

Building alliances on girls' issues

Lessons from the Girl Power Programme 2011–2015

Girl Power Alliance



Building alliances on girls' issues

POVERTY, GENDER INEQUALITY, climate change... today's problems are too complex for any one organisation or agency to address alone. So forming alliances has become necessary for all who aspire to improve the world.

Alliances may be formed by all types of organisations: non-governmental, professional groups, women's and youth associations, donor agencies, international organisations, local authorities, national governments, the private sector. They may include only one type of organisation (such as civil society) or may cut across traditional boundaries between the public, private and non-governmental sectors. They may vary from formal to informal networking, and from one-off joint initiatives to long-term, institutionalised collaborations with strictly defined roles and shared responsibilities.

Donors and some governments are pressing for non-governmental organisations to collaborate with each other to improve their effectiveness and avoid duplication. For the NGOs, alliances offer an opportunity both to increase their impact and to gain a stronger voice and higher visibility. Nevertheless, alliances also face many challenges. Some governments are critical. Alliances may lack resources and their working procedures may be unclear. Their members may be ambivalent to the alliance, or may compete with other members for visibility and resources.

This brief explores three aspects of alliances, drawing on the experience of the Girl Power Programme, an initiative to improve the lot of girls and young women in 10 developing countries (Box 1): set-up and design, daily operations, and value.

The Girl Power Alliance

The Girl Power Programme built alliances at several levels (Figure 1). The initial partnership was forged between **six Dutch non-governmental organisations** which form the Girl Power Alliance. This grouping developed a joint programme for better rights and opportunities for girls and young women, based on the combined knowledge, expertise and networks of its constituent organisations. The alliance successfully applied for funding for the Girl Power Programme from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Girl Power worked in 10 countries. Within each one, the national partners of the six Dutch organisations set up **country steering committees**. Each of these national partners implemented activities in their specialist areas. An organisation working on media, for example, focused on teaching girls how to shoot and produce video programmes. One working on advocacy helped groups of girls to lobby for their rights. In the country steering committees, national partners coordinated their projects, planned joint activities and monitored the work together in order to achieve synergy.

The national partners also helped form and strengthen **networks** of girls' groups, grassroots associations and other civil society organisations, and linked civil society with government institutions and other service providers.

Key messages

Alliances are a good way to pool the talents and increase the effectiveness of actors working on social change. The partners need shared objectives, but do not have to focus on the same topics or have exactly the same vision.

Alliances must be voluntary, and made up of partners who have complementary approaches. Because alliances depend on mutual trust, the members must know each other and be comfortable working with each other.

Alliances must be transparent. Each member is accountable for its own area, and must communicate openly with its partners. It must be willing to listen and flexible enough to address others' concerns.

From a member's point of view, **an alliance involves costs** in the form of staff time and of effort spent in coordination and monitoring. For the alliance to be worthwhile, the benefits for the beneficiaries must be clear. The benefits to the organisation itself must outweigh the costs.

Multi-member alliances inevitably involve larger and smaller members. It is important to agree on how to govern the alliance and make decisions. **Equal treatment is important.** Make sure that the smaller partners are heard and their contributions and interests are taken into account.

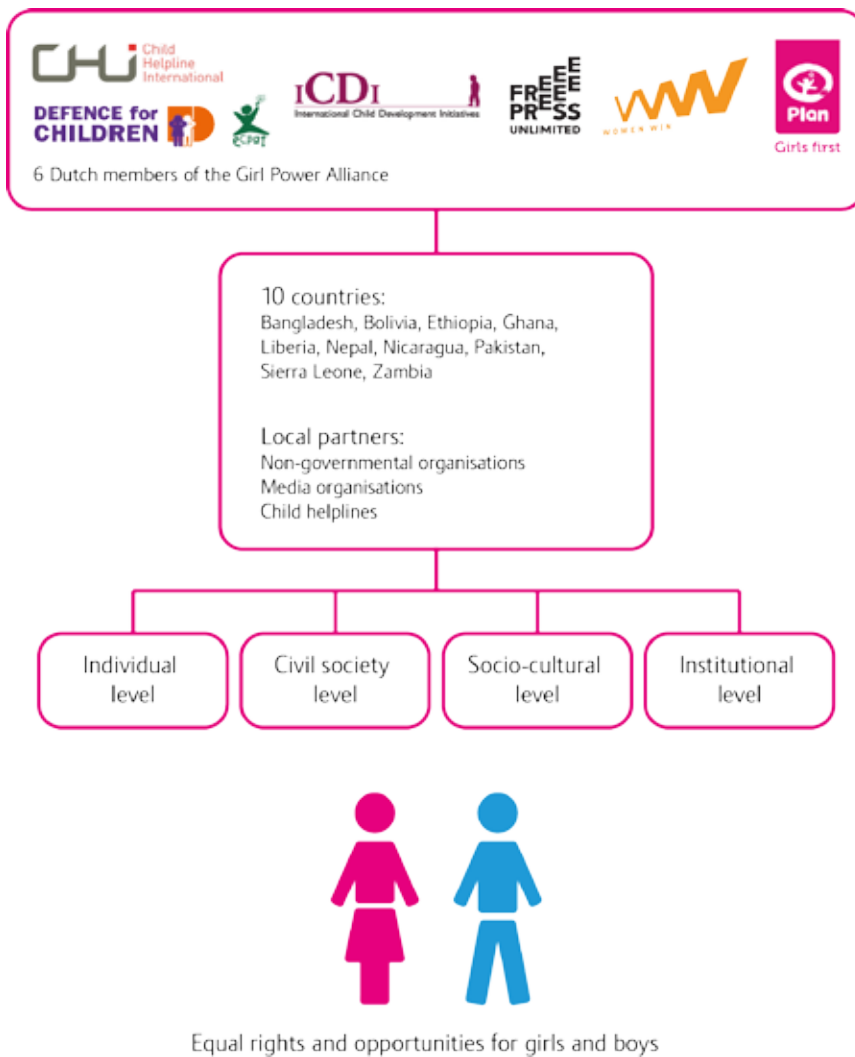


Figure 1. Structure of the Girl Power Programme

Set-up and design

At the start of a collaboration, the various potential partners decide whether there is enough common ground for collaboration. If they decide to do so, they define their shared objectives and plan how to achieve them.

Motivations

In Girl Power, donor requirements and access to funding were important incentives for alliance building. Donors increasingly promote collaboration among the funding recipients: it is easier to administer a single large grant to an alliance than several smaller ones to separate organisations. They also point to cost savings, reduced duplication and greater effectiveness and impact.

For all organisations involved in Girl Power, a joint commitment to girls' rights was an equally important motivation to commit themselves to a 5-year partnership.

Organisations also had their own specific motivations – for example, a desire to expand their work into a new region, to strengthen their experience on a particular theme, or to increase their visibility with certain donors. Such objectives were not explicitly discussed.

Box 1. Girl Power

The Girl Power Programme (2011–2015) fought the injustice that girls and young women face every day. It did so by trying to ensure that they have equal rights and opportunities. It worked in 10 countries: Bangladesh, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Sierra Leone and Zambia. Local organizations in each country implemented the activities.

Girl Power focused on four main themes:

- **Protection** against violence and abuse
- Access to post-primary **education**
- Socio-political **participation**
- **Economic empowerment** of girls and young women.

The programme was supported by the Dutch government and was coordinated by the Girl Power Alliance, a group of six Dutch non-governmental organisations.

Box 2. An international alliance: The South Asian Association of Helplines

When their parents died, 5-year-old Neelam and her 3-year-old brother were left orphaned in Bangalore, in southern India, far from their home in Nepal. Their parents' employer in Bangalore approached the Association for Promoting Social Action, a Girl Power partner that runs a child helpline. Could it trace the children's relatives? The helpline got in touch with Child Helpline Nepal, which managed to locate the children's grandparents in Baitadi, in western Nepal. Neelam and her brother were successfully reunited with them.

Twelve-year-old Ganga Ram and his friends had been put to work in a factory in Nepal. They were rescued and cared

for in a shelter until Child Helpline Nepal could arrange for them to be taken home to Bihar, in eastern India.

Two successes. But sadly, such problems are not unusual in South Asia. Similar cultures, widespread poverty and high rates of migration mean that violations of children's rights often cross borders: they include abductions, child labour and child brides. A coordinated approach is needed to deal with such issues.

The South Asian Association of Child Helplines provides such coordination. This association of nine child helplines in eight countries grew out of the partnership of three Girl Power organisations in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. It

coordinates the region's child helplines and provides protection to children and young people, from prevention and intervention to rehabilitation.

The Association is managed by a secretariat and is governed by a board of representatives from each country. The board meets twice a year in person or through conference calls. It is responsible for major strategic and financial decisions, and recruits and supervises the secretariat.

The Association has introduced a toll-free emergency number, 1098, in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, and is trying to get the same number allocated in the other countries.

Process

The members of the **Dutch alliance** started exploring opportunities for collaboration 2 years before the Girl Power Programme was launched. They put a lot of time and effort into the joint design of a proposal. After the donor had approved the funding, this overall proposal was relatively quickly elaborated into country programmes and partner projects.

The **national alliances** did not have such an exploratory phase. Some of their members took part in start-up workshops with the Dutch alliance and helped plan the national alliances. For others, participation in a national alliance was a given if they wanted to take part in (and get funding for) Girl Power. For some, this was a conscious choice; others felt they were being forced into a marriage. None of the national alliance organisations had a choice as to who their alliance partners would be.

Building alliances in each country has been further complicated because it took the Dutch organisations a long time to select partners. That delayed things: in several countries, new members joined well after the project had been started, in 2012, 2013 or even 2014. Most were brought in without any consultation with the existing alliance members.

Country and project steering committees

The **country steering committees** coordinated the activities of the partner organisations in each country, handled high-level advocacy work and managed conferences. These committees were made up of national organisations that received funding or capacity support directly from the Dutch partners.

In some countries, lower-level **project steering committees** coordinated activities in each district or province. They comprised representatives of the civil society organisations that implemented the work in the communities.

Lessons

- **Clarify motives.** It is important to be clear on the motives for collaboration. Which are the shared objectives? Do these provide enough common ground for a partnership? It is equally important to discuss the individual organisations' objectives and interests. If partners do not get anything, or not enough, out of a partnership, they will lose inter-



Launching ceremony for the Madadgaar National 1098 Helpline in Pakistan, a member of the South Asian Association of Helplines

Box 3. A national alliance: Lobbying for a law in Sierra Leone

Most women in Sierra Leone will be victims of either sexual or domestic violence at some time in their lives, studies show. Violence against women reached a peak during the country's 11-year civil war, but still remains high.

A new law aims to bring levels of violence down. It increases the minimum jail sentence for the perpetrators, prohibits forced sex within a marriage, and

protects children from being abused by teachers and others in authority.

A coalition of Girl Power partners (Defence for Children, One Family People and Plan Sierra Leone) and other non-governmental organisations lobbied the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children to accelerate the adoption of the draft law. The coalition also arranged consultations with chiefs, police, family support units and members of

parliament to ensure that it would have enough support. The Sexual Offences Act was finally passed in 2012.

This lobbying has raised awareness among the police, the department of social welfare and socio-legal services about sexual violence. Reporting of such offences has risen as girls and women have gained confidence that their attackers will be punished.

est. A lack of commitment from one or more partners affects the whole partnership. Sometimes friendship is better than marriage!

- **Get to know your partners.** Differences are what make partnerships work. But managing differences can be quite difficult. Before taking up joint responsibilities, take time to get to know your partners, their organisational culture, strategies and operational approaches.
- **Be realistic.** Cost-effectiveness and sharing of resources are often mentioned as benefits of collaboration. But effective collaboration takes time, both during the set-up phase and throughout the lifetime of the partnership. During the planning phase, make sure that enough resources are available to realise the ambitions – or adjust the ambitions to the resources available.
- **Beware of too many alliances.** The alliance must not duplicate what an existing partnership or network is doing, but must team up with existing groups and complement their work. Do not build a new alliance if other initiatives are already addressing the same issues; it will not add value and will overload both the communities and your own organisation. Belong to too many clubs, and you will get overstretched and fail to attend meetings or take part in programmes.

Daily operations

How the collaboration is managed and operates day to day determines how efficient and effective it is. The daily management of the 10 national alliances was to a large extent determined by guidelines developed by the Dutch alliance. The Dutch alliance also decided which organisation would lead the national alliances.

Each national alliance adapted its management and operations to its own situation. In **Zambia**, the partners decided to rotate the chair of their alliance, with each member taking on the responsibility for the organisation, preparation and chairing of meetings for one year. This created a sense of belonging, strengthened participation and encouraged active contribution to meetings and activities. In **Sierra Leone, Pakistan** and several other countries, separate forums were convened within the alliance at strategic, management and operational levels. This aligned activities on the ground and facilitated the exchange of knowledge and tools among organisations.

The Dutch alliance developed a robust set of procedures, templates and terms of reference, resulting in a clearly defined governance structure with 10 country teams; a steering committee; planning, monitoring and evaluation teams; finance and learning groups; a board of directors; and a coordinating desk.



Bolivian girls voting at their school
Photo: Plan International

Box 4. A national alliance: Pushing girls' issues up the agenda in Bolivia

Although legislation exists to guarantee the protection and well-being of women and girls in Bolivia, it is not always applied, and budgets are scarce. Health, education and violence do not always get the priority they deserve, and the interests of girls and young women are often ignored.

Girls from five of the country's nine departments are trying to change this. In 2014, they started gathering information on how girls were treated in their own municipalities, and used the data they had collected to debate these issues with the local authorities.

As the national elections drew close, 70 Girl Power representatives drew up a 24-point document covering protection, participation and education issues. They presented these demands to political candidates at a well-attended national forum in the city of La Paz. All five candidates signed the document expressing commitment to the process.

This was a first step to developing a permanent lobby group to dialogue with National Assembly politicians and candidates.



A second national forum in October 2015 followed up on the agreements. This forum was attended by the Minister of Education, staff from the Ministry of Equal Opportunities, the president of the National Young People's Committee, members of parliament, representatives of aid agencies and the national media.

Girl Power has proposed a permanent monitoring process in which the alliance partners will play an important role. The alliance has become an effective social monitoring mechanism with direct access to local and national political decision-making.

Lessons

- **The right mind-set.** Working in partnerships requires specific skills, mind-set and competencies. These include openness and transparency, a joint understanding of the partnership process, genuine interest and support towards each other, equity, flexibility, and a willingness to address others' concerns.
- **Accountability.** All partners are accountable for the delivery of their respective inputs, whether they have a financial relationship or not.
- **Communication.** A healthy partnership requires continuous and appropriate communication – through email, telephone or meetings, both formally and informally. Whatever governance structure is chosen, it must support a continuous flow of information between the partners and within organisations.
- **Leadership models.** Different models of leadership and decision-making can work for different partnerships. Most important is to discuss various options and to come to a common choice that all support.

Value

Partnerships aim to produce more than the sum of their parts, so that one and one is more than two. Their added value must outweigh the costs. If so, there is a good chance that the partnership will continue beyond the life of an individual project.

The members of an alliance benefit in various ways: they gain knowledge and organizational capacity, increase their visibility and enhance their access to networks, funding and institutions. The experience of working in an alliance is an asset in itself: alliance members continue to draw on the Girl Power model when working with other donors and on other topics. With the end of the Girl Power Programme, the members of the Dutch alliance still work together on other initiatives.

Alliances also bring benefits for the target group, girls and young women. They get improved access to services, higher-quality services and more effective lobbying and advocacy on their behalf.

Adding value

The organisations involved in Girl Power ensured they added value in many different ways. In **Bangladesh**, the members of the national alliance developed a “wheel of expertise” to share and exchange knowledge, tools and methodologies (Figure 2). This shows what each partner could contribute to the alliance, and what others could learn from it. One member, Nari Uddug Kendra, promotes sports as a way to empower girls. Other members saw this was a good idea and copied this approach.

In other countries too, the alliance enabled members to expand their operations into new locations or thematic areas, and to provide complementary services to girls and young women. In **Zambia**, alliance members running life-skills training and other activities with girls included information on 116 Childline Zambia, a helpline operated by alliance member CHIN. Elsewhere, partners used each other’s networks to ensure that girls who had been abused were referred to the right places for help, and that their cases were followed up.

Joint lobbying and advocacy have proved more successful than individual initiatives. It is not easy for a single organisation to set up a meeting with parliament members and policymakers. But when organisations approach them collectively, doors and agendas open more easily. Partners can ride on each other’s networks and links with particular ministries or politicians. A good introduction can work wonders, and having a powerful, trusted collaborator putting your issue on the agenda can be very effective.

The partners were involved in frequent exchanges: meetings and discussions, joint monitoring visits, reporting and training sessions. Through these they developed a joint understanding of key issues, helping them speak with one voice and strengthening their activities for and with girls.

Lessons

- **Costs of alliances.** Partnering costs money, resources and staff time. For the organisation, the benefits must exceed these costs if partnering is to make sense.
- **Identifying benefits.** The benefits must be identified early on, both for

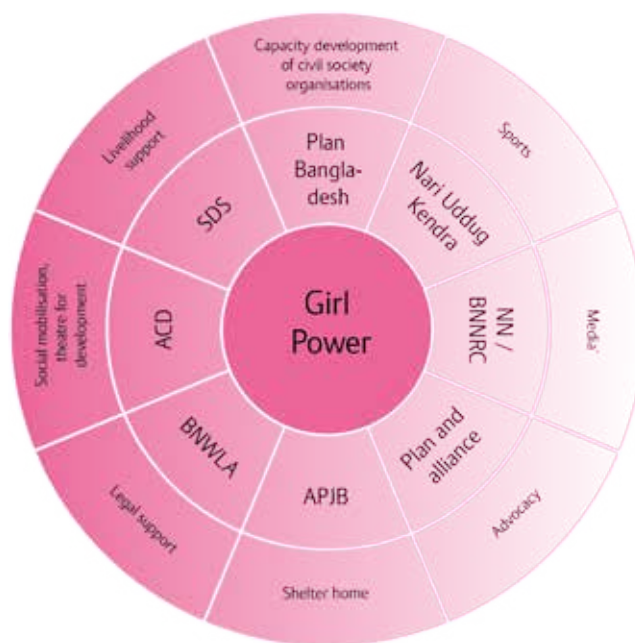


Figure 2. The “wheel of expertise” of the Girl Power partners in Bangladesh shows the strengths and focal areas of each member of the alliance

Box 5. A local alliance: Banishing child marriage in Bangladesh

Nearly 300 villages in Bangladesh have publicly banned child marriages. While the minimum legal age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18, over one-third of girls are married before they are 15 with the approval of compliant or corrupt local officials.

Early marriage is popular in Bangladesh in part because parents of the bride are expected to pay a hefty dowry to the husband’s family. Younger brides typically require smaller dowries. Under-aged brides typically have to

break off their schooling; many become pregnant before they have reached adulthood.

An alliance of Girl Power partners has persuaded the leaders of 294 villages to outlaw early marriage. This has prevented 410 such marriages from taking place. The campaign is supported by the national government, and involves community members, religious leaders, matchmakers, government agencies, local authorities and the police.

the organisations and for the beneficiaries. Only then can the value of the alliance be monitored.

- **Sustainability and moving on.** How can the partnership ensure that the results of its efforts will last after the end of the project? Will the partnership continue after the current project? These questions must be addressed and planned for from the beginning of the partnership. Right at the end is too late.
- **Equal treatment.** A danger is that the larger and stronger members dominate the alliance's decisions, activities and funding. Make sure that the smaller partners are also heard and their contributions and interests are taken adequately into account.

Recommendations

Individual organisations working alone cannot solve complex development issues. They need to work in partnerships. Such alliances create stronger impacts, accelerate and scale up development interventions, and are more cost-effective than individual efforts. The partners share resources, knowledge and tools, and can lobby for change more effectively.

Donors

- **Encourage, but don't force.** Alliance building and working with partners take time, specific skills and capacities. They are new to many organisations. Donors should allow sufficient funding and time to strengthen capacities and adjust programming.
- **Facilitate learning.** Donors should create platforms for learning and sharing on building alliances (as well for other topics where NGOs can learn from each other).

Development organisations

- **Is your organisation strong enough?** An organisation must be strong enough to contribute to building a successful alliance and to benefit from it.
- **Identify the added value.** Work out how both your target beneficiaries and your organisation can benefit from the proposed alliance. Compare this to the costs of joining. If the balance is positive, consider joining it.
- **Commit to the partnership.** If your organisation joins an alliance, the leaders and staff must be committed to it. Take time to get to know the other organisations, their ways of working, and their motives and objectives.
- **Help the alliance work.** Alliances do not function on autopilot: you have to work on them. Develop working procedures, ensure timely communication, and be prepared to give and take. Each partners must have an equal say in the decisions made.
- **Retain your identity.** An alliance is not a new organization, but a loose network of organisations that are working on the same issue.

Policymakers

- **Treat alliances as partners.** Alliances are groups of organisations that have come together to work on an issue they regard as important. They can help you design better policies. They are valuable sources of information and ideas, and their members can provide valuable access and insights to the targets of policies.
- **Encourage alliances.** Dealing with large numbers of individual organisations takes time and energy. Alliances of such organisations can distil multiple ideas from the grassroots into a form that can be incorporated into policy deliberations.

The Girl Power Alliance

- Child Helpline International
- Defence for Children-ECPAT
- Free Press Unlimited
- International Child Development Initiatives
- Plan Netherlands
- Women Win

tinyurl.com/ppzueun (in Dutch)

Lessons from the Girl Power Programme 2011–2015

Briefs in this series

- Empowering girls: Learning what works
- Making child protection systems work better
- Engaging boys and men
- Helping girls get organised
- Building alliances on girls' issues

Published by

Girl Power Alliance
c/o Plan Nederland
Amsterdam, Netherlands
www.plannederland.nl
2015