



**United Nations**

Department of  
Economic and  
Social Affairs

# Partnerships in response to COVID-19

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**PARTNERSHIP  
ACCELERATOR  
2030 AGENDA**  
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## Building back better together



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# 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator



The 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator is a collaborative initiative by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and The Partnering Initiative, in collaboration with United Nations Office for Partnerships (UNOP), UN Global Compact, and the UN Development Coordination Office. The initiative aims to significantly help accelerate effective partnerships in support of the Sustainable Development Goals.

One of the key objectives of the Partnership Accelerator is to bolster effective country driven partnerships and partnership platforms in support of SDG implementation, including through national partnership workshops. Organized in collaboration with the UN Resident Coordinators in select countries and informed by in-depth needs analysis used to define their scope and content, these workshops offer training on the development of effective partnerships, and enhanced understanding of relationships across participants from different sectors, to launch new partnerships for supporting SDG implementation.

The present report is intended to demonstrate the potential of partnerships for overcoming the challenges for implementing the 2030 Agenda posed by COVID-19. It also serves as an important input to upcoming national Partnership Accelerator workshops.

## **More information**

[sustainabledevelopment.un.org/PartnershipAccelerator](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/PartnershipAccelerator)

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## Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by **Professor Xiaolan Fu**, Founding Director of the Technology and Management Centre for Development, Professor of Technology and International Development and Fellow of Green Templeton College, University of Oxford, as an individual consultant to United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), and in support to the 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator.

The report was made possible through substantive input from representatives from the **ANTICOV clinical trial, the International Initiative on COVID-19 in Yemen, the UKRI GCRF/Newton Fund Agile Response, the UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE)'s COVID response, the Tencent Foundation – private sector funded partnership, the COVID-19 Women and Children Safe at Hotel (Mexico), the IOM partnership on filter hotel for migrants (Mexico), and the COVID-19 Women Safe at Home (Mexico), and the UN Resident Coordinators Office in Mexico.**

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## Executive Summary

Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are multi-stakeholder initiatives voluntarily undertaken by governments, intergovernmental organizations, and other stakeholders, and whose efforts are contributing to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Addressing complex global challenges requires collective efforts from stakeholders across different sectors, supported by science, technology, and innovation from multiple disciplines. Partnerships can serve as an effective vehicle to bring together resources and knowledge from a wide range of societal actors to form a powerful force to tackle global challenges.

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the international community has made significant efforts to mobilize partnerships to accelerate the global response - providing urgent health and socio-economic responses and supporting communities to live with the pandemic, as well as working towards post-pandemic recovery and ensuring we “build back better”.

This study looks at 36 partnerships for leveraging and exchanging resources, combining and integrating partners’ resources, and collaborative work to generate system transformations.

### COVID-19 response partnerships - key findings:

A wide range of partnerships have been formed during the pandemic, most focusing on the immediate response to COVID-19

Partnerships have provided financial support and technical assistance; supported project implementation and delivery; facilitated research, data collection and analytics; and coordinated various response actions.

The United Nations, civil society and the private sector are playing a key role in initiating partnerships.

A shared sense of urgency, pre-existing networks, partnership experience, flexibility from partners and institutions, use of digital technologies for communication and partnership management, and adoption of innovative practices are key factors that contributed to the speedy formation of partnerships.

Vision, trust, alignment of interests, flexibility, commitment, and adaptive governance structures and leadership are key success factors in working collaboratively.

Major challenges in the formation of the partnerships include communication between partners, access to resources, and uncertainty given the rapidly changing conditions.

There is a need to rethink procedures deemed necessary for formalizing partnerships.

# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of our highly interconnected societies, posing an unprecedented challenge to all countries and all peoples, and in particular putting those farthest behind at even greater risk. Slowing the pace of COVID-19 and mitigating its impact cannot be the work of governments alone, instead it requires an all-of-society response.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Group has launched a coherent framework for the UN's urgent socio-economic support to countries and societies in the face of COVID-19, putting into practice the Secretary-General's report on "Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19". Moving beyond the initial response phase, the UN Secretary-General underlines the need for the world to "recover better", and that any recovery strategy should ensure we collectively remain on track towards the longer-term objectives outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Despite the challenging context of the pandemic, the international community has mobilized partnerships to accelerate the global response, providing urgent health and socio-economic support, helping communities to live with the pandemic, and working towards post-pandemic recovery, ensuring we "build back better".

Most remarkably, while it usually takes considerable time to develop and form a partnership, during COVID-19, partnerships were built up rapidly in just a few weeks or months.

Using a combination of secondary data analysis and in-depth case studies, this study analyses the types of multi-stakeholder partnership (MSP) that have been formed as a global response to the pandemic. It explores their formation and driving forces, enabling contexts, challenges, and success factors, as well as the implications for future responses to crises. Special attention was given to partnerships that have effectively harnessed science, technology, and innovation.

## Partnerships in response to COVID-19

The world-wide impacts of COVID-19 have prompted an unprecedented all-sector, rapid response. Governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society collaborated to enhance social capital, resources, and development of required infrastructures for response and support. Such collaborations have been the backbone of the global effort against COVID-19.

Partnerships in this study can be classified into three categories:

- 1 public-private partnerships.
- 2 public-civil society.
- 3 private-civil society partnerships.

A prominent example is the ACT Accelerator - a ground-breaking global collaboration which brings together governments, health organizations, scientists, businesses, civil society, and philanthropists to accelerate development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines.

The experiences of successful partnerships have increased understanding of the value of sharing knowledge, data, technologies, and resources. However, there are significant differences between developed and developing countries in accessing and developing these technologies, particularly pharmaceutical resources. Many developing countries face severe, urgent, and unique health challenges and, despite progress in improvement of public health and governmental capabilities over the last decades, the burden of the pandemic is still greater than that in higher income countries (Murray et al., 2020). Partnerships have been crucial to enabling a more egalitarian distribution of resources, as the global community has embraced a more collaborative way of working to help overcome the challenges some countries are facing (Di Benedetto et al., 2019). The coordination between international institutions, the public sector, professional organizations, and academia has become a key factor in the effectiveness of the emergency response.

There is not one way to successfully collaborate, and each partnership needs to be designed to respond to its specific context. Experience from leading institutions in establishing partnerships is key and can support others in the rapid response needed for effective collaboration.

## Types of COVID-19 response partnerships

This study focuses on 36 COVID-19 related partnerships, of which 9 were studied in depth. Details of these 9 can be found in Appendix 1.

This section presents a typology of the range of multi-stakeholder partnerships studied, what impact they are having, and how they are delivering against the different phases of the pandemic as set out below.

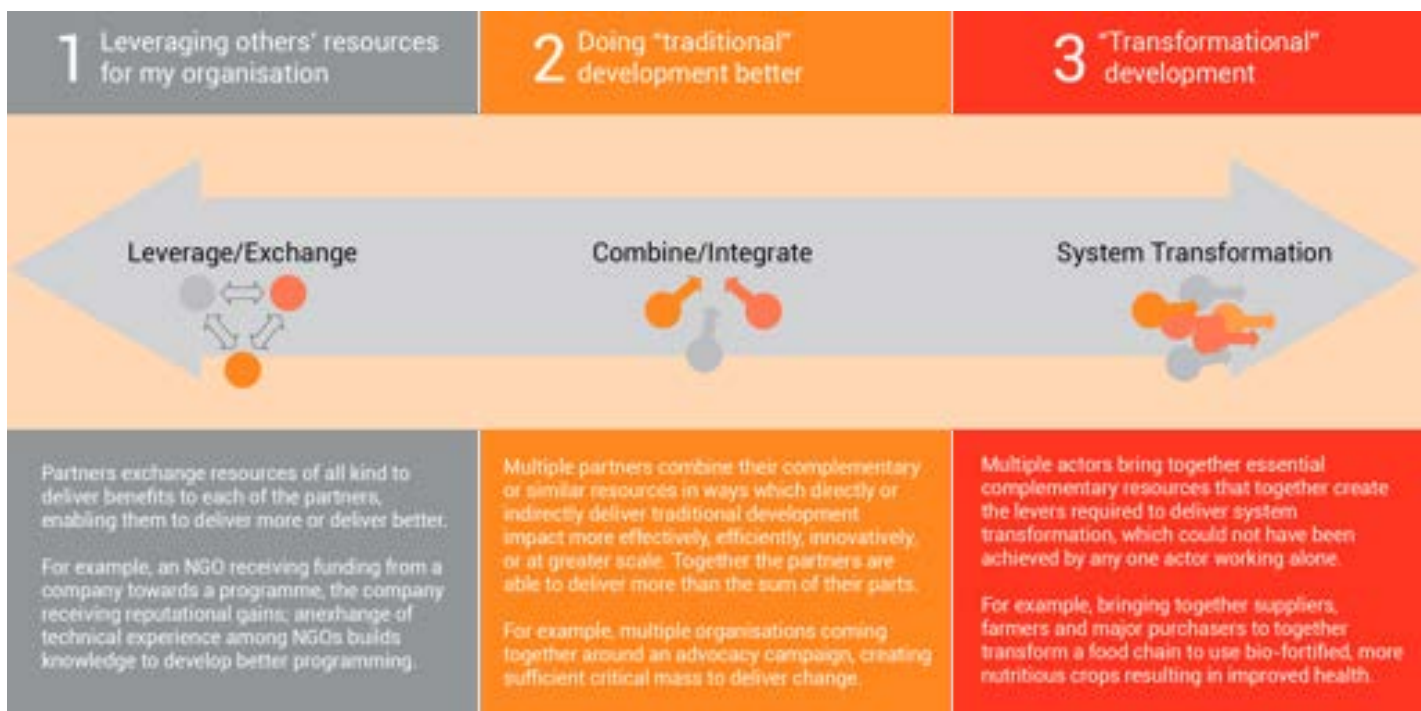
Using the description from the SDG Partnership Guidebook (UN DESA & TPI, 2020), multi-stakeholder partnerships are here defined as ongoing collaborative relationships among organizations from different stakeholder types aligning their interests around a common vision, combining their complementary resources and competencies, and sharing risk, to maximize value creation towards the SDGs and deliver benefit to their partners. To further distinguish different types of partnership, the Partnership Spectrum shown in Table 1 is used.

Photo Credit: World Bank / Sambrian Mbaabu



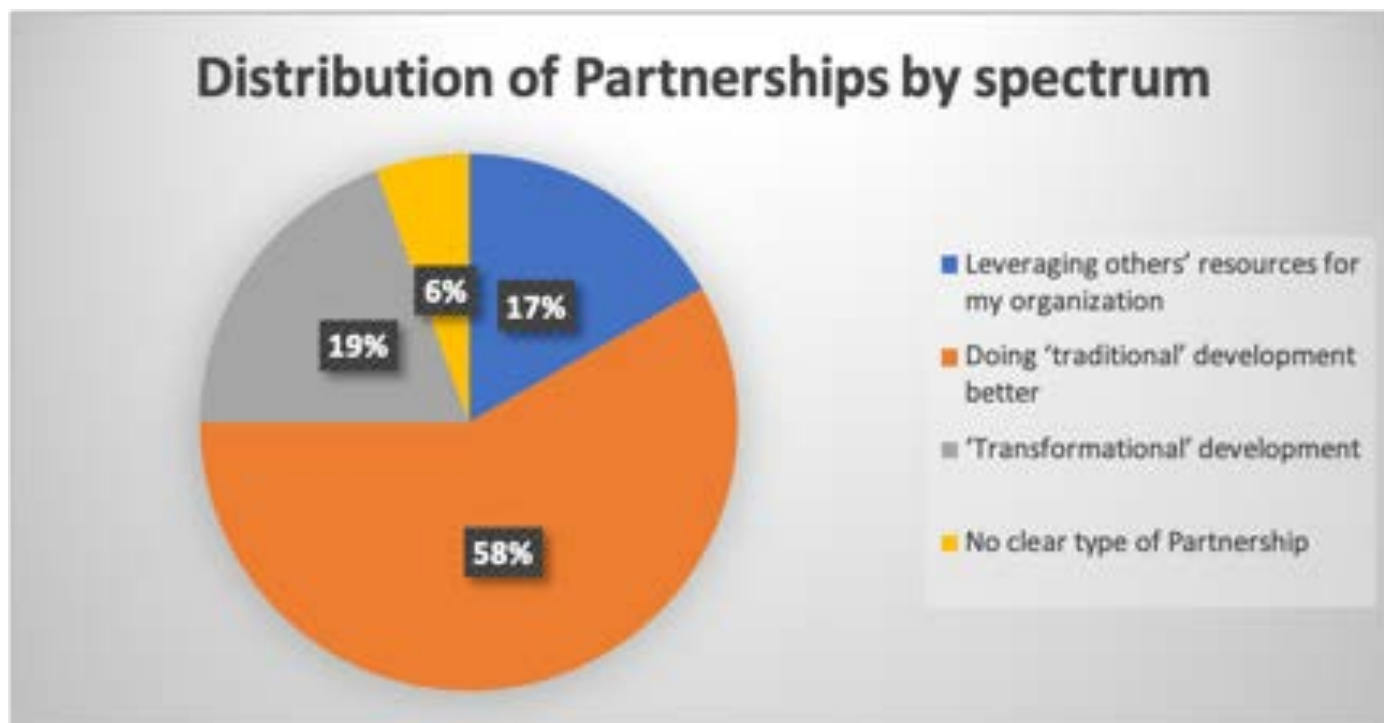


**Table 1. Partnership Spectrum**



Source: *SDG Partnership Guidebook (TPI & UNDESA, 2020)*.

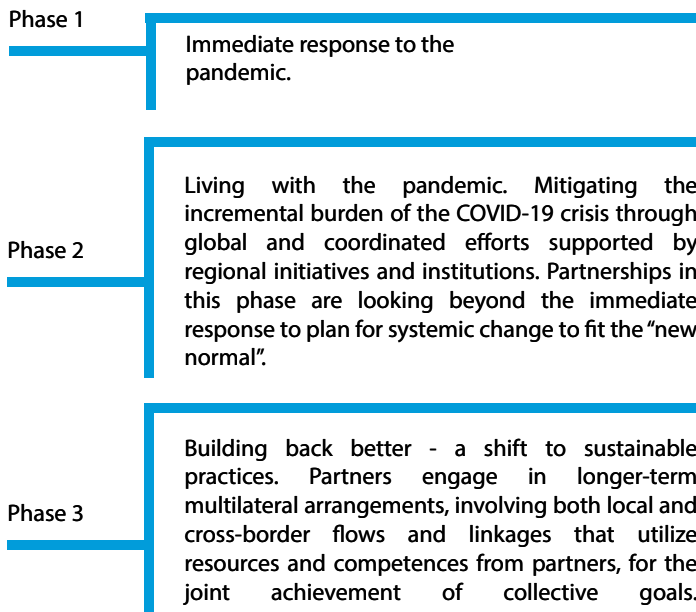
**Chart 1 below shows the distribution of the 36 partnerships studied, against the partnership spectrum (for further details, see Table 2 in Appendix 2).**



Source: Data collected by authors

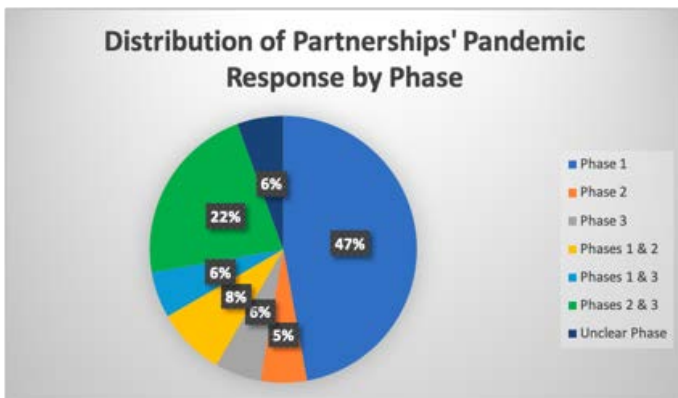


In the research for the study, three distinct phases of the fight against COVID-19 were identified, ranging from short-term immediate actions to long-term sustainable practices.



Several of the partnerships address more than one phase. Most partnerships focus on phase 1, but around a third focus on phases 2 and 3, as shown in Chart 2 below (for details, see Table 3 in Appendix 2).

**Chart 2**

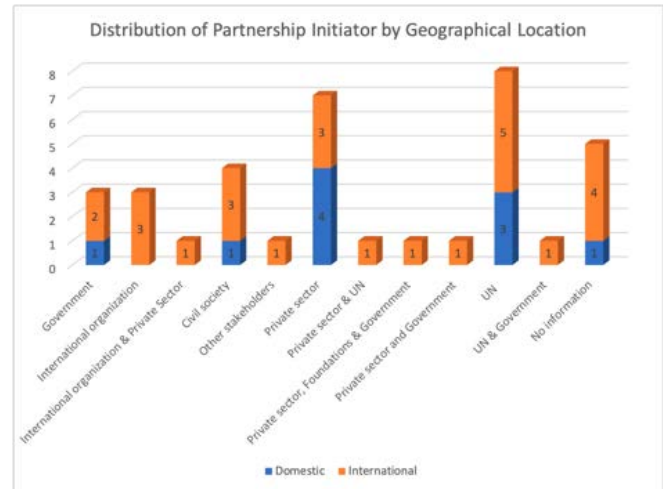


Source: Data collected by authors

## Who were the initiators?

Four main initiators of partnerships are identified: governments, the private sector, civil society, and the United Nations (UN). Most of the partnerships studied were initiated by the United Nations and the private sector, as Chart 3 shows (for further details, see Table 4 in Appendix 2).

**Chart 3**



Source: Data collected by authors

## United Nations

As an intergovernmental facilitator, the UN is contributing to partnerships across all three phases of the pandemic, not only with capital but also with global networks, extensive technological support, know-how, support for governments in building and strengthening national capacities, and political connections and influence. UN organisations have demonstrated strong alignment between their own strategic objectives and those of the partnerships they have promoted. Support to developing and emerging economies is always prioritised by UN-led partnerships.

One example is the UN's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund, which operates under the leadership of the UN Secretary-General with the involvement of UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes that cover key sustainable development areas. The vast assets and capacities of the UN system were leveraged to rapidly address needs identified through country Socio-Economic Response Plans.

## Governments

Governments initiated several MSPs, with a 'whole of government approach' bringing together all levels of government toward a common goal. Government roles include leadership, conducting strategic communications, convening expert guidance, relaxing regulations, developing national economic priorities, and providing public health supporting resources. This initiating role of governments is particularly significant in delivering an immediate response to COVID-19.

The public sector initiated MSPs usually involve private and public organizations, international organizations, and NGOs. For example, the GCRF UKRI GCRF/Newton Fund Agile Response brings together scientists and researchers from across the world and has supported 40 new projects to develop new technology and processes to address the challenges faced by some of the world's most vulnerable people<sup>1</sup>.

## Private Sector

A business that promotes the creation of a partnership is usually well placed to identify practical solutions and other like-minded organizations that want to collaborate. For example, private companies initiated the International Initiative on COVID-19 in Yemen (IICY) which unites businesses and international organizations to assist Yemen's response to COVID-19.

Among existing partnerships, private sector initiators appear to be dominated by leading multinational companies that have more resources to focus on their impact within society and seek ways to work with potential partners against the pandemic. Their unique expertise, their capacity to innovate and produce new technologies for adaptation, and their financial leverage enable them to act as broker between governmental, private and non-governmental actors. For example, Apple and Google have been working together to enhance tracking technology to better calculate the number of infected people (Hern & Paul, 2020).

## Civil Society

In the context of the pandemic, civil society driven partnerships provide a safe place where relationships between partners can develop very quickly. Early participation also means that donors can contribute to a proposal's design to fit with other development interventions, and balance power relationships among partners.

Partnerships led by civil society may include new and existing partners from industry, government, the UN, academia, and other NGOs.

## Rapid Partnering

Five key factors have contributed to the speedy formation of the partnerships and their success in delivering value during the pandemic in 2020:

- 1 the emergency nature of the crisis,
- 2 the use of technologies to overcome barriers imposed by the crisis,
- 3 adoption of innovative practices in the partnerships,
- 4 building partnerships based on trust and existing networks,
- 5 flexibility of partners and the partnership to face the crisis uncertainties.

As factors 4 and 5 have been discussed above, this section will focus on the first three factors.

<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.newton-gcrf.org/impact/news/20-projects-funded-to-address-covid-19-challenges/>

The emergency nature of the health crisis is the main factor that necessitated rapid formation of a partnership, according to the interviewees. In the face of adversity, different actors have taken swift action to innovate and partner: 'the pandemic moved fast, and the UN recognized the need to move faster to harness the worldwide collaboration needed to help countries stop and cope with this global health and development crisis. The appointment of the UN Secretary-General's Designate to the Fund was a keystone for collaboration at the strategic, administrative, and operational levels. At the country-level, the collaboration involved partnering with 100+ UN Country Teams, led by UN Resident Coordinators, all eager to meet the challenges on the ground in their countries and in collaboration with the Fund' (Head of the Secretariat, the UN's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund).

The scale of the common threat has resulted in a clear focus, and a greater willingness of partners to trust each other. The emergency has removed many of the normal barriers to collaborate and innovate, speeding up regulatory approvals, access to unrestricted funding, sharing knowledge, resources and digital technologies, and mobilization of experts, community workers, etc.

The use of technologies has helped partners to keep working and reduced communication challenges. Efficient communication is vital to tackling the complexity of large partnerships - cultural differences, competing timescales and demands on resources, and governance challenges.

Digital technologies also enable partners to work as normal while saving on travel costs, aiding flexibility, building trust, and facilitating information exchange. Innovations in digital technology also enable matching new partnerships quickly and in a non-traditional way.

Finally, partners must adopt innovative practices both in the partnership itself, and in the funding process to accelerate the application review and decision-making. Adoption of a two-stage funding application process made many applications possible and manageable.

## Can this be replicated for other global crises or SDGs?

The urgency of the pandemic, the fact that it directly affects many people's lives, and the rapid and global spread are unique factors that enable quick action. One interviewee drew a parallel to climate change - if its urgency can be raised to this level and achieve wide public consensus, quick partnership development may enable positive actions concerning this, as well other pressing global challenges.

## Challenges

**Crisis Uncertainty:** Dealing with uncertainty, unpredictability and unexpected issues was a significant challenge for many MSPs in combatting COVID-19 (e.g., ANTICOV, IICY, IOM partnership on filter hotel for migrants, COVID-19 Women and Children Safe at Hotels in Mexico, UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund).

**Resourcing:** Some partnerships get started without external or additional funding, using available resources. Most of the successful cases studied acknowledged the importance of funding to enable them to work effectively across countries. during the crisis (e.g. ANTICOV, UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund, COVID-19 Women and Children Safe at Hotels in Mexico).

**Communication difficulties:** The spread of COVID-19 has led to unprecedented measures such as widespread quarantines and extended travel restrictions, challenging communication amongst partners. There are mixed feelings about the use of digital technology for partnership communication. Some feel it enables more frequent meetings in comparison to traditional in person meetings, while others feel a lack of face-to-face communication may cause misunderstandings.

## Success factors

### Forward planning

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Careful planning around the delivery process, resource requirements, and the ultimate outcome that the partnership aims to reach are seen by respondents as important factors to ensure a partnership's success (e.g., COVID-19 Women Safe at Home, Mexico; IICY). Several respondents suggested that, for example, 'I believe the first success factor is to plan ahead the collaborations in this case. Our planning took only 2 weeks as we think this has to be really quick, but it resulted to be extremely successful' (COVID-19 Women Safe at Home, Mexico).

### Trust between partners and existing networks

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Of the selected MSP cases studied, all interviewees mentioned that trust is a critical success factor. Partnerships 'move at the speed of trust'. There may already be a pre-existing level of trust between partners, and many leveraged on their existing networks.

### Alignment of interests towards a shared vision

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These are two of the most important success factors, according to almost all interviewed partnerships. Starting from a basis of existing relationships can help organizations achieve this quickly.

### Commitment

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A high level of commitment helps partners to achieve joint goals. More committed partners will balance short-term problems with long-term goal achievement, and support other partners who are struggling to deliver, or collectively increase resources when things are not going to plan.

### Governance structure and leadership

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Two governance mechanisms were observed during the interviews. Firstly, a joint steering committee that is empowered by the negotiated contracts and involves all members to make key decisions such as resource allocation and the overall goals of the MSP. Secondly, complex systems of explicit rules that MSPs need to coordinate the interactions between partners.



Photo Credits: Terre des hommes / Amadou Maïga



Photo Credits: Corporate Walmart

# Conclusion

Multi-stakeholder partnerships have been an important driving force in the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The urgency of the pandemic pushed the rapid creation of partnerships. It created a common sense of urgency, which called for flexibility within institutions to adjust their administrative bureaucracy to facilitate the signing of formal contracts and the transfer and mobilization of resources. The processes and turnaround were shortened and simplified, generating fast results.=

The success of the partnerships created to tackle the pandemic can be explained by six factors: i. forward planning around the needs, potential partners, and the steps to put the partnership into action; ii. trust among partners which usually is associated with previous collaboration; iii. alignment of interests and a shared vision of the needs they will solve, their roles and the creation of value; iv. flexibility from partners to be responsive to changes in the environment and the needs of the partnership; v. a high level of commitment to collaborate and pursue the collective goals agreed for the partnership; and vi. the governance structure and leadership of the partnership to coordinate the relations and activities between partners through time.

Enabling conditions for the emergence and success of crisis-response partnerships include:

1. The emergency conditions created by the pandemic pushed all types of institutions to be flexible, to commit their resources and experience, and to solve problems promptly.
2. The MSP model is an important factor for success, since it is appropriate to combine multiple resources and to use the partners' social capital not only to design a partnership model quickly, but also to make it viable in practice.
3. Technologies, and in particular digital technologies, were a crucial enabler of the partnerships during the pandemic. Given the restrictions imposed to reduce the spread of the pandemic, the communications between partners were mainly digital. Many partnerships also needed to develop their own platforms and apps to deliver their solutions or to manage several stakeholders in the different stages of the delivery process. Innovation in the creation or delivery of solutions has shaped the work of several partnerships created during the pandemic.

Although the conditions of emergency surrounding the pandemic are unique, some recommendations are relevant for partnerships focusing on global challenges in the future:

1. Some areas of the bureaucracy of organizations, especially governments and international organizations, can be modified to accelerate the creation of partnerships. The pandemic emergency allowed all types of institutions to solve administrative processes very quickly and this is an area of potential improvement.
2. Allowing for flexibility within an organization can generate a fast process of partnership creation. It can also facilitate innovative ways of creating and delivering solutions.
3. The use and creation of technologies for the communication, creation, and management of a partnership contribute to efficient coordination of efforts and resources. Technologies are particularly important for international coordination of partners and to allow remote working from individuals in different organizations. Some innovative partnerships have created new technological platforms to deliver their solutions to the public. Therefore, great emphasis should be placed on technology and innovation and their role in enabling crisis-response for SDGs-oriented partnerships.

# Methodology

This study analyses data collected from both secondary and primary sources. Firstly, information on 36 COVID-19 related partnerships was collected from secondary sources, including documentation, reports, and news. Online data searches were carried out via search engines and on websites of the UN, World Bank, NGOs, etc. Additional data were also collected based on expert recommendations and referral sampling to capture partnerships with no online exposure.

Secondly, from these 36 cases, in-depth studies of 9 partnerships were conducted. These were selected according to their representativeness by 1) type of leading organization: international organization, private sector, and civil society organization; 2) three different stages of the pandemic: immediate response, live with the pandemic, and post-pandemic recovery; 3) physical partnerships or virtual partnerships; 4) regional representation. The table in Appendix 1 provides a brief description of these interviewed cases. Each partnership nominated two partners for the interview to provide perspectives from different players to gain a more comprehensive view of the process. Each focused on creation process and flow of resources; relationships with stakeholders; enabling success factors; the impact of partnerships.



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## Appendix 1: Description of Interviewed Partnerships

**Table 1. List of partnerships**

Partnership	Description	Initiator
1.The ANTICOV clinical trial	The ANTICOV clinical trial responds to the urgent need to identify treatments that can be used to treat mild and moderate cases of COVID-19 early and prevent spikes in hospitalizations in Africa. The partnership includes 26 prominent African and global research and development (R&D) organizations, with coordination by the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi). Major funding is provided by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) through KfW and by the global health agency Unitaid as part of ACT-A, with early support from the European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP2) and the Starr International Foundation; and support for DNDi's core activities from Médecins Sans Frontières International, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and UK aid.	Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (NGO)
2. International Initiative on COVID-19 in Yemen	The International Initiative on COVID-19 in Yemen (IICY) is a collaborative partnership of businesses and international organizations, including Hayel Saeed Anam Foundation, Tetra Pak, Unilever, the United Nations, the Yemen Private Sector Cluster and the Federation of Yemen Chambers of Commerce & Industry. The aim of the International Initiative on COVID-19 in Yemen is to support the efforts of authorities in both channelling medical supplies to the healthcare facilities across Yemen and supporting the country's response to COVID-19.	Hayel Saeed Anam Group (Private sector)
3.The UKRI GCRF/Newton Fund Agile Response	The UKRI GCRF/Newton Fund Agile Response is a funding call that supports research into COVID-19 and its impact on some of the world's most disadvantaged people. It has awarded grants to 40 projects. The projects will develop solutions to mitigate the short and long-term social, economic and health consequences of the pandemic.	BEIS (government department)
4. UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund	The UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (the Fund) is a UN inter-agency funding mechanism established by the Secretary-General to help support low- and middle-income countries overcome the health and development crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It targets support to those vulnerable people and communities least able to cope with economic hardship and social disruption. The Fund is supported mainly by government donors, and its recipient institutions are country offices of UN agencies and their Member State partners.	The United Nations (the UN)
5. Global Partnership for Education (GPE)'s COVID response	This work aims to provide rapid support and funding to GPE partner countries to respond to the challenges presented by the COVID epidemic and enable continuity of learning. The partnership was able to respond extremely quickly.	Global Partnership for Education (International organization)
6. Tencent Foundation – private sector funded partnership	The Tencent Foundation has launched many partnerships between private sector, NGOs and local governments, and facilitated donations and crowdfunding to support various responses to the COVID crisis through an innovative online donation platform and innovative charitable fund-raising models.	Tencent (Private sector)

Partnership	Description	Initiator
7. COVID-19 Women and Children Safe at Hotel, Mexico.	In response to the increase in domestic violence generated in the context of COVID-19, and as part of the response plan from the Spotlight Initiative, UNICEF and UNFPA, national and local governments and a hotel corporation (Grupo Posadas) have begun implementing a strategy to provide safe, temporary and free hotel accommodation for women and their children who are victims of violence, for a brief period while their cases are studied and they are referred to different support networks or shelters.	UNICEF and UNFPA (The UN), within the Spotlight Initiative
8. IOM partnership on filter hotel for migrants, Mexico.	The IOM in partnership with the government, civil society, academia and private sector of Ciudad Juarez (north of Mexico and near the frontier with the United States), implemented a program to provide accommodation and other relevant services to migrants during the 14 days of quarantine to prevent COVID-19 contagion.	International Organization for Migration (The UN)
9. COVID-19 Women Safe at Home, Mexico	The project has been implemented in alliance with Mexico City Government, UNDP and UN Women, reinforcing institutional capacities to respond and support victims of violence against women, creating sorority support networks and piloting a financial support mechanism for vulnerable women.	United Nations Development Programme (The UN)

## Appendix 2: Types of COVID-19 Response Partnerships

**Table 2. Distribution of Partnerships by spectrum**

Type of Partnership	Number of Partnerships	Proportion
Leveraging others' resources for my organization	6	16.7%
Doing 'traditional' development better	21	58.3%
'Transformational' development	7	19.4%
No clear type of Partnership	2	5.6%
Total	36	100.0%

**Table 3. Distribution of Partnerships by Responses to Pandemic**

Response to Pandemic	Number of Partnerships	Proportion
Phase 1. Immediate response, short-term problem solution	17	47.2%
Phase 2. Living with pandemic, medium-term problem solving for incremental impact	2	5.6%
Phase 3. Recovery, long term planning for advanced development	2	5.6%
Phases 1 & 2	3	8.3%
Phases 1 & 3	2	5.6%
Phases 2 & 3	8	22.2%
Unclear Phase	2	5.6%
Total	36	100.0%

**Table 4. Distribution of Initiator of Partnerships by Geographical Orientation**

Initiator type	Domestic	International	Total	Proportion
Government	1	2	2	8.3%
International organization		3	3	8.3%
International organization and Private Sector		1	1	2.8%
Civil society	1	3	4	11.1%
Other stakeholders		1	1	2.8%
Private sector	4	3	7	19.4%
Private sector and the United Nations		1	1	2.8%
Private sector, Foundations and Government		1	1	2.8%
Private sector and Government		1	1	2.8%
The United Nations	3	5	8	22.2%
The United Nations and Government		1	1	2.8%
No information	1	4	5	13.9%
Total	10	26	36	100.0%



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