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Guidance Note 14

Partnerships with the private sector and civil society

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most marginalised post-COVID-19:
Guidance for governments on the use
of digital technologies in education
ACT THREE (OF THREE): GUIDANCE NOTES

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Guidance Note: Partnerships with the private sector and civil society¹

Context

Partnerships can play an important role in delivering effective educational outcomes through the appropriate use of digital technologies. Experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic will have highlighted many of their potential benefits, but also the challenges associated with implementing them effectively.

Partnerships have at least five main benefits for governments interested in using technology in education:

- Both the private sector and civil society organisations bring important knowledge, skills and experience related to the use of technology in education that may not be found within government departments.
- Key strengths of private sector companies include their understandings of business models, management structures and how to make initiatives sustainable (getting financial support from them should not be the primary interest for governments in engaging with them).
- Civil society organisations bring grounded understanding of challenges in delivering learning opportunities for the most marginalised, and an ability to foster communal engagement.
- Working in partnerships helps share costs and increases mutual synergies and benefits between governments, the private sector and civil society.
- Such partnerships may help reduce the risks for governments in delivering educational initiatives.

However, partnerships can also carry with them unanticipated costs and potential risks. The most important of these are that partnerships can:

- Become much more expensive than governments originally anticipate, and are often a drain on resources for years longer than expected.
- Benefit the companies involved more than they do the learners, not only in terms of market share and financial profitability, but also in the types of education promoted.
- Lead to governments accepting inappropriate technologies and content, just because they appear to be being provided at reduced costs.
- Lock governments into rigid systems and particular types of technology that become swiftly outdated and redundant.
- Adversely distort systems of good governance, and encourage inappropriate disbursements of scarce government resources.

In an important and prescient paper, Martens (2007, pp. 5–6) thus highlighted eight key risks associated with the ways in which the term ‘partnerships’ had rapidly become a new mantra shaping UN discourses in the first decade of this century:

¹ Lead author Tim Unwin.

- The ‘growing influence of the business sector in the political discourse and agenda-setting’.
- ‘Risks to reputation: choosing the wrong partner’.
- ‘Distorting competition and the pretence of representativeness’.
- ‘Proliferation of partnership initiatives and fragmentation of global governance’.
- ‘Unstable financing — a threat to the sufficient provision of public goods’.
- ‘Dubious complementarity — governments escape responsibility’.
- ‘Selectivity in partnerships — governance gaps remain’.
- ‘Trends toward elite models of global governance — weakening of representative democracy’.

Most of these apply even more so now in a post-COVID-19 world, not only at the international level but also nationally in terms of the relationships between governments and the private sector. Governments intending to embark on partnerships using technology for education should therefore always evaluate them with great care to ensure that the benefits for learners do indeed outweigh the disadvantages and challenges.

A useful way of considering such partnerships in a post-COVID-19 era is to weigh up whether any financial savings for governments really do lead to enhanced delivery of intended educational outcomes, especially for the poorest and most marginalised communities. It is often argued that the private sector can deliver such services more efficiently and cost-effectively than can governments. However, concerns arise when private sector profits outweigh any inefficiency losses associated with government delivery for any given quality of educational service.

Guidance

When considering implementing partnerships that use digital technologies in education, it is therefore useful for governments to consider the following ten principles:

1. The partnership should have clear and agreed *intended educational outcomes*, and these should be agreed by all partners and relevant stakeholders through an inclusive process of dialogue right at the beginning of any initiative.
2. Each partner should be willing to *share their interests* in being involved in the partnership, what they expect to gain from it, and what they are willing to commit to it in an open and transparent manner.
3. All formal partnerships should have a single *senior and charismatic champion*, and the heads of all partner organisations should be committed to it.
4. There should be *continuity of individual representation* from each partner organisation at all meetings, at least some of which should be face-to-face.
5. *Sustainability and scalability* of the intended development intervention should be built into the partnership design from the very beginning. These will not be achieved if added on as an afterthought.
6. The partnership should be *realistically costed*, and partners must agree to commit resources punctually at the relevant time.

7. They should have an appropriately resourced, experiences and staffed *partnership management team*.
8. They should be built on a *moral agenda* that involves *trust, honesty, openness, empathy and respect*.
9. The relevant *supportive wider infrastructure* must be in place to enable ICTs to be used effectively to deliver the intended educational outcomes.
10. They must have in place *clear and coherent internal and external communication strategies*.

A note on terminology

Partnerships using digital technologies in education often continue to be referred to as *public-private partnerships* (or PPPs). Strictly speaking, these only involve the private sector (companies) and the public sector (governments). Given the crucial importance of civil society organisations, such as teachers' unions and community organisations, in delivering educational initiatives, the term *multi-stakeholder partnerships* (MSPs) has therefore increasingly been preferred. However, literally, this only refers to many different stakeholders being involved, all of which could be from the public and private sectors, thereby once again excluding civil society. For partnerships that are explicitly designed to include all three sectors (governments, companies and civil society) the term *multi-sector partnerships* is therefore to be preferred. This is important because it is increasingly recognised that PPPs fail to deliver on their expectations, and this is often because they exclude civil society organisations necessary for their success.

Examples

Examples of interesting partnerships using digital technologies for education from which important lessons, both positive and negative, can be learnt include:

- The World Economic Forum's *Global Education Initiative* (2003–11) (see Unwin, T. and Wong, A. (2012) *Global Education Initiative: Retrospective on partnerships for education development 2003–2011*, Geneva: World Economic Forum).
- *The NEPAD e-Schools demonstration project* (See Farrell, G., Isaacs, S. and Trucano, M. (2007) *The NEPAD e-schools demonstration project: A work in progress*, Vancouver and Washington: COL and infoDev).

Suggested further reading

- Cassidy, T. (2007) *The Global Education Initiative (GEI) model of effective partnership initiatives for education*, Cologny: World Economic Forum.
- Principles for Digital Development, <https://digitalprinciples.org/principles/>.
- Geldof, M., Grimshaw, D.J., Kleine, D., and Unwin, T. (2011) *What are the key lessons for ICT4D partnerships for poverty reduction?*, London: DFID, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08aba40f0b6497400072c/DFID_ICT_SR_Final_Report_r5.pdf.
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- Tennyson, R. (2011) *The partnering toolbox*, 4th ed. Oxford: The Partnering Initiative (IBLF) <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Partnering-Toolbook-en-20113.pdf>.
- Stibbe, D. and Prescott, D. (2020) *The SDG partnership guidebook*, The Partnering Initiative and UNDESA, <https://www.thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The-SDG-Partnership-Guidebook-v0.9.pdf>.
- True Educational Partnerships (2020) *How EdTech is changing the education landscape*, <https://www.trueeducationpartnerships.com/schools/how-edtech-is-changing-the-education-landscape/>.
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