

Building meaningful North-South partnerships: Lessons learned and best practices

ACTIF working group

The following lessons learned and good practices have been documented through the activities of the Act Together for Inclusion Fund (ACTIF) working group. This working group brings together Canadian organizations that have received funding from to carry out, in partnership with organizations in the South, projects that strengthen the respect, protection and fulfillment of the human rights of LGBTQ2I people.

Lessons learned



Meaningful partnerships begin with meaningful personal relationships

Organizations are run by people, and it's with these people that we enter into relationships. To establish a good partnership with an organization, it's helpful to develop a contract or formal working documents, but that's not enough. It's important to get to know the people we'll be working with, and to discuss with them our values, past experiences, mutual expectations, preferences in terms of working hours or communications, and so on. The people who will be working together in a partnership must learn to talk, listen and respect each other. This is the basis of a good partnership!





Establishing meaningful partnerships is both a means of carrying out good projects... and a result in itself.

Organizations in the South know their environment and are well positioned to identify the best strategies for advancing the rights of LGBTQ2I people in their context. Their leadership is essential to running effective local projects, hence the need - for Canadian organizations - to establish good relations with them and give them a central role in projects. At the same time, building meaningful North-South relationships, based on mutual respect and trust, is an outcome in itself for the LGBTQ2I movement. And many organizations are justifiably proud of the partnerships they have succeeded in establishing or strengthening! Indeed, even if some projects fail to achieve the desired results, the creation of a network of solidarity between organizations in the South and North helps to break down isolation, share successes and challenges, provide mutual support and learn together.



Meaningful partnerships seek to rebalance power relations

Good partnerships recognize the inequalities of power that can exist between Northern and Southern organizations, particularly with regard to decision-making and budget management. Not all organizations have access to the same opportunities and the same financial, technical and human resources, which means that some organizations, generally those in the North, may have more power than others. Good partnerships recognize the existence of these inequalities and seek to rebalance power between organizations in the South and those in the North, so that all organizations can exercise their leadership and strengthen their skills.



Partnerships grow stronger through successes and challenges

It's normal to encounter difficulties, whether when establishing a partnership or implementing a joint project. Acknowledging the existence of challenges and committing together to overcoming them is essential. When partners take the time to discuss together what's going well, but also to address challenges and consider possible solutions, the relationship of trust is built and the partnership can grow stronger. A meaningful partnership is built through shared experiences, both positive and negative. It is based on honest communication, in which each partner recognizes that not everything is perfect, but commits to a common goal to the best of his or her ability.

Best practices

1 Capitalizing on specific expertise

In a meaningful partnership, each partner has specific expertise that can be used to achieve common goals. It is important that the organizations identify and value each other's strengths, and together determine concrete strategies for leveraging them within the framework of the joint project.

2 Agree on roles and responsibilities... and trust!

In a partnership project, some decisions are taken jointly, while others may be the responsibility of a single organization. Agreeing, as early as possible, on the roles and responsibilities of each partner is a key element of good collaboration. Each partner needs to ask: To what level of information do I want access? What level of decision-making do I want to be involved in? Once the partners have agreed on the roles and responsibilities of each, each partner must be confident that decisions, including those that do not include him or her, will be made in the best interests of the project. Mutual trust is essential to the smooth running of a North-South project.



3 Setting aside time to be together

Partners need to set aside regular time to meet, not only to discuss the progress of the project, but also to evaluate the collaboration and make any necessary adjustments. Follow-up by e-mail or telephone and virtual meetings are generally effective, but in some cases, cannot replace face-to-face meetings, particularly for strategic planning at the start of the project. Meetings should not only take place when challenges arise, but should be scheduled on an ongoing basis, and resources allocated to them. Taking the necessary steps to be present and available to your partner is essential to good collaboration.

4 Being flexible

Flexibility is a prerequisite for the success of North-South projects. Organizations need to be aware that the context can change very quickly in some countries, especially when working with marginalized groups. Partners must expect that a project will not be carried out as initially planned, and be flexible in terms of the activities to be carried out, the timetable, the division of tasks, and so on. Changes of course should not be seen as irritants, but as an effective strategy for responding to changing needs.

5 Supporting community leadership

Organizations and individuals who are members of, or work directly with, the local LGBTQ2I community have clear expertise in identifying and implementing the best strategies for advancing rights in their context. North-South partnerships must value and support the leadership of local communities by ensuring that they participate in project planning, implementation and evaluation, and that they have sufficient resources to do so (financial, human, time, etc.). Identifying and lowering barriers to the participation of community leaders is essential.

6 Facilitating South-South collaboration

While North-South collaboration fosters the exchange of perspectives, South-South collaboration identifies best practices in a specific context and strengthens the national or regional network of allies, thus fostering the creation of relevant and sustainable initiatives. North-South projects should include concrete strategies and resources to facilitate South-South collaboration.