

BALANCING PARTNERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY:

STRATEGIES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
ORGANIZATIONS WORKING ON
SYSTEMS CHANGE



Africa Systems Change
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Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in driving systems change within government to improve the lives of citizens. However, many CSOs face a significant challenge: how to effectively partner with government while still holding it accountable. This learning brief summarizes the reflections of several Co-Impact Partners on navigating this delicate balance and provides practical strategies for CSOs to navigate this complex relationship.

Why Balancing Partnership and Accountability is Difficult

For many CSOs, a core strategy to achieve their mission involves holding governments accountable through various methods, such as public awareness campaigns, advocacy, performance data collection, strategic litigation, policy engagement, and community mobilization. However, CSOs are increasingly recognizing the importance of collaborating with governments to drive meaningful systems change. This evolving approach can create tensions, particularly when accountability efforts are perceived as criticism of the government, potentially complicating the development of effective partnerships.

Governments may perceive advocacy efforts by CSOs as a betrayal, especially when these organizations publicly criticize government policies while working closely with them. Governments often expect partnerships to involve full alignment and discretion, with any criticism communicated privately rather than publicly. Open criticism by CSOs may be seen as a breach of trust or a deviation from agreed-upon terms, undermining the effectiveness and impact of the partnership. This perception can strain the relationship, potentially reducing government cooperation and support.

Strategies for Balancing Partnership and Accountability

To effectively navigate this complex relationship, CSOs have used the following strategies:

- ❖ **Clarify Expectations Early:** At the outset of any partnership, establish and document clear expectations concerning communication and advocacy with the government body in question. Define the boundaries for public and private discourse with them and agree on methods for addressing disagreements or criticisms to prevent misunderstandings by signing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with relevant government agencies. The MOU should outline each party's roles, responsibilities, and



expectations in detail. This may include specifying how feedback and concerns should be raised and resolved.

- ❖ **Balance Advocacy with Diplomacy:** When advocating for change or highlighting issues, approach the situation in a way that respects the existing partnership while effectively addressing critical concerns. In practice, this means framing criticisms of Government constructively by focusing on the issues and their impact and offering actionable suggestions for improvement rather than just identifying problems.
- ❖ **Maintain Open Channels of Communication:** Ensure there are established channels for private discussions where issues can be raised and addressed directly with government representatives. Setting up these channels—such as regular meetings, confidential briefings, or dedicated communication lines—creates a space for open and honest dialogue, allowing issues to be addressed before they escalate. Furthermore, this proactive approach helps to maintain transparency and foster trust by demonstrating a commitment to resolving conflicts constructively. Additionally, it allows for the exchange of feedback and concerns in a controlled environment, where solutions can be negotiated and agreed upon without the potential for public disputes.
- ❖ **Highlight the Shared Goals:** Emphasize the mutual benefits and shared objectives of the partnership in communications with both government entities and the public. Clearly articulate how the goals of the partnership align with the broader aims of both parties and how collaboration serves the public interest. Highlight that advocacy efforts are designed to support and enhance the effectiveness and impact of government actions, rather than to undermine them. Reinforce that addressing issues and proposing improvements is intended to contribute positively to the government's ability to meet its objectives, thus fostering a more collaborative and supportive relationship.
- ❖ **Engage in Constructive Dialogue:** Foster a culture of open, respectful dialogue with government partners by creating an environment where honest and constructive conversations are encouraged. Address any concerns or perceptions of betrayal directly and transparently, focusing on finding common ground and mutual understanding. Make it clear that the CSO's advocacy efforts are intended to improve outcomes and not to undermine the partnership. Reinforce the commitment to working collaboratively by regularly engaging in dialogue, acknowledging the value of the

partnership, and addressing any issues promptly and thoughtfully. This approach helps to build trust, prevent misunderstandings, and demonstrate that the CSO's mission of advocacy and partnership goals can coexist and support each other effectively.

What to Avoid

To navigate the delicate balance of partnership and accountability, there are some things partners agreed they should avoid:

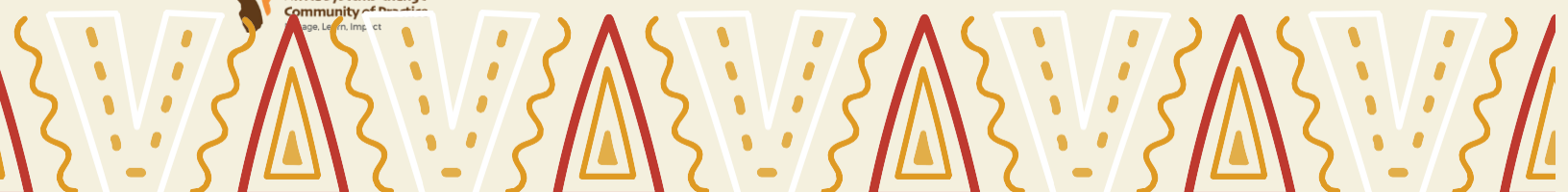
Unclear Communication: Failing to communicate clearly to government partners that advocacy will continue alongside collaboration can lead to misunderstandings and damaged relationships. Avoid creating the impression that criticism will cease when a partnership is in place.

Breaching Confidentiality: Sharing confidential information from your partnership with government bodies with others outside the partnership can damage trust and potentially jeopardize future collaborations. Instead, rephrase sensitive information as general statements without divulging specifics.

Compromising Integrity: Be cautious of situations that could compromise your organization's ethical standards or create bias. This might include:

- a. Engaging in practices that bend or break rules to accommodate government officials (e.g., exceeding budget ceilings for out-of-town policy discussions).
- b. Accepting benefits from government officials that might influence your advocacy positions.

Partisan Entanglement: Avoid being pulled into active partisan politics. Partnerships formed with one administration may be dissolved when another comes to power, potentially undermining long-term progress.



Conclusion

Balancing partnership and accountability is a complex but essential task for CSOs engaged in systems change. By employing these strategies, organizations can work effectively with government while maintaining their critical role in holding authorities accountable. This approach allows CSOs to leverage the benefits of collaboration without compromising their integrity or mission.

As the landscape of civil society and government relations continues to evolve, these strategies will need to be regularly reassessed and adapted. However, by maintaining a commitment to both partnership and accountability, CSOs can play a pivotal role in driving meaningful, sustainable systems change that benefits all members of society.

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