

Lessons Learned – managing joint transboundary activities and regularising shared working practices

The challenge

Working across borders with multiple transboundary partners is both a deeply rewarding and challenging process. In the majority of cases the experience is project-based for a limited time and therefore any issues are either not encountered or knowingly sidestepped in the interests of project delivery.

In a long-term partnership, however, the challenges need to be faced and solutions which respect all sides must be negotiated. The main issues can be broken down into three overlapping areas of concern:

[How to integrate the working practices of different organisations?](#)

That different organisations have different working practices is a commonplace observation, these practices arising from differing personalities and leadership styles, amongst many other aspects. At a transboundary level these differences are also intensified by cultural factors, many of which can be unexpectedly simple, such as differing holiday seasons leading to longer than anticipated periods when work cannot progress.

[How to manage conflicts in a remote working environment?](#)

Conflicts will always arise in working relationships, at all scales. In cross-border work this potential is exacerbated by the fact that most communication takes place at a distance, particularly the day-to-day management of joint work, which is rarely handled in person. Written communication and online meetings tend to foster more frequent misperceptions or flare-ups than their face-to-face equivalents.

[How to co-ordinate workplans and the delivery of joint outputs?](#)

Co-ordinating different teams within a single office is universally acknowledged to have its challenges, how then to manage ongoing and tight deadlines across multiple teams, in multiple offices in multiple countries?

The solution

Addressing these issues requires time, good will and the determination to overcome obstacles, as well as sincere respect for differences. Over the seven years of its existence PrespaNet has travelled from being three organisations loosely aligned in intent and conservation goals for the area of Prespa, to a closely streamlined network of environmental actors working in concert on a wide range of joint, overlapping or co-ordinated actions.

The network pursues tried and tested solutions, such as ensuring that frequent face-to-face meetings are arranged in order to maintain relationships and allow space for informal conflict management, and appointing specific officers as the conduits for inter-organisation communication, so as to avoid the pitfalls of multiple potentially conflicting paths for dialogue and decision making.

In addition, however, the most successful mechanism has proved to be the decision to negotiate and implement a set of standard working practices and procedures for the most common areas of joint work. The partners designed, discussed and refined these procedures in order to take account of differences and reduce the scope for conflict through greater clarity of expectations and transparency of processes.

Lessons learned

- Plan regular in-person meetings at all levels, from formal meetings with senior staff and directors to smaller more informal groupings that focus on a specific topic or activity. Despite the increased cost and time, face-to-face meetings elicit greater understanding, better appreciation of opposing views and support more diplomatic approaches.

- Always allow space in all meetings, whether in-person or online, for social interaction. This is particularly important in long periods where only online opportunities are available. If time and resources are available plan a solely social meeting; the investment in relationships will be more than repaid in increased working good will, the generation of ideas and professional creativity.
- Nominate an official conduit for all communication on behalf of the organisation – nothing fosters misunderstandings faster than conflicting or diverging progress on multiple fronts. Take the time to share information generously, even when not immediately or apparently connected to joint work, and ensure that all decision-making passes via the official channel.
- Agree a framework for the most common areas of work, starting with something simple and manageable – communications activities are a good place to start. Address both angles – what are the shared strategies, aims and objectives? What are the specific ways in which these objectives will be managed and achieved? In the example of communications, it pays for all sides to agree on what the key communications messages are and to whom they should be directed – constantly refer back to your shared strategy as you develop work together. From this point a set of agreed procedures will ensure that a specific piece of work progresses smoothly according to an agreed timetable, even taking into account the inevitable differing subjectivity in creative perspectives.
- When developing procedures, pay attention to detail and to past experience in possible bottlenecks or hotspots for conflict, focus on these issues and how they can be overcome. For example, if in the past the late involvement of new opinions or senior decision-makers has created stressful last-minute changes in direction close to deadlines, then decide on the working team at the earliest stage and stick to it, so that everyone shares the evolving process; set clear stages for gaining senior consent and buy-in, and agree that progress to the next stage is irreversible to ensure that attention is focussed when staged decisions are taken. Try to ensure that cultural factors and existing differences in practices are listened to respected and then accounted for in decision-making processes – if staggered holiday periods have created past delays, for example, ensure more time is built in at the start of an activity.
- Create shared working principles that can form the basis of your interaction – spend time on this process as the process of discussion and negotiation is as valuable for establishing and accepting agreed practices as the final set of principles.
- Make the effort to share daily work – reports, proposals, important emails – and seek comments and differing perspectives, apart from the general improvement this tends to bring to anyone's work, the process also builds trust and understanding, and offers a valuable opportunity to broaden skillsets, as well as deepening partners' engagement in and understanding of each other's working environment.
- In general terms, relationship building is key to successful long-term collaboration and will thrive if the framework and terms of interaction are collaboratively agreed, transparent and, most importantly, adhered to.
- Lastly, and acknowledging that these are common observations, but also acknowledging that they bear frequent repetition – two things are crucial to managing joint work as part of transboundary co-operation: the ability to ask for help and admit that something is beyond our immediate ability to manage alone, and the ability to listen, perhaps the most critical faculty of all.
- The aim of all the above is to regularise working practices as far as is possible in order to reduce the potential for conflict and effectively manage joint work. It is human nature that this will sometimes fail, and space for failure should definitely be allowed, accepting that occasional conflict is part of any relationship, working or otherwise.