

Connecting to the Innovation Ecosystem: Partnerships (Excerpted from the Spark Innovation Model)

While the value of having a reliable and trusted partner is immense, the effort to search for and identify the right partner can be very demanding. This is why some regions organise special spaces where social enterprises have the chance to explore potential partnerships with other organisations. Depending on the objective of the partnership (e.g. sales, joint exploitation), social enterprises may need assistance to negotiate the terms of the partnership and make a workable and sustainable deal. All partnerships should serve the planned innovation activities and the enterprise’s strategic objectives.

What does this mean for me?

Partnerships are incredibly important to the success of a social enterprise.

Without unlimited resources, or access to customers and finance successful social enterprises have to work with other organisations to create the changes they want to see.

 Key concept	<p>Partnerships can give you access to resources, networks or skills you don’t currently have.</p> <p>Partnerships are an important part of the Dual Use Business Model Canvas of the SPARK Innovation Model (and indeed, of most Business Model Canvases)</p>
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<p>Partnerships often have no direct financial cost. This doesn’t not mean they are free or grant you access to resource you don’t have for no cost.</p> <p>Consider you will have the time cost of managing the partnership, and also the opportunity cost – what else could you be doing that increases social impact or your financial sustainability instead of developing these relationships?</p>	 Be Aware
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What are collaborations and partnerships and why are they important?

Collaboration is simply about two or more organisations working together towards a common goal or on the same project. Most social enterprises will collaborate with other organisations at one point or another. Collaborations can arise between two social enterprises or between a social enterprise and a charity or voluntary organisation, but it also often takes place with organisations from the public or private sector.

Collaboration is a flexible option which can take many forms, such as shared resources and shared running of projects or services. It can last for the duration of an event or a project, or

even lead to a long term partnership. A partnership is a more systematic and official approach to collaboration, usually tied by a contract or legal agreement. It involves sharing responsibilities, risks and rewards with your partners and is therefore a more formal way to collaborate.

An increasing number of social enterprises are looking into collaboration and partnership. This is because it can be difficult to access grants or funding for projects alone, and also because of the increased pressure to achieve value for money and efficiency which can be done by sharing resources. In some cases, the ability to work across a range of beneficiaries or locations will be a requirement to get a grant or a contract, and will require small organisations to work together to meet such criteria.

Collaborations and partnerships are not for everyone – it has to be an option that works for you. However, if the collaborative process is planned well, a social enterprise working alongside another organisation can often deliver more effective and comprehensive services, access more opportunities and reduce the cost of delivery.

Why work in partnership?

The first thing you should do is to think about why you would collaborate. Is it that you **want** to, or that you **need** to?

Thinking about what your objectives are will ensure that your enterprise can engage in purposeful, focused and useful collaboration. You should also be able to determine what a successful collaboration looks like for you.

Identify or define the reasons why you want to collaborate or why you would consider this option. What does your social enterprise want to achieve in the short, medium and long term through collaboration and partnership? Here are a few examples:

Collaboration will help us...

- Survive financially or sustain the enterprise another way
- Increase our capacity to deliver on existing or future projects
- Augment our chances of getting a contract
- Secure funding
- Access new opportunities or new markets
- Reach more potential beneficiaries (e.g. geographically)
- Access new resources/contacts/information/expertise
- Work with like-minded organisations
- Improve our social/environmental impact

How will you work together?

This is a crucial stage during which you should critically consider the collaboration opportunity in order to minimise risks and increase chances of success. You should ask questions to yourself, your team and perhaps involve other stakeholders in order to know more about the potential partner organisation. Questions can include:

- Are your ethical values and objectives compatible?
- Have you agreed what you want to achieve (i.e. are your objectives aligned)?
- Who is doing what? (I.e. is it clear what each party is providing and getting back from the collaboration process?)
- What resources will be required and how much will it cost (financial, management time, other)?
- What are the risks involved in terms of confidentiality, intellectual property, conflicts etc.?
- What are the timescales involved?

Finding organisations to collaborate with

If you have identified the need to work in collaboration or partnership but haven't yet identified organisations you could work with there are a number of options:

- Look around you – some potential partners can be found within your customers, your suppliers and even your competitors.
- Communicate your needs – if others don't know what you are looking for they will not be able to help! Advertise your needs on your website or through your newsletter or other social networking sites. The website www.fundingcentral.org.uk also provides a facility to advertise for collaborators or partners.
- Take advantage of social enterprise networks, local CVS and other membership or umbrella organisations – use their newsletters, events and contacts to find a suitable partner.
- Do your research and approach potential candidates with your collaborative idea.
- Speak to funders, commissioners and public sector organisations that you are interested in approaching – they often have processes in place to enable and facilitate collaborative working.

Things to look out for with collaborations and partnerships

Not every organisation is good at working in partnership – some enterprises have very specific cultures or work ethics that make it difficult to collaborate with others. Try to work

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with organisations that share your values and your standards otherwise you will end up compensating for their weaknesses.

Be prepared to end a partnership if it does not meet your objectives or is straining your staff and resources. This may mean setting clear exit options in a contract or in a formal agreement.

If you cannot create a win-win situation and you cannot terminate your agreement it is likely that the partnership will spoil your working relationships and demoralise your team.

Keep in mind the potential intellectual property and confidentiality issues around some aspects of your work – be very clear about what resources you will share for the duration of the project and what will remain your enterprise's property during and after the project's lifespan.



Dig deeper

- Business Model Canvas, and related models
- Stakeholder Mapping and Stakeholder Engagement
- Institutional Mapping