



Partnering and collaboration in a time of Covid-19: What we are learning
17 April 2020

1. **Relationships matter.** The Covid-19 crisis requires a ‘whole of government’ and ‘whole of society’ response. Government alone is not going to manage. It helps to be able to draw on pre-existing relationships of trust within the system in order to mobilise, coordinate and lead. If these relationships are historically non-existent, or poor, they need to be improved, rapidly. Non-aligned collaborative intermediary organisations can play a very useful role in helping different sectors and organisations to work better together, through convening the right conversations, spotting the gaps, ‘joining the dots’ and building trust. It’s as important to build relationships and partnerships within government as between government and whole of society. Pay particular attention to the diabolical combination of organisational silos and egos!
2. **Civil society moves faster than government in a time of crisis.** For example, in just four weeks the Cape Town Together movement now has over 11 000 online members and 2 000 registered volunteers and has proved to be a valuable platform for connecting people and groups, communicating accurate information, initiating joint action, mobilising ideas and resources, bringing in new people and channelling energy in a constructive way. Under the Cape Town Together movement, 105 neighbourhoods have established Community Action Networks (CANs) as a rapid community response to Covid-19. These local groups offer a platform for communities to take action together and to share resources and information. There are now 19 partnerships between 38 CANs in wealthier and poorer neighbourhoods, under the banner of physical distancing, social solidarity. See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/CapeTownTogether/>
3. **Partnering works best when you focus on specific problems.** Don’t try and coordinate everything with everyone. It becomes too complex. Don’t try to set up unwieldy committees, which can attract gatekeepers, mandate defenders and empire builders. Instead, mobilise coalitions or platforms around specific issues, i.e. food security, production and distribution of masks for the public, caring for the homeless, etc. Ask yourself: who needs to work together to solve this problem? Help leaders to see themselves as part of a co-dependent system, rather than as representatives of a separate department or organisation.
4. **Align the ‘top-down’ authorising environment with the ‘bottom-up’ mobilising environment.** Each ‘environment’ has a different role. The authorising environment brings to bear political decision-making, data-based public policy, state resources, enforcement capabilities, and the ability to scale responses. The mobilising environment brings agile local responses, grassroots communication networks, and the space for experimentation and innovation. Both environments need each other. Again, trusted intermediary organisations can play a role in bringing the two together. In particular, government needs to value bottom-up knowledge, so communication systems should be two-way and should have feedback loops built into them.
5. **You don’t have to agree on everything to be able to work together.** Different sectors and organisations have different interests and perspectives. That’s normal in a democracy, but

that doesn't stop us agreeing to work together on a common agenda of fighting Covid-19. In a time of crisis, focus on the things that unite rather than divide.

6. **Design sustainable interventions because this fight against Covid-19 is going to be a long one.** Ensure that partners are able to stay the course by not overloading them with too much at once. They need to be able to maintain their energy and enthusiasm. Hope, optimism and goodwill are essential ingredients for implementation of well-thought-out plans. This is also important for a 'build back better' strategy for after the crisis. The relationships of trust we build during the crisis have the potential to form the basis of a better society afterwards.
7. **Build on existing organisations, systems and knowledge.** Listen to community organisers who have an in-depth knowledge of local conditions, personalities, politics, needs, challenges and potential solutions. Be aware of the way you're communicating about what you're doing. Try and be aware of your own assumptions and biases.
8. **Be prepared to say that you don't have the answers.** If you can do this, then you have a better chance of hearing when others do have the answers.
9. **Welcome all offers of help, as there is a role for everyone.** This fight is large enough to offer a role for anyone willing to take part, whether it is designing distribution systems, raising funds or making masks.
10. **Share information and learn.** Be generous with sharing information so that we can speed up our response by using tried and tested methods and not having to reinvent the wheel. Don't try and plan too much. Take collective action, and while you take action, pause and reflect, learn quickly, adjust and adapt your plans. Repeat.

For any partnering support, please contact covidcollaborate@wcedp.co.za

Additional partnering lessons:

- [Building relationships in a time of crisis](#)
- [The big Cs that will help us get through this](#)
- [Ten steps on how to build effective partnerships](#)