

Start Fund: Learning from Partnerships

2018





Learning from Partnerships

Introduction

The Start Fund is a multi-donor pooled rapid-response fund that initiates disbursement of humanitarian finance within 72 hours. It is collectively owned and managed by Start Network members, a group of 42 national and international aid agencies. The fund was officially launched on 1st April 2014 and has an annual disbursement of approximately £9 million (GBP). It is designed to fill gaps in the humanitarian funding architecture in three main areas: underfunded small to medium scale crises; forecasts of impending crises; and spikes in chronic humanitarian crises.

This is the Fund's first review of the contribution and participation of partners in Start Fund responses. Here, partners are defined as local or national NGOs that are not formal members of the Network but are involved in Start alerts. This learning review was commissioned as the result of a recommendation in the 2017 'The Start Fund, Start Network and Localisation' report.¹ It explores how members identify and maintain their partners, as well as how partners contribute to the Fund's projects - from design to decision-making, implementation, and learning.

This product is based on a review of project reports and learning exchanges during Alert 151 to 202 (Apr 2017 - Dec 2017) and on 19 key informant interviews with members (9) and their partners (10). For the period of analysis, Start Fund MEAL was provided by World Vision UK.

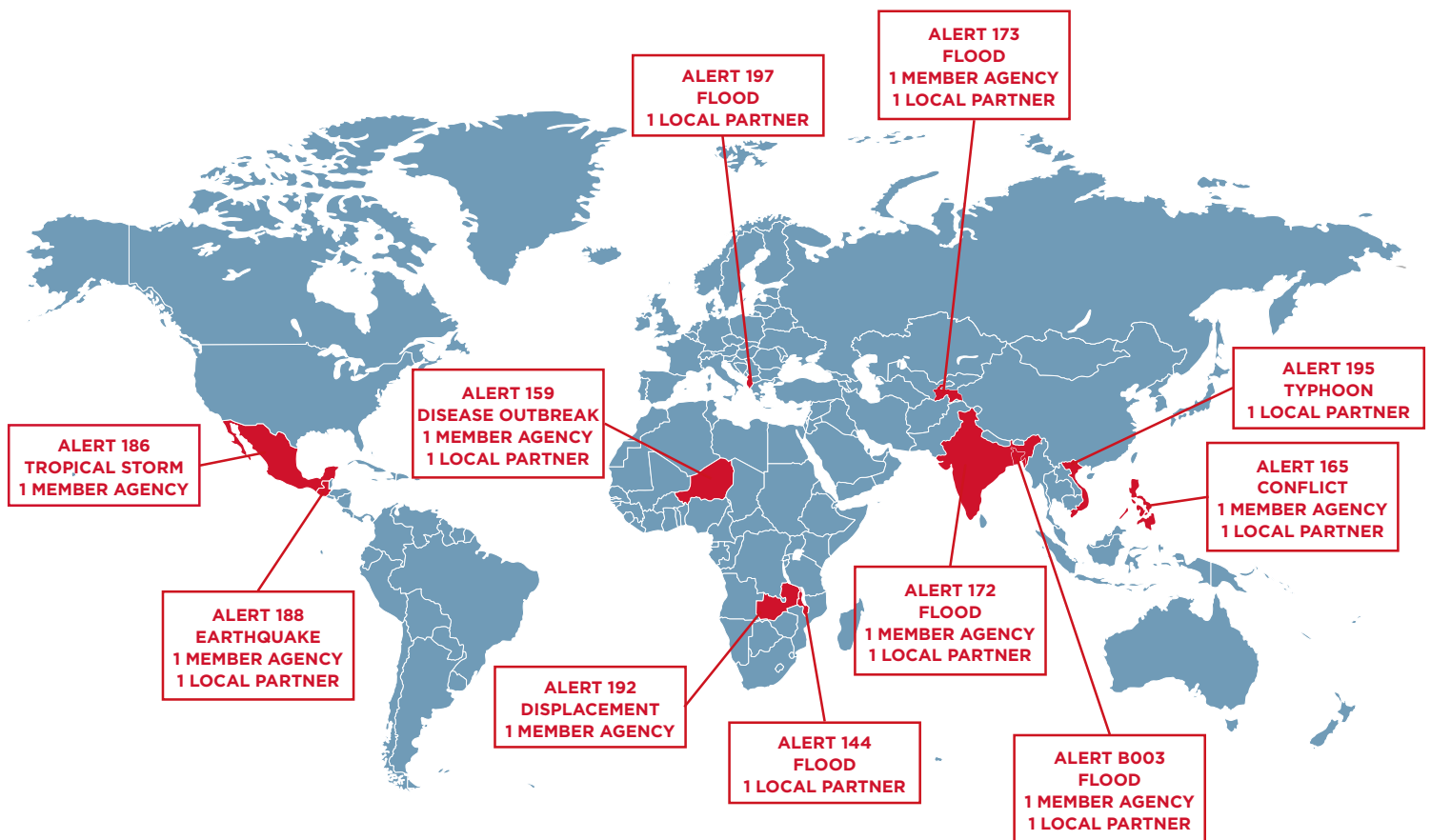


Figure 1: Interviewees consulted during this learning review, selected from a sample of all the Start responses involving local partners

¹ Patel and Koenraad (2017) The Start Fund and Start Network and localisation. Available at: <https://startnetwork.org/resource/start-fund-start-network-and-localisation>

Approach to partnership

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit concluded with a series of 'Grand Bargain' commitments, which included a commitment to greater localisation of humanitarian aid. Signatories agreed to support multi-year investment in the institutional capacity of national and local responders, to reduce the barriers to partnership with national and local responders, and to set an aggregated target of at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible.² Agencies also agreed to increase the use of pooled-funding mechanisms to achieve these aims.

The Start Network aims to shift the centre of humanitarian gravity, so that decision making and leadership take place at the front line and affected people are empowered to improve their lives. The Fund has sought to promote more local and national membership over time and also includes mechanisms for members to sub-grant funding to frontline organisations that are non-members. Between Alert 151 and 202, 31 out of 79 funded projects (39%) sub-granted some or all funding to a non-member orgs. In total, members partnered with 64 non-members including 5 INGOs (8%), 7 national affiliates (11%), 41 national partners (64%, including public-sector partners) and 11 sub-national partners (17%).

In interviews for this review, members reported working in partnership to improve efficacy, increase the speed of response, and reduce duplication of activities. A third of those interviewed also expressed an ideological motivation for working in partnership – and two stated that their organisations only work through partners as a matter of principle. When asked about their motivations for working with a particular partner, the members highlighted the partners' knowledge of specific locations, capacities, trust by the community, and inclusive approaches. Partners' motives for collaboration included the members' clear understanding of the context, shared vision, mutual trust, proven track record, and systematic approach to response.

Members noted four factors that limit how often, or how deeply, they work with local partners. These included the capabilities of partners in implementation or reporting (4 interviews), speed to mobilise (2), concerns regarding partner's commitment to neutrality (2) and availability of a partner in the affected area (2).

TYPES OF PARTNERSHIP

The interviews indicate three broad categories of partnerships in Start funded responses:

- **HIGHLY COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS:** Members who work extensively through local partners tend to have a highly collaborative approach to project design and pass on a greater proportion of the project management fee.³
- **MODERATELY COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS:** In these relationships, the partner is often involved in gathering data and contributing information on the context to the design process. The Start members in these partnerships may use the 1% learning fund⁴ to develop new partner competencies.
- **LOW COLLABORATION, OR 'SUBCONTRACTING' PARTNERSHIPS:** The member and partner are normally engaged in other, longer-term activities that include more collaborative decisions. However, Start Fund projects are delivered by subcontracting.

² 'The Start Fund, Start Network and localisation' report defines 'as directly as possible' according to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Team on Preparedness and Resilience (IASC) Taskforce interpretation: "no more than one intermediary between original donor and actual aid provider".

³ A 10% flexible fee for project management that comes with every approved budget. It is also termed "Indirect Cost Recovery / Non-Project Attributable Costs" in project reporting.

⁴ The Start Fund sets aside 1% of its total funding for Start Network member agencies to strengthen humanitarian response through additional learning from past experiences and through increased involvement of communities.

Figure 2 provides an overview of how partners reported their involvement with Start Fund projects and processes during interviews. All partners were involved in project implementation, 77% contributed to a needs assessment, and between 46-54% were involved in project design, report writing, M&E or post-action reviews. Partner involvement in Start Fund processes, such as initiating an Alert, or taking part in project selection was very low.

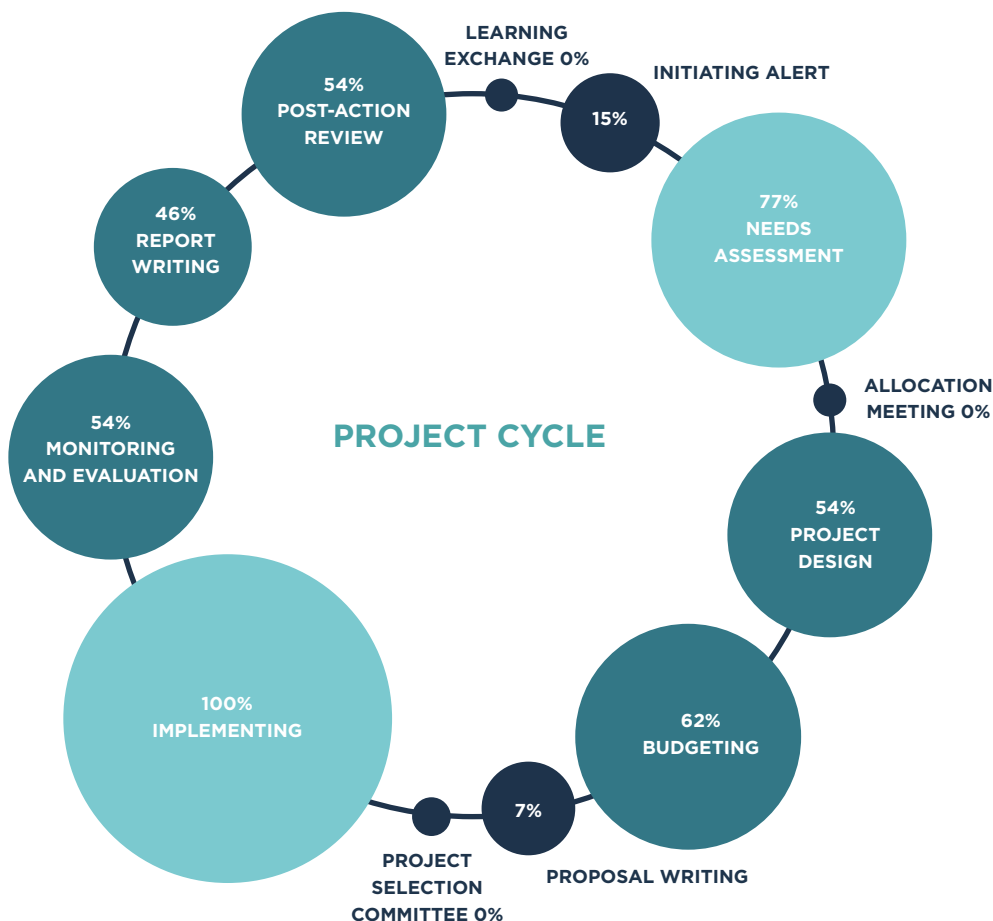


Figure 2: Partner involvement at different stages of the project cycle (gathered from interview data)

Partnership quality

Local partners and members were asked a series of questions about the quality of their partnerships during Start Fund projects. Their responses are summarised against a list of “attributes for effective partnership” developed by the Partnership Brokers Association, an organisation that has worked closely with the Start Network since its founding:

<p>Clear understanding between the partners* of the word ‘partnership’. * In PBA’s criteria, the word ‘partners’ refers to both sides of the partnership, rather than just to local partners</p>	<p>Four of the nine members interviewed said that the partnership was less participatory or collaborative during a Start response than during other joint projects. The difference was attributed to the short project timeframe and the small amount of funding. This was confirmed by corresponding local partner interviews. For example, one local partner in the Philippines (Alert 165) said it was disappointed that the member agency had not consulted them about the Start response, but did on previous peace-building projects. The partner reported:</p> <p><i>‘But in Emergency response during the start of the Marawi Siege, we were invited only as volunteer man-powers for the distribution. We did not feel the partnership between the [member and partner]’</i></p>
<p>Agreement to a shared vision and common purpose</p>	<p>Long-term partnerships with a Start member were reported by 92% of partners. These covered a broad range of humanitarian and developmental objectives. Interviewees reported that Start Fund responses provide clear parameters for shared objectives. All partnerships were based on a project agreement that specified roles and responsibilities, with expected outputs.</p>
<p>Account and allowance being made for both member and partner interests</p>	<p>Overall, the speed of funding makes it difficult for members to respond flexibly to partner needs. However, two partners noted specific instances where the member had responded to requests for additional staff costs and additional training. Another two said that budget limitations meant that their requests for additional costs for transport were not met.</p>
<p>Co-creation of design, decisions and solutions</p>	<p>In interviews, partners reported variable levels of collaboration for project design and decision-making; 77% of local partners contributed data and information to support proposals or needs assessments. 70% of members in the partnership interviews led the consultation on project design and reporting. More substantive co-design normally only happened in cases of long-term pre-existing partnerships. For example one local network reported:</p> <p><i>“We asked members [of the local alliance] who could help with floods - and the [Start fund member] said they can. We did planning with them about how to best help. The member suggested money for beneficiaries, but we rejected this idea. But making food packages would take too long. We settled on distributing cheques rather than money. It was a long night!” (Alert 197 Albania)</i></p>
<p>Commitment to sharing risks as well as benefits</p>	<p>Interviewees reported few risks, which made this attribute difficult to assess.</p>
<p>Both members and partners contribute resources (tangible or intangible)</p>	<p>Members and partners contributed finance, staff and time to the response. Capacity development activities were also identified in 12 of the 13 partnerships discussed in interviews. These activities were normally directed from the member to the partner (with one exception). Collaborative approaches to response can also include training and mentoring that builds capacity. The Vietnamese government people’s committee (Alert 195 Vietnam) reported significant learning through working collaboratively with Start member CRS during each project stage:</p> <p><i>“what we learned here was the logical and scientific steps, especially how to involve the community in this process. We also learned how to select beneficiaries. It’s very important to spend time on selection process with the involvement of the community. If we don’t get it right, people will not be happy and there may be conflict.”</i></p>
<p>Members and partners share decision-making and leadership responsibilities</p>	<p>Most Start members retain leadership and decision-making responsibilities. Only 40% of the interviewed partners felt they had significant decision-making responsibility during at least one phase of the response. In the 31 projects implemented with partners, £71,412 of £188,806 in management funding⁵ was spent by non-member organisations.⁶ This is an area where there are opportunities for devolved decision-making to be demonstrated - both symbolically and practically - as articulated by the Vietnam Red Cross in Quang Ngai Province (Alert 195):</p> <p><i>“We would like the [member] to transfer the operational budget including relief and administrative expenses for us so that we are more proactive in implementing the project’s detailed plan.”</i></p>
<p>Members and partners commit to mutual accountability</p>	<p>All Start projects were underpinned by a service agreement that outlined accountabilities. However, there was only one case when the service agreement was written jointly and the full budget was only shared by 40% of the partners interviewed. Nevertheless, most partners reported regular communication with the member during the response and all partners said that they felt comfortable providing feedback. As one partner stated:</p> <p><i>“Relationally we are equal, but because of the service agreement, structurally, we are not” (Alert 159 Niger).</i></p>
<p>Members and partners work together to develop a principled approach to their partnering endeavours</p>	<p>The majority of interviewed members clearly articulated a set of values that underpin their approach to partnership. Members and partners also regularly referred to staff codes of conduct. However none of the partners reported a jointly established set of values.</p>
<p>Attention is paid to the partnering process as well as the partnership’s projects</p>	<p>Six of the interviewees described methods for upholding or reviewing the values underlying their partnerships. These mostly reflected informal relationship building and face-to face communication. Two members also referred to more formalised approaches such as recruiting staff that express particular values and having specific staff members who are mandated to review partner processes.</p>

⁵ The management fee is a 10% flexible fee for project management that comes with every approved budget. It is also termed “Indirect Cost Recovery / Non-Project Attributable Costs” in project reporting.

⁶ The full management fee was retained by the Start member for 56% of the partnerships interviewed. In the other 44% of cases, the fee was split (in various proportions).

How does partnership contribute to localisation?

The Start Network recently launched a new strategy to further localise and decentralise its membership, but at present, there are only a small number of national-level members. Non-members are unable to submit Alerts directly or apply directly for funding, but can do so alongside a member agency. By partnering with local agencies, Start Network members can help local actors to gain experience in leading responses and to form new linkages with the humanitarian response architecture.

The Start Fund's localisation report presented seven dimensions to localisation along with specific benchmarks. The table below provides an indication of the extent to which Start Fund partnerships contribute to each dimension.

 <p>Quantity and quality of funding</p>	<p>Between April and December 2017, the Start Fund delivered activities through 64 non-member partners. There were mixed views on the quality of funding among those interviewed. At least two national partners felt that projects were underfunded due to project costs being under-budgeted in order to increase the chance of selection at Project Selection stage.</p> <p>Quality funding includes funding that is flexible, supports positive cash flow, and accounts for overheads. Approximately half of partners interviewed had received a management fee. Several also noted that the speed of the Fund affords them flexibility. For example:</p> <p><i>“No delay, that’s what we like about Start. It is very quick” (Indo-Global Social Service Society, Alert 172 India)</i></p>
 <p>Capacity development</p>	<p>Start Fund projects are fast and short with little extra funding for capacity development. Nevertheless, capacity development was delivered by some members through coaching and mentoring (as detailed above in the partnership quality section on partners contributing resources) and by others via 1% Learning Fund activities.⁷ Several Start members (Alert 161 Pakistan, Alert 144 Malawi, Alert 188 Guatemala) used 1% funds to run training for partners addressing gaps that emerged from the response. In Pakistan (Alert 161), when local agencies did not meet due diligence capacity criteria to be involved in the response, the member agency was awarded the 1% learning fund to train 20 local organisations in management of cash-based transfers in emergencies, conducting baseline, endline, pre and post Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) surveys, and gender and inclusion mainstreaming.</p>
 <p>Participation revolution</p>	<p>In learning exchanges, Start members highlighted that local partners support better engagement of the community in responses (unfortunately the minutes provide little detail of how accountability was increased). However, in one reported case, Christian Aid worked with local partner IGSS to mainstream accountability into their projects (Alert 172 India):</p> <p><i>“We did have a complaint mechanism, but not as systematic as Christian Aid. It was not in-built, now it is. Now we have a dedicated complaint number, and based on this, people have responded with grievances and suggestions which we have been able to address. We feel more accountable to community, as well as to donors. This builds our credibility.”</i></p> <p>However, the report “Start Fund: Learning from Accountability to Crisis Affected Communities” suggests that, overall, community feedback is not often utilised to shape future project design.⁸</p>
 <p>National authorities and national actor presence and leadership in coordinational fora</p>	<p>At least three members delivered Start responses in partnership with a government agency. These partnerships were either formally required, or supported greater resourcing, or improved security. Overall, these partnerships involved greater accountability to the national authority. In Alert 195 Vietnam, for example, a member and a public-sector partner (The Vietnamese Government People’s Committee) reportedly collaborated on every stage of the project. Member agencies reported some barriers to effective and transparent partnership with government agencies in some contexts. For example, one Start member expressed concerns about communicating what the full management fee was to their government partner.</p>
 <p>Visibility of national and local actors</p>	<p>Several members said they had promoted their partners to other INGOs and networks. There was one case where a new partnership was formed between an existing partner and another Start member. However, at least two partners felt they had limited visibility in coordination forums.</p>
 <p>National actors in humanitarian policy debates and initiatives</p>	<p>There was one reported case of a member providing a partner, IGSSS, with opportunity to contribute to a national publication.</p> <p><i>“Christian Aid alerted us (IGSSS) to an opportunity to contribute our learning to a publication on best practices in DRR in Orissa, and the article was published by the government” (Alert 172 India)</i></p>

⁷ The Start Fund sets aside 1% of its total funding specifically for Start Network member agencies to strengthen humanitarian response through additional learning from past experiences and through increased involvement of communities. A 2-page guidance document about the fund can be found here: <https://start-network.box.com/s/t72lfy6q5itnfe5v5aeawtixjyvg2wl>

⁸ Only 13 of 69 responses reported using community feedback in the design of subsequent responses. See Start Fund: Learning from Accountability to Crisis Affected Communities (2017) available at: <https://startnetwork.org/resource/start-fund-learning-accountability-crisis-affected-communities>

Conclusions and recommendations

The Start Network was launched to address system-level inadequacies in the humanitarian sector. The first of these was the centralisation of humanitarian decision-making and response. Members agreed that the Network would aim to create “a system in which response to crises is defined by those closest to them, and based on humanitarian need”.

So far, the Fund has delivered this by involving national affiliates in the Alert and Project Selection processes and by funding projects that are delivered alongside partners. In 2017, 59% of Start Fund members awarded funding delivered projects through non-affiliated local or national partners. In the vast majority of cases, the partnership pre-dates the Start Fund response and continues beyond it.

The depth and quality of partnership varied significantly from project to project. Members took at least three different approaches to partnering: (a) some had a longstanding commitment to collaborative processes which they brought into the Fund, (b) some worked with partners to collect data and contextualise projects but retained decision-making roles in order to speed up the project design process, and (c) some sub-contracted partners to deliver specific activities. Those in the last category noted that their longer-term projects often involved more collaborative processes.

WHAT IS WORKING WELL?

A number of Start Network members have supported partners to take decision-making roles, provided flexible quality funding, and promoted local leadership across different project phases. Several others have sought to address capacity gaps by harnessing the strengths of other local partners. Trócaire, for example, facilitates horizontal learning exchanges between partners, funding travel to partner locations. They also accessed the 1% learning fund for one of their local partners to train other agencies in seismic norms for construction in earthquake-prone areas where their expertise is now being recognised at the regional and national level.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED?

The need for swift project design and timely project completion (in a 45-day window) can cause some members to suspend collaborative processes. Stronger local humanitarian leadership can be promoted by ensuring that partners are involved in decision-making and review processes.

The learning review affirms recommendations in the Start management response to the localisation report⁹ (noted with a *) alongside new recommendations for improving localisation:

COMMUNICATION WITH PARTNERS

- Collect partner contact details in order to share the Start Fund handbook, partner-specific guidance, and invitations to learning exchanges. Relevant Alert notes could also be shared with partners and their views gathered through the survey.
- Develop a handbook for partners that provides information on the Start Fund including an introduction to the Fund, an outline of decision-making processes, and information on how they can get involved and feedback mechanisms*
- Encourage members to familiarise local partners with the format, structure and content of Start Fund documents to enable greater involvement in initiating and leading on Start alerts and proposals. Where needed, pre-identify translators.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

- Clarify criteria for membership and work to increase the number of local partners that are also members*
- Invite partners that have contributed to multiple Alerts to participate in introductory training for standing committees and Start Network hubs
- Invite partners to attend project selection meetings, especially in cases where partners contributed significantly to project design and would be implementing a portion of the project firsthand. Invite feedback on partners' concerns about the project selection process or the standing decision-making groups*

⁹ The Start management response to 'The Start Fund, Start Network and localisation' report is available at: <https://start-network.box.com/s/5hqtbfq43q3uw393wgy3nd4v393v7ql>

- QUALITY FUNDING**
- Include discussion of partners strengths and limitations during project selection
 - Establish a working group of members and partners to review management fee (also termed indirect cost recovery) policies with a view to ensuring the management fee is distributed in a way that reflects the costs managed by partners*
- TRANSPARENCY**
- Enable and encourage partners to share the Start Fund Annual Report with partners
 - Encourage members to share the proposal and final project reports (including budgets) with their partners to promote trust and understanding
- LEARNING AND PARTNERSHIP REVIEWS**
- Further incorporate capacity needs identified by partners within the objectives for activities funded by the Start Fund “1% Learning Budget”
 - Include partners in learning exchanges at the end of projects
 - Ensure spot check visits to Fund response locations include meeting with partners to gather their views on the relevance and effectiveness of projects and their experience as an implementing partner
 - Encourage members to conduct joint and equitable partnership reviews of the partnership process* using the Partnership Brokers’ Association qualities and Start Localisation dimensions as a basis for members and partners to co-define a quality partnership and identify relevant practical indicators.

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