

Practitioner case study:

Key factors for the successful implementation of stakeholder partnerships: the Case of the African Cashew initiative

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Abstract:

This paper will discuss the main concepts related to stakeholder partnerships and the key factors for their successful implementation. Laying out a methodological background developed by the Collective Leadership Institute (CLI) and drawing on its 2 years of extensive experience with the African Cashew initiative (ACi), this paper will discuss eight key factors for the success of complex stakeholder partnerships and illustrate their application with examples from the initiative.

The implementation of sustainable development efforts often requires finding joint solutions to complex challenges and cooperation between different societal actors in order to pool expertise, experiences and resources (Kuenkel, Gerlach, & Frieg, 2011). Such cross-sector stakeholder partnerships require patience and persistence, but, when managed well, they can build the cross-sector stability we need to address global challenges. Any attempt to initiate, implement or facilitate such cooperation processes is an intervention into a fragile and often controversial system of actors. So, it requires careful attention to the **quality of the process**, the quality of relationships and interaction among stakeholders (Armistead,

Pettigrew, & Aves, 2007), as well as to the quality of the formal and informal structures that are created to make the cooperation work (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006).

Complex cooperation processes in sustainable development may be influenced by external factors that the initiators have little power over, such as political instability or economic crises. But most factors crucial for the success of such initiatives actually can be influenced to a certain degree. These factors – in combination – can determine the quality of a cooperation process and, eventually, contribute to its success. Paying attention to them helps to maintain the dynamic, to keep stakeholders sufficiently involved and finally to achieve tangible outcomes or successful implementation.

In the field of international cooperation, value chain promotion has become increasingly interesting for testing innovative models for alleviating poverty, not only for development agencies, but also for governments and for advocates of sustainable economic and environmental development in the private sector.

This is why the Collective Leadership Institute has dedicated itself to supporting the implementation of result oriented stakeholder partnership and dialogue processes and developed a framework to guide practitioners along their way.

This paper will first discuss the key concepts related to stakeholder partnerships and briefly define the factors for their successful implementation. The subsequent section will briefly lay out the methodological background developed by the Collective Leadership Institute on which the key factors are based (*The Dialogic Change Model*). Drawing on the Collective Leadership Institute's 2 years of extensive experience with the African Cashew initiative (ACi), this paper will discuss eight key factors for the success of complex stakeholder partnerships and illustrate their application with examples from the initiative. Finally, the lessons learned will be summed up in the conclusion.

KEY CONCEPTS

The key factors have been elaborated with reference to the different phases of a stakeholder partnership as defined in the Collective Leadership Institute's *Dialogic Change Model* (Kuenkel, Gerlach, & Frieg, 2011), a tool which assists the result-oriented, structured planning and implementation of a Stakeholder Dialogue/partnership in four phases. The following 8 key factors are based on the experience of practitioners and summarized here (Kuenkel, Gerlach, & Frieg). In the main body of this article, more detail is given for each of the key factors and reference is made to the African Cashew Initiative with a supporting example.

Leadership and high level sponsorship	Stakeholder partnerships are change initiatives and need to be strongly led: not by one person, but usually by a group of initiators or conveners. Because there is no disciplinary hierarchy between stakeholders, leadership is a capacity that a core group of stakeholders in its function as good Container needs to develop jointly. High-level support is essential for impact.
Cohesion and relationship-management	An often undervalued factor is creating a sense of belonging. This involves making sure stakeholders feel that they are part of something larger. Relationships require attention throughout stakeholder partnerships. Protocol, boundaries and territories must be respected.
Goals and process clarity	People engage when they see the bigger picture and understand how they can contribute to positive change. stakeholder partnerships may look unpredictable, so stakeholders want to know what to expect, and when. Keeping the goal high helps stakeholders to connect emotionally; clarity on process planning provides the minimum level of certainty that people require to stay engaged.
Knowledge and competence	Most stakeholder partnerships take place around content issues. Expertise and information need to be provided in a way that helps stakeholders to see the issue's full picture. Capacity-building helps create equality and balance, particularly for weaker stakeholder groups: it can strengthen their voices and improves the quality of their contribution.
Credibility	Credibility is composed of different aspects: the reputation and position of the initiators or conveners of stakeholder partnerships; the transparency in communication among participating stakeholders and the public; the reliability with which recommendations or inputs from different stakeholders are taken into account; and the degree of representation of stakeholders involved.
Inclusivity	Stakeholder partnerships that exclude important stakeholders will lose credibility, cause distrust among non-participating stakeholders, or have reduced impact. Integrating the concerned or affected, but weaker, stakeholder groups ensures that outcomes are based on a broader picture.
Ownership	People implement what they have helped to create. Ownership

develops when the goal of the Stakeholder partnership is relevant to all stakeholders and when they perceive that their contribution counts. Keeping people engaged is an important road to success. Authentic participation, in the way contributions are handled, events are run and communication takes place, ensures ownership.

Delivery and

outcome-orientation

Focus on outcomes is a prerequisite for commitment. In Stakeholder partnership process planning, it is important that tangible results are always visibly achieved: this can range from a basic agreement to meet again, to documented recommendations, or from agreed-upon action plans, to progress reporting on implementation.

Taken from (Kuenkel, Gerlach, & Frieg, 2011)

The Dialogic Change Model

The differentiation of 4 phases in a stakeholder partnership has proven helpful in taking all demands and requirements of the different phases of a partnership process into account and preparing them adequately.

Phase 1: Exploring and engaging

In Phase 1 stakeholders explore the stakeholder partnership's context, taking other existing initiatives and the people involved into account. This requires understanding the external context, the factors that will influence the dialogue, and the dynamics of the complex system in which the stakeholder partnership will take place. Talking to selected but relevant stakeholders and opinion-leaders informally in this phase can help to understand the prospects and potential obstacles for dialogue and change. Central to Phase 1 is building trust, creating resonance and making the case for dialogue and change.

Phase 2: Building and formalizing

Phase 2 is geared toward consolidating the system of stakeholder collaboration and formalizing stakeholders' commitment to change. The objective of this phase is to find an appropriate formal structure for moving an initiative forward and to build a stable collaborative system for implementation for which goals are agreed upon jointly, and roles and resources are formally defined.

Phase 3: Implementing and evaluating

This phase can be seen as the actual implementation of planned activities and includes the establishment of an internal stakeholder partnership monitoring system to ensure results and learning. Its focus is on creating visible results in a reasonable timeframe so that all actors involved can see the success of the stakeholder partnership.

Phase 4: Developing further, replicating or institutionalizing

Once a stakeholder partnership has reached the agreed-upon results, the question remains whether an initiative should stop there, or if it should be further developed. If the desired goal has been achieved, success should be adequately celebrated: participation and contributions of individual stakeholder groups should be acknowledged and appreciated. Many stakeholder partnerships terminate successfully after Phase 3. The goals of Phase 4 are different from case to case; they can be, for example institutionalizing a successful dialogue form or to use the experience gathered in dialogue in another process.

If conducted correctly, a stakeholder partnership can ultimately ease the implementation processes and help attain sustainable results because actors will have begun to perceive reality and other's points of view from a new perspective. The Dialogic Change Model developed by the Collective Leadership Institute can help create a process design that can be owned by all stakeholders, on local, national and international levels.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND OF THE AFRICAN CASHEW INITIATIVE

Before discussing the key factors with the help of examples from the African Cashew Initiative, a brief overview of the ACi and its objectives will help put the overall project into context.

The Initiative's overall objective is the sustainable success of the African cashew industry. This success is driven by three main forces:

- **I. Sustainable growth in production and farming income**
- **II. Sustainable success in local processing**
- **III. Sustainable supply chains**

Higher cashew production income and volume per farmer are seen as the major drivers for force I, as well as additional income through small-scale processing. Force II aims at increasing processing volumes and productivity, improving quality standards (e.g., that meet international demands), increasing the marketability of by-products, and improving financing

and trade conditions. Force III largely concentrates on building loyal relationships between farmer business organizations and processors, and improving transparency on potential factors contributing to increased quality and to an enabling investment environment.

It is expected that within four years, 5,500 new jobs will be created in cashew processing and that 150,000 small-scale cashew producers will generate USD 15 million in additional income per year. Including the producers' family members, the targeted number of beneficiaries amounts to 900,000. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the cashew tree offers numerous environmental benefits such as fighting deforestation or soil erosion. An increased production of cashew thus can also be seen as a contribution to climate change adaptation and mitigation.

The cultivation of cashews is increasingly seen as a positive economic factor in creating economic growth both for rural growers and for urban industrial processors in terms of generating employment and adding value to emerging economies. In addition, the global demand for cashews is steadily rising. The initiative focuses on improvements in cashew nut quality and increased production, and the expansion of improved cashew processing on medium and large scales. In addition, ACi aims at improving market linkages along the value chain, promoting the African cashew on the world market and improving the framework conditions for investments and business activities in the selected cashew value chains. It is currently implemented in five countries: Ghana, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte D'Ivoire and Mozambique.

Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development and Private Sector partners such as OLAM, Kraftfoods, Intersnack and SAP, the initiative is implemented by 4 different partners under the lead of the German Development Cooperation (GIZ – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) and works in close collaboration with the Governments of the 5 mentioned African countries. One of the main partners in the Initiative is the African Cashew Alliance (ACA), a platform which promotes the African cashew industry worldwide.

Such a diverse setting of actors requires a very conscious approach to planning and implementation. The individual circumstances present in each of the pilot countries create a **complex multi-stakeholder and multi-country environment** within the African Cashew Initiative, bringing with them a range of challenges and opportunities and creating the need for **custom made solutions**. Furthermore, the wide range of complex secondary objectives, from training of the farmers to increasing efficiency of processing units, improving the quantity and quality of primary production in order to build strong business linkages with the private sector, requires alignment of **project governance, management structure and**

modes of operation. The African Cashew initiative has to successfully operate on many different levels in order to achieve its overall goals:

- From **micro level** support to farmers and processors,
- capacity development for and strengthening of **meso level** organizations and institutions (farmers-groups, associations),
- ensure the support of financial institutions for the development of the cashew market,
- influence the **macro level environment** in each country to further promote cashew production and local processing,
- strengthen **local, regional and international** market linkages, and institutional development for regional support institutions (e.g. ACA).

Not only the role of national governments, but also the role of the Initiative's private sector partners is gaining in importance. It is becoming increasingly clear that not exclusively harnessing the financial resources of the private sector, but rather tapping in on the entrepreneurial, innovative, and managerial capacities of businesses at all scales will help contribute to improving the social and economic objectives of the African Cashew Initiative.

Thus, the Initiative's management team must constantly deal with extremely different contexts, actors, organizational cultures, mindsets and decision-making procedures. Bringing together actors from different sectors and with different interests into a joint initiative requires developing an affinity for dealing with diversity, as well as advancing communication and management competence beyond the realm of typical project management skills.

There is the challenge of constantly ensuring sufficient coordination and integration of the partners' activities and different stakeholder expectations, but also the need to navigate between very different organizational cultures and subsequent expectation. One of the key challenges lies in creating alignment in implementation and a collective commitment to fast strategic learning. Ultimately, the African Cashew Initiative can only be successful, if it succeeds in inspiring and capacitating all actors on country level to take up the support being offered and develop it further into a long-lasting economic development of the sector. This requires strong management with a coherent implementation strategy, which all implementing and funding actors can identify with. However, it also requires tailor-made strategies for each individual country in order to adequately cultivate a sense of ownership for the initiative's goals on the ground. The management needs to navigate implementation between sustainable engagement processes on country level and the demands of fast milestone achievement impressed upon by the donors.

KEY FACTORS FOR THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS: THE CASE OF THE AFRICAN CASHEW INITIATIVE

On the path to reaching its goals, the ACi has faced a number of challenges, most of which have been overcome with time. The next section describes in further detail the 8 key factors for the successful implementation of stakeholder partnerships stated above and demonstrates them on the basis of examples from the African Cashew Initiative.

Key factor 1: Leadership and high level sponsorship.

The initial collaboration in a complex stakeholder cooperation such as the ACi can be brokered/initiated by a credible (see factor 5) high-level individual or organization. Most stakeholder cooperation projects build on past, often fragmented project experience and attempt to strengthen impact by aligning the efforts of different stakeholders. Hence, it is often practitioners in the field who draw attention to an issue and bring in a powerful sponsor or organization. Legitimacy within a group of stakeholders (Crosby & Bryson, 2005a) is key at the onset, as initiators need a mandate to start the collaboration process. More generally, initiating individuals can be e.g., high-level leaders, recognized for their cross-sector experience, CEOs, or politicians. It can also be large NGOs, private enterprises or foundations. High level sponsorship is vital for the successful launch of a collaboration process.

In Phase 1 (Exploring and engaging), the ACi was initially spear-headed by practitioners with extensive experience in supporting agricultural value chains as well as in public private partnerships. Drawing on the limitations but also successes of past projects by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), it became clear that any support for African cashew farmers and processors would require an integrated as well as market driven approach. Designing a project of such scale required an intense engagement process not only within GIZ itself, but also among key value chain actors, large private sector companies and potential funders. Such an engagement process requires networking leadership skills and the capacity to inspire and convince a diverse set of actors with a new approach to project implementation.

Leadership in complex stakeholder partnerships requires more than just traditional leadership skills: "...leaders frequently have a narrow range of expertise, speak a language that can be understood only by their peers, are used to being in control, and relate to the people with whom they work as followers or subordinates rather than partners. Partnerships, by contrast, need boundary-spanning leaders who understand and appreciate partners'

different perspectives, can bridge their diverse cultures, and are comfortable sharing ideas, resources and power.” (Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001)

Although hierarchical differences and differences in influence and power play an important role in a partnership situation, there is no disciplinary hierarchy between stakeholders, no leader who has the final say in what needs to happen. Leadership is therefore the capacity to engage (Armistead, Pettigrew, & Aves, 2007), which stakeholders need to develop jointly. Stakeholder partnerships thrive on a combination of passionate drivers and a spirit of collective responsibility for change. But they also need to take influential actors into account: obtaining their support can be a crucial success factor (Kuenkel, Gerlach, & Frieg, 2011).

A major challenge for The African Cashew Initiative in Phase 3 (See Dialogic Change Model: Implementing and evaluating) is the decentralized leadership structure across its 5 countries Ivory Coast, Ghana, Benin, Burkina Faso and Mozambique. Responsibility for each implementation focus and its objectives is taken by a different implementing partner such as Techno Serve, FairMatch Support and the African Cashew Alliance. The management structure at the regional level in Ghana consists of a top management by GIZ as the lead agency responsible for the overall implementation and coordination of activities, and the implementation manager of each of the 3 other implementing partners (IPs: Techno Serve, FairMatch Support and the African Cashew Alliance). At the country level, this structure is replicated: the GIZ-employed country coordinators manage implementation in collaboration with the representatives of each of the other implementing partners. Private sector enterprises are both partners in implementation and funders; hence they oversee implementation in their role as funding core partners and are members of a steering committee that functions as a sounding board for implementation progress and strategy adjustment.

This set-up is very demanding on the management’s leadership skills. It takes great coordination to not only manage this type of complex collaboration, but also to create synergy between organizations that approach implementation with differing philosophies. Each country also spawns immensely different challenges regarding domestic stakeholder expectations, implementation management and coordination among implementing partners. Indeed, no formal disciplinary hierarchy exists between the partners at country level, but nonetheless the initiative’s overall success depends on their effective collaboration. As noted above, collaboration under these circumstances rests greatly on the ability of leaders on every level to engage partners and create synergies within the partnership structure. The private sector partners, however, tend to assess the project’s progress in a framework typical for internal performance appraisal in large enterprises, while expectations on how to lead

such a complex system can be very different between partners experienced in development cooperation and those more familiar with private sector practices.

Key factor 2: Cohesion and relationship management.

Under the assumption that successful partnerships are key to achieving sustainable results, stakeholders need to move from an individual project management style into collaborative action (Glasbergen, 2010). Therefore, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust is essential. This requires putting a particular emphasis on building and maintaining relationships with and between the different stakeholders involved in a cooperation process (Kuenkel, Gerlach, & Frieg, Working with Stakeholder Dialogues, 2011).

During the first two years of implementation, a considerable effort went into building alignment between the different partners. Although objectives, roles and responsibilities (see phase 2 : Building and formalizing) had been clarified with all involved partners and a management structure (see above) had been set up as a regional office, much work had to be invested in creating the level of alignment, collaboration in implementation and synergy that was envisaged as a cornerstone of successful implementation. In the beginning there was a strong tendency toward “parallel” implementation by the different partners with a limited degree of exchange on progress. However, the higher the demands on delivery grew, the clearer it became that only a fine-tuned “joint” effort could ensure delivery. Hence, the management of the initiative needed to set up a structure of strategic learning and management meetings: an implementing partners meeting, learning and innovation meetings and management retreats. They all served to enhance identification of all partners with their common goals, align implementation activities, optimize the coordination of efforts, and jointly monitor success.

However, cross-sector stakeholder partnerships such as the ACi can be intrinsically more problematic than, for example, intra-sector partnerships such as business-to-business relationships. Based on the pure nature of such partnerships, stakeholders are often forced to assume roles and responsibilities which may be partly incompatible with their core competencies or the way they are used to operate (Waddell, 2005).

With stakeholders such as multinational donors (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation), NGOs, private enterprises, and national governments, the “corporate cultures”, management and cooperation styles of each organization are fundamentally different from one another (Glasbergen, 2010). Specifically, diverging world views, languages, and different approaches

to problem-solving, to project management and to monitoring progress can cause slowdowns which can hamper the project's progress.

A prime example of the different "languages" spoken by the private sector, the donors, and the German development agency GIZ arose just before the second ACi steering committee meeting in September 2010. In addition to the existing project proposal with agreed upon objectives and milestones, the lead agency was asked by BMGF to produce a "road map" as an additional planning tool for the project's further implementation and to highlight its "critical path" as well as key performance indicators. As much as this helped to re-align private sector companies and enhance their confidence in the project's delivery, the other agencies, particularly those more familiar with project and monitoring tools used within development cooperation, initially regarded the new tool more as a burden complicating the implementation and reporting than as a helpful management instrument. It took a considerable amount of time until the lead agency (GIZ) was able to fully use this tool in the management and coordination of implementing partners.

Before any of the partners can reap the mutual benefits of such a stakeholder partnership, there first must be an inner shift in attitude and a genuine willingness to collaborate. But building and maintaining trusting relationships does not happen on its own. The core group of stakeholders, in this case the GIZ management of ACi, needs to constantly manage relationships with the individual partners, and maintain a certain level of trust within the ACi partnership. This is achieved through the principles of transparency and participation (Kuenkel, Gerlach, & Frieg, 2011) and the recognition that equity and accountability in interpersonal interaction/communication are relevant.

With operations in 5 African countries and partners/donors from 4 continents, this initially proved to be a difficult task for the ACi. With only two face-to-face meetings of all the stakeholders per year, these events need to be used wisely to help build the personal and the working relationships which are needed to keep a project running despite great distance between partners.

One example of how ACi encouraged cross-border relationship building was the establishment of the country coordinators' meeting. Early in the project, the 5 country coordinators were hired and had contact only with the project's top-management, but had no chance to directly interact and exchange during the formal meetings. However, it became quickly apparent that in order to carry out their duties, they needed the input of their colleagues, who were faced with similar situations and difficulties in their own countries.

Key factor 3: Goal and process clarity.

People engage when they see the bigger picture and understand how they can contribute to positive change. Clarity about goals and about process go hand in hand in stakeholder partnerships. Although the purpose of bringing stakeholders together is often clear to the core group, this does not necessarily mean that the goal is understood or even agreed upon between all invited stakeholders.

Often – particularly in stakeholder consultation, for example – the goal remains vague, and participating stakeholders feel more like observers than engaged participants. But even when the goal seems to be clear, it needs to be developed further, adjusted, or reshaped by all main stakeholders involved. Developing an agreed-upon goal and pushing the stakeholder partnership towards outcomes requires solid process architecture. The road ahead may look unpredictable despite written up project plans, so stakeholders want to know what to expect, and when: keeping the goal high helps stakeholders to connect emotionally, and clarity on process planning provides the minimum level of certainty that people require to stay engaged. Goal and process clarity support each other: the less developed, more changeable and more distant the goal, the more reliability the process needs to offer (Kuenkel, Gerlach, & Frieg, 2011).

The ACi's long list of objectives, activities, outputs and expected outcomes are laid out in an extensive contract which was drafted and signed by all implementing and funding partners before the initiative began in 2009 (see phase 2 : Building and formalizing). The corresponding responsibilities of each implementing partner were also included in the contract – in other words which organization was responsible for which output.

However, although the goals may have seemed clear, it was difficult to keep all partners sufficiently up to date on the overall progress of the project – the milestone document was complex and tedious. In addition, it soon became clear that although each partner had its own individual activities and objectives, it was only possible to achieve many of them in collaboration with the other partners, which meant keeping up to date on their activities and progress.

A process ensued which proceeded to adapt some of the initiative's goals to better reflect the realities on the ground based on the experience to date. The development of a redesigned "roadmap" 1½ years into implementation, which was in the beginning perceived as an additional burden, turned out to become a process helping all actors the see the "big picture", the challenges and the complementary of their contributions. A more comprehensive document emerged outlining the rationale behind each of the initiative's objectives and their

interconnectivity using a logic tree. Additionally the current status of major progress indicators are displayed in a dashboard containing selected graphs. Eventually, the road map created a greater sense of ownership for the initiative's objectives on the whole.

In a last step, key performance indicators (KPIs) and key cost indicators (KCI) were established in close collaboration with the private sector partners. These were especially chosen to systematically track the initiative's overall progress.

Key Factor 4: Knowledge and Competence.

Trust can be based on both the competence and on the perceived intentions of either individuals or organizations (Nootboom B. , 2006). As stakeholder partnerships take place around content issues and delivery, expertise and information need to be provided in a way that helps stakeholders to see the issue's full picture. If one partner's shortcomings are due to a lack of competence, then capacity-building (particularly for weaker stakeholder groups) may be an option to help strengthen their voices and improve the quality of their contributions, e.g., educating stakeholders about the concepts, information, and tools that are key to its work (Keast, Mandell, Brown, & Woolcock, 2004). Stakeholders should be confident that the right competencies are present within the wider group, but not necessarily in each individual (Nootboom S. G., 2006).

Stakeholder partnerships build on the emergence of collective intelligence and the assumption that integrating different interests and competence leads to joint progress. Both aspects require expertise, experience and knowledge in the understanding of content, as well as the capability to collaborate constructively. Nonetheless, the experience that stakeholders bring into a partnership need to be aligned (Madden, 2010).

The African Cashew Initiative targets the entire value chain, from the production of raw cashew nuts to the commercialization of the final products on the world market. Innately, different stakeholder groups throughout the value chain have a vast range of expertise and competencies, often limited to their own specific areas, and have access to different resources for building their capacities in the other levels of the value chain.

Learning and innovation plays a central role in the African Cashew Initiative's steering structure. Over the course of the last year, alongside the usual steering committee and implementing partner meetings, there has been an extra 1-2 days set aside for the sharing of experience and lessons learned all along the value chain. Additionally, new tools and

methods have been introduced at the meetings to help deepen all the stakeholders' comprehension of the cashew sector in each of the countries where the project is active.

If Partnerships lack knowledge and competence, the consultation, decision-making or implementation process they intend to deliver will be inadequate for the achievement of the goal.

Key factor 5: Credibility.

Partnerships need credibility to be effective. Credibility involves a number of factors, which are discussed briefly here.

Firstly, the reputation, neutrality and credibility of the initiator, convener or facilitator are especially important to lend credibility and legitimacy to the initiative and facilitate collaboration (Gray, 1989). Conveners may be powerful individuals, such as a mayor or CEO, an Organization or a private foundation. In the case of the ACi it is a combination of both: the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) as well as GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) represent reputable organizations, well known for their philanthropy and implementation experience, respectively.

Secondly, it is important that all stakeholder groups be equally represented in the dialogue process in order to remain credible not only to stakeholders within the process, but also to those observing it. The ACi has worked hard over the last year to assure that the initiative's steering committee be composed of members from the entire value chain. This in turn improves the transparency of decision-making, as all stakeholder groups are involved in the process.

Thirdly, the reliability with which recommendations or inputs from different stakeholders are taken into account can affect the overall credibility of the decision-making process.

Finally, how embedded the Stakeholder partnership is in relevant societal processes also contributes to its credibility. Scholars call this the degree of *structural embeddedness* (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006). The more partners have interacted in positive ways in the past, the more social mechanisms will enable coordination and safeguard exchange (Jones, Hesterly, & Borgatti, 1997).

The ACi is currently developing national stakeholder platforms in 2 of the countries (Ghana and Benin) in which it is active. An effort is being made to integrate this effort into previously existing national structures to avoid doublings but more importantly to empower local structures to take on the initiative's objectives (see phase 3: implementing and evaluating).

The objective of forming the national platforms is to capacitate the industry to grow to a stage where they can advocate for better conditions for the cashew industry and negotiate better conditions for improved business in their various countries.

The more credible a stakeholder partnership is, the more likely participants will be to identify with the goal and the process and to justify their participation in the stakeholder partnership to their constituencies, organizations, superiors, etc.

Key factor 6: Inclusivity.

Stakeholder partnerships that exclude important stakeholders will lose credibility and will cause mistrust among non-participating stakeholders. They will also be less effective, because stakeholders who are important for implementing or supporting results are absent from the dialogue process. In a study in the health sector in the US, Weiss et al. (2002) identify one of the main indicators for the effectiveness of leadership in stakeholder partnerships as being the degree of inclusiveness and openness exhibited in the collaboration process.

Integrating stakeholder groups with weaker voices, such as small or informal businesses, communities, women's groups, small NGOs, and so on, is important to ensure that participants can base their decisions on a broader picture. Inclusivity, however, does not mean including everybody: the art is to find out, which stakeholders can help to create the change in thinking and acting that the stakeholder partnership requires.

An over eager effort to populate partnerships with all possible interests in an effort to be inclusive can, however, result in inefficiency. An overly wide spectrum of interests can lead to an "information overload", a loss of focus and a lack time to adequately deal with the complexities (Armistead, Pettigrew, & Aves, 2007).

The ACi is targeting wide scale change in the entire cashew value chain, which inherently means the involvement of a large number of stakeholders on the regional, national, and international levels. The challenge was, and still is, how to include representatives from the different levels of the value chain, but also government representatives sufficiently in the planning and decision-making phases and still keep the initiative on track with the set milestones and targets.

With the help of African Cashew Alliance (ACA) as one implementing partners, steering committee structures were created on the national level, which included representatives from the local governments, local business and farmer associations, and were involved in the initial milestone revision and planning which took place in each country. These structures

were then also represented in the initiative's own steering committee which meets twice annually to review progress and revise the initiative's overall strategy.

However, the exact composition of the steering structures at the project level is still a subject of debate. The private sector partners tend to prefer an "exclusive" steering body, reducing the number of individuals to a selected few, whereas the public partner and lead implementing body GIZ tend to be overly inclusive, preferring to leave the composition of the steering committee open. Who should be a member and under what conditions stakeholders should be allowed to have a say in strategic decision-making processes plays an important role in how less powerful stakeholders perceive the legitimacy of the initiative and therefore to what degree they take ownership of the decisions made and their implementation.

Key factor 7: Ownership.

People implement what they have helped to create. Ownership develops when the goal of the stakeholder partnership is relevant to all stakeholders and when they perceive that their contribution counts. Keeping people engaged is an important road to success. If participants in a dialogue process have the impression that their recommendations are not being implemented and feel that their concerns and perspectives not being taken into account, there is a high probability that they will reduce their engagement and fail to implement decisions, become passive observers of the dialogue, or completely withdraw from the process altogether. Authentic participation in the way contributions are handled, workshops are run and communication takes place, ensures ownership (Kuenkel, Gerlach, & Frieg, 2011).

The ownership of the initiative on country level among value chain stakeholders remains a challenge. Engagement has taken place, but requires time and continuous effort. The building-up of national stakeholder platforms is being seen as a cornerstone for enhancing the long-term ownership for the initiative's goal, in this case the country specific promotion of cashew production and processing. But as the project is understandably very focused on quantitatively measurable milestone delivery, the engagement processes on country level may at times not receive the required attention.

On the other hand, more ownership has developed among the private sectors partners. It has become clear that the value of the private sector's contribution goes well beyond their financial resources. Tapping into their entrepreneurial, innovative, and managerial capacities is an invaluable contribution to improving the initiative's social and economic objectives. Through revisiting the role of the private sector, did the private sector partners' ownership for

concrete processes in ACi take a leap forward. They took the initiative in identifying processes within the initiative's current configuration where they could get involved or test innovative ideas.

Many of the private sector partner's possible "in-kind" contributions to the initiative have been left unspent, either because the management was unclear on how to use the private sector's expertise, or because the private sector was not pro-active in offering their competence (in-kind contributions which give some of the partners a place on the steering committee and therefore say in how the initiative moves forward).

One example of such an initiative is the SAP-ACi partnership "Virtual Cooperatives", which aims to provide solutions related to market linkages and overall transparency within the Cashew production and processing value chain. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) provide the means to enhance the productivity of Cashew farmers, to strengthen farmer cooperatives, and to enable them to do collaborative business with the established economy in a transparent and sustainable way (ACA newsletter, August, 2011).

If a group of stakeholders is going to invest resources in implementation, it is critical that the actors involved in a stakeholder partnership have a joint ownership of the strategies being developed. Not all stakeholders can contribute equally to the solution, as each partner comes with different types and scale of resources. However, it is important not to focus simply upon the outcome, but to also maintain the acute awareness that the process itself and building of relationships is part of the outcome (Waddell & Brown, 1997).

Key factor 8: Delivery and outcome-orientation.

Bryson et al. (2006) argues that the main objective of cross-sector partnerships should be the creation of sustainable "public value" that would not otherwise be created by a single sector alone. This is most likely to occur by making use of each sector's characteristic strengths while also finding ways to minimize, overcome, or compensate for each sector's characteristic weaknesses. Focus on outcomes is a prerequisite for commitment, particularly in phase 3 (Implementing and evaluating).

As a time-bound implementation initiative, the ACi focus is on delivery: it has a detailed implementation plan with milestones to be achieved by each implementing partner over a period of four years. The funders of the initiative, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and several private sector companies each require progress reports to justify their further engagement in the initiative. Although implementation may be slow and complex in the five pilot countries, which

vastly differ and require different approaches, there is a need to regularly report results in an aggregated way to keep the funders engaged.

Proprietary reporting formats which the different sectors often take for granted, obviously play a major role in keeping players engaged. Private sector expectations such as quarterly reports, key performance and cost indicators (KPIs & KCIs), and project dashboards are in most cases not the norm for development projects. On the other hand, descriptive reports and activity-reporting typical for development cooperation appear to the private sector as being vague, unsubstantiated and lacking in concrete results. Hence, despite the fact that all expected results have been laid down in writing in an initial project proposal, the way to get there, the speed with which to get there and above all, the evidence of achievements in a complex development and market environment remains a continuous point of discussion among the collaborating stakeholder within ACi.

Planning and implementing a stakeholder partnership requires regularly making successes visible – big or small. If stakeholders begin to get the impression that a dialogue and implementation process is stagnant, or that the use of their inputs is not transparent, they will most likely withhold their engagement. Even small achievements such as further meetings, agreements on action plans, and small success stories can contribute to keeping engagement alive and encourage stakeholders to undertake more intense activities in the future (Waddell & Brown, 1997).

Although the process itself is extremely important, outcomes are essential to any stakeholder partnership. Decisions and programs that produce concrete results on the issues that originally motivated the partnership are critical to keeping the partners' interest high, and their evaluation positive. Stakeholder partnerships are more effective when their members pay attention to both process and product (Waddell & Brown, 1997).

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Project set-ups such as that of the ACi are becoming more and more common due to larger scale interventions and change initiatives which are gradually choosing cross-sector approaches and becoming increasingly international, both in their organization and their implementation. This means that improving collaboration between NGOs, the public sector, the private sector and development agencies will remain a major topic on the agenda for sustainable change for the foreseeable future.

This gradual shift in paradigms requires the exchange of best practices and an evaluation of approaches which have succeeded or failed in the type of complex context described in this paper. This also means that there can be no premature answer as to how best to design a cross-sector initiative which aims to have an impact in individual countries, across borders languages and cultures. This is especially true for those value-chain actors who have tended to be at the receiving end of global market changes. However, the valuable learning from the experiences with the ACi can be summarized as follows:

The complexities of setting up a multi-country and multi-stakeholder project of this scale were underestimated at the outset. Equally underestimated/undervalued was the necessary time and effort required to carry out a sufficient engagement process both at the regional level and at the country level.

Concerning management skills, the leadership required by the lead agency goes far beyond normal project management and organizational skills. In such complex initiatives, sufficient time must be invested to align actors (project period), which was in the case of ACi, underestimated by private sector. Therefore, sufficient attention and time must be invested in internal communication within the initiative itself. The capacity to design an engagement process which takes these factors into consideration is not synonymous with traditional project management skills. This can, in many cases, justify bringing in professional external support or expert stakeholder broker to assist in designing, implementing and monitoring the stakeholder partnership process.

Further, the implementation styles of the public and private partners were, in the case of the ACi, difficult to reconcile. Private sector driven implementation may not always take into account the complexity “on the ground” in the individual countries. The considerable distance in understanding world views between funders and beneficiaries was equally difficult to overcome. Similar future initiatives should pay more attention to such possible dissonances during the planning phase. This should take into account the learning opportunities which can arise from cross-sector collaboration: both the NGO style and the private sector style have their advantages and disadvantages. Stakeholder partnerships such as ACi should

integrate cross-sector learning opportunities into their project design. However all actors involved must be open to a different approach, e.g., key performance indicators that truly reflect the nature of development work.

As much as a matching fund¹ approach can help get private sector companies on board by offering them the possibility to make in-kind contributions, a stronger direct involvement of the private sector in actual implementation workstreams (e.g., SAP) is the true key for success. This example shows a partner which moved from a simple supervisory function to being an active collaborator in the implementation process.

Stakeholder partnerships and stakeholder dialogue initiatives require more than just patience and long-term commitment. This paper has outlined the key factors which have and will continue to impact the outcomes of stakeholder partnerships such as the African Cashew Initiative, demonstrating how, when well-managed, they can build the cross-sector stability needed to address global challenges. Stakeholder partnerships are not a recipe for every problem and do not work according to an exact blue print. Beyond their complexity and complication they have qualities that are of high value for strategically oriented projects, because they provide in-depth experience of all stakeholders' perspectives.

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¹ Matching funds matches donations made by organizations contributing cash or in-kind dollar-for-dollar

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