

## COLLABORATION IN ACTION

### Guidelines for IUCN NL's Partnerships with southern partner CSOs

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

A major objective of IUCN NL is to enhance conservation of nature and sustainable landscape planning through empowerment of civil society by forming partnerships with local CSOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

For IUCN NL, collaboration with southern partner CSOs starts with trust-building and by exploring each other's priorities, strategies and opportunities for collaboration (complementarity).

Consequently, the partnerships we are establishing are characterized by applying a bottom-up approach – from communities to landscape, to local government, to national government – and supporting processes that lead to genuine changes. Although these processes take time, they increase the likelihood of achieving sustainable changes.

This document describes the Guiding Principles and Guidelines for an effective and efficient partnering approach.

Although IUCN NL has different groups of partners<sup>1</sup>, these Partnering Guidelines focus on partnerships with southern civil society organizations (CSOs)<sup>2</sup>.

These guidelines are grounded on participatory processes throughout, on the notion that all partners contribute valuable resources, and that strengthening the partnering capacity of IUCN NL and its partners is an ongoing process.

It is a living document that will be updated based on new insights/experiences from IUCN NL and its southern Partners.

##### a. IUCN NL

For more than three decades, IUCN NL has supported local CSOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America with projects and programmes to strengthen societies to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. Over the years, the approach shifted from supporting to partnering with southern CSOs. IUCN NL *'believes that the best overall strategy to meet Dutch and global nature conservation goals builds upon collaboration across borders and sectors, deploying each organization's unique strengths and expertise and embracing innovation and adaptation in our efforts'*.<sup>3</sup> Its partners *'can expect a committed and resourceful partner and - where relevant - an open, professional, and flexible donor. [...] We will make special efforts to network partners across regions and continents, aiming at mutual exchange and added value in collective strength'*.<sup>4</sup>

The transformation from supporting to partnering asks for more explicit partnering guidelines.

##### b. Southern Partner CSOs

The term 'civil society organization' refers to the wide diversity of not-for-profit, non-state organizations as well as community-based associations and groups (CBOs) - distinct from both the governmental and business sectors - that advance a collective or public good. Depending on the country, there are many types of legal structures used to constitute a CSO. Some of these include companies, associations (membership organizations), societies, foundations (in which property is dedicated for a specific purpose), charities, trusts, and cooperatives.

Southern Partners are those CSOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America that collaborate with IUCN NL in the implementation of a project or programme.

Partners can have different roles depending on the scope of their work areas (regional, national or

<sup>1</sup> Partner groups IUCN NL: Southern Civil Society Organisations, IUCN international secretariat and its regional and thematic offices, IUCN members based in the Netherlands, Working Group International (BE, WI, TBI, IES), Groene 11, MoMo4Climate (WWF NL, TBI).

<sup>2</sup> Hereinafter referred to as "partners".

<sup>3</sup> See IUCN NL Strategy 2020-2024, page 4;

[https://www.iucn.nl/files/algemeen/jaarverslagen\\_en\\_beleidsstukken/iucn\\_nl\\_strategy\\_2020-2024.pdf](https://www.iucn.nl/files/algemeen/jaarverslagen_en_beleidsstukken/iucn_nl_strategy_2020-2024.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 18.

local), their approach (e.g. rights-based or indigenous knowledge), their constituencies (e.g. activists, students, intelligentsia, local communities, or community-based organizations), and their thematic focus (e.g. forests, nature conservation, indigenous peoples, gender, youth, value chains of natural resource exploitation, etc.).

## **2. GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

A principled way of working is important to enable healthy, equitable relationships in any partnership. Guiding principles are guidelines shaping how IUCN NL behaves in partnerships. In each partnership partners agree on a set of guiding principles that are important to them in that partnership.

Some of the guiding principles may be at odds with IUCN NL's upwards accountability to its donors and with the supervisory functions IUCN NL is obliged to conform to for the sake of funding. This will be discussed and resolved in a transparent way with all partners involved. The guiding principles are:

- a. Mutual trust and openness
- b. Equity
- c. Respect for Diversity
- d. Awareness of Cultural Diversity
- e. Keeping Civic Space Open
- f. Recognition of Autonomy
- g. Open and safe Dialogue
- h. Gender responsiveness
- i. Mutual accountability and good governance

### **a) Mutual Trust and Openness**

All parties will build continuously on mutual trust. Trust as the starting point for relations implies that each organization must be open and transparent in determining and communicating its own strategic direction. IUCN NL will be transparent about its intentions, commits to exchanging information and documentation for the benefit of the project implementation, will follow up on the tasks agreed with partners in a timely manner, and will timely inform its partners if, why and how circumstances necessitate adjustment of agreed planning. Where relevant, IUCN NL will be transparent about its level of engagement with specific private companies, governments and opposition parties.

A similar level of open, timely and transparent conduct of business is expected between all partners. Mutual trust and openness will be achieved through dialogue and open communication.

### **b) Equity**

The consolidation of equal relationships between IUCN NL and its partners is considered both a means and an end in itself. Such relations are essential for achieving locally owned and initiated change.

Equity requires mutual respect between partners, irrespective of size and power, acknowledging power differences and power imbalances and their potential impact on the partnership.

IUCN NL strives for inclusive and equal participation of partners in decision-making processes by creating a safe space for open dialogue and, where possible, by delegating power to national and regional networks.

### **c) Respect for Diversity**

Partners appreciate that each organization has the best understanding of its own reality.

Partners respect each other's mandates, obligations and independence and recognize each other's constraints and commitments.

Partners respect differences in positions, roles and strategies and show commitment to understand differences, to collaborate and complement as well as find mutual gains and consensus. They do not exclude partners based on differences in opinion or different approaches, but remain in dialogue, seeking out common ground that will in the end support the mission.

### **d) Awareness of Cultural Diversity**

International collaboration requires awareness of how (local) culture is impacting the work. Subtle

differences in communication patterns and the complex variations in what is considered good work or common sense from one country to the next may have a big impact on how we understand one another. Cultural patterns of behaviour and belief frequently influence our perceptions (what we see), cognition (what we think), and actions (what we do). Awareness and understanding of cultural differences – varying attitudes concerning when best to speak or to stay quiet, the role of the leader, and what kind of feedback is most constructive – is a first step<sup>5</sup>. IUCN NL recognizes and acknowledges the differing ways in communication<sup>6</sup>, evaluation<sup>7</sup>, persuasion<sup>8</sup>, leadership<sup>9</sup>, decision-making<sup>10</sup>, trust<sup>11</sup>, disagreement<sup>12</sup> and scheduling<sup>13</sup>. IUCN NL will explore and enable discussions on the implications of these cultural differences.

**e) Keeping Civic Space Open**

International collaboration requires vigilance and solidarity regarding a shrinking and limited civic space. As partners, we can take the following steps: recognize the problem, communicate effectively, litigate and protect. Partners should be cautious and consult the respective partner about any information to be made public.

**f) Recognition of Autonomy**

IUCN NL bases its partnership relationships on the recognition that each partner is autonomous and will always strive towards independence of partners - also in financial terms e.g. by advising on potential donors and current calls for proposal, and acting as a reference.

**g) Open and safe Dialogue**

IUCN NL will seek out a dialogue with (potential) partners, developing joint programmes of work together. A safe space for dialogue must be created based on both trust (e.g. acknowledging what can be made public) and on the right means of communication (e.g. email, WhatsApp, Signal, phone, or personal meetings). IUCN NL will invest in multilingual communication, give a voice to, and a platform for all partners, and foster diversity in exchanges.

**h) Gender responsiveness**

IUCN NL commits to gender equality. We regard gender inequality and the resulting barriers as context specific. IUCN NL therefore works from a bottom-up approach together with partners to ensure gender responsive actions that create enabling environments for gender equality and transformative actions to stimulate women's empowerment.

**i) Mutual accountability and good governance**

IUCN NL commits to mutual accountability and good governance. IUCN NL holds partners accountable and asks partners to hold IUCN NL accountable for resources: financial transactions, communications and also compliance with these guiding principles.

Governance activities should be focusing on achieving the mission and making proper use of resources. Good governance involves providing direction and supervision, providing guidance for the partnership's development; monitoring its progress; protecting the interests of the programme's beneficiaries; and ensuring accountability to society, beneficiaries, constituencies, and back donors through a process that is transparent, equitable, and appropriate to the needs and abilities of the beneficiaries.

All parties require sound leadership and management and well-functioning organizational structures and systems to deliver services effectively and efficiently. Partners should be willing – and will be supported – to strengthen their capacities to take on the roles expected in a partner relationship.

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<sup>5</sup> Meyer, Erin (2015). The Culture Map, Public Affairs, New York.

<sup>6</sup> Low-context vs. high-context.

<sup>7</sup> Direct vs. indirect negative feedback.

<sup>8</sup> Principle-first vs. application-first.

<sup>9</sup> Egalitarian vs. hierarchical.

<sup>10</sup> Consensual vs. Top-down.

<sup>11</sup> Task-based vs. relationship-based.

<sup>12</sup> Confrontational vs. avoiding confrontation.

<sup>13</sup> Linear time vs. flexible time.

### 3. VISION

IUCN NL sees development as a political process, aimed at changing unequal power relations and at social transformation.

Degradation of nature and poverty are not inevitable or 'natural', but a result of the actual functioning of human-made social, economic and political structures favouring certain groups of people at the expense of natural ecosystems and other groups of people or communities. Currently, non-democratic as well as democratic governments are curtailing spaces for civic engagement by restricting the freedom of expression and civic activism. CSOs should be enabled to speak up for the interests of people / communities and ecosystems who are either ignored or are treated unjustly by the state or market.

- **Development** is viewed as a process in which these structures are transformed and civil society is empowered to contribute to this transformation.
- **Open Civic Space** is a prerequisite for an effective role of civil society. In facing a limited and shrinking civic space, CSOs from north to south need to come together, understand mutual dependence, and support each other. We must forge genuine solidarity.
- A **multiform and autonomous civil society**<sup>14</sup> is considered essential for social transformation. It not only requires organizations that can achieve results, but also organizations that are actors in their own right. This reflects the notion of civil society and movement building as the underlying belief of how social change occurs.
- **Strengthened capacity and autonomy** of all partners is a formal objective of the partnership.
- **Empowerment of women and marginalized groups** can only be ensured when it is locally owned and driven. Local organizations play the lead role in designing activities and doing the actual work 'on the ground'.
- **Autonomy from the state and large international donors** is perceived as a pre-condition for civil society's contribution to social transformation because it enables people to participate in change processes in ways not possible under the 'official' programmes. The **contribution from IUCN NL** is primarily defined in terms of facilitation (described hereunder) and capacity strengthening.

### 4. FACILITATING ROLES OF IUCN NL

In order to best leverage our strengths to support and empower partners to jointly catalyze the change we want to see in the world, IUCN NL believes it has four key roles to play in the conservation arena, both in the Netherlands and internationally<sup>15</sup>:

- **IUCN NL acts as an advocate:** Taking advantage of our position in the Dutch and international public sphere, our membership and partner network, and our neutral and credible reputation, we advocate key stakeholders, especially in governments, to give priority to conservation and adopt greener ideas and principles. Thus we facilitate the further adoption of pro-conservation practices in the wider community.
- **IUCN NL acts as a convener:** Leverage our multidisciplinary expertise, extensive network, and trustworthy reputation, we bring together different stakeholders to address common conservation challenges. Thus, we foster stakeholder collaboration, breaking down silos and enabling mutual learning, and achieve greater weight for conservation in the public agenda.
- **IUCN NL acts as an incubator:** Thanks to our broad oversight of issues and trends in conservation, as well as our in-house expertise and skill to identify new opportunities, we foster innovation, reaching out and scouting for partners to pilot new approaches and stimulating leverage. We thus strengthen conservation efforts through non-traditional and complementary approaches or by covering unaddressed gaps in the field.
- **IUCN NL acts as a resource broker:** We provide our partners with resources necessary for their operations: securing and redistributing financial resources, brokering knowledge products and expert advice, and facilitating access to the IUCN NL network and international platforms. We thus strengthen local organizations, embedding conservation in the local agenda everywhere.

In partnerships, IUCN NL may perform an additional role in facilitating/supporting local partners in their local partnerships.

<sup>14</sup> See also under 5. Types of relations

<sup>15</sup> See IUCN NL Strategy 2020-2024, page 6;

[https://www.iucn.nl/files/algemeen/jaarverslagen\\_en\\_beleidsstukken/iucn\\_nl\\_strategy\\_2020-2024.pdf](https://www.iucn.nl/files/algemeen/jaarverslagen_en_beleidsstukken/iucn_nl_strategy_2020-2024.pdf)

- IUCN NL can play a role in **helping partners to build local alliances**.
- When local partners are facing power dilemmas or conflicts in which IUCN NL is not a party, we may offer - as a good partner - to **facilitate a process of fact finding and mediation to help solve the problems**.

## 5. TYPES OF RELATIONS

IUCN NL categorizes its partner relationships in four (not mutually exclusive) groups.

- Consortium partners:** Leading / management partners in a consortium that has acquired funding for a specific programme.
- Knowledge partners:** Civil society and academic partners for knowledge exchange and learning.
- Lobby partners:** Partners that collaborate with IUCN NL on specific lobby and advocacy campaigns.
- Grantee partners:** Partners that receive funding for implementation of a programme for which IUCN NL has secured funding.

## 6. PARTNER IDENTIFICATION

IUCN NL strives for a partner identification process that is mutual in nature. Both IUCN NL and a (potential) partner should see their own goals, autonomy and identity reflected in the collaboration. Ideally, IUCN NL is not only selecting a partner but is also selected by that partner.

The partnership should be the result of a negotiation process in which the selection criteria of both sides are considered. Past experiences reveal that equity, respect, autonomy and open and timely communication are major principles to be lived up to in the partnership.

In cases where IUCN NL's roles include the redistribution of financial resources (donor), equity may be a challenge that can be tackled - if applicable - by devolution of power to country and regional committees of partners or by organizing a sensible dialogue on the applicable programme framework and its boundaries.

Long-time trusted partners play a crucial role in finding potential new partners in any given country or landscape.

In countries or landscapes where IUCN NL intends to start work for the first time, ample time should be taken for scoping potential partners with the help of local consultants and regional CSOs who know the political and ecological context and the existence of genuine and trustworthy CSOs with a mandate from relevant constituencies and with an openness to tackle gender imbalances.

Once a partnership is mutually agreed upon in principle, IUCN NL will assess the track record of the partner concerning risks (including fraud and corruption risks) and the capacities and needs regarding governance, gender and financial management; if needed the partner will be offered opportunities for capacity strengthening.

## 7. PARTNERING IN PRACTICE

The Partnership lifecycle<sup>16</sup> assists IUCN NL to clearly understand and undertake specific activities before, during and after partnerships. There are four steps in the lifecycle of the partnerships.

1. In the **Formation Phase**, emphasis lies on a mutual partner identification process (see above: 6 Partner Identification), building relations, agreeing on guiding principles in a partnership (see above 2: Guiding Principles), mapping resources and needs, and agreeing on conditions for collaboration. During this phase, IUCN NL and its partners explore what is needed in terms of capacities and capacity strengthening and of additional partners. Assumptions and risks of the partnership are explored, as are the different expectations for success. An exploration is started on governance issues like representation in regional and international level and the corresponding roles of decision-making, advising or negotiating (fit for purpose governance systems) in relation to proposals, reporting, upcoming opportunities and problems on the way. The roles of IUCN NL

<sup>16</sup> The Partnering Cycle is adapted from the original designed by the Partnership Broker Association – [www.partnershipbrokers.nl](http://www.partnershipbrokers.nl)

- (and other consortium members) are explored.
2. In the **Implementation Phase**, the focus is on governance, trust-building, deepening engagement, further development and agreement on governance structures, and on the implementation of projects, with a clear division of roles and responsibilities. For the mutually agreed reporting system, IUCN NL may ask for additional reporting obligations needed to satisfy its 'back donor', e.g. audit and IATI requirements (upwards accountability to its donors). During the implementation process, IUCN NL may be asked to contribute in its role of advocate, convener, incubator, resource broker and/or facilitator towards local partnerships for which it has similar reporting obligations (mutual accountability).
  3. In the **(annual) Reviewing and Revising phase**, the partners together review the results of the joint programme, the partnership process and the governance structure - based on the principle of mutual accountability - its effectiveness and efficiency. Joint learning through the learning loop is part of this process. If necessary, they adjust the programme, strategies and/or the process of collaboration and/or governance structure and decide whether any additional resources and/or partners may be needed.
  4. After an agreed period, the collaboration enters the phase of **Sustaining Outcomes**. The implementing partners, together with IUCN NL (and others where relevant) jointly assess the possibilities of moving on, such as scaling up, expanding or deciding to end the partnership based on developments in the context (incl. funding), results and the partnership process.

## 8. CONFLICT RESOLUTION

IUCN NL will follow the guiding principles, facilitating roles and partnering cycling described above when establishing formal and contractual agreements with partners.

Any differences arising from the implementation of the collaboration will first be approached through a path of deliberation and prioritizing a sense of mutual respect.

When IUCN NL determines that a partner is not fulfilling the obligations under the contractual agreement, IUCN NL will undertake several actions which will:

- 1) Aim for resolution of the conflict;
- 2) When the conflict may not be mutually satisfactorily resolved, move to a dissolution of the formal and/or contractual obligations, after which remedy may be sought (formal legal procedures may be used);
- 3) In cases of gross misconduct, and after having sought remedy, the breach of contract will result in the grey or black listing of the partner by IUCN NL, which will prevent the partner from establishing any potential future formal relationships with IUCN NL. Such a decision will be shared with other partners in the partnership and with the involved back donor. Upon request, IUCN NL will inform other donors of the grey/black listing of the organization in question.

In case a partner determines a breach made by IUCN NL of the obligations under the contractual agreement, or when a local 'whistle blower' alleges fraud, corruption or criminal acts (incl. sexual harassment) by (the staff of) a partner, IUCN NL will set in motion the process described in its Complaints Procedure<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> To be accessed through:

[https://www.iucn.nl/files/algemeen/jaarverslagen\\_en\\_beleidsstukken/complaints\\_procedure\\_iucn\\_nl.pdf](https://www.iucn.nl/files/algemeen/jaarverslagen_en_beleidsstukken/complaints_procedure_iucn_nl.pdf) Form:  
[https://www.iucn.nl/files/algemeen/jaarverslagen\\_en\\_beleidsstukken/complaints\\_form\\_iucn\\_nl.docx](https://www.iucn.nl/files/algemeen/jaarverslagen_en_beleidsstukken/complaints_form_iucn_nl.docx)