

PARTNERING IN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Key Findings from an OECD DevCom Survey

23 June 2020

INTRODUCTION: The Growing Need to Partner in Public Engagement

If achieving sustainable development needs partnerships, then so does communicating it. Indeed, there are many good reasons why development organisations might choose to partner in public engagement.

3 GOOD REASONS TO PARTNER IF YOU WANT TO ENGAGE CITIZENS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT		
<p>Partners help TELL THE FULL STORY</p> <p>E.g. community organisations can help you talk about marginalisation; businesses can help explain foreign direct investment.</p>	<p>Partners ENJOY TRUST AND REACH</p> <p>E.g. social media influencers can reach young consumers; business partners can reach investors; civic activists can mobilise masses.</p>	<p>Partners can TEACH YOU NEW SKILLS</p> <p>E.g. international NGOs can be great storytellers; designers can visualize content; retailers are experts at segmenting audiences & marketing.</p>

In January 2020, the **OECD Development Communication Network (DevCom)** conducted a survey on how its members approach the growing need for partnerships. **18 development organisations responded** (17 national institutions¹ and the European Commission).

This briefing note summarises key findings on:

- I. **Strategies:** Why do development organisations partner in public engagement, and with whom?
- II. **Modalities:** How do development organisations partner in public engagement?
- III. **Governance:** How do organisations manage and fund their partnerships?
- IV. **Challenges:** What can organisations do to improve their partnerships?

The note complements a recent OECD Report on *Development Assistance Committee Members and Civil Society*, which provides deep insights into partnerships in general and includes some findings on awareness-raising partnerships.²

Since the survey was anonymous, this report does not name specific organisations or countries in its analysis. The report does highlight some specific examples of partnerships in public engagement, where respondents have provided links.

¹ Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

² See page 68 of OECD (2020). *Development Assistance Committee Members and Civil Society*.
<https://doi.org/10.1787/51eb6df1-en>

I. **STRATEGIES: Why do development organisations partner in public engagement, and with whom?**

For the most part, development organisations **recognise the need for partnerships**. Two thirds of respondents (12 of 18) say that partnering is an “important” or “very important” part of their organisation’s communication efforts. Yet, **not many organisations formalize their partnering strategy**: 8 respondents say they have a formal strategy to guide their partnerships in communications.

We asked respondents to name three main reasons **why** they engage in partnerships. We also asked them to tell us **with whom** they prefer to partner. Here are five things we learned from their responses.

5 FACTS ABOUT WHY AND WITH WHOM DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATORS PARTNER



Development Communicators Partner ...

- 1. ...at home, not abroad.**
15 respondents say that raising public awareness at home is one of their top 3 partnering goals, and CSOs at home are their most popular partners. Only 1 respondent calls branding abroad a main goal.
- 2. ...to raise awareness, not to promote action.**
Only 4 respondents say they partner to promote action. Since achieving sustainable development requires “all hands on deck”, this goal may require further attention.
- 3. ...for more legitimacy, not to learn new skills.**
For 8 respondents, partnerships bring legitimacy with specific audiences. Only 2 respondents say they engage in partnerships to leverage the communications skills of partners.
- 4. ...with civil society & multilaterals, not businesses or foundations.**
Civil society and multilateral organisations are the two most popular partners. Only 2 respondents put businesses or foundations into their list of top partners.
- 5. ...to go local.**
5 respondents cited local governments as top communications partners. Indeed, there is growing recognition of cities as key players in sustainable development.

II. **MODALITIES: How do development communicators partner?**

Survey respondents mentioned **three main ways to partner** in public engagement:

1. **Paid Partnerships**

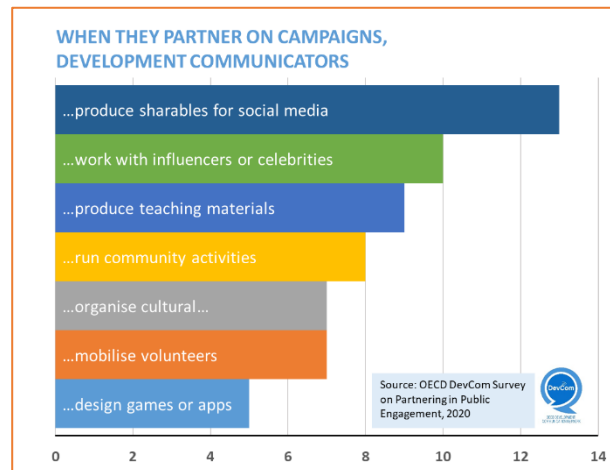
12 of our 18 respondents say they fund partners to conduct specific public engagement activities, for example to increase knowledge of the SDGs. This often includes grants for longer-term engagement programmes delivered by civil society partners, mainly at home. It can also include one-off partnerships, for example when organisations work with [artists](#) or influencers. The [UK Aid Match](#) scheme incentivises successful charity campaigns by doubling the donations they receive.

2. Joint Events, Campaigns & Platforms

11 respondents say they collaborate with partners on joint campaigns. At national level, this can include a wide range of activities: special [events](#) and [development weeks](#), joint [social media campaigns](#), the design of [teaching materials](#) and [research platforms](#). Many communicators also engage in international campaigns like [Somos Iberoamerica](#) or [#2030IsNow](#), coordinated by multilateral organisations.

3. Project Partnerships

8 respondents say they systematically include clauses on communications in their contracts with project partners. These clauses mainly aim to ensure institutional visibility and transparency, guiding partners on how to use logos, add disclaimers and report on funding. Some go further, requiring partners to conduct awareness-raising activities both at home and in project countries.



III. GOVERNANCE: How do organisations manage & fund their partnerships?

Who is responsible for partnerships?

Given the diverse nature of their partnerships in public engagement, it is not surprising that **organisations assign the management of partnerships to different teams**. Half of respondents (9 in 18) say that their partnerships are managed mainly by communication teams. Elsewhere, partnerships are managed by teams that are responsible for civil society relations (4 respondents), development education (2 respondents) or projects/operations (2 respondents).

Our survey suggests that **some organisations would gain from better internal coordination**, since partnerships concern the work of many teams. 5 respondents say that roles and responsibilities for partnerships are not clearly divided. Only 2 say there is a joint management process involving several teams.

How are partnerships monitored?

There is scope to **improve monitoring and evaluation**. 8 respondents say they do not systematically evaluate the impact of partnerships for public engagement. By contrast, 2 respondents say they have a shared results framework with partners, while 3 respondents use independent evaluations.

How are partnerships funded?

The survey does not provide a clear picture on how organisations fund their partnerships. **8 respondents say they have a specific budget for partnering in public engagement**, but most respondents were unable or unwilling to provide more detailed budget breakdowns. Partnership budgets could be discussed further at a follow-up meeting among DevCom members.

IV. CHALLENGES: What can organisations do to improve their partnerships?

By definition, partnering implies letting go of some control. When asked about their biggest partnering challenges, several respondents answer that it is **difficult to agree on goals**.

In the case of paid partnerships and project partnerships, some respondents fear that their partners could use funds to engage in political advocacy or fundraising activities. In the case of joint events or campaigns, 2 respondents say that campaign messages could be diluted if based on a consensus among partners with very diverse goals. There can also be reputational risks: what if we partner with the wrong influencer or business?

These concerns suggest that **building relationships and mutual trust may be the greatest partnering challenge**. Respondents describe different approaches to relationship building. Some begin with senior-level negotiations and formal contracts, while others emphasise personal contacts and regular informal dialogue.

DevCom members might consider **combining formal and informal relations**. Personal contacts are essential, but, as one respondent points out, the development sector (and development communications in particular) suffers from a high turnover of staff. Partnerships will only survive if they are institutionalised.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS & NEXT STEPS

Like all successful relationships, partnerships for public engagement need care – time, resources and patience. Our survey shows that some development organisations remain reluctant to invest in such partnerships. Yet, the trend is towards more collaboration. The COVID-19 crisis has once again shown how important it is to collaborate across sectors and stakeholder groups.

In a multi-actor development landscape, the question may thus no longer be whether development organisations should invest in partnerships, but whether they can afford not to.

As next steps, DevCom members could meet to share their experiences and discuss the survey results, as part of the [DevCom Zooms In](#) series of virtual events. A special focus could be placed on the implications of COVID-19 for partnering.

They could also seek out further dialogue with other OECD based networks bringing together civil society, foundations and the private sector.

“We know only too well that what we are doing is nothing more than a drop in the ocean. But if the drop were not there, the ocean would be missing something.”

— Mother Teresa