

IVCO 2022 Think Piece

PARTNERSHIP – JUST ANOTHER BUZZWORD?

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Partnership is essential in today's world of volunteering. Volunteering agencies, organisations, and businesses cooperate for different purposes such as sending and receiving volunteers, finance, research, advocacy, and events.

Through partnership, one can take advantage of the complementary skills and resources of several actors, and achieve together what we could not do on our own. Volunteer leaders must be able to bring together a variety of different parties and make them work together effectively.

PARTNERSHIP – A LACK OF CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

In the recent report [Partnership – Just another Buzzword?](#) (written by Jon Lie of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs in Oslo for Norec), it is stated that partnership has in some ways become a buzzword which covers a range of relations. More often than not, the precise meaning is not defined.

For example, SDG17, Partnerships for the Goals, has become a sort of banner for general support to international cooperation, even with emotional overtones – the expression of feelings, commitment and common ground, rather than an operational goal. There is a lack of conceptual clarity.

FAIR AND EQUAL PARTNERSHIPS

In the current discourse on decolonisation, important aspects of partnership include equality, reciprocity, and fair distribution of power between the parties. This is not only a moral imperative but also a more effective way to create ownership and, in turn, sustainable results.

Knowledge of how to facilitate, support and maintain a fair power balance between partners will be a crucial volunteering leadership skill for the years ahead. How can a partnership take advantage of the strengths of each actor, build a complementary network, and maintain values such as respect and equally shared power?

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The traditional narrative and operational framework for international volunteering has been one of skills and knowledge transfer, especially from volunteers from the Global North to people and communities in the South. But who is really the teacher and who is the learner?

In the English language, to teach and to learn are two different words. This may perhaps lead us to think that in a partnership, teaching and learning are two different roles. However, in my native tongue, Norwegian, 'teach' and 'learn' are the same word. This could in a nice way indicate that in real life, we cannot distinguish one of these roles clearly from the other. It points to a concept of knowledge that is less of a package to be handed over, and more of simultaneous, interwoven processes, which are facilitated through dialogue in a partnership.

The practical implication is that everyone in a partnership has the potential to bring knowledge to the table. In order to secure ownership and sustainability, the value of that knowledge has to be recognised.

ARE GOOD INTENTIONS ENOUGH?

One might think that the principles of equality and reciprocity are held especially highly in the civil society sector, with its activist and spokesperson NGOs campaigning for causes, many with a decolonisation agenda. But interestingly, the report mentioned above finds that civil society volunteers from Norway, more or less as a matter of course, assumed the role of teacher, while their Global South counterparts naturally slid into in the role of learner. The same was not found with corporate volunteers.

It seems, therefore, that good intentions are not enough to achieve equal and reciprocal partnerships. Competent volunteering leadership is required as well, and a key skill of volunteering leaders today and tomorrow will be an ability to facilitate and bring out the relevant knowledge that everyone possesses.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

There are many advantages of embedding volunteer exchange into deeper and thematic-based home-host partnership with multiple dimensions, as opposed to more one-dimensional partnerships.

The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Centre (WEEE-Centre), based in Kenya, recycles electronic waste safely for sustainable development. They have formed a partnership with a similar company, Vohitra Sarl, in Madagascar.

Utilising volunteer exchange, the companies together improve their practices in e-waste management. They also work together on research, innovation, and policy inputs for the adoption of relevant regulations by the respective national governments. And they campaign together to inform the public about the environmental and health risks posed by electronic waste.

Over a period of three years, each of these companies has sent six staff members to volunteer with the other on one-year placements. Each volunteer shares their knowledge with the host partner, and brings home what they have learned. In this way, both agencies serve as both home and host partner, and benefit from what their volunteers learn abroad. This ensures the appropriate application of knowledge, better outcomes and more sustainable results. The knowledge gained and exchanged is embedded in the respective companies, so it doesn't go away when each volunteer ends their placement.

The model of a multi-dimensional partnership proved resilient to the COVID pandemic. Partnerships could keep their cooperation going using means other than physical volunteer visits.

Such partnerships place high demands on volunteering leadership, who need the skill to pull together thematic diversity and manage equal and multi-dimensional partnerships. These are key skills for volunteer leaders to develop and perfect so that we can make volunteering relevant and effective for the 2030 Agenda.