

Common challenges and solutions

Why is this important for MSPs?

Multisector partnerships run a high risk of failure if not thought out or nurtured properly. The risks are especially high in the initial stages in the MSP process, when the relationships between different stakeholders is still developing and the potential of the MSP remains to be tested.

As with other relationships, MSP dynamics can become stressed, or even come apart, through a range of challenges. Some of the often-encountered challenges in MSPs include partners not using the same language, or assuming a shared understanding where there is none; or it could manifest as a lack of interest and participation; or worse still, attempts to dominate discussions and marginalise alternative viewpoints. It is also common to encounter loss of trust and active antagonisms that might prevent the MSP from moving forward.

Researchers have identified a common set of what they term as 'slow burning challenges' that threaten to derail MSPs unless countered actively. These challenges come from two sources – an incomplete understanding of the practical nature of MSPs (see Roles of MSPs), and a lack of preparedness to handle power dynamics within an MSP (see Power in MSPs).

Because these challenges are common to many MSPs, there are common solutions that may help. Some of these are noted below:

Whom to invite, whom to leave out?

Carry out an initial stakeholder mapping to make sure the 'must-haves' are on your list. Aim for 3–8 committed stakeholders from different sectors; remember that the core

group should be agile and not too large at this stage.

Analysis or action first?

Researchers will plea for more analysis upfront, activists may want action to start straightaway. It is not an either/or decision. Early actions can create engagement and trust. Good analysis is critical but in complex systems the insights often come from testing things out. Propose action research and balance the thinking and the doing.

What is the common concern?

Don't rush! People will need time to understand the common concerns and find shared goals. Be careful of setting strategies and action plans before it is clear what you really want to achieve. Try to agree on an overarching common goal, but there is no need as yet to define the strategies on how to get there. You can also agree to disagree on the strategies. Make this explicit in your Partnership Agreement.

What if a key stakeholder has no interest?

Respect their view, but try to find out under what conditions they might consider joining. Ask permission to contact the stakeholder again in say six months to give them an update.

Can latecomers still join?

The more the merrier – but can you manage it? Distinguish between a core group (or steering committee) and a second ring of participants who can join but will not be involved in oversight or major decisions. Map stakeholders to see who should be on board. Prioritise the essential ones, but also look out for underrepresented stakeholders.

Going deeper, or going faster?

You will notice different preferences of stakeholders for pacing the MSP. Balancing these preferences is an art, not a

science. Remember that not everybody needs to do all things together, all of the time.

Agreeing on the MSP strategy

Accept that it will be impossible to have all stakeholders agree on all aspects of what the MSP should do. Invest in developing a shared Theory of Change that can become a strong unifying factor for the MSP.

Keeping motivation up when things move slow

This is the phase where the MSP usually suffers from setbacks, as reality is stubborn. It might be necessary to review your overall goal and perhaps make it less ambitious. Another tactic is to identify intermediate goals and celebrate them actively when they are achieved. The best MSPs remain adaptive and agile in the mature phase.

How to avoid over-formalizing an MSP

This is a challenge because of the natural tendency to formalise and structure as much as we can (especially in the public sector). MSPs should look carefully at the content of any partnership agreement that is used to set up the MSP: the emphasis should be on principles in the partnership, not only on technical details of roles and responsibilities.

Keeping commitment from participating organisations

An organisation that decided to join an MSP may allocate some budget and staff time to it – but this does not mean that decision makers are fully aware of how the MSP is progressing. Try to create packages of information that the MSP champions can take back to their organisations so they can continue to sell the MSP to their colleagues.

Over reliance on a facilitator or broker

Some suggest that MSPs involve qualified facilitators or

partnership brokers in setting up MSPs. But if they end up dominating, there is something wrong. Any facilitator should consider their intervention as time-bound, and should build new capacities among MSP participants to transfer responsibilities as soon as can be done responsibly.

Doing reflection activities with busy leaders and executives

Reflection and learning are often regarded as 'nice to haves', rather than core business. Rather than calling it 'reflection' or 'learning', we often use words like 'strategy review' or 'performance enhancement'. In these conversations, we can address the same questions (What happened? Why? So what? Now what?). Ideally, everybody is involved. But in reality, this role will be played by specific people in the steering group.

Who should do the monitoring?

What matters most in an MSP is the meaning that stakeholders attach to what is being achieved, rather than expert judgement or external evaluation. There is still a place for external support – for example, if results are disputed or if a donor requires it – but monitoring and reflecting on lessons should be an internal role led by the steering group.

People don't open up and admit what really happened

This displays a lack of trust. Reflection and learning can be important relationship-building opportunities between organisations, so starting with building trust among MSP members is an important step that should not be rushed. But be careful: it is not acceptable to look in someone else's kitchen and criticise the food. The first task is to work on mutual trust in the team.