



**SWISSAID Policy on
PARTNERSHIP**

Key Messages

Shift to Locally Led Development: The core goal of this Partnership Policy is to **rebalance power** from the Global North to the Global South, emphasizing the **agency, leadership, and ownership** of national and local actors in designing and implementing solutions.

Equitable Partnership Mindset: The organization will move away from a dependency model to a partnership mindset based on **collaboration and mutual contribution on an equal footing**.

Targeted Partnership: The policy aims to globally include **100 national and local partners** (including 3 to 5 strategic, long-term partners per country program) to significantly **increase their agency and decision-making power** by the end of the 2025-2028 program cycle, reinforcing a locally led development approach.

Increased Financial Commitment: A minimum of **30%** of the annual country program's budget must be transferred directly to partners, with a target goal of reaching **50%**.

Multi-Directional Accountability and Capacity Building: Partnerships are underpinned by a principle of **multi-directional accountability** (to communities, partners, and donors) and **capacity building** is viewed as a **mutual and ongoing process of learning and growth between all partners**, not a one-sided transfer of knowledge.

1. Introduction

This Partnership Policy aims at fostering a common approach across our organization to developing and nurturing strong and equitable partnerships, based on common values and principles. It sets priorities and provides guidance for all SWISSAID programs, projects and activities involving partners. The goal of the document is to enhance the quality of SWISSAID's engagement with partners, focusing on a shift towards locally led development. This policy has become necessary due to an evolving context in which SWISSAID forges partnerships with a diversity of actors in order to collectively address critical development challenges, leverage specialized skills and competencies, and expand our collaborative networks, while also responding to the global imperative to rebalance relations between Global North and Global South stakeholders towards greater equity. The elaboration of this document involved staff in the SWISSAID country programs and headquarters, as well as partners and topical experts.

2. Context

In recent years, the push for localization has gained significant traction, evolving to become a defining trend within the global development and humanitarian sectors. This shift is characterized by a strong call for increased agency, leadership, and ownership held by national and local actors. Driven by a growing recognition that locally led development is more effective and sustainable, it also responds to the imperative to address and dismantle the remnants of colonial structures that persist within the international development system. Key initiatives such as the "Grand Bargain"¹ in the humanitarian sector, the "Pledge for Change"², and the OECD DAC recommendations on civil society participation³, alongside insights from the ODI report on localization⁴, further inform and underscore this evolving landscape.

1 <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

2 <https://pledgeforchange2030.org>

3 <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5021>

4 <https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/localising-aid>

Recognizing the transformative nature of locally led development, SWISSAID actively engages in continuous learning and adaptation to best support this shift, and this Policy directly reflects that commitment. Furthermore, as a member of the SUFOSEC alliance⁵, SWISSAID fully aligns its principles and practices with SUFOSEC’s joint commitment to power shifting⁶.

Operationally, SWISSAID has Coordination Offices (CoOfs) in its country of operations, and each CoOf collaborates closely with organizations that are rooted in the territory with strong local experience. Where needed, we strengthen local organizations, especially smaller ones, and we generally work with local service providers and technicians. We further embed national leadership and ownership through a Local Advisory Committee (LAC) in each country program, providing advice and oversight to the CoOf and ensuring alignment with national priorities and local realities. Furthermore, SWISSAID already has a policy which prioritizes the recruitment of local, national, and regional staff across its countries of operation and actively monitors partnership dynamics through annual surveys with selected local partners.

3. Definitions

Several terms and concepts are frequently employed when discussing partnerships and locally led development. The following definitions, derived from our preparatory work⁷, provide a concise understanding of their application within this document.

- **Localization:** a process of shifting power, resources and decision-making from international actors to national and local actors, placing the latter at the forefront of development and humanitarian efforts.
- **Locally led development:** A process where local actors – including individuals, communities, organizations and institutions – drive their own development.
- **Local ownership:** Local actors – including individuals, communities, organizations and institutions – have the authority, agency and responsibility to direct their own development processes.
- **Decolonization of aid:** The process of dismantling the power imbalances and colonial legacies that persist within the international aid system, acknowledging and rectifying the historical exploitation and marginalization caused by colonialism.
- **White saviorism:** An approach where a white person from the Global North focuses on “rescuing” non-white people in the Global South. It is heavily criticized because it perpetuates colonial-era power dynamics by assuming that local people are helpless and lack agency, reinforcing harmful stereotypes in the process.
- **Shifting power:** Moving away from top-down international actors’ approaches towards locally led development, redistributing authority, resources, and decision-making to local actors.

⁵ <https://sufosec.ch/en>

⁶ https://sufosec.ch/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Sufosec_Report-EmpoweringPartnerships_8-24_E_def.pdf

⁷ Including: “Background Study on Local Ownership Alliance for Sustainable Food Systems and Empowered Communities” (SuFoSEC), Ravelworks Africa, 2021

- **Ladder of participation:** Drawn from the PARTOS Power Awareness Tool (PPAT)⁸, this framework categorizes participation in decision-making across five distinct levels:
 - ① → **Exclusion:** The partner is not informed in the decision-making and excluded from the decision-making process.
 - ② → **Information:** The partner is informed about decision-making but has no say.
 - ③ → **Consultation:** The partner is consulted before a decision is made.
 - ④ → **Co-decision:** The partner co-decides.
 - ⑤ → **Decision:** The partner decides.
- **Global South – Global North:** Global South generally refers to lower- and middle-income countries, largely located in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. Global North generally refers to wealthier, industrialized countries, primarily located in North America and Europe, as well as some high-income countries in other parts of the world like Australia, New Zealand, Israel, Japan, and South Korea.

4. Types of partnerships

Over the years, SWISSAID has developed relations and collaborates with a variety of partners at various levels, including but not limited to International NGOs, United Nations and other multilateral agencies, regional organizations, national governments, decentralized authorities, national NGOs, networks, associations, advocacy organizations, universities, research institutions, service providers, the private sector, as well as local grassroots organizations, associations and groups, farmer organizations, local communities and traditional authorities. Although relationships with our partners vary by organization, location and over time, we have established four different types of partnerships to categorize and structure our interactions. These types of partnerships are not mutually exclusive. An organization may have multiple partnerships of different types, and a single partnership could involve elements of multiple types. The specific characteristics and dynamics of each partnership will depend on the unique circumstances and goals of the organizations involved and may evolve over time and place. These four kinds of partnerships are:

- **Strategic partnerships:** In these partnerships, we aim to build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with aligned goals and objectives. As much as possible, we will leverage complementary expertise and resources, while facilitating effective collaboration through coherence of policies and standards, joint planning and decision-making. These types of partnerships can be clarified and formalized in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).
- **Implementation partnerships:** These partnerships are formed to enable us to collaborate with other organizations to implement a specific project or initiative. They are based on shared responsibility for project outcomes, division of labor based on expertise and resources, coordinated planning and execution, and regular communication and monitoring. These types of partnerships are based on contracts linked to project documents clearly defining the collaboration.
- **Funding partnerships:** These partnerships are mainly driven by a donor-recipient relationship where a funding partner provides financial support to contribute to development initiatives and projects. These types of partnerships are based on a funding agreement with clear terms and conditions ensuring accountability for the use of funds, while they also offer potential for collaboration beyond financial support.
- **Synergy partnerships:** In these partnerships, we aim to exchange ideas, share knowledge, combine efforts and reinforce our respective initiatives to achieve a greater impact based on shared vision and values. These types of partnerships do not necessarily need formal agreement and can simply be based on regular exchanges.

⁸ <https://www.partos.nl/publicatie/power-awareness-tool-2-0>

5. SWISSAID principles around partnerships

Reflecting the African proverb “If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together,” we prioritize collaborative approaches to development, recognizing that true sustainability stems from national and local actors who lead solutions. By combining their invaluable local knowledge with global resources and expertise, we aim to create and nurture an environment where all partners thrive, ensuring lasting and impactful change through shared effort and mutual support, based on the following principles:

- **Nurturing local leadership and ownership:** At the core of our partnership approach lies our commitment to local leadership and ownership. We prioritize collaborating with national and local actors who drive their own development agendas. This means shifting decision-making power, resources, and leadership to those who possess the deepest understanding of their unique contexts and needs. We act as facilitators, providing technical, financial, and managerial support to enable local actors to identify their own priorities, design and implement context-specific solutions, and build sustainable local capacity. Importantly, this implies shifting to a partnership mindset that emphasizes collaboration and mutual contribution based on equal footing, moving away from dependency and “white saviorism”.
- **Ensuring mutual respect and trust:** We recognize that successful partnerships are built on a foundation of mutual respect and trust. This requires a departure from traditional, top-down approaches, a recognition of the value of local and contextual knowledge, and a commitment to shared decision-making. We encourage honest self-assessment from all partners, including ourselves, and prioritize open transparent communication at every stage of the partnership. We value the diverse perspectives and contributions of each partner, fostering an inclusive environment where all voices are heard and respected. This approach allows us to foster the co-creation of knowledge by engaging partners and project participants as active contributors to knowledge creation, not just as informants.
- **Guaranteeing equity and inclusion:** Our commitment to equity and inclusion drives us to build diverse partnerships that encompass a wide range of actors and perspectives. We recognize that not all partners have equal access to resources or decision-making power, and we actively work to address these imbalances. We strive to create an inclusive environment where all partners feel valued to contribute to their full potential. We promote equitable access to resources, amplify the voices of marginalized groups, and actively involve local actors in all stages of project design, implementation, and evaluation. We particularly value partners who demonstrate a commitment to gender equity both in their own structure and activities.
- **Committing to capacity building and transfer of skills:** We view capacity building as a mutual and ongoing process of learning and growth, not a one-sided transfer of knowledge. Within our capacities, we prioritize tailored capacity building plans to the specific needs of each partner, focusing on practical and relevant training that equips them with the skills and knowledge they need to achieve their goals, but we also learn from our partners and value their support to build our capacities.
- **Enhancing accountability:** Accountability is a fundamental principle that underpins all our partnerships. We believe in multi-directional accountability, recognizing our responsibility to the communities we serve, our partners, our donors, and each other. We foster a culture of transparency and learning, striving to share lessons learned, research findings, and policy recommendations in accessible ways, to ensure that local actors benefit directly. We actively seek feedback and conduct regular monitoring and evaluation (M&E). We aim to adapt our M&E practices to be more inclusive, participatory and responsive to local priorities, moving beyond donor-driven metrics to incorporate locally relevant outcomes. This includes the use of qualitative methods that capture lived experiences. We support partners in building their own capacity for accountability, providing training and mentorship on data collection, analysis, and reporting.

6. Implementation

This section provides a set of key activities, tools, and methodologies to facilitate the implementation of this policy. It should be understood, however, that this is not an exhaustive list, and it may be updated and adjusted based on specific contexts, our learning processes and input from partners and other key stakeholders.

- **Adjust our structure to foster decentralization and local leadership**
 - Review our own organizational structure and operational models to enhance decentralization and promote locally led development.
 - Explore a leaner organizational structure with reduced reliance on international staff and a greater focus on local partners, encouraging exchanges of skills and competences.
 - Explore different implementation modalities, prioritizing full delegation to partners whenever possible, and considering mixed implementation or direct implementation by SWISSAID only in exceptional circumstances.
- **Design a process to select and nurture mutually reinforcing partnerships**
 - Identify key partners based on clear and fair criteria through a public or restricted Call for Expression of Interest, targeted pre-identification of known potential partners, selection from direct expressions of interest, or a combination of these methods. Following identification, pre-select partners through a desktop check, reference checks with other partners or donors, and a review of any past collaborations.
 - Subsequently, to complete the selection, it is possible to employ the Capacity Assessment Tool (CAT) for a thorough analysis of organizational capabilities, adaptable to specific program and country contexts. Additionally, further due diligence can be performed, and a pilot phase may be implemented to further evaluate the potential partnership before formalization.
 - Define Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) or contractual agreements that clearly outline roles, responsibilities, and expectations.
- **Build project management structures to enhance shared leadership**
 - Collaboratively plan, implement, monitor and evaluate projects through co-design workshops, outcome mapping, and other similar methodologies, drawing on a common understanding of needs and opportunities to jointly address.
 - Use participatory methodologies to assess the issues at stakes and to design workable solutions.
 - Set up Project Steering Committees (PSCs) comprising all key project partners to ensure meaningful participation and ownership in all stages of project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
 - Provide tailored training, resources, and technical assistance based on consultation and mutual agreement to strengthen partner capacity, leveraging the results of the CAT assessment.

7. Minimum standards

This Partnership Policy serves as the guiding document for our partnership approach by providing an overarching direction which Coordination Offices (CoOfs) will adapt to their own specific contexts. However, at a minimum, each SWISSAID CoOF must:

- Collaborate with **around 10 national or local partners** to globally reach the SWISSAID 2025-28 Program target of “100 empowered national and local partners have increased their agency and decision-making power, and SWISSAID has embraced a more equitable partnership approach, reinforcing locally led development”.

- Identify and nurture **3 to 5 strategic partnerships** among its national or local partners. These partnerships will extend beyond individual projects or initiatives, fostering mid- to long-term collaboration founded on shared vision and values. A key aim is to achieve **Level 3 (Co-decision)** on the Power Awareness Tool with these partners, ensuring they meaningfully participate in the early inception phase of joint projects, initiatives and activities. Collaboration models include: (1) co-creation and co-implementation of projects, (2) delegation (mandate), and (3) core contribution to their programs or strategies.
- Increase the share of the annual country program’s budget that is transferred to partners, reaching at a minimum 30%, while aiming for a higher **target of around 50%**.
- Involve the **Local Advisory Committee (LAC)** in actively contributing to program steering and strategic guidance. The LAC should at a minimum review and approve the Country Program, the annual country report, and the mid-course and end-course program evaluations. While the LAC’s focus should remain strategic rather than operational, the CoOf should maintain regular engagement with it, ideally through regular meetings, joint field visits, and participation in high-level events, to enhance LAC members’ ownership and agency.
- Regularly use the **Sufosec Power Awareness Tool (SPAT)** and the **PARTOS Power Awareness Tool (PPAT)** to assess power dynamics and ensure equitable decision-making within partnerships⁹, aiming to reach co-decision with most partners¹⁰.
- As much as possible, avoid creating dependency of partners on SWISSAID, and ensure that partner program budgets are **not funded more than 50% by SWISSAID**, or that support to partners receiving more than 50% of their budget from SWISSAID does not exceed 10 years.
- Design a clear **complaint mechanism (CM)** and establish visible and accessible channels for submitting complaints and identify well-qualified individuals in the organization responsible for properly handling these complaints.
- Leveraging the Annual Partner Organization Surveys, regularly **collect feedback from partners** to evaluate satisfaction and identify areas for improvement.
- Adopt **positive language** that consciously positions individuals and partners not as passive “beneficiaries” or “aid recipients” but as active “project participants” or “valued partners”. This shift in terminology fosters relationships built on genuine collaboration and shared agency among all involved.
- Actively promote **South-South learning** and horizontal knowledge exchange through workshops, conferences, webinars and peer-to-peer learning initiatives such as the thematic Communities of Practice (CoPs).
- Document and disseminate **best practices and lessons learned** from partnerships. Build and strengthen networks of local partners and continue advocating for locally led development. Where necessary, provide institutional development support to partners.

9 The SPAT is used to monitor power relations between SWISSAID and its partners on an annual basis, while the PPAT is used to evaluate power dynamics with strategic partners.

10 SWISSAID Strategy, Outcome 4, Indicator a: “Proportion of partner organizations that have reached co-decision on the Power Awareness Tool in their collaboration with SWISSAID”. The target is 80%.

8. Conclusion

This Partnership Policy upholds SWISSAID's commitment to equitable and locally driven development. We strive to be a relevant and adaptable partner, effectively collaborating with diverse actors for sustainable impact. Recognizing that lasting change stems from national and local leadership, we champion a collaborative approach where all partners leverage their unique strengths. This is an ongoing, inclusive process of continuous improvement, adapting to evolving local needs and global best practices. Ultimately, achieving our program goals and contributing to a more equitable and sustainable future relies on collaborative partnerships built on trust, mutual respect, and shared objectives – which is at the heart of this policy.