

# Partnerships: Are They Worth It? The case of the Global Alliance for Workers and Communities



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There is much talk about the importance of partnerships in achieving long-term development goals. Yet, partnerships are not easy, take a lot of work, and demand that participants sacrifice a degree of their individual autonomy in pursuit of a common goal. A true partnership does not mean that one partner writes the cheque; another opens doors; and another does the work. To the contrary, an effective partnership requires on-going compromises, time, and investment by all parties. In the end, they often succeed or fail largely on whether or not the partnership remains accountable to an agreed upon set of standards and to the public trust while also adding value for all participants—in other words, whether “all boats rise.”

While a relatively new effort, the Global Alliance for Workers and Communities (GA), an innovative, tri-sector initiative of the International Youth Foundation (IYF), Gap, Nike, Inditex and the World Bank, appears to offer some clues on how to build vibrant, sustainable partnerships. Created in 1999 GA's mission is to marshal the insights and resources of private, public and not-for profit entities to improve the lives and future prospects of workers involved in global production and service supply chains. GA's founders joined for

different reasons: IYF sought to provide developmental support to thousands of young people in contract factories who had limited access to services and programs; Gap sought a response to issues around worker development; Nike was looking for an independent monitoring partner; and the World Bank sought to impact international and national standards guiding CSR, and to work in partnership with the private and NGO sectors.

Ultimately, GA became something different than what all parties thought. Negotiations among the partners took many months to develop trust and a common vision and mission. Even today, the partnership is constantly “tested” as new issues surface. Yet, since the beginning, each party knew

### Elements of Effective Tri-sector Partnerships

- Recognising each others' differences as assets
- Defining a common vision, mission, guiding principles and operating procedures
- Trust and transparency
- Having a higher authority to keep all on track
- Seeking a “win-win”

**“It is essential that all partners share a common vision, mission, and guiding principles. Without these commonly held agreements the partnership may run the risk of each partner attempting to achieve its own end to the detriment of the higher purpose.”**

that by leveraging their respective resources and expertise, they could more effectively promote sustained development and potentially impact policies that far outlasted the partnership. Some key elements to a successful partnership are discussed below.

#### **Recognising each others' differences as assets**

*GA partners came to this initiative with different interests, networks, and assets:*

- Nike and the Gap guarantee resources, access to factories, and leverage with factory managers that are a precondition of constructive engagement at the workplace level;
- The World Bank provides critical knowledge and expertise, especially on wider issues of sustainability, capacity-building, and community and human development; and
- The International Youth Foundation, through its global network of youth development organisations in over 40 countries and territories, ensures a vital infrastructure alongside proven expertise in project management and youth development.

By joining forces GA partners have been able to better leverage their collective networks, expertise, and access at the national and international levels. For example, today, Gap, Nike and participating contract factories in China, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam are linked to critical stakeholders – such as universities, NGOs, and local and national governments in participating countries. Such relationships were made possible through existing IYF networks and through GA's ability to build expertise in development partnerships, especially with NGOs, local government, universities, and others. At the same time, GA has been able to reach thousands of young workers in factories whose doors had previously been closed to the development community. And with the World Bank, GA has been able to explore with the International Financial Corporation (IFC) and the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) possible ways to develop services that address critical human development needs in participating countries. These relationships and opportunities would not have occurred without the World Bank.

#### **Defining a Common Vision and set of guiding principles**

While every organisation has its own norms, values and operating systems

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**GA Mission:** To improve the lives and future prospects of workers involved in global production and service supply chains, the majority of whom are women, and to promote collaboration among the private, nonprofit, and public sectors in support of those efforts.

**GA Guiding Principles:**

- Tri-sector partnership (and collaboration)
- Long-term, strategic intervention that goes beyond “policing” and that makes a business and development case
- Mutual benefits for factories, workers and corporations
- Worker participation and workplace “ownership”
- To be efficient, valued, sustainable, scalable, measurable

and may join a partnership for different reasons, it is essential that all partners share a common vision, mission, and guiding principles. Without these commonly held agreements the partnership may run the risk of each partner attempting to

achieve its own end to the detriment of the higher purpose.

IYF, Nike, Gap and the World Bank identified shared commitments including sustainable worker development and rights, workplace improvements; and tri-sector partnerships.

Over many months, they debated and crafted GA’s mission and set of operating principles. (See box) Each institution was able to put aside its parochial interests to hold all accountable to the common agreement. At the same time there was also a willingness to assist each institution to achieve its specific needs. By acknowledging upfront the common and individual interests of each partner, the GA has been able to prioritise activities and avoid unnecessary pressures from any one partner.

**Trust and Transparency**

Gaining the trust of all partners in GA was, and continues to be a major challenge and takes a good deal of time. And while it’s often re-tested, this trust has been built and maintained primarily through constant communication and transparency, i.e., frequent sharing of information on all GA activities, including the mistakes, and the establishment of very clear

operating procedures and systems, deliverables, timelines, communications protocols, roles, and responsibilities. Partners thus know exactly what to expect from each other, what is expected of them, and when to expect actions to be taken. That is, they are accountable to each other. Without transparency and clear operating procedures, partnerships run the risk of mistrust and duplication of efforts. Such deficiencies can also result in each partner doing what it thinks is best, rather than trusting the collaborative process.

**Having a higher authority to ensure that key principles are upheld**

While most partnerships begin with the best of intentions, each participant has its own internal pressures and interests. To overcome this challenge and ensure that the GA adheres to its mission and goals, the founders created an Operating Council (OC), responsible for overall policy and strategy. Creation of this body was important to ensure a balance of power, so that whether a partner brought to GA funding or political access, it would have equal voice and vote as others.

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policies and direction, it has played an effective arbitration role, holding all accountable to GA's mission as well as to the public trust.

The OC continues to work at becoming an effective governing body. Initially, members found it difficult to arrive at decisions, thus tabling key issues. However, over time, members have sought to understand each other, recognising that each represents perspectives shared by many outside critics and key stakeholders. For example, the OC was particularly challenged in 2000 when GA surfaced serious code violations through its worker needs assessments in some Indonesian contract factories. The OC played a key role in defending GA's principle of transparency, making the findings public, and requesting the brands present a remediation plan and quarterly reports on actions taken and results. Overall, the OC has played a key role in ensuring that GA remains accountable to the collective interests of all parties over the interests of any one partner.

**Seeking a "win-win"**

Finally, it is absolutely essential that partners share a commitment to a "win-win" approach. As mentioned above, most institutions join a partnership to achieve institutional ends as well as goals common to all.

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Within effective partnerships, each party must understand, respect, and support the needs of the others. Many partners join together, thinking that they will “convert” the others to their approach. But in effective partnerships, each institution must enter into the relationship with a willingness to give up some things and to gain others. Each must be committed to helping the others obtain their objectives, while also securing the common objectives. If an institution enters into a partnership determined not to change, then it shouldn’t join in the first place.

The GA is proving that all partners can be winners. By working with global brands and contract factories “from the inside out,” i.e., as a partner interested in helping to find solutions rather than problems, GA has demonstrated that it is able to empower workers so that they are better equipped to resolve workplace issues while also empowering factory managers and improving the bottom line for the factory and global brand. GA is also able to surface compliance problems, in some cases before they become severe, and inform the factories and brands responsible to resolve them.

### **Conclusion**

Working through partnership requires much determination and patience, and it is not advisable for all. Those joining such an alliance must be clear about their expected outcomes, respect and trust each other and the process, and be willing to hold the initiative accountable to a standard that is above the interests of any one party. The value of the tri-sector partnership is that the participants represent different perspectives and stakeholders and have a responsibility to hold the partnership accountable to each other as well as to their constituencies, thereby building and keeping the public trust.

Clearly, GA is demonstrating that tri-sector partnerships have the potential to yield more effective and sustainable results than individual partners working alone. Some may question whether GA is able to operate independent of its partners. Thus far, GA has been able to maintain its independence as a result of members’ commitment to transparency, to the institutional goals and to being accountable to each other and the constituencies they represent. While working through such a partnership may produce only incremental changes in the beginning, GA believes that such an approach will have a far greater chance of being sustained -- as they will be slowly ingrained into the societies and institutions around which GA operates.