ICRS Briefing Note
Community Partnerships

Overview

Community partnerships refer to collaborative relationships between organisations and local communities to address shared goals, challenges, and interests. These collaborations can take various forms, such as joint initiatives, programmes, projects or ongoing relationships that go beyond traditional business interactions.

The aim of these partnerships is to create positive social and/or environmental impact, promote sustainable development, and strengthen the relationships between businesses, non-profit organisations, government entities, and the communities they serve.

While this often takes the form of businesses donating to charities or non-profit organisations, the value exchanged between partner organisations can extend far beyond monetary transactions. The strength of a partnership often lies in the diverse resources and forms of support that partners can offer each other, fostering a richer, more resilient, and collaborate ecosystem[1]. This can include:

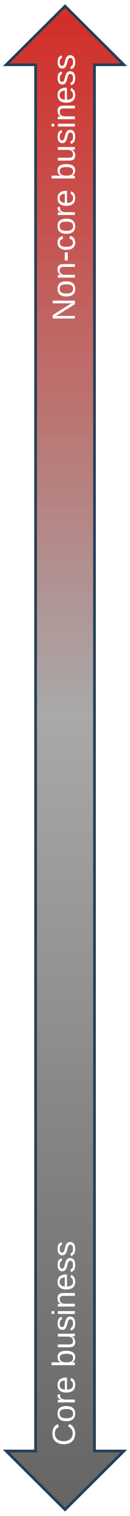
- The sharing of information, research, data, expertise, and cultural knowledge
- Access to software, digital tools, and platforms
- Networks, connections, and influence
- Mobilising volunteers and peer support
- Offering gifts-in-kind, e.g. event space, products, pro bono services
- Facilitation, strategic feedback, training, policy support

Benefits of Community Partnerships for Businesses

Businesses do not exist in a vacuum, and to succeed they require access to public services, good governance, and sustainable economic development, among other fundamental factors. Companies can do a great deal to address these common interests and create long-term value for society by investing in the communities they affect and serve.

78% of companies taking action to support UN goals and issues do so through partnerships[2]. Many businesses deliver their corporate social responsibility by partnering with a non-profit organisation whose objectives align with their values and address important issues. This can result in benefits for the business such as improved brand image and reputation, social or political capital, knowledge and capacity building, innovation in thinking and enhanced employee morale and retention.

The UN's SDG Partnership Guidebook maps the outcomes of partnerships on a spectrum from indirect, non-core philanthropic business incentives to core strategic business incentives:



Philanthropy / reputation / employee benefits	Unrelated or only tangentially related to a company's core business, aimed at achieving reputational benefits, notably by demonstrating corporate citizenship to both employees and customers. Companies are facing increasing consumer and community scrutiny around the impact of their practices, and employees are increasingly considering their potential employer's CSR credentials in their decision to accept a position.
Strategic social, infrastructure or environmental investment / social license to operate	Strategic social or environmental investment, usually related to a company's operations or value chain, and aimed at improving a company's social licence to operate and to help build a stable long-term business, societal and ecological environment in which it can thrive. Companies are increasingly aware that their own licence to operate depends on their ability to demonstrate they are responsible entities that contribute positively to the communities in which they have a footprint.
Compliance / direct business risk management supply chain sustainability	Investments to tackle more direct business risks (including the skills, availability, and wellbeing of its workers) and to ensure sustainability in its value chain. Companies need stable, transparent and secure environments to operate at their full potential, and so it is in their interest to contribute directly to, or influence, an enabling environment. Having rule of law, respect for property rights or having access to a skilled pool of talent, for example, all affect their ability to operate. Conflicts with communities over impacts on health and livelihoods, or protests over labour rights, can damage their reputation and affects operations. Business are increasingly working with others to tackle systemic issues that present business and human risks – such as corruption and climate change – and co-creating codes of conduct and standards can influence and shape the practices of entire value chains.
New market / business opportunity	New markets, new investments, or new business opportunities. The Business and Sustainable Development Commission's report, 'Better Business, Better World', estimated the investment opportunities for business in 60 key areas generated by the SDGs at $12 trillion. Among the top 10 opportunities identified were: mobility systems, new healthcare solutions, energy efficiency, clean energy and affordable housing, agriculture solutions and urban infrastructure. A recent PwC report looking at how ready business is to support governments to achieve the SDGs makes the point that "businesses that align their strategy with national priorities will most

	likely be given their licence to operate, by governments and citizens alike – those that do not, or that struggle to demonstrate alignment with the national interest, cannot expect equivalent treatment, so creating competitive disadvantage", particularly as governments begin to align their national policies and regulations with the SDG frameworks and priorities.

Source: UN SDG Partnership Guidebook

How volunteering can benefit your business: Employee volunteering is when staff donate time and skills during work hours to tackle social issues. Investing in a strategic impact-led approach to volunteering creates several key benefits[3]:

- A range of employee volunteering initiatives can increase employee engagement, job satisfaction and retention.
- Provides learning and development opportunities for employees, exposing them to new experiences and responsibilities (which might not be possible within a large, commercial organisation). The individuals can then deploy these skills and insights back in their day job.
- Businesses generate the most significant impact when volunteering programmes align with issues that matter. Volunteering done right will support your responsible business strategy.

There are large benefits to the charity partners also, who place a particularly high value on tapping into the professional skills from corporate employees. Rather than having volunteers in the field completing manual tasks, it can be more beneficial to the community partner to have access to legal, financial, marketing or HR expertise.

Community Partnerships in Regulation and Legislation

While community partnerships are usually voluntary, they may be subject to various regulations and guidelines depending on the jurisdiction. As a general rule, charitable contributions can be tax-deductible. Organisations need to be aware of local laws to ensure compliance and responsible conduct. Some examples include:

- UK: Limited companies pay less corporation tax when it gives the following to charity: money; equipment or trading stock; land, property or shares; employees on secondment; sponsorship payments.
- EU: Member States are free to design their tax systems as they see fit, provided they comply with EU law. Historically, no Member State granted the same income tax benefits which they provided to domestic charities to foreign charities, even if the latter fulfilled the relevant criteria of the national law.
- USA: Community partnerships in the USA are governed by a combination of federal, state, and local laws. The Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) of 1977 encourages financial institutions to invest in low- and moderate-income communities, promoting economic development and affordable

housing. Additionally, various federal agencies, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), implement programs and regulations to support community development and environmental justice.

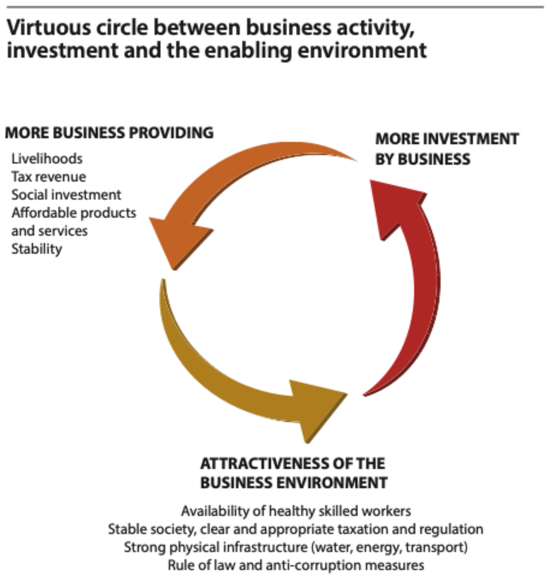
How Community Partnerships relate to CR&S

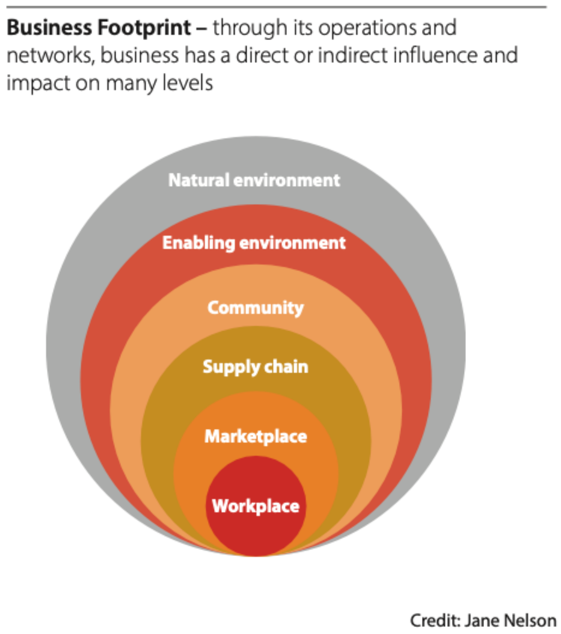
Due to the wide range of community partnerships and their goals, they can relate to all four of ICRS's Guiding Principles; (1) Champion ethical behaviour, (2) Pursue positive societal impact, (3) Pursue Positive Environmental Impact, and (4) Promote development of sustainable products. Goal 17 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals[4] is 'Partnerships for the Goals', which explicitly highlights the need for global partnership for development.

What does it mean for an organisation?

The UN SDG Partnership Guidebook describes the essential role of business in society and an ever-increasing engagement of business as a key partner in development. Business doing business responsibly, inclusively, and sustainably is positive for societies and for development: It creates and sustains livelihoods; reduces poverty; generates taxes; delivers essential products and services efficiently and affordably; and catalyses technological innovation.

For organisations, community partnerships represent an opportunity to build strong ties with the local community, enhance brand image, and contribute to long-term social and economic development. These collaborations can lead to innovation, increased employee morale, and a more resilient and supportive operating environment.





Source: UN SDG Partnership Guidebook

What does it mean for an individual practitioner?

Individual CRS practitioners within organisations play a crucial role in fostering community partnerships. Engaging with communities requires effective

communication, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to navigate diverse stakeholder interests. Practitioners contribute to shaping the organisation's approach to community engagement, ensuring it aligns with both business objectives and social responsibility.

The ICRS competency framework is a great starting point, where you can apply the core competencies to the topic of community partnerships to increase your knowledge and skills. We've included some core competencies below, along with examples to consider:

- Engage with stakeholders: Identify key community stakeholders and understand their needs and expectations. Maintain open and transparent communication channels with community stakeholders to build trust and address concerns. Stakeholders could include local communities, governments, NGOs, foundations, unions, and the media.
- Plan, develop strategy & manage projects: Conduct a thorough assessment of community needs and priorities to ensure inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. Manage and maintain successful partnerships, with clear mission statements, governance structures and resource planning.
- Measure and report impact: Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms from the outset to measure the success and impact of community partnerships *e.g.* through frameworks such as Business for Social Impact (B4SI), or New Philanthropy Capital (NPC).

Key Actions

The UN Global Compact has a wide range of resources for partnerships, including community partnerships:

The Partnering Lifecyle:

1. **Scoping and Building:** Stakeholder mapping, engaging key stakeholders to fully understand the issue, undertaking process of engagement and negotiation to collectively develop value-creating partnerships:

Source: UN SDG Partnership Guidebook

2. **Managing and Maintaining:** Establish the governance, operational and management structures, allocate human resources and financial resources (or mobilise resources from external sources).
3. **Reviewing and Revising:** A well-maintained partnership includes a culture of constant process of review and iteration, monitoring progress towards goals, reviewing the health of the partnership and making the necessary changes to keep partnership on track.
4. **Moving on renegotiation sustaining:** The partnership may decide to close (either because it has completed its tasks or is not delivering sufficient value), continue on, institutionalise its activities into one of the partners or a new organisation, scale up its activities, redirect its efforts or reimagine itself.

The following tools and guidance can be found here:

- Stakeholder mapping
- Partnering agreement template
- Internal prospective partnership assessment
- Value assessment framework
- Partnership health check
- Troubleshooting: *e.g.* ever-changing personnel, one partner not delivering, global partnerships failing to deliver in-country.
- Managing power imbalances

Further Reading and Resources

UN Global Compact on Partnerships

UN's SDG Partnership Guidebook, 2020

Tools for Education Sector: Developing community partnerships and multi-agency working, Llywodraeth Cymru (Welsh Government), 2018

Tools for Healthcare Sector: Developing Community Partnerships Toolkit, SCCTSI Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute

Business in the Community (BITC): Employee Volunteering Guide

NPC: Starting to measure your impact: 4 Step Cycle

Business for Social Impact (B4SI) frameworks form a robust measurement standard that any company can apply to understand the difference their contributions make to business and society.

Sources

(1) 17 Resources to Share with Community Partners That Aren't Money, Alex Derr, Visible Network Labs, 2024.

(2) UN Global Compact Annual Survey, 2021

(3) Employee Volunteering Guide, Business in the Community, 2023.

(4) The 17 Goals, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development