Organisations under the Spotlight. Why?’*](#) looks at what we mean with ‘intermediary’ and why ‘back-donors’ or ‘funding partners’ use them. Most organisations playing an intermediation role with aid money are international, but there can very well be, and are, also national ones. That paper unpacked how intermediaries can add value but can also abuse their power over national and local actors they sub-grant to. It also stated that intermediary organisations make choices about how they handle their ‘intermediation’ position: Do they see themselves as merely an executive instruments of the donor’s plans, putting pressure on the LNA to fall in line with those? Do they see themselves as primarily a supporter of LNA, pushing back at the funder’s unhelpful demands? Do they see themselves as brokers who try to manage, if not resolve, tensions and discrepancies between the donor’s ideas and requirements and the LNA’s ideas and capabilities? Do they want to maintain the intermediation role, because it is a valid business model and offers quite some power and resources?

Given that aid donors will continue to use intermediaries, this second paper focuses on what donors can and must do to ensure that intermediaries use their power responsibly, strive towards equitable partnership with national and local subgrantees, and intentionally work towards role changes, with the national-local actor taking on more and more leadership. The paper consists of three components:

- [A practical conversation guide for donors to use](#), proactively, with organisations they intend to fund which in turn will subgrant to (other) national and local actors (LNA).²
- An invitation for back-donors [to be self-critical about how their behaviours influence how an intermediary organisation plays that role](#): sometimes donor requirements are such that it becomes difficult for an intermediary organisation to play a truly supportive and enabling role for its local and national subgrantees/partners.
- An answer to the question whether a direct communication is appropriate between a back-donor and a LNA which receives its funds through an intermediary.

The briefing papers draw on available reports and studies but are also strongly grounded in GMI’s continued engagements with institutional donors, agencies in intermediary roles, and local and national sub-grantees of the latter.

DONOR CONVERSATIONS WITH INTERMEDIARIES – AND THEIR COLLABORATION PARTNERS

Given that back donors have a great deal of power to allocate resources and set priorities areas, there is a need to reflect on how that power can be used or misused intentionally or unintentionally. GMI’s paper [*“Anatomy of Power. An invitation for reflection on your organisation’s use of power”*](#) (also available in French and Spanish) provides guidance to reflect on power more systematically.

Some staff of institutional donors (which includes foundations, and possibly corporates exercising their social responsibility) ask questions from potential receivers of their grants, about how they relate to their local ‘partners’. While relevant, such individual interests are rarely institutionalized, and the points raised may be ad hoc and touch upon some, but not all areas, that are important for local actors. The annex to this paper provides a structured set of conversation topics, as memo aid for donor staff.

These conversations can take place at international headquarters level, for example when a donor provides flexible ‘core funding’ or only very lightly earmarked ‘programme funding’.³ Then the answers will be of a more general nature. The conversation is certainly required when intermediaries approach back-donors with more specific proposals. All conversations do not have to cover all questions – but the memo aid allows for a more conscious choice which one to raise and which ones not.

Ideally, the conversations take place with the local collaborating partners present. Sometimes, agencies preparing for an intermediation role, first seek approval of a proposal from the donor before finalising ‘their’ (!) choice of local actors to involve. Not wanting to raise expectations until there is fair confidence that funding will become available, is a valid consideration. But it also means that prospective LNA subgrantees/partners, are not involved in the conceptualization and preliminary design of the proposed action, and the exploratory conversations with one or more possible funders. Pragmatic ‘solutions’ to this situation can be:

- If the choice of LNA collaborators is not yet finalized, the donor can still suggest that those being considered are part of the conversation. It will help everyone see more clearly whether and where the complementarities lie, and whether they are interested in working together.
- If someone cannot physically take part, try to bring them in online, or have the whole conversation on line, to level the playing field.
- If no LNA are even under consideration, perhaps because the international agency is first discussing a concept note with the funder, then part of the conversation may have to be continued once the collaborators have been confirmed. That should happen before a proposed joined action is finalized and contractually fixed. This is practiced, for example, by the Regional Development and Protection Programme in Jordan and Lebanon. The RDPP uses a pooled fund of several institutional donors, managed not by the UN, but by a team contracted by one of these donors.

Note that, with some adjustments to the phrasing, the question sheet can also serve as inspiration for mid-term reviews and end-evaluations.

¹ See e.g. Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream 2020: *Guidance Note on Arrangements between Donors and Intermediaries*; Humanitarian Advisory Group, Glow Consultants & CoLab 2021: *Bridging the Intention to Action Gap. The future role of intermediaries in supporting locally-led action*; Myanmar Civil Society 2022: *Positioning Paper on Localisation and Intermediary Role*; A4EP 2022: *Proposition Intermediaries Caucus*; Intermediaries Caucus 2022: *Towards Co-ownership: The role of intermediaries in supporting locally-led humanitarian action*. Peace Direct 2022: *The Nine Roles that Intermediaries Can Play in International Cooperation* (working paper for the Netherlands MoFA); Peace Direct 2023: *The Nine Roles that Intermediaries Can Play in International Cooperation*. This paper is also based on GMI’s leading critical reflections on this with bilateral donors.

² In line with the views of home-grown local and national actors around the world, GMI does not consider INGOs who register in a country as a ‘national’ entity but who remain part of a global alliance or federation, a ‘national actor’. This does not apply to national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.

³ DANIDA for example, some years ago held conversations, in Denmark, with those it provides at best lightly earmarked programme funding to, about good practices and future ambitions in localisation and local leadership.

“Donors will only know if their commitments are being put into practice if they make time to talk to us and hear our lived experience of partnership with their intermediaries”

BACK–DONORS: CRITICAL SELF–AWARENESS OF HOW YOU ENABLE OR CONSTRAIN POSITIVE INTERMEDIATION

If an intermediary want to support and reinforce LNA, in line with the global commitments made, funders need to acknowledge and be critically self-aware that their behaviours and requirements can enable or constraint this. Here some examples

1. Some funder practices that are enabling for equitable partnerships and constructive intermediary roles: ‘donors’ acting also as ‘partners’

Quality financing

- Longer-term financing that enables the development of deeper partnerships (including with the donor) and stronger mutual understandings. Longer-term financing can also be one enabler for greater effectiveness and possibly deeper impact.
- Adequate costing and cost coverage of the roles intermediaries are expected to play, and of the core costs of local actors.
- Donors directly funding national actors and allowing the latter to draw on and fund international partners for where they are seen to be adding value. (That can be an evolution over time, as happened between Trócaire and KMSS in Myanmar, also encouraged and supported by international 3rd parties, including a UK humanitarian country-fund) ⁴

Smart adaptability

- A use of results-based management (RBM) as an incentive to focus the minds on objectives but underpinned by regular reviews of theories of change and procedural practices for timely adaptive management. From such perspective, RBM becomes a reference to reward continued relevance and effectiveness thanks to timely and appropriate adaptations, rather than a straightjacket that prevents, sometimes drastic, adaptation when learning-in-action and/or a changing context require it. This will require close alignment between finance, perhaps legal, and programme donor staff – with programme effectiveness remaining the primary objective.⁵
- Certainly in volatile and unpredictable situations, monitoring, review and evaluation practices that are appropriate for such contexts i.e. MEL4AP or monitoring-evaluation-learning for adaptive practices.
- Decentralised decision-making, close to the operating context, is often an enabling factor for appropriate adaptability. Back-donors need to delegate resources and decision-making to e.g. embassy based staff,

⁴ See the three learning reports on that journey: *Localisation through Partnership. Shifting towards locally-led programming in Myanmar*. Trócaire, HAG, HARP-F August 2019, August 2020 and December 2020

⁵ Several years ago, when internal large scale violence broke out after the independence of South Sudan, the desk staff of a back-donor contacted the INGOs it was funding there, through a multiyear contract, what adjustments they felt they had to make, minimally to increase the conflict-sensitivity of their work. Interestingly, some INGOs were already very actively reflecting on this, while others were still in ‘business-as-usual’ mode.

with the right type of skills, including depth of context understanding and relational competencies. Foundations may have one or a few trusted individuals, following the situations closely at country or regional level.

Reduced administrative burden

- Donor staff using their knowledge of and contacts in their own administration to help minimise or resolve practical problems that make it difficult for intermediaries (and their subgrantees/partners) to do ‘the right thing’ at the right time.
- Harmonisation of donors, at least donors to the same intervention, to reduce the administrative burden on intermediaries, and thereby on their subgrantees, that makes actions less cost-effective and often less adaptive than required.

Risk sharing

- Back-donors take part in assessments of risks and opportunities for the different actors in the collaboration chain. They contribute to proactive risk prevention and risk management preparedness, and absorb part of the costs of ‘no fault’ incidents.⁶ Better quality funding offers better conditions for risk sharing than overly earmarked and inflexible grant conditions.

Internal donor coherence

- Staff of different departments of a back-donor have a shared understanding and use of key terms, such as the ‘outcomes’, ‘effectiveness’, ‘impact’, ‘theories of change’ and ‘results’. They also have a realistic understanding of what ‘results’ can be expected in a limited timeframe, in a context with powerful actors and factors, over which those it finances have little control and influence. That also implies awareness that ‘quick results’ for complex and deep-seated problems, will be superficial and not last.⁷

Staff with strong relational skills

- Based on the understanding that effective collaboration depends not only on contracts spelling out roles and responsibilities but also, a lot, on proactive and clear communications, and the chemistry between key people in the collaborating organisations. Having good relationships does not take precedence over relevant and effective work, but poor relationships often affect the quality and effectiveness of the work.
- Awareness, among back-donor staff, of their own power and status, and care to use it responsibly and not abuse it.
- Empathy and attention to the stresses that each may be living with, in challenging and at times dangerous environments, with heavy workloads.

Back-donor staff that explicitly invite feedback from intermediaries (and their subgrantees/partners) on where and how their requirements are constraining and even counterproductive for relevant and effective actions whose risks are well managed.

⁶ See GMI 2022: *At Last. More appropriate perspectives on risk and risk management in the aid sector.*

⁷ See GMI 2021: *Has COVID Taught Aid Administrations about Adaptive Management?*

2. Some funder practices that can put high pressure on an intermediary

Excessive compliance requirements

- Donor contracts with intermediaries, that demand intense ‘upward’ compliance and accountability, that make it very difficult for international intermediaries to establish and maintain equitable, decision-making partnerships with national actors.
- Maintaining compliance requirements which are contextually no longer appropriate, and even put LNA and the affected people they serve, at heightened risk.⁸
- Note also how the term ‘compliance’ is a radical expression of power inequalities. From a relational point of view, a more constructive conversation would be in terms of shared and individual responsibilities of the collaborating agencies, and respective accountability requirements.

Excessive rigidity

- Overdetailed results-planning (and -budgeting), notably in volatile situations with a high degree of uncertainty, low control by the intervener and therefore no straightforward, let alone linear, cause-effect relations (applicable e.g. to peace work in ongoing conflict) and/or an obligation to deliver the results as fixed per the contract, even if the situation changes dramatically. This leaves no space for co-creation, innovation, and especially adaptation. A 10% variation margin on budget lines may enable some adaptation, but will not be enough if a drastically changed context requires more drastic adaptations. Administratively delayed approval of more drastic adaptations may also mean they are no longer timely, and therefore less effective.

Full risk transfer

- High risk aversion (which may be unrealistic in many contexts or for several types of intervention), so that all risk is transferred from the back-donor to the intermediary. In turn, the latter will be very risk averse, transfer more risk to subgrantees than they can handle, and impose multiple oversight conditions that make it very challenging to do the right thing at the right time. The end result may be that too high a proportion of a grant is used to controlling rather than enabling relevant action on a problem.

Insufficient resources to play the intermediary roles

- Intermediation, with its potential for adding value but also its expected controlling (of finance but also of quality), carries a cost. Intermediaries, like LNA and back-donor themselves, need efficient infrastructure to work in (offices, energy, connectivity, computers and recent software, a certain mobility etc.), for which a ‘management fee’ (ICR) is offered, generally somewhere between 6% and 14% of a grant budget. They also need enough qualified staff to play their roles. The more administration the back-donor imposes, the more data and information the back-donor demands, the higher the intermediation costs. The general practice of international aid agencies has been to not provide a similar, flexible, management fee to their LNA sub-grantees. This has an impact on LNA’s ability to develop their

⁸ See e.g. GMI & RAFT Myanmar 2022: *Localisation in Myanmar. Supporting and reinforcing Myanmar actors today and tomorrow*. For HARP-F, pp. 20-21; Local Intermediary Actor Network & Univ. of Melbourne Myanmar Research Network 2024: *When Compliance does Harm. Impacts of international frameworks on local aid workers and systems in Myanmar*.

organisations, also into greater financial health.⁹ It also means most ‘capacity-strengthening’ inputs have little return on investment. Such use of LNA as cheap labour is not justifiable. But forcing intermediaries to share their management fee, without reducing the administrative and controlling burden on them, to the point they cannot cover their own costs, is not the answer.

- Demanding too much match-funding from intermediaries. Few donors will fund 100% of a proposed budget. Several ask 10% to 20% match-funding from another source that intermediaries then need to find. That is not always easy, as other institutional donors may not be willing to align with the proposal a first donor has accepted after discussion. Finding a higher-percentage of match-funding, for a multiyear contract, can become a major challenge even for well connected intermediaries with much fundraising capabilities.¹⁰

Inconsistent and unrealistic expectations

- Inconsistent understandings, and use of language, among back-donor staff about ‘results’, ‘effectiveness’, ‘impact’, ‘theory of change’, or about what are realistic expectations regarding ‘results’, within resource constraints and contextual challenges, in the first place create headaches for intermediaries.

A preference for ‘big envelopes’

- Several back-donors are somewhat understaffed. Apart from the stress this causes on their staff, it also leads to a preference to use intermediaries they can provide ‘big envelopes’ too, i.e. large amounts in one contract. That intermediary is then expected to operate large programmes, possibly with a multitude of subgrantees/partners. This can overstretch the intermediary. It also works against smaller intermediaries, that may be better at doing the nuanced and adaptive work with their subgrantees/partners, that is often required in complex situations with different dynamics in different local areas (e.g. rule of law, governance-related, and conflict reduction work). ‘Big is beautiful’ practices also create incentives for intermediaries to grow, taking more of the money that should be going to the people in whose name it was raised. Intermediation then becomes part of the business model, to be maintained rather than transitioned into LNA taking on more roles, responsibilities and leadership.



⁹ See e.g. Humentum 2022: *Breaking the Financial Starvation Cycle. How international funders can stop trapping their grantees in the starvation cycle and start building their resilience.*

¹⁰ One institutional back-donor for example, offers fairly regularly 3 year grants, even in fairly unstable contexts. But the quality of that funding is put in jeopardy by its demand of 50% match-funding. Intermediaries may be able to find the complementary 50% for a year or 18 months, but struggle to have it fairly guaranteed for 3 years. As a result, they may choose to accept a smaller grant than they actually can handle, to be a bit more confident they will continue to find the required match-funding. Meanwhile, the ‘quality’ of such longer term funding is diminished.

CAN THERE BE DIRECT CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN BACK-DONORS AND LNA, WITHOUT THE INTERMEDIARY?

National actors have long been asking for more direct contact with back-donors because they are acutely aware of how international intermediaries control the narrative both ways. Back-donors on the other hand wonder whether it is appropriate to have direct communications without the intermediary – is this not unfair and possibly an inappropriate signal of distrust in the intermediary?

This should not be a dilemma: In any situation with significant power differences, it is appropriate to hear the parties concerned together but also separately. ‘Fear’, whether justified or not, is a common ingredient in many of the so called ‘partnerships’ between international agencies (and probably national intermediaries as well), and their subgrantees. Particularly where the LNA is quite dependent, financially, on that particular money flow. *‘Do not bite the hand that feeds you’*, often leads to much self-censorship and at times rather overblown ‘praise’ for the intermediary. And there are many instances of backlash against leaders of LNA who are too assertive and critical of behaviours of intermediaries.¹¹

Routine practice:

Therefore, as a matter of routine practice, the back-donor staff should engage with subgrantees both jointly with the intermediary, but also separately. For example, during ‘field visits’, staff from the intermediary organisation need not be present all the time and in every conversation – not with their LNA subgrantees/partners, nor with the intended ‘beneficiaries’. This is no different from having conversations with women without the presence of men, or with children without the presence of their adults. You want to try and create conditions for people to speak frankly. If an intermediary organisations objects to this, and insists on being present, it suggests a limited level of trust and raises the question what they worry about?

Donors are also advised to plan for an annual, scheduled and structured conversation, with LNA they fund directly or indirectly, to listen directly to their views. And to include them, intentionally, in the development, review and evaluation of their country strategy and global policies.

Back-donors are advised to more often include questions about the quality of the collaborative relationships into independent mid-term reviews or late-stage evaluations, or even commission such with that as the core topic.

Dealing with tensions:

Back-donors should be reachable for the subgrantee when tensions arise in the relationship with the intermediary. This can be the option of last recourse, when the LNA feels they have tried but failed to resolve the issue constructively with the intermediary directly. Ultimately, they are operating with the back-donors money, for whom constructive collaborations are a requirement for effective implementation. The quality of relationship therefore is a matter of legitimate interest of back-donors. Without the possibility of direct communication, the intermediary can frame any issue in a manner that puts all the blame on the subgrantee – possibly an abuse of power.

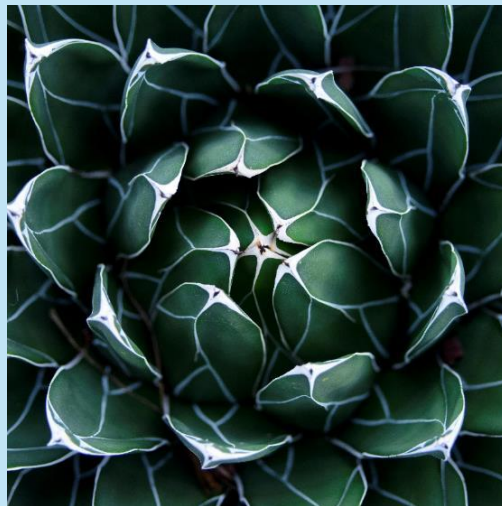
One example from our own inquiries concerned a LNA that had had instances where they could raise a serious problem with their focal point in the intermediary organisation with the focal point’s manager and get it effectively addressed by that manager, and others where they got nowhere and were able to mobilise their focal point in the back-donor administration to inquire into the situation and get it fairly and constructively resolved. But, this had been possible because of the personal connection with the back-donor staff member (based at

country-level) and his personal readiness to take this up, not because of a more structural policy and mechanism in the back-donor administration for feedback and possibly complaint, including about the perceived fairness or not of an intermediary organisation.

Another example concerned the LNA members on the ‘advisory board’ of a pooled fund, who experienced that they were fairly systematically excluded from important decisions by the fund managers and the international members on the ‘advisory board’. There was no explicit understanding or mechanism that allowed them to bring this to the attention of the back-donors who contributed to the pooled fund. Yet when this almost anecdotally came to the attention of one of the back-donors, the latter certainly saw this as a matter of legitimate concern and something they were going to inquire into.

Once again, when tensions exist in a relationship, it is only fair to listen to all parties concerned, separately. When there is trouble within a family, third parties will also speak separately with children; when there are significant tensions between a teacher and a student, the school authorities should hear both sides. If a back-donor does not have the staffing or right staff to do this, they can call upon a third party to try and ‘broker’ that relationship towards a better state, which must involve hearing the parties separately.

In short, the stated preference is definitely for all concerned to speak together, while recognising that in situations of unequal power relations, not everybody may feel confident they can speak frankly, certainly not about issues in the collaboration. Bilateral conversations, periodically as a matter of routine practice, and certainly when there are tensions, are not only fair but also necessary. In the sector there is a lot of focus on setting up robust feedback and complaints mechanisms for accountability, this should also apply to the partnership chain.



¹¹ See e.g. A4EP 2024: *Living up to Commitments. Investing in women-led organisations*

ANNEX: CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR DONORS WITH INTERMEDIARIES

This is a memo aid, to be used functionally i.e. take the questions that are most appropriate to the specific situation, and go through them in a relatively structured manner – remaining aware of what you choose not, to ask about.

An organisation may provide reasons why, at this moment, it does not want to work with ‘partners’, or why the collaboration, at this moment, may not be very ‘equitable’. Such arguments can be convincing in various circumstances. The purpose of the conversation is to bring these arguments to the foreground, so they can be reviewed for their quality, and reviewed after X time to see if they still hold in evolved circumstances.

1. Intervention modality

If an international agency proposes an action which remains exclusively or mostly direct implementation:

- How long have you been operating in this context? And on this issue?
- Why are you (still) directly implementing so much? Why on this issue or in this location?
- If most of the proposed action will be implemented directly, why a small bit with and by a local actor? (is this just to pretend the agency is acting on the localisation commitment?)
- How long will you continue implementing directly (in this context, on this issue)? When and how do you see yourself make the shift to support and reinforce local actors to work on this?
- Do you have an organizational policy on this? Is it part of your country-strategy? Where are you now on this?

More generally, for every intermediary and its collaborating LNA

- How long have you known each other? How did you get to know each other? How long have you already been collaborating together? (*If there has been a collaboration for quite a while already, has it evolved into a more balanced/equitable collaboration, or has there been little change in the structural relationship over time?*)

2. Identifying and designing the intervention. (Around the concept note, repeated for the more detailed proposal)

Who has been involved in:

- The problem analysis (more structural programming goes beyond ‘needs assessment’)? Have all collaborating agencies been involved? Other key stakeholders? If not, why not – and when will this happen?
- Setting the outcome objectives, and in designing the intervention approach? (idem)
- Determining the theory (theories / hypotheses) of change, and/or the logframe assumptions and -indicators? (idem as above)
- Determining the overall budget, and the individual budget lines? (idem) Will there be investment of time by the subgrantee that are currently not covered by the budget, for example attending meetings, commenting on draft papers, responding to inquiries from consultants etc.?
- Detailing the workplan? Is it realistic, given the broader context, but also in light of the capabilities and workloads of the collaborating agencies?

3. Value contributions

You intend to collaborate for a shared objective. Can we review more specifically what value, relevant to that purpose, each of you brings to this collaboration? Let us consider ‘value’ in the broad sense, not just monetary, and in light of what it takes, in this context, to achieve that objective. That can include at times not so easily recognized value such as deep understanding of the political and broader power dynamics in an environment; contacts with and access to key people; deep understanding of past bad experiences of a stakeholder group, and how that may make them adopt an attitude of doubt and suspicion etc.

(This can give a sense whether or to what degree the collaboration is based on recognised complementarity, more than an instrumental use of LNA.)¹²

4. Roles and responsibilities

- Do you (we) have an agreed, common understanding, about the roles and responsibilities of each one of us in this collaboration chain? Who has decided these and how, whose views have been most influential in that decision?
- Are the subgrantees (or consortium members) comfortable with the roles and responsibilities they have been assigned – also if they appear to be mostly ‘executing’ and not so much ‘steering’ and ‘managing’.
- Should the roles and responsibilities remain the same over the duration of the collaboration? Do we want them to evolve? What will enable that to happen?
- What is your (intermediary) ‘transition plan’ (not necessarily ‘exit’, often the next step is one of LNA taking on roles and responsibilities previously held by the international agency, who can still bring value in a supporting role). What is the intended time frame? (if it is open-ended, it may remain at the level of ‘good intentions’).

5. Risks across the collaboration chain

- Can we discuss the spectrum of risks for each of us who will be collaborating here? Who is quite exposed to what kind of risk? How do we ensure that the risk reduction measures of each of us individually, do not increase the risk for another one? Where do we share risk, or who absorbs a certain risk on behalf of another? Where will there be continued transfer of risk? How will we deal with the consequences of an incident that still occurs even if all of us have taken all reasonable precautions, who will absorb what? ¹³
- Can we develop a comprehensive risk matrix, that reflects the different risks for each of us, and that we can periodically review?
- If we are having this conversation now only with you, intermediary, then we need you to later have the same conversation with your subgrantees. But we want to be informed about this, and at a later stage come together with all of us as collaborators, to review the risks across our collaboration chain.

6. Transparency

- Who sees the whole budget, who sees the totality of the all the donor’s contributions, and how it is shared between the collaboration agencies? If subgrantees are not shown the broader budget picture, why not?

7. (Intended) nature of the collaboration

- What is the nature of the collaboration at this point in time? Is it largely transactional? Is it intended to evolve more into a ‘partnership’? Is it already a ‘partnership’ – what makes you say so?
- How will key decisions be taken? Which ones remain the exclusive authority of the intermediary, which one the exclusive authority of the LNA? Which ones the LNA will be ‘consulted’ on, which ones will you really take ‘jointly’?
- If we look at the terms of the contracts with subgrantees, what type of collaboration do these express? If the contract rather one-sidedly protects the interest of one party in the collaboration, and this cannot easily be changed at country-level, can it be counterbalanced with a documented ‘partnership agreement’, that spells out the principles and spirit of how you (we) want to collaborate with each other?
- Would you call this collaboration a ‘strategic partnership’? Why or why not? If that is the intention on both sides, what needs to happen further to get there?
- Have you had a conversation about ‘power’ in your collaboration, and what would be considered a ‘legitimate use of authority’ and what would constitute ‘abuse of power’?

¹² See GMI 2020: *Value Contributions in Partnerships. Are you having the conversation?*

¹³ See GMI 2022: *At Last: More appropriate perspectives on risk and risk management in the aid sector*

- Do you plan to have a periodic review, not of the joint action, but of the collaboration is going? How often might that be? How will it happen in practice?
- Even in good ‘partnerships’, concerns will arise related to the -perceived- behaviour of the other. Let us take some concrete examples, that we know from experience can happen: How do you (we) want to behave with each other when a serious concern arises?
- How will you (we) create an atmosphere in which we feel comfortable to alert each other when something comes up that will affect or joint intervention, or that may affect the quality of our collaborative relationship?
- If it is a transaction, pure subcontracting, relationship – which can be justified, is this totally clear to all collaborating agencies? Do we agree we will not call this a ‘partnership’?

8. Passing on qualities of the donor’s funding and requirements

- Our wish as funder is to see the quality of our funding (e.g. multi-year, flexibility, reporting-installments procedure that minimizes the risk of cash flow interruptions) maintained or increased – but not reduced- when passed on in subgrants. Will that be your practice? If not, why not?
- That includes Internal Cost Recovery for all subgrantees (except perhaps governmental and private sector ones). Is that, will that be your practice? If not, why not?
- Our wish is not to see conditions and requirements added to the ones that come with our grant to you, when you pass on part of that via subgrants. Will that be your practice? If not, why not, what will be different? Is that inevitable? If it is, the subgrantee needs more resources (staff, competencies, time...) to deal with your additional requirements.

9. Maintaining the ability to have direct communications

- As funder, we recognize the sensitivities around parallel lines of communication, but also the power that control of communications can give. We do not want to see a clause, in your contracts with subgrantees, that would forbid them for having any direct contact with us.
- Our default practice is to speak with all collaboration partners together. However, we also recognize there can be structural inequalities, and that the behaviour of the structurally weaker one can be influenced by fear. So we reserve the right to also speak, occasionally or if a need arises, with each of you separately. Are we clear on this?

10. Contribution to stronger local and national actor capabilities

(The earlier reflection on what value each contributes has given us already some indications of the ‘capabilities’ of each.)

- What does each of the collaborating agency believe it is good at, and why? (appreciating strengths, not just looking at gaps and weaknesses)?
- What do you want to learn from each other during this collaboration?
- What do you both (or ‘all’) want to learn more about, together, during this collaboration?
- How is joint learning planned for in your collaboration?

If there is an explicit ‘capacity-development’ component in the proposal:

- Who has been involved in deciding this? Whose priorities does it reflect?
- Is there a clear objective? Are you clear whose capacity will be developed for what, how it will be assessed that the objective has been reached? If the focus is on individual staff member competencies, does the objective sit at the level of awareness, knowledge or skill? If the intention is greater skill, will the learner be able to practice, with mentoring accompaniment?
- Who controls the budget, who decides on the which resource people will be called upon, and the approach?
- If the effort concerns individuals, how will these new competencies be institutionalized?
- Has this effort been linked to the financial health of the recipient organisation? What are the chances it will be able to retain this now more capable staff?

- If the effort is immediately oriented at organizational development, does it reflect the strategic priorities of the organisation? If these are different from what is envisaged in the proposal, why is that?

At a more strategic level:

- How does the way you designed the intervention and intend to work together contribute to a strategic goal of stronger, national and local, collective capabilities to handle this societies' challenges better?
- How might the way this intervention and collaboration is designed, (unintentionally) contribute to weaker (and more competitive) national and local capabilities?

11. Reporting, communications and sharing of credit

- How do you intend to handle communications with us, on key issues (not routine matters) that concern the joint action or the collaborating LNA? For these, will each collaboration partner be cc'd in as the default mode?
- How do you plan to handle the narrative and financial report to us (and to other donors)? Will each of you contribute to the reports?
- Will each of you see and 'sign off' on the final version that is being submitted to us as SCP ME? If not, why not?
- Do you intend to be explicit in your report who has done what, and receives credit for it?
- In your public communications, do you also share the credit by mentioning each other and each other's roles and contributions? (subject to approval by the one being named, as sometimes public mentions can constitute a risk)

Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) is a values-based and purpose-driven consultancy and advisory service. Collaboration, within and between organisations and with other stakeholders, for public good purposes, is one of our core competencies.

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