Bridging the Partnership Divide: HINARI Over Eight Years
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Abstract: Successful public-private partnerships do not last eight years by chance. A partnership develops in the first place by defining and agreeing on common grounds and goals. As time goes by, the dynamics of any partnership must reinvent itself and will then prove enduring or not.

The Health Access to Research programme (HINARI) was conceived in early 2001 to offer developing country institutions free or nominal-cost access to the world's biomedical literature. Initially, HINARI was a partnership of six major commercial publishers and the World Health Organization. Eight years later, HINARI is one of three sister programmes, and the partnership has grown to include three United Nations agencies, Yale and Cornell universities, more than 150 publishers of all shapes and sizes, the International Association of STM Publishers, Microsoft Corporation, Ex Libris, and innumerable individuals and institutions who have become champions and ambassadors of the concept.

A number of cohesion principles have kept the HINARI partnership alive and vibrant including: respect; openness and transparency; flexibility and compromise; engagement and autonomy; and review and re-inspiration.

Introduction
When one proposes to discuss partnerships, one of the first tasks is to set limits on the meaning of the term partnership to create a finite space for focus. Writ very broadly, the term partnership could be applied in as diverse fields as interpersonal (marriage), chemical (alloys), governmental (treaties), or organizational (alliances, collaborations, networks). While the focus of this paper is on organizational partnerships, and in particular what can be learned from the public-private partnership of the Health Access to Research programme (HINARI), the other fields in which partnerships occur can be useful analogies to remember when struggling with the complexities of the partnership environment.

As this paper progresses, the readers should apply their own experiences with partnerships in very diverse fields to the topics raised for consideration. Experiences with marriage may suggest a place for respect, compromise, renewal. Even a basic understanding of alloys can suggest that the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts (or less than). News coverage of government negotiations can provide a sense of the need for flexibility, and the obscurity of power struggles.

Shifting from this larger picture into the target area of organizational partnerships, a quick review of the literature also presents a broad array of coverage that requires additional focus. Partnerships can be ones between two commercial entities, or between a governmental body and a community organization. Partnerships can be bi-lateral (between two groups) or multi-lateral (between many groups). The more players and
types of organizations present in the partnership, the more complex the dynamics involved.

Once a precise type of partnership is defined (in this paper, a multi-lateral, multi-sectoral partnership) another range of topics opens up. Today, this paper will touch lightly on a number of these topics: implementation, communication, formalization, growth, evolution, re-invention, and succession. Time and space prohibit an in depth review of all possible topics here; however, there is a wealth of published literature available for those who wish to explore the concept of partnership more fully.

This paper reviews a number of partnership issues and topics and provides some illustrations from HINARI's experience over the last eight years. In 2000, the World Health Organization (WHO) convened a meeting of developing country researchers and asked what was their greatest information need. The answer was "access to the priced literature." HINARI was created to address this need, and supported by a public-private partnership initially between six publishers, WHO, and Yale University Library, was launched in July 2001. Developing country institutions began accessing almost 1500 journals through HINARI in January 2002.

What has grown to become the Research4Life partnership offers more than 7500 journals from over 150 publishers via HINARI and two sister programmes: AGORA (Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture) under the leadership of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) with support from Cornell University's Mann Library; and OARE (Online Access to Research in the Environment) sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Yale University. The three programmes are available in over 100 countries, and many more partners have joined over the years, including publishers of all types and categories (not-for profits, commercial, open access, university presses, societies and associations, and many now from developing countries.) In addition, the partners now include software companies such as Ex Libris, and Microsoft which is much more than just a software company.

From the initial discussions about HINARI in 2001 to various expansions, extensions, clonings, reviews, and representation changes, the partnership has experienced much growth and adjustment. Yet, the concept and commitment are as strong now as at the beginning. This paper will look now at some of the aspects of the partnership which contribute to its ongoing dynamism.

**Partnership implementation**

A key ingredient for a successful partnership is aligned goals between the partners. A careful reader will note this is not exactly the same thing as sharing a set of common goals. While the latter is a comfortable space to be in, it is not always possible nor necessary for the partners to all agree on everything the partnership is to accomplish. What is imperative is that the partners understand where each organization's goals for the partnership align and where they diverge.¹ A partnership can form in the space of

alignment as long as everyone understands and is comfortable with the need for compromise on the areas of divergence.

HINARI was formed in just such a space of alignment. Developing country researchers needed access to the wealth of global published scientific information and price was an inhibiting factor in gaining that access. The World Health Organization has a mandate in its constitution to support access to medical information. Publishers were interested in corporate social responsibility and understanding future readers and authors better. Yale University Library wanted to fulfill its global mission by connecting readers and collections in a new way.

Another point to note on the issue of implementation and alignment of goals is that the mutual goals of the partnership cannot diverge significantly from the organizational direction of any member. If the individuals designated for partnership activities feel those activities are in conflict with the goals of their own organization, that membership will soon be in jeopardy. On the other hand, in a vibrant partnership, committed representatives soon discover synergies between activities of the partnership and those within their own organization.

HINARI has seen a number of synergistic activities in the Knowledge Management and Sharing (KMS) department of WHO (where the administrative activities of the programme are managed). The KMS E-Health unit has reached an agreement with the International Telecommunication Union to improve the information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure of a number rural health clinics in Africa. A significant incentive for this work was to ensure that the clinics could access the wealth of information available to them from HINARI. A second collaboration with the UNICEF/UNDP/World Bank/WHO Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR) resulted in ten infrastructure grants of $20,000 each to tropical disease research and training institutions in eligible countries; development of the HINARI training programme and training materials; funding of four multi-national training workshops; and considerable advocacy about the need for information.

**Communication**

Simply possessing aligned goals between various partner members does not guarantee success in the partnership arena. Another necessary component is passionate people who can straddle several worlds and translate different organizational languages. The partnership literature refers to these kinds of individuals as "boundary spanners." It is not necessary that every organization involved in the partnership have such individuals as their representatives. It is imperative that a partnership have at least one or two people who can serve as the bridges crossing organizational divides.

For HINARI, the partnership was successfully launched because of two committed boundary spanners: Barbara Aronson, then a librarian at the World Health Organization

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who later became the HINARI Programme Manager and is now retired, and Maurice Long, then with the British Medical Journal, and now the Research4Life Publisher Liaison supported by the International Association of Scientific Technical and Medical Publishers (STM). Barbara understands the inner complexities of international organizations such as WHO, the needs of researchers in the developing world, and is able to speak the language of information organization and librarians. Maurice understands the complex inner world of the publishers, whether editorial or marketing and sales, and the heterogeneity of the publishing world and how that intersects with libraries. Between the two of them, they could speak openly and frankly with different players in the partnership to ensure that everyone was comfortable with the framework that was being built, and that everyone was getting something they wanted from their involvement in HINARI.

**Formalization**

Different types of partnerships require differing levels of formalization. For the purposes of this paper, formalization refers to how much of the roles and responsibilities and desired communications of the partners are committed to paper in some more or less legally binding form. There are some types of partnerships where it would be pretty surprising not to have a significant level of formalization - such as one that involves some exchange of funds, or where two otherwise competing organizations are collaborating on a particular activity, and need to firmly outline where the collaboration space ends.

For many other kinds of partnerships, the level of formalization follows somewhat loosely the feeling of trust and openness shared by the partners. The theory is that the greater the level of distrust or power imbalance felt amongst partners, the greater the desire for formalization to ensure that power is shared appropriately and surprises are minimized. This can sometimes result in a downward spiral, with efforts to institute formalization creating further distrust or perceptions of power imbalances.

One of the commonly noted aspects of the original HINARI and now also the Research4Life partnership is that "no one has ever signed anything." While a lovely sentiment, this is not strictly true. The original six publishers (Blackwell, Elsevier Science, Harcourt Worldwide STM Group, Springer Verlag, John Wiley, and Wolters Kluwer International Health & Science) signed a 13 point Statement of Intent which was witnessed by WHO. The institutions in the developing world who access the content of the Research4Life programmes sign a minimalist license committing them to respect the intellectual property rights of the publishers (though this is more of a pledge than a contract, since it is not counter-signed). And some of the partners (e.g. Microsoft and UNEP) have signed bilateral memoranda of understanding, facilitating their joint work on specific aspects of the programmes.

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Despite these small outcroppings of negotiated understandings, the level of formalization in the Research4Life partnership remains incredibly low for its size and complexity. It remains true that there is no legal, formal document of partnership that all parties to the alliance sign. There is a great deal of informal documentation that has resulted from years of meeting notes, where decisions are made through discussion and consensus. There also exist some basic rules of the road, mostly designed to assist users of the programme understand how to make use of the content. The low level of formality has extremely positive aspects in the degree of trust that the partners demonstrate in each other, the great potential for creativity where clear boundaries are not defined, and occasional negative moments when new partners feel like they are floundering in a sea of unknowns until one of the "old hands" does the equivalent of history brain-dump for the uninitiated.

Informal approaches to partnerships are not for all collaborations or all collaborators. Depending on the many factors of partnership (monetary, authority, etc.) it is wisest to begin as loosely as possible and tighten up formality only in areas where there appears to be confusion. Partnerships may want to pay attention to a drive for a great deal of formalization, as this could be a warning sign to the partnership that the goals of the members are starting to diverge. Some formalization may end up being a natural result of growth, diversity, or turnover in membership representation.

**Growth and evolution**

When a partnership is launched, it is very helpful to have some vision of where the partnership should be headed. Sometimes, the projections will be accurate; more often new factors will come into play. Growth can be a source of significant strain on a partnership, and the issue needs to considered at the beginning and addressed as needed over time. There are inside and outside drivers for evolution in a partnership, and the surrounding environment also may drive a need for adjustment in perspective inside a partnership.

HINARI has seen many elements of change since it began in 2001. Some of the change was expected, such as increasing numbers of publishers and journals being included in the programme. Some of the partnership growth, such as spawning sister programmes under the same partnership umbrella, wasn't anticipated, but seemed a natural expansion. Some activities, such as advocacy for better ICT infrastructure or information literacy training, are in areas where the only way forward is to collaborate in new ways with new partners.

It is important to recognize and prepare for the strains of including new participants, new types of organizations, and expanding the scope of a partnership. A successful alliance is a careful balance, ensuring that all participants feel their voices can be heard, that their contributions to the ongoing activities remain important, that they can affect the decisions of the whole. As new participants come on board, there are two natural sources of tension. One is the sense of the newcomers that the "old guard" is the "insider group" and that there is not a simple or clear way to gain a position of equal power or voice. The
other is the sense of dilution or diffusion of energy, strength, focus, and control that may come to prior partners as new people or groups are added.

There are no easy answers, but a couple of logical approaches can ease the transitions on all sides. One is establishing from the beginning a norm of openness and transparency. This ties together with trust based relationships. If partners are discussing and analyzing openly the factors that are changing the dynamics of the group, and are trusting each other with their worries or concerns, compromises and options will become apparent that might otherwise be bypassed or ignored. The second approach that should be explored is clustering new members and groups in smaller teams working on specific needs of the partnership. This provides a dynamic of control and engagement as the partnership gets bigger, as long as the teams do not become a repeat of the same few active people.

In addition to growth inside a partnership, there may also be shifts in the activities or priorities of the organizations participating in the partnership, changing the dynamics of times spent on partnership activities or support for a particular partnership goal. Beyond that is also the likelihood that the landscape or marketplace in which the partnership was formed will change as well. It is important for the partnership to recognize and address any changes in the larger world that may effect the overall goal of the partnership or the goals or imperatives of any of its members. Ignoring the bigger picture can lead to a slow death for the partnership. Stagnation is simply a waystation on the road to decay and dissolution.

As HINARI is situated in the information landscape of publishing and libraries, we are keeping a close eye on the financial woes of most libraries in the economic downturn, and the resulting impact that has on publisher bottom-lines. If a partner is needing to down-size their operation, it may mean we will see the departure of some of our engaged individuals who work on aspects of our continuing partner activities. Whether it will also mean a change in the parameters of our partnership goals and how we achieve them is something we will learn together over time.

**Review and re-invention**

Pressure from growth, validating engagement, evolving goals and objectives, shifting alliances within the partnership, changes in the landscape outside the partnership, representation turnover, or funder scrutiny: there are many reasons for a partnership to take stock of what it has done, and reconfirm its core principles and basic objectives. The need for review and the ways of accomplishing that are as diverse as the means and methods of partnership itself, and should be carefully tailored to the exact driving forces for the review.

For HINARI, one of the driving forces for the first major review of the programme was to determine whether there was still a need for the programme by the users, and a willingness to commit for an extended period of time by the partners. This occurred after five years of partnership, and permitted everyone involved to settle in for the "long haul"
by putting a far off target of at least 10 years (i.e. through 2015)\(^6\) for keeping the basic parameters of the programme in place.

Sometimes a partnership needs reinvention to revitalize itself. That may be a reinvention of the partnership itself, perhaps by structuring a small executive team when the partnership becomes too large to operate as a body of the whole. Alternatively, the reinvention may be of the "ground rules" or goals of the partnership. A partnership may start with one goal, discover that in order to achieve that goal, a second area of focus needs to be added, and then discover that external factors are changing the shape of why those goals were needed. In this case, it may be time to ask itself whether there are new areas where the original goals still need to be accomplished, or are there new goals that fit the group's desire to continue working together. If the answer to both those questions is "no", then it is wisest to disband rather than wasting energy.

Reinvention can be as simple as recognizing that there are gaps in what the partnership is trying to accomplish and simply agreeing to focus partnership energy on covering those gaps. Or reinvention could be as drastic as determining that the partnership needs to incorporate as a legal entity, redefine the goals, or remake all the rules and roles of the group.

A key element of reinvention needs to be a firm grasp of the principle that if something is not broken, do not change it for change's sake.

HINARI is currently undergoing its second review process, and it is expected that just as the first review process led to a tiny bit of formality in the form of an official Executive Council, there will be some form of reinvention and recommitment to the partnership goals that will result from this second review.

**Succession**

If a partnership remains vibrant over a significant period of time, it will be natural for staff turnover in the partner organizations to create gaps in knowledge and commitments. The gaps may be minor, in categories of partners who don't engage in day-to-day operational issues, or major if one of the primary boundary spanners of the partnership is departing.

As with any organization, succession planning is an important activity in which to engage. And while the major transitions are what catch the attention in the partnership, and people rightly worry about what will happen when "person A" retires, it is important not to lose track of the ongoing erosion that can come from staff turnover in less visible roles.

In HINARI, the partnership has witnessed both kinds of transitions. The author took over the role of Programme Manager from Barbara Aronson, one of the original boundary spanners of the partnership. There was an extended period of transition, and

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the author had been active and increasingly engaged in the partnership almost from the beginning. While an ideal succession is not always possible to achieve, it is clear that grooming a set of potential players within the partnership to develop needed skill sets regardless of official titles is an important ongoing task.

In terms of the minor erosion of awareness and commitment from less prominent players in the partnership, one key truth should be planted firmly in front of all partnership members. There are no minor players in the partnership game. Each time a replacement representative for a partner is introduced, it must be someone's assigned responsibility to provide background information, welcome them to the partnership, find their passion points, open the doors for involvement, and keep them engaged and enthusiastic by feeding back the results that most interest them or their organization. The larger the partnership gets, the more daunting this task (which is best divided amongst several people anyway), but the responsibility cannot be ignored. If it is, very soon the partnership will be running on the commitment of a handful of overworked people, and eventually will fail when those people depart.

**Conclusion**

Partnerships are not simple, and should not be viewed as a cure-all for any achievement that is too difficult or too complex for a single organization to accomplish. In fact, there are any number of barriers to achieving a successful partnership, and the pain of an unsuccessful partnership should be contemplated before leaping into action.7

Start by thinking about why a partnership is wanted in the first place. The whole may very well be greater than the sum of the parts in a partnership, with all members working synergistically, and a reasonable amount of effort put into maintaining communications, and relationships. On the other hand, a partnership can also turn out to be more trouble than it is worth, if the wrong partners or motivations at cross purposes come into play.

The most important question is how can one tell if a partnership will work or not? Unfortunately it is an art more than a science. If anyone had contemplated a partnership comprised of commercial and open access publishers, for profits, not-for-profits, societies and associations, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, institutions of higher education, and librarians of all stripes, they would have said it could never work. And frankly, if representatives of all those groups were placed in a room with no prior preparation and told to cooperate, very likely nothing would result. A partnership must start from somewhere, and the best partnerships start small, get it right in that setting, and then grow in many dimensions, constantly communicating, reflecting on the partnership balance, continually integrating new people and factors, and irregularly reinventing themselves. It takes a lot of energy, but if the mix is just right, it is possible to achieve that golden goal of partnership - something that accomplishes what no other mix of people or organizations could have done.

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Further Reading