

# "We cannot work alone"

## A study of WASH and gender equality civil society partnerships

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Institute for  
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### Summary Brief



This summary brief presents findings from research on the drivers, benefits, and challenges of engagement between water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) civil society organisations (CSOs) and gender equality and women's rights organisations in Indonesia. The research was designed to help inform how CSOs can partner more effectively and collaborate to maximise mutual WASH, gender equality and inclusion outcomes. The research was funded by the Australian Government's Water for Women Fund.



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## Key findings

The research into partnerships and collaborations between WASH and gender equality CSOs in Indonesia found that there are compelling drivers to collaborate, important benefits of doing so as well as some challenges:

- Drivers to partner included improved skills, increased knowledge and power to advocate, increased resources, and more integrated activities towards shared goals.
- Benefits were found to be learning from each other, complementary skills, and an integrated approach to the interrelated issues of WASH and gender equality.
- Challenges were found to be a difference in organisational priorities and structures, different skill levels between organisations' staff, communications issues, organisational definition of gender equality, and concerns about long-term sustainability of partnerships due to different levels of financial resources between partner organisations.

Recommendations for CSO partnerships identified through this research include more regular communication, a focus on shared values and goals, co-creation of projects from the start, financial officers speaking the same language (or investing in high quality interpreters), recognising power dynamics between organisations, the benefits of two-way capacity development, and ensuring diversity in partnerships.

Water for Women is Australia's flagship water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) program supporting improved health, equality and wellbeing in Asian and Pacific communities through socially inclusive and sustainable WASH projects. Water for Women is delivering 18 WASH projects in 15 countries together with 11 research projects over five years (2018-2022).

## Introduction

There is emerging evidence that collaboration between the WASH sector and gender equality and women's organisations can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes. However, there is a need to better understand the models that best support CSO efforts to support shifts in gender norms, increase women's leadership and voice and improve WASH outcomes, particularly considering the intersectionality of multiple, interrelated forms of marginalisation.

In Indonesia there is a vibrant civil society engaged on women's and gender equality issues including those with a focus on women's voice and leadership, women and girls with disabilities, and violence against women, as well as equitable and inclusive WASH, and interest to facilitate greater interaction between these interrelated segments of civil society.

The research questions that guided this project were:

- What are the drivers, benefits, and challenges of engagement between WASH sector CSOs and gender equality and women's rights organisations?
- How can CSOs partner more effectively to maximise WASH, gender equality and inclusion outcomes?

## Research Methods

This was a qualitative study with an applied research approach, which drew on five complementary methods to answer different aspects of the research questions:

1. Literature review (on CSO coalitions and partnerships, Indonesia's women's movement, North-South partnerships, and localism)
2. In-depth interviews with 15 CSOs (6 WASH and 9 gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) organisations), covering a diversity of size, type and history
3. Longitudinal research of collaborations between CSOs, comprising of two rounds of interviews over 2.5 years (five interviews conducted twice)
4. Joint analytical processes, and action-research applications
5. Social network mapping of the connections and collaborations between WASH and gender equality organisations (workshop exercise)

# Conceptual Framework

## 'Power With' – a fundamental aspect of empowerment

The study was underpinned by the types of power 'Empowerment Framework' and focussed on the concept of 'power with' which is related to the process of group mobilisation to agitate for rights and change social norms and conditions (Figure 1). The types of group mobilisation which were the focus of the study included CSOs partnering directly with each other and with community-based organisations, coalitions, networks, and government sanctioned women's groups.

Types of power	Examples
'power within'	Self-understanding, self-esteem, sense of entitlement to fulfilment of rights, self-belief to make changes in one's life
'power to'	Decision-making roles in the household, community, and economy - extending to areas traditionally considered as men's occupations or domains
'power over'	Access and control over financial, physical and knowledge resources
<b>'power with'</b>	<b>Process of group mobilisation to agitate for rights and change social norms and conditions</b>

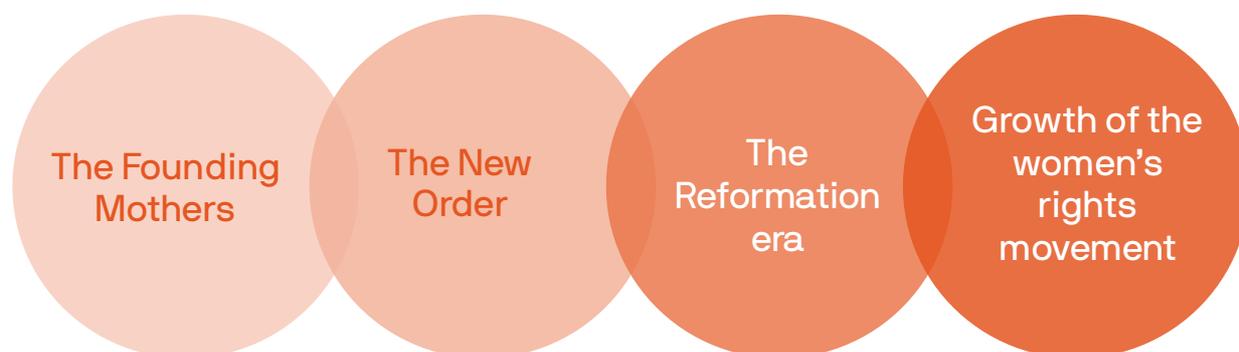
**Figure 1:** adapted from Grant et al (2019)<sup>1</sup> based Rowlands; VeneKlasen and Miller; Eyben, Kabeer and Cornwall; and Perezniето and Taylor.

*“Power with’ involves finding common ground among different interests and building collective strength. Based on mutual support, solidarity and collaboration, ‘power with’ multiplies individual talents and knowledge. ‘Power with’ is a key tenet of empowerment, by building voice and increasing power through acting together around mutual interests. Advocacy groups seek allies and build coalitions drawing on the notion of ‘power with’.” (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002, page 55).*

a This included the PKK (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga) or the 'Guidance of Family Welfare' which was created by the State to work in villages and support its family planning program. In 2019, the PKK focussed on 10 main programs which included '[1] comprehension and practical application of Pancasila ; [2] mutual self-help; [3] food; [4] clothing; [5] housing and household management (home economics); [6] education and craft skills; [7] health; [8] development of cooperative; [9] protection and conservation of environment; and [10] sound (healthy) planning which is carried out according to the conditions and priorities of community needs.

## Feminism and the Women's movement in Indonesia: A brief timeline

In order to understand the civil society context that the research sits within, the following brief history of key moments and actors in Indonesia's women's movement are presented.



**Figure 2:** The phases of feminism and the women's movement in Indonesia.

### The origins of the women's movement: "The Founding Mothers" (early 1900's)

As in other colonised countries in Asia, the origins of feminism and the women's movement in Indonesia were linked to the rise in nationalism around the turn of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup> The first women's groups, inspired by early feminists such as Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879-1904), advocated for women's education and occupation, and supported the nationalist movement. As nationalism gained pace, Indonesian women distanced themselves from Dutch feminists and colonial organisations, instead focusing on pressing local social issues.<sup>2</sup> Indonesian women had to be sensitive to the nationalist movement's concern about foreign influence, with feminism seen as "of Western origin...anti-religious, or anti-male".<sup>3</sup> This meant that none of the participants at the first Women's Congress in 1928 called themselves 'feminist'.<sup>2</sup> While nationalism was beneficial for women, giving them political voice and participation in organisations, at the same time it was harder for women from higher socio-economic and strict Islamic backgrounds to take public roles.<sup>2</sup> Women's organisations continued to align with Indonesian culture and values rather than what was perceived as western feminism, and some of this sentiment continues today.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 3:** The inspiring leaders of the Universitas Indonesia Gender Studies Program, Jakarta Indonesia

### The New Order: the heavy influence of the state (1966-1998)

After independence, several women's organisations were established, focusing on basic needs such as food, health and education and marriage law.<sup>5</sup> One of the most notable of these was the Indonesian Women's Movement 'Gerakan Wanita Indonesia' (GERWANI) set up in 1950. GERWANI was reaching around 1.5 million members in 1965 when the New Order government used military force to dismantle all grass roots level organisations, including GERWANI.<sup>4</sup> It was labelled as a dangerous women's organisation with its key members killed or imprisoned without trial. The New Order regime controlled all community groups<sup>6</sup> and created a nationwide organisation for women called the PKK (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga or the Guidance of Family Welfare) to work in villages and support its family planning program.<sup>4</sup> The PKK was influenced by the gender ideology of the New Order regime, where women were primarily viewed as wives and mothers looking after the domestic sphere.

During the New Order era, women also joined religious study groups which enabled participation in the new openness from democracy in the Reformation era, however, religious conservatism prevailed including views that women should not take public roles.<sup>6</sup>

### The Reformation era: advancements and challenges for the women's movement

From 1998 onwards, the women's movement has been advocating for women's representation in governance, women's health, anti-discrimination and support for victims of violence.<sup>2,7</sup> Women continue to face challenges in government representation in a heavily patriarchal country. Women's and gender equality organisations work closely with communities, and advocate for gender equality across all parts of society.

## Research Findings

### How was gender equality defined by WASH and gender equality CSOs?

Most organisations interviewed (10 of 18) indicated that gender equality was considered in an intersectional way in terms of a range of inequalities and social dimensions. The organisations' responses have been broadly categorised along the spectrum in Figure 4 which presents a continuum of approaches to tackle gender inequality.

Continuum of approaches	Exploitative	Neutral/Blind	Inclusive	Empowering	Transformative
WASH organisations			**	****	**
Gender organisations			*		**** ****
State sponsored women's organisation (a)				*	

**Figure 4:** Definitions of gender equality by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as mapped onto the gender equality continuum (n = 18). Continuum adapted from Cavill et al (2020)<sup>8</sup>

### Key

#### Exploitative

Perpetuates or can even exacerbate gender inequities

#### Ignoring

Does not take gender into account or does not address inequities explicitly

#### Inclusive

Recognises that WASH programming affects people of different genders in unique ways and focuses on these groups' practical and immediate needs

#### Empowering

Addresses the unique practical WASH needs of people of different genders and supports an enabling environment for all people to claim their rights to WASH across the domains of empowerment (see Figure 1)

#### Transformative

Seeks to reshape gender relations to be equitable. This approach focuses on transforming power relations and norms that perpetuate inequalities.

(a) The Indonesian Government's New Order regime created a nationwide organisation for women called the PKK (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga or the Guidance of Family Welfare) to work in villages and support its family planning program. The PKK continues to this day, please see the footnote on page 3 for more information about the PKK.

*“Gender equality is not only about male and female. Part of the organisational basic values are gender justice, such as promoting the same treatment of women and men and non-discrimination on the basis of any reason including ethnicity, religion, belief, race, age, gender, marital status, socioeconomic status, type of work and political orientation”.*  
 – Interviewee

## Types of Partnerships

Interviewees characterised collaborations between WASH or gender equality organisations predominantly as ‘coordinated’ within the spectrum shown in Figure 5, which was also confirmed by the research analysis examining the partnerships. Coordinated partnerships are those that include some joint planning, may be project based but are not highly committed or formalised such as those at the collaborative end of the spectrum.

AUTONOMOUS	COOPERATIVE	COORDINATED	COLLABORATIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organisations operate independently</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remain independent but network and share information</li> <li>Low commitment</li> <li>Informal arrangements (no memorandum of understanding (MOU) or contracts for e.g.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some joint planning</li> <li>Often project based coordination</li> <li>Memorandum of understanding (MOU) or contracts in place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shared culture, visions, values and resources</li> <li>Joint planning and delivery of some services</li> <li>High commitment</li> <li>Formalised partnership</li> </ul>

**Figure 5:** Spectrum of collaboration, adapted from Winterford, K. (2017)<sup>9</sup>

## Drivers for collaboration between WASH and GESI organisations

WASH and GESI organisations reported several drivers for working together towards shared outcomes.

Some momentum was expressed by interviewees to be coming from donors who are encouraging an emphasis on GESI and collaboration with rights holder organisations. WASH and GESI organisations identified five main drivers for collaboration including:

- Both organisations having an opportunity to increase human resources and attract funding.
- The chance to improve skills, knowledge and the power to advocate on certain issues. This process was reported to lead to improved results, sustainability of programs, and strengthened support for advocacy initiatives and campaigns.
- The recognition of the importance of WASH for women and girls. WASH was seen as an entry point for organisations that are promoting reproductive health and behaviour change programs.
- The understanding that WASH systems are complex and many actors are required to create change from the government to the community level.
- The willingness of women from gender equality CSOs to be volunteer change agents.

*“Sanitation and clean water is a basic need for the community, especially women. Then this situation becomes a driving factor for partnerships with other parties”*

– Interviewee

*“[Collaborations] are very possible and very much needed because sanitation is also closely related to reproductive health as well.”*

– Interviewee

*“We [WASH organisations] hope that they [women’s organisations] can become agents of change at the local level after we finish. That they will continue to advocate for STBM ...and even get funding from the local government. They can become the training facilitators due to the skills that they have developed.”*

– Interviewee

## Integrated SDGs and Symbiosis of Partnerships

The organisations interviewed recognised that in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it was important to leave no-one behind and that integration of efforts and partnerships are required to meet the Goals. There was a sense that both sectors ‘need each other’ and there was a shared view that gender and WASH issues have the same root problems. These problems are about addressing systemic cultural and social issues, and not just about infrastructure and services, that while important, do not meet all women’s WASH and gender equality needs.



**Figure 6:** Research participants map out drivers, benefits and challenges of collaborating across WASH and GESI sectors

*“The main reason is simple, we cannot work alone. The goals of the organisation are large, and [our organisation] cannot do it alone without collaborating, because the issue is not a single problem.” – Interviewee*

## Benefits for collaboration between WASH and GESI organisations

The research identified several benefits arising from WASH and gender quality partnerships, which is positive as it demonstrates that outcomes can be strengthened through partnerships. These benefits included:

- Opportunities for cross-learning and accessing complementary skills which can result in increased knowledge and deeper perspectives for both partners. Where there is a gap in skills, the other organisation can complement with its capacity. For example, gender equality CSOs bring connection to community and behaviour change skills and WASH organisations can bring technical knowledge on WASH issues to the partnership.
- An integrated approach to the interrelated issues of WASH and gender equality which can elevate project goals and advance a progressive agenda. For instance, if safe and private WASH services are provided and maintained, girls will be able to stay longer at school and do not need to skip school for menstruation.
- Strong and effective advocacy, including educating communities and improving outcomes for those communities.
- The opportunity to develop new ideas together as a joint program, which can be useful to attract grants and funding and promote program achievements together. This can further help to avoid reinventing the wheel and support the sustainability of programs.
- Political support for programs and contributions to achieve program objectives and targets, often sooner and with a broader coverage and impact.
- Empowerment through increased voice of women involved in WASH programs, who are supported to demand their rights.
- GESI-focused organisations reported the benefit of addressing more immediate issues (such as WASH infrastructure needs) because much of their other advocacy work (related to changing gender norms) is long-term.

*“The benefit for [our organisation] when there is collaboration with WASH organisations is to ensure and spread gender mainstreaming in WASH programs”. – Interviewee*

*“Benefits of collaboration with WASH organization are both on the organisation side and community side. For organization side, this collaboration to enrich the substance of WASH, exchange ideas and strategies in advocacy. For members/ community side, this collaboration has good impact for community especially for women. They were empowered, they have taken the initiative to speak to the government or they took the initiative to demonstrate to demand their water rights.”*

–  
**Gender organisation Interviewee**

*“From the many collaborations we’ve had with many partners, we can learn from their lessons learned and what they have done. [We can use these lessons to inform] what the future strategy will be like, to be able to reach out, and what issues can be associated with WASH that are more appropriate to be applied to the community. In addition to gaining new perspectives, new knowledge, new theories, we can learn from what has been done, what the challenges have been, and what the opportunities were, so we can plan for the future”.* – **Interviewee**

*“There are actually many benefits. When we've clicked, let's say that we already agree on what we want to achieve, it's faster. It will be completed faster, then the impact will be wider, the coverage is also wider, because it seems like we have friends, more friends can reach out to an issue.”*

– **Interviewee**



**Figure 7:** Plan International working with stakeholders in Indonesia.

**Photo source:** Water for Women

## Challenges to collaboration between WASH and GESI organisations

Even with a strong case for collaboration, challenges can arise when organisations with their different backgrounds, political philosophies, and perspectives work together. Both WASH and gender equality CSOs openly discussed some of the challenges they had experienced in their current collaborations. These were:

- **Competing organisational priorities and direction:** Each organisation brings to the partnership table its own agenda. Even though there may be alignment in end goals (eg. WASH and gender equality), there can be differences in how each organisation prioritises certain activities or aspects of the partnership.
- **Different levels of staff capacity and embedded understanding of gender equality.** CSOs noted that it is challenging for partners when there are different skill levels when it comes to WASH and to gender content and partnership experience. The people representing the organisations can also have different amounts of time available to work on shared activities. This can cause friction when determining and carrying out roles and responsibilities.
- **Organisations can have very different sizes and structures which may or may not align with that of their partners.** For example, one partner may have a large team where program level staff engage in the partnership, while the other partner may be a small organisation where only one senior person engages. Partnerships can also stall or require a restart when there is a rotation or when key staff leave an organisation.

*“The challenges that women organizations work on include gender-based violence, reproduction, child marriage, and other women organisation mainstreaming issues. [This makes it] really challenging for women’s organisations to be concerned with other issues which is felt to be male dominated such as sanitation, infrastructure, etc. because of lack of capacity.”*

– Interviewee

- **Organisations can differ in terms of their ways of operating and can have different approaches and perspectives.** For example, differences in the way that achievements are measured can be a challenge in working in together. Furthermore, partners can have limited time to carry out a project and this shortage of time can lead to a mismatch in expectations of a collaboration, which cause tensions once the project is “in the field” or in implementation.
- **Mismatched or limited financial resources and sustainability:** CSOs reported that the coordination activities required for collaboration are often costly and funding is not always available for such activities. Organisations can have different levels of financial resources to bring to a partnership, and this can cause friction, particularly when combined with different levels of human resources. Furthermore, all local CSOs are challenged by organisational sustainability in relation to funds for ongoing operations, which can affect their ability to commit to longer-term collaborations.
- **Sensitive subject matters:** Organisational memoranda with governments or other parties can restrict them from explicitly working on certain issues. For instance, some topics can be socially and politically controversial, and make it challenging to partner with rights-based organisations working on these issues. Additionally, organisations may differ in how they define ‘gender equality’, and the strategies they are willing to pursue in support of gender equality outcomes.



**Figure 8:** WASH in Indonesia.

**Photo source:** DAI

# Recommendations to support effective collaboration

By reflecting on lessons from partnerships to date, the following suggestions have emerged to improve and strengthen collaboration between gender equality and WASH CSOs for mutual benefits.

1. **Build good communication and invest in partnership training and partnership check-ins:** At the onset of the partnership, it is important for organisations to discuss their preferred modes of communication, as well as mode of partnership. For example, organisations may differ in their ability to engage openly or need to put in place privacy or safety measures which should be mutually agreed from the start. This can help to decide where and when people can meet, who to invite to public forums, use of logos in communications etc. It can also be useful to budget or seek funds for training on effective partnerships and to support partnership check-ins (see Annex 1).

*“It’s a cliché, but in all any collaboration when the communication is not carried out routinely, eventually the cooperative relationship might break up. Indeed, it is something that must be maintained continuously.”*

– Interviewee

2. **Partner on projects that have practical benefits for the constituents or local level members of the organisation, and build on shared values and goals:** A deep understanding of shared goals and purpose can be useful to plan activities in an effective manner. For example, such shared values and goals might include: an understanding that the main beneficiaries of WASH and gender equality CSOs are women (in all their diversity); connecting WASH to gender equality through programs focussed on reproductive health and stunting; and identifying that WASH organisations could strengthen their community development capabilities by partnering with gender organisations, were identified as good entry points.

3. **At the onset, it can be useful for organisations to develop a common understanding about the key political and philosophical aspects of their partnership.** For instance, discussing about their approaches to activism, organisational ideology on key issues and talking about what they feel comfortable saying and doing publicly. Partners can aim for a collaborative approach to setting up partnerships that are delicate and important possibly rather than sub-contracting or coordinated style of partnership (see Figure 5 above). They can also consider a range of partnership and governance options before pursuing a particular model and be explicit about the level of decision-making in each option.

4. **Co-create the joint project or initiative together from the start wherever possible:** It is ideal to engage all partners from the start to co-create the project together and develop shared knowledge and understanding, rather than bringing them in the middle of implementation or once goals and methods have been pre-determined.

*“We agree that [the partnership] is equal, but most activities are already pre-defined. Would like to sit down and create the plan together - would be great to have a blank piece of paper and create it from scratch. The risk is that you [the partner organisation] end up being a technical input”. – Interviewee*

5. **Pay close attention to finance issues and misunderstandings.** It is important to talk through financial pressures and accountabilities on both sides, so this is understood by all parties. This might include for example donor requirements, what funds can and can't be used for, how reporting will be done etc. Ideally, both financial officers in each organisation would speak the same language, or investment made in good quality translation processes.
6. **Power dynamics exist in all settings, and they are important to consider early on in partnerships and within the project.** It is recommended that organisations start and continue the process of conducting a power analysis together. The priorities of different women (in all their diversity) will be equally diverse, so engaging only with one group or class of women's organisations is unlikely to allow for the full range of needs and views within a given societal context to be understood. For example, will public toilets be a priority for all groups of women, or more for some than others?
7. **It can be useful to map out intersectionality issues in relation to the groups with whom CSOs engage, and to try to partner with a broad range of groups in order to capture the diversity of people, their needs, and their different levels of power.** Moreover, donor organisations can support the commitment to gender equality by making requirements for organisations who access their funds to demonstrate and apply transformative gender equality principles.

8. **Partnering with some types of organisations may reach a segment of women (for example, elite women, or rural women, or urban women), but these partnerships alone will not provide a comprehensive understanding of the needs, views and aspirations of all women.** Therefore, WASH organisations are advised to look broadly at the types of organisations with whom they can partner and who these organisations represent, and ensure that they are not only partnering with elite women’s organisations as part of their engagement strategy. At the same time, strategic connections to elite or state sponsored women’s groups may be necessary to achieve WASH goals, but the opportunities and limits of these partnerships should be kept in consideration.



**Figure 9:** Research participants mapping out drivers, benefits and challenges of collaborating across WASH and GESI sectors

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## Further Resources on CSO partnerships

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For more information:

[waterforwomen.uts.edu.au](http://waterforwomen.uts.edu.au)

## Annex 1. Partnership check in template

This partnership check in template will be useful to any organisation partnering with another organisation. It has been developed with civil society organisations in mind, especially those working across sectors. It is suggested that this template be used to conduct a partnership check in with each other every six months or so, and ideas to further develop the partnership documented and followed up on at the next discussion.

Hello's and catch up – something you have each been doing related to work or life that has been interesting, exciting, challenging, informative *(each person shares something about their life and work)*

What is working really well with respect to our partnership? Why is this working so well? *(each person says something – or more than one thing. You can also use post-it notes or flip chart paper to facilitate the contributions)*

In what ways is the partnership supporting each other's strategic aims (the goals and focus of each organisation)?

What are the top three things that your organisation gains from being in partnership with each other?" *(discuss similarities and differences)*

Organisation 1:

1

2

3

Organisation 2:

1

2

3

Do both organisations feel that communication is effective in the partnership? Is there anything you would like to change or improve in any way?

Your hopes and dreams for the partnership: When you both look at the figure below of types of partnerships, where would you say you are now, and where would you like to move to in the future (if change is aspired to – it may not be).

AUTONOMOUS	COOPERATIVE	COORDINATED	COLLABORATIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Organisations operate independently</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Remain independent but network and share information</li><li>Low commitment</li><li>Informal arrangements (no memorandum of understanding (MOU) or contracts for e.g.).</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Some joint planning</li><li>Often project based coordination</li><li>Memorandum of understanding (MOU) or contracts in place</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Shared culture, visions, values and resources</li><li>Joint planning and delivery of some services</li><li>High commitment</li><li>Formalised partnership</li></ul>

Spectrum of collaboration, adapted from Winterford, K. (2017)

Are there any challenges or issues about the partnership?

- What could be done to help with those challenges?
- How, when and who should action the strategies to address any challenges?

Are there any changes that each organisation would like to make to the partnership (way of working, managing finances, communication, focus of the project, anything at all) “we’d love it if you could.....”, “would it be possible if you could do XYZ”

What (if anything) shall we do differently after this conversation to improve our partnership and ways of working?

- *Who will do it?*
- *When will they do it?*
- *How will they do it?*
- *What will be the benefit of this change/action?*

Other items you'd like to talk about in particular during this meeting

Date for the next partnership check in meeting

