

Learning brief: Building Equitable Partnerships

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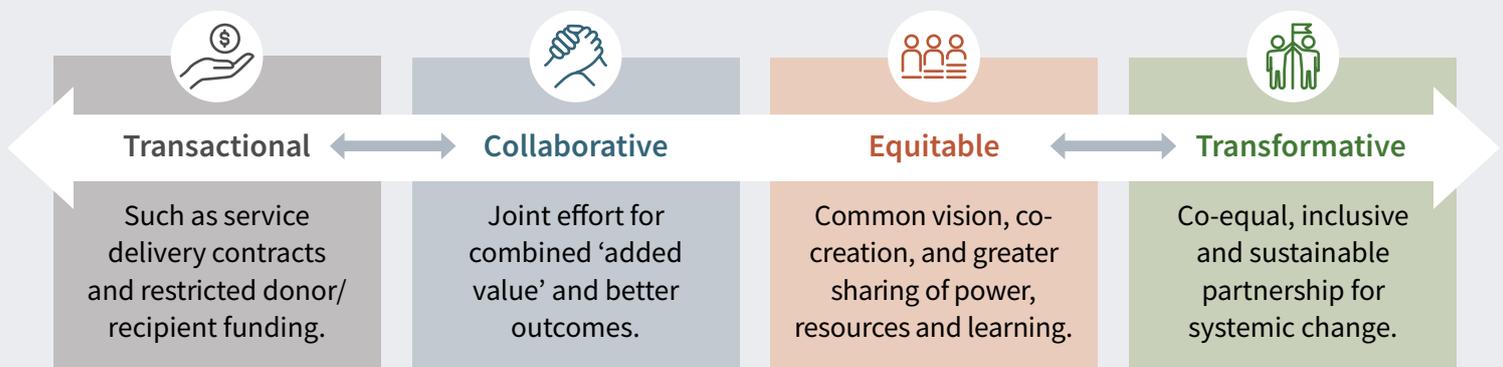
The [Climate, Environment and Nature \(CLEAN\) Helpdesk Programme](#) provides UK government officials with expert support on climate, environment and nature. It is delivered by a consortium led by [SouthSouthNorth \(SSN\)](#), working in partnership with [Social Development Direct \(SDDirect\)](#), [Paul Watkiss Associates](#), and [ODI Global](#).

Since its inception, the CLEAN Helpdesk has demonstrated innovative approaches to development partnerships, driven by SSN's strong leadership. As a South African based organisation, SSN is committed to shifting power within the aid system and advancing progress in the climate, environment and nature space.

Forming an equitable partnership

During the programme's inception phase, SDDirect the Gender Equity, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) lead introduced the *Equitable Partnership Framework and Tools*. This approach was developed by SDDirect, [Plan International UK](#) and the global Plan International family to provide practical resources to move from rhetoric around equitable partnerships and locally led development to good practice. At the centre of our approach to partnership is the *equitable partnership continuum (Fig 1)*:

Figure 1: The equitable partnership continuum represents (as ideal types) a spectrum of different kinds of partnerships with different levels of ambition (SDDirect/Plan International)



As part of the programme's inception workshop, the CLEAN Helpdesk consortium carried out a partnership readiness assessment. We discussed how we wanted to work together and identified ways to address potential challenges arising from our different organisational sizes and locations.

Measuring our partnership progress

At the end of our first year, we conducted a partnership health check. The process involved an anonymous online survey of consortium members and FCDO, targeted interviews with key stakeholders, a learning session at the March 2025 CLEAN Helpdesk workshop with consortium partners and donor representatives, capturing learnings and actions in a report.

Participation in the partnership health check and review process was enthusiastic, thoughtful, and inclusive of all the partners, including FCDO. The survey provided a valuable mechanism for honest, critical feedback that was complemented by open, safe space dialogue in the partnership review workshop session.

Almost all respondents felt that, in the first year, the partnership had either fully achieved the equitable level of ambition, or was at the collaborative level and moving towards equitable. There was consensus that equitable is an achievable level of ambition for the remainder of the programme.

The survey collected views on performance against 14 equitable partnerships indicators. Overall, the survey results were very encouraging – (Fig 2). Not surprisingly, the most divergent results applied to some of the bigger structural challenges of short-cycle delivery projects. CLEAN delivers technical assistance of around 20 days per intervention, therefore addressing change around empowerment and equity; shifting the power; and leadership are particularly challenging.

A summary of the selected survey responses

Figure 2: CLEAN partnership survey results on key indicators (March 2025). We used a traffic light system as follows:

- Red: Area for performance improvement and action.
- Orange: Adequate progress and performance, needs further attentions.
- Green: Strong progress and performance.



1. Alignment

100% agreed that partners are aligned on partnership objectives, priorities, and values. These areas are openly discussed in team meetings, where there are opportunities to discuss and provide feedback.

2. Financial management and partnership costs

Partners agreed there is a collaborative and transparent approach to financial management, but wanted to understand more about the budgets available for support on communications, GEDSI, and knowledge synthesis.

3. Partner contributions

Respondents agreed that each partner is contributing as planned and appreciated high levels of trust for partners to lead on their areas (MEL, GEDSI, knowledge management, stakeholder engagement, technical assistance delivery, etc.). There is room to

improve on capitalising on strengths and assets of partners to complement each other's contributions by learning more about consortium organisations beyond the programme.

4. Shifting the power

Whilst respondents believed that there is a shared commitment to shifting historic power and resource imbalances and advancing development that is 'locally led and globally connected', the length of the programme and demand-led nature of the Helpdesk make this challenging in practice.

5. Communications and information sharing

This was the lowest scoring indicator. In the first year there were challenges with sharing documents and ensuring access for different partners. This has been resolved with the move to a different knowledge management platform.

Achievements and added value of an equitable partnership

Partners reported benefits of taking an equitable partnerships approach:

- A stronger shared understanding of the CLEAN Helpdesk's mission, objectives, ambitions and delivery approach.
- Enhanced teamwork, stronger engagement, and a shared sense of joint venture, common purpose and togetherness.
- Better quality dialogue, meetings, decision-making, communications and information-sharing, with active participation and space to challenge and engage.
- Increased honesty and transparency, enabling efficiencies and effective problem-solving.
- Enhanced value-added from the diverse talents, strengths and assets of the partners, which fosters an integrated approach and more impactful technical assistance delivery.
- Clearly defined responsibilities, scopes of work and ownership of workflows among partners and staff – but also scope to negotiate and be flexible as needed on roles.
- Shift away from historic North/South dynamics and power, to a South led consortium.

Constraints and challenges

The CLEAN Helpdesk model creates some challenges for building equitable partnerships. High levels of demand leave less time for planning and streamlining processes, and the fast-paced nature of service delivery sometimes constrains co-creation space. The nature of technical assistance helpdesks is reactive, serving client needs with limited scope to influence more broadly (e.g., on wider locally-led development agenda).

There are also challenges associated with the donor system. The current length of the programme (2 years) limits opportunities for realising the partnership's full potential as well as its scope to advance systemic change.

Moving to the equitable level requires very strong relationships, which is challenging when so much interaction is virtual. Being too polite and fear of 'overstepping the mark' may also constrain on open exchange and dialogue.

“The CLEAN Helpdesk's progress towards an equitable partnership is a big win for all partners, including FCDO, which provides proof of concept of the equitable partnerships approach and deserves to be celebrated.”

Key informant interviewee, March 2025





Benefits of taking a considered approach to partnerships

The equitable partnerships process has provided a platform for open, safe space conversations on the quality, effectiveness and mutually beneficial nature of the CLEAN Helpdesk partnership.

By explicitly setting a level of ambition for the partnership, with an inclusive self-assessment of progress against practical indicators, the consortium has been able to make visible what is often assumed or invisible in traditional modes of development collaboration. It has been able to

link equitable partnership indicators to real-world issues of quality, efficiency and delivery. It has also generated plausible evidence that greater equity and inclusion in development partnerships contribute directly to better delivery results for stakeholders in the climate, environment and nature space.

The CLEAN Helpdesk experience demonstrates the importance of investing in the negotiation of shared vision, values and ambition, translating all this into practical ways of working, holding each other accountable, and forging a robust culture of collaboration where feedback is valued and every voice counts.

Photos credit: SouthSouthNorth



Read more about the [Building Equitable Partnerships approach](#) and [download the tools](#):

- The **equitable partnership continuum**: Including a detailed outline of different levels of ambition.
- An **added value case for partnership tool**: Supporting collaborative analysis by the partners to develop a convincing case for the partnership.
- A **partnership readiness assessment tool**: Facilitating joint partner reflection and analysis of preparedness, assets and capacities to realise the level of ambition.
- A **partnership health check tool**: Providing a platform for regular self-assessment of partnership effectiveness and progress towards to the partners' chosen level of ambition.

Visit the [CLEAN Helpdesk website](#) to learn more and access our resource library | Contact us: info@cleanhelpdesk.org