

Governance in complex multi-stakeholder settings; The case of the Universal Access to Female Condoms Alliance

Karine Godthelp & Fons van der Velden¹



Photo: Female condom demonstration in a hairdressing salon in Cameroon (Photo: Chris Pennarts)

OPINION – Fons van der Velden and Karine Godthelp draw lessons from five years of collaboration by the alliance within the MFS-II subsidy framework of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The *Universal Access to Female Condoms* programme is an interesting case whereby the collaboration took place in a unique and insightful manner.

Do arranged marriages work? Experiences among Dutch development organisations indicate that very often they may not succeed. Within its recent subsidy frameworks the Dutch government placed a premium on collaboration. Whilst in the case of the MFS-I framework, this did not have a binding character, stricter conditions and rules applied for MFS-II. Anyone familiar with the Dutch development community, knows about the troubled experiences of quite some organisations in the sector and can concoct the battlefield that emerged: some alliances crossing the finishing line in good harmony, while others dealing with tensions and quarrels with the result that the collaboration reaches its completion with some agony and contention.

Collaboration is of vital importance: in recent years increasing insights have proven that complex global problems demand complex multi-actor approaches; whether it concerns

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public-private collaborations, alliances with NGOs, or (strategic) partnerships between (Dutch) government and development actors, social investors or social entrepreneurs. In other words, now that MFS-II has come to an end, laying the groundwork for a different way of collaboration, it is important to draw lessons from five years of collaboration under MFS-II. An interesting case in this respect is the *Universal Access to Female Condoms* (UAFC) programme (2009 - 2015), which incidentally was not an arranged marriage, but an alliance in which collaboration took place in an remarkably constructive and enlightening manner.

The Universal Access to Female Condoms consortium

The UAFC programme is a collaboration between Oxfam Novib, Rutgers, i+solutions and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The programme is geared towards improving the availability, accessibility and affordability of female condoms. The three strategic pillars of the programme are: advocacy for political and financial support; country programmes in Cameroon, Nigeria and Mozambique; and improving the pharmaceutical supply chains including technical advice to producers and consumers. The final evaluation of the programme, carried out with ACE Europe (Mechelen) as the lead consultant, has shed light not only on the degree to which these programme strategies have proven to be effective and in what way, but also on the nature and quality of collaboration between the four parties within the programme.

The most important lessons to be gained from this collaboration can be summarised as follows:

Lesson 1: Acknowledge the elephant in the room

To facilitate the complex, innovative and comprehensive UAFC programme, an elaborate management structure was set up early in the programme. The core of the management structure was formed by an international steering committee with an independent chair, an independent programme coordinator, and a coordination group. Steering committees were also set up in the two most important countries running the programme, Cameroon and Nigeria.

The three programme partners (excluding the Ministry, as financing agency), all had their own institutional interests, not the least of which concerned the way in which they were able to profile their organisation and how financial funds were managed and allocated. The programme partners acknowledged this 'elephant in the room' already at an early stage of the programme. Collaborating in an alliance involves complexities of power. Power balance and possible differences in exertion of power were proactively managed and addressed by UAFC. Having an independent chair and an independent programme coordinator worked out very well in practice: much attention was paid to creating a constructive working atmosphere between the collaborating organisations, amongst others in the form of quarterly meetings led by the independent chair, annual *face-to-face* meetings, and monthly consultations between members of the coordinating group.

Lesson 2: Culture: navigating to harmony

Oxfam Novib, Rutgers and i+solutions are three very different organisations, not only in terms of their expertise, but also as far as organisational culture is concerned. To align these differences, mechanisms were developed from the start onwards to enhance the collegiality in an informal and occasionally almost imperceptible manner – primarily at the strategic and

management levels. The managers of the different organisations jointly visited the programme in Cameroon; the chair and programme coordinator actively approached colleagues within the various organisations; and the programme coordinator demonstrated her independence by working from the offices of all the three different organisations that were involved with UAFC in the Netherlands. Potential conflicts of interest and tensions within the consortium were tackled proactively by the independent chair and programme coordinator – the philosophy being: do not allow issues to drag on, but discuss and resolve them pro-actively. At the strategic level, this led to intangible but very essential contributions to a synergy between the organisations.

At the operational level, investments in bridging differences in organisational culture and in fostering common learning were not realised to the same extent at central programme level and even less so in the three programme countries. Whereas at the top levels UAFC was very well managed, leading to a good collaboration, at the operational level insufficient attention was paid to monitoring harmony and maintaining commitment of the partners. As a result from time to time problems arose within the collaboration at this level.

Lesson 3: More than the sum of its parts?

Within the UAFC consortium, each partner made its own professional contribution. The role division of the programme partners was very clear right from the start, and to a certain degree 'logical'. Oxfam Novib was responsible for the execution of the programme in Nigeria and Mozambique and for the contract management; Rutgers coordinated advocacy and communication; and i+solutions was involved with improving the pharmaceutical supply chains (plus technical advice to producers and purchasers) as well as the country programme in Cameroon. The three organisations were complementary and there was little overlap between the roles, functions and responsibilities they fulfilled within the consortium. Operational zones were clearly defined so to speak, creating harmony and enhanced synergy and coherence – all stakeholders involved were held accountable for their own professional expertise.

However, such a strict allocation of tasks has its downside: the level of mutual dependence is high, while there is little room for calling other parties 'to order' if deliverables or results are inadequate or overdue. Again, this may have resulted in some tensions in communication and challenges at the operational level.

The history of UAFC and the eight years of collaboration also demonstrate that facilitating coherence and synergy is easier to achieve in the early, pioneering stage of a collaboration than in the growth or mature phases. In the pioneering phase, there is a high degree of common commitment to 'the job', lines of communication and command are short, informal collaboration relations are maintained, employees are highly committed, et cetera, while in the later phases, tasks, responsibilities and authorities need to be more strictly allocated, and a different 'breed' of staff members (not necessarily as committed, devoted and passionate as the first generation of staff members) are joining while scaling is taking place.

Lesson 4: Well-arranged financial affairs as prerequisite

Often in a collaboration between development organisations finance issues turn out to be the principal cause of irritation, disproportionate power relations, problems and conflicts.

Well-arranged financial arrangements are crucial for maintaining organisational and institutional peace and stability between collaborating organisations. The UAFC programme has benefited from the fact that funding was readily available – the budgets were adequate to enable the three organisations to allow each other room for manoeuvre. An important additional factor for success was the way in which the consortium dealt with the budget and its re-distribution. At the start of the collaboration, no binding agreements were made concerning the proportional distribution between the various organisations (no drawing rights). When decisions on financial matters had to be made during the course of the programme – for example when an activity had been allocated too much budget and the surplus had to be re-allocated, considerations related to programme content were leading (rather than institutional interests). The independent chair, unhindered by institutional interests, played a significant role in facilitating such negotiation processes.

Within the UAFC consortium, it was further agreed that the lead agency (in this case Oxfam Novib) and the contract manager would take the lead in financial management and administration and in management of relationships with the other organisations investing in the work of the consortium. The consortium partners believe that such an arrangement contributes to transparent financial management of the consortium. However, one consortium party considers this construction to have had negative consequences for the entrepreneurship of the participating organisations and more specifically how they contributed to the financial sustainability of the programme. In the case of the Southern partners too, for a long time little entrepreneurship was shown in terms of contributing to the financial sustainability of the programme. This was probably due to the predominantly operational role that they had been assigned. During the second phase of the programme, improvements in this area were observed.

Lesson 5: Inclusive management: active participation of Southern partners

In the management model of the UAFC consortium, a significant role and function was reserved for the international steering committee, consisting of the senior management of the Dutch consortium members and (external) international experts. This steering committee took responsibility for the strategic control and supervision of the various phases of the programme. Their role ranged from providing feedback to programme proposals to controlling budgets. This worked well at the strategic level.

However, the design of the UAFC programme led to the decision to give Southern partners primarily an operational role in the implementation of the programme. These partners were involved to a lesser extent at the strategic level. For example, they were not represented in either the international steering group or in the coordination group. This was a conscious, pragmatic choice at the programme's initiation, but one can question the wisdom of such a restricted participation of Southern partners, both from the ideological point of view as from a practical one. As a matter of fact, learning from practice during the implementation of the programme turned out to be much more difficult when the organisations that directly face the effects of this practice are only involved in a limited manner.

Furthermore, with due respect to UAFC in general, such an oversight demonstrates the inability of the development sector, even after 65 years of development cooperation, to shape authentic partnerships between agencies from the global South and from the

northern hemisphere, characterised by mutual dependence, reciprocity, equality and collaboration in all stages of a project or programme cycle.

Conclusion

Complex problems demand complex solutions – in this light, collaborative links between a range of different actors are of vital importance. The management structure of such collaborations is very context-specific: tailor-made approaches are a necessity within each Public-Private Partnership, multi-stakeholder platform, alliance or strategic partnership. Experience has shown that the crucial factors for the proper functioning of a consortium include proactive management of power and institutional interests; bridging of cultural differences; complementarity, and being able to hold each other accountable; financial management based on content; and the active participation of Southern partners in all phases of a programme.

Collaboration is no easy undertaking, but considering the complexity of social problems and the practice of today's development cooperation, it is certainly a necessity. Let us hope that the case study of UAFC can serve as a source of inspiration.

** Fons van der Velden is director of Context, international cooperation (Utrecht). At the time of writing this article, Karine Godthelp was employed as a consultant at Context. She is currently working for the Fair, Green & Global Alliance (Amsterdam). This article is based on selected findings and conclusion of the external evaluation of the Universal Access of the Female Condom programme, which was implemented in 2015 under the supervision and responsibility of ACE Europe (Mechelen, Belgium).*