

DARING TO QUESTION OUR CONVICTIONS

In 1999 the Groupe *initiatives* (Gi) published a brochure setting out our views on the need for renewed commitment to cooperative development. It presented our analysis of the situation and described the issues around which we have built a common identity and joint projects. We returned to this theme fifteen years later, with a year-long process of reflection on our practical experiences, and candid discussions within the group and with our partner African institutions. We chose partnership practices as the overarching theme in order to consider GI's contribution to the current general debate on cooperation policies.

Seven pledges and proposals formulated by the GROUPE *INITIATIVES* in order to renew partnerships and tackle the issues in our intervention areas

This theme allowed us to look at the realities of cooperation relations between European and West African associations, which have changed considerably in recent years and therefore require our critical attention. Partnerships also revolve around the identity of the individual organisations concerned, and this exercise shed some useful light on the way we need to think about this form of collaboration. As this is not a new topic of debate there was the danger of repeating previous discussions (something we did our best to avoid). However, we still believe it was a worthwhile endeavour – not just because of its topicality, but because **partnerships are central to our development approach.**

We knew that limiting ourselves to collaborations with West Africa would leave other regions out of the picture, and with them all the rich relationships we have developed in very different realities in parts of South America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Portuguese- and English-speaking African countries. While this means that **our conclusions are not of universal value, they will be of general interest** due to the diverse situations we did consider and the comparative analysis of our respective experiences. This broad range of experiences enabled us to avoid getting too bogged down in the specificities and weighty history of European-African relations, while not denying their existence and the particular record of France and West Africa.

When we talk about linking our thinking on partnerships with 'territorial issues', we mean the geographical and political entities in our intervention areas: the villages, neighbourhoods, towns, communes, nations, sub-regions, watersheds, irrigated areas, livestock routes and migratory trails within these spaces, and their less physical aspects – the families, social groups, institutions and even ideas and beliefs in a particular area. Given the changing nature of the world in general and of 'development cooperation' in particular, we believe that it is important to look beyond the borders of the countries where our intervention areas are located and to consider the interdependencies between these nations and European countries.

Several points are worth noting here:

1. The general consensus on the meaning of the word 'partnership' tends to overlook the fact that in reality, partnerships operate in very diverse situations (which merit more distinctive approaches) and are often **much less balanced** than the term suggests.

2. While members of *Gi* have developed many meaningful and productive relationships, **we do not claim to set ourselves up as teachers** in this field, as some of our partnerships have been more evenly balanced than others.
3. **The responsibilities for these imbalances are both highly complex and shared:** all actors involved in European-African cooperation contribute to them in one way or another.
4. The successes that have been achieved far outweigh the challenges and constraints that inevitably arise in joint endeavours. Therefore, we reaffirm that partnerships as we understand them are absolutely central to our approach, as they **reflect our desire to practice and promote solidarity at the international level.**

To shed light on how this might be done, we present the following seven points and recommendations:

① MORE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships vary, depending on whether they involve professional organisations, intermediary associations, local governments, companies, administrations or government corporations. We engage in these different types of relationships without a normative model to promote, and will continue to do so in order to benefit from the various missions undertaken by each kind of actor. We also recognise the many advantages of the more pragmatic ‘project’ partnerships that enable us to seize a particular opportunity to take action or catch an opening; not least the fact that this kind of partnership can constitute a trial period or step towards a closer collaborative relationship.

*However, we should not restrict ourselves to ‘project management’, since we are committed to developing long-term partnerships between West African, European and international partners as **part of a joint political project**. This kind of partnership could be seen as a form of **strategic alliance**, as the actions taken are intended to produce results that can respond to **territorial issues**, contribute to **dynamics of change** for greater justice, equity and sustainability, proposals for public policies at the national and even supra-national level, and strengthen **multi-actor regulatory agencies**.*

② REVIEWING OUR IDEAS ABOUT ‘THE NORTH’ AND ‘THE SOUTH’

The assumption that solidarity automatically involves ‘the North’ helping ‘the South’ no longer holds true: the ‘North/South’ dichotomy has been turned on its head as certain emerging economies have become global leaders. But this does not mean that the world has become homogenous, or that all countries have the same capacities. Poverty and inequality are powerful indicators of differences between and (increasingly) within countries. Realities in ‘the North’ and ‘the South’ are certainly very different, but both need to tackle issues of poverty and inequality – and the human and financial resources in West Africa belie any easy assertion about the lack of capacity and resources in this region.

*We pledge to make our partnerships more equal in terms of distribution of responsibilities, remuneration and financial contributions. This will involve joint decisions, co-funding, a shared commitment to greater **responsibility** and **accountability**, and fostering **complementarities** in order to redress the imbalances that still exist in too many partnerships.*

③ OUR CAPACITIES ARE COMPLEMENTARY AND MUTUALLY REINFORCING

Our view of partnerships recognises that our partners have their own capacities; we should not

assume that they will always have weaknesses that need to be strengthened. It also recognises the importance of identifying and combining individual, collective, technical and institutional capacities. The latter are vitally important if we want to be ‘agents of change’ and act as facilitators for multiple actors helping to improve the quality of relations between the State and society, rather than operators that simply deal with the shortcomings of public policies. The different networks (professional, scientific, trade, academic, political, etc.) that we can tap into are a good example of our complementary capacities.

*But this does not mean that we cling to an idealised egalitarian vision which ignores the fact that certain actors do lack capacity. Partnerships will sometimes be unequal, or start off that way, before we have synergised our **complementarities** and **strengthened** capacities – both our own and those of our partners. Contractual frameworks should help determine which capacities complement each other and which ones need to be strengthened.*

④ CONTRACTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF CONFLICT

Our vision of partnerships is based on a certain ‘shared destiny and common vision’. This common vision is a necessary precondition for fruitful partnerships, but may not be immediately obvious and will often take quite a long time to emerge. This happens through a process of building shared values as partners assess the situation, decide on a plan of action, agree to the rules of the game, identify the respective capacities required, determine the risks that need to be taken and decide how they will be shared, etc. All this should be done within a contractual framework.

*We will strive to develop **contractual frameworks** that encourage **dialogue, sharing** and reciprocal commitments, rather than simply provide a monitoring mechanism.*

Building this kind of relationship requires balance, stability and greater transparency on both sides. We are not naïve enough to expect contractual frameworks to prevent problems arising (as they inevitably will, given the responsibilities and risks that have to be taken), but they should help to resolve difficulties rather than create them.

*Rather than rejecting **conflicts**, we will endeavour to make it a factor in regulating – and thus building – partnerships, by seeking to resolve healthy differences of position and interest through compromise.*

⑤ MODES OF FUNDING THAT MATCH THE RHETORIC

The quest for ‘effective aid’ has led to increasingly and excessively rigorous (if not to say nit-picking) international cooperation funding contracts, along with requirements for intervening agencies to show that they uphold the other principles of the Paris Declaration (harmonisation and appropriation). This has an unfortunate tendency to reduce partnerships to little more than funding opportunities. The contradiction between the rhetoric promoting partnerships (especially from certain financial ‘partners’) and the contractual obligations they impose is deeply unhelpful, as it sometimes places our partners under our administrative control or sets us up as guarantors against their supposed shortcomings.

The kind of partnerships that we support goes through stages: they take time to build, nurture, evaluate and develop. As a result, they incur costs that are not always recognised as eligible expenditure in development cooperation operating budgets.

*We believe that partnerships are valuable enough to warrant special **funding** mechanisms. We recommend the establishment of **specific funds** in Europe and West Africa to help structure organisations, and propose that the costs of partnerships are included as **direct costs** in operating contracts rather than administrative costs, in order to finance this essential element of successful partnerships.*

⑥ STRENGTHENING PARTNERS’ LEGITIMACY AND SOVEREIGNTY

Our partnerships and the international efforts they serve work across borders while recognising each country's national characteristics and the authority of the public powers that have been mandated to run it. Yet substitution and excessive reliance on European actors is still a common feature in too many so-called 'partnerships'. While we recognise our position as a direct agent, we affirm our empathy, proximity and connection with our partners, and are very careful to ensure that people from the countries with which we cooperate are actively involved in our structures. We believe that this gives our interventions certain legitimacy.

*We will make every effort to (1) ensure that the **political leadership** of our partnerships goes to actors with strong ties to the intervention zone; that is to say, those who will be responsible for sustaining the actions in the long term, who often take more, or at least different, risks than us; (2) use the advantage of being a European agency to play a more **detached** role, strengthen our partners' legitimacy and leadership, and open up to other territories.*

7 PROMOTING COMMON ISSUES AND CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

Our approach to solidarity has also been affected by the increased interdependencies created by the new global geopolitical landscape. Different societies are facing a number of issues that have become global concerns, problems that affect both 'the North' and 'the South' despite all their differences. It is not easy to for a single country to find solutions within its national borders, even if the State does have room to manoeuvre (something that varies from one country to the other). Partnerships can strengthen our strategic responses to these common issues, drawing us out of our European and West African borders and into solidarity efforts that are as global as the issues they aim to address.

*We will do all we can to strengthen our duty of solidarity and broaden our focus on others' development by acting on common problems that also affect us on 'our territory'. This is what we mean by '**cross-border cooperation**', which is understood in both a broad physical sense and in different forms of cooperation (State, decentralised, inter-community, inter-professional, etc.).*

The **common issues** that enable us to build partnerships based on this kind of 'shared destiny and common vision' include poverty and inequality, global warming and its practical consequences, access to basic healthcare and social services, the spread of diseases from animals to humans, demands for citizenship and democracy, funding for State budgets and taxation, managing human mobility, under-employment, declining working conditions (decent jobs), matching training to employment, food quality and sovereignty, corporate social and environmental responsibility, and equitable trade relations. These issues will be prioritised at a later date.

These seven points and proposals will help us to question and change our economic models, our governance systems and our practices. We will share this position paper as widely as possible through the different networks in which we are involved, and are open to any form of alliance that strengthens the power of the collective voice that we need for cooperation and international solidarity to change in step with the world.

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On behalf of members of the Groupe *initiatives*
President, Christian LESPINATS