The Purposeship Principles Standard
A Guide for Purpose-Driven, Cross-Sector Relationships

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PREFACE

Cross-sector collaboration for sustainable development has enormous potential. It has the capacity to bring targeted resources and diverse skills together to address some of the biggest challenges facing our world. To maximize impact and mitigate risks, these resources are often expertly funneled through a series of contractual agreements, implementation procedures, and monitoring systems. However, these rigid processes required by funders, grantees, and contractors alike tend to overlook the dynamic nature of the very social and environmental issues they are aiming to address. As the sustainable development community continues to wrestle with pragmatic strategies for building a better world, some theories have turned back to the lessons of nature itself.

Inspired by John Kania and Mark Kramer’s work on Collective Impact, consider for a moment how animals like schools of fish are able to swim with such astounding coordination and alignment. Although comprised of thousands of independent bodies, the school moves as one, reacting in unison to unpredictable changes in geography, topography, currents, and even potential predators. Similar to flocks of birds, scientists discovered that there is no single leader in a school, but that a leader emerges depending on the direction the school needs to swim. Scientists also determined that only three rules govern their movement:

- maintain a minimum distance from your neighbor;
- swim at the same speed as your neighbor; and
- always turn towards the center.¹

It is through these three simple principles that thousands of fish are able to see, respond, and move as though they were one organism.

This is the spirit with which we approach development. To make development work, the rules need not be procedural, chronological, or prioritized. Rather, they should be principled, interchangeable, interdependent, and ever-present. Similar to the schools of fish or flocks of birds, leaders in development should not be predicted, self-appointed, or voted upon. Leaders should be chosen by the environment and its circumstances. Individuals should be moved to lead because he or she has the timely, appropriate, and relevant capacity to do so.

All too often we reject the natural ways in which humans, communities, and the environment relate. Our global ecosystem is in constant motion and its inhabitants are marked by their instincts to survive, to grow, and to prosper. Our approaches for enabling development and prosperity should be similarly dynamic — anticipating and responding to emergent problems and solutions in real-time.

It is with this reverence for nature and an enthusiasm for a better world that we present the principles-based approach of Purposeship.

PARTNERSHIPS & THE 2030 AGENDA

“To successfully implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we must swiftly move from commitments to action. To do that, we need strong, inclusive and integrated partnerships at all levels.” – UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon

The cross-sector collaboration approach has grown out of a response to the increasingly complex and interconnected challenges of the 21st century. The public sector, the private sector and civil society organizations (CSOs) are closer together than ever before. This shift has led development practitioners to assert that cross-sector relationships are not only a

pathway to advancing “today’s development agenda, but [they also] hold the keys to scaling the most successful of those projects in the future”. The Sustainable Development Goals, according to the post-2015 UN General Assembly report, “are underpinned with a goal on global partnerships for the means of implementation”. To this end, partnership has been defined as one of the 6 essential elements to carry on with the 2030 agenda. Multilateral development banks, as well as other international development agencies, are ready to step up their efforts “to provide policy solutions and innovative financing responding to the specific needs of each country, each partner, each investor - and each global challenge”. With the Addis Ababa Action Agenda in play, the private sector has been invited to explore and bring new ideas to the table in a proactive way. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are the celebrated vehicle through which Sustainable Development Goals will be made possible. The development community has experienced considerable success in answering why partnerships matter. But the jury is still out on an even bigger question: How do we make partnerships work?

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ARE PARTNERSHIPS TRULY SUSTAINABLE?

The most successful relationships are those that are based in trust. The barriers to building trust in partnerships include the difficulty of merging the motives, languages, and cultures of diverse sectors; the issue of competition among parties with differing views; the complications in agreeing on management and measurement strategies; and the perennial obstacles of politics. Ironically, partnerships attempt to address these relational challenges with operational adjustments and procedures, which often fail in tackling the root problem.

This leads us to some key questions: How is trust in cross-sector collaboration built and maintained? What does it take to bring together diverse groups to effectively deliver sustainable development? How might these groups work together to provide the critical resources needed to meet development goals? And how might these groups work together to transform organizational behavior and address institutional justice in the process?

To answer these questions, we initially set out to create a toolkit for CSOs to form meaningful partnerships with corporations. We use the term CSO as a way of including informal civil society groups and community organizations as well as formal NGOs. We felt that if we could provide such CSOs with tools, they would be better positioned to engage corporations in development. We found two problems with this approach: first, CSOs were not the only actors that needed to improve, and second, layering on more procedures and tools was not the appropriate mechanism for improving relationships.

As a result, we established an alternative model for cross-sector collaboration called Purposeship, based in three principles of Adaptability, Utility, and Mutuality. Rather than creating a procedural toolkit squarely focused on CSOs, we created the Purposeship Principles Standard, a dynamic, principles-based guide for building and maintaining meaningful cross-sector relationships that is relevant to all sectors.

CIVIL SOCIETY LEADING THE WAY

The challenges facing partnerships are not about skills or resources. They are about breakdowns in power and perception, which lead to dysfunctional relationships. The new way forward requires a conscious effort in relationship-building. It demands that partners view their differing perspectives as a source of strength. Cross-sector relationships will work only when each party understands one another and appreciates what each can offer. This initial leap of faith, required by all parties, has the potential to produce the impact that our global community desperately needs. Who should take the initial jump?

The perceptions of the sectors are deeply ingrained. CSOs often perceive corporations’ interest in partnership as a shallow greenwashing mechanism. Similarly, corporations often view CSOs’ as a public relations requirement rather than a true impact maximizer.

Kumi Naidoo, former head of Greenpeace International, challenges CSOs to take the “jump into the unknown and recognize [that] the current system of doing business is broken and if [CSOs] want to actually protect the core entity of business into the long term, they have to adapt or die”.

In other words, CSOs need to step up, claim their expertise in driving impact, and present themselves as equal partners rather than passive recipients.

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These can be difficult words for the CSO community to take in, especially from one of its more iconic organizations. Is it true that CSOs must adapt to business goals or die? Perhaps the more important question is — Does adaptation require the submission of power?

**CSOs as Agents for Change**

CSOs have played a critical role throughout history in transforming society. From the abolitionist movement to carbon emissions regulation, CSOs have consistently pushed business and government to adjust its practices for the better. The journey may be painstakingly slow, but CSOs have been the drivers of radical changes to some of the most unshakable institutions and entrenched business practices our society has ever witnessed. While CSOs continue to “act as forms of distributed intelligence and conscience in the market place”, few CSOs have the confidence that it is possible to do so through cross-sector partnerships. Furthermore, the increasingly complex challenges facing the human family require massive “system-level changes...to build sustainable economies” and CSOs would be wise to build on its history of inspiring institutional change and explore how their “efforts could best be deployed to this end”.

The global community is emphatically calling for the engagement of CSOs in business and governments. Cross-sector collaboration may provide the strategic opportunity to do so. Studies show that the public’s trust in CSOs on issues of the environment, human rights, and health is more than double the amount of trust placed in any other sector (governments, corporations, and media). In the case of human rights, for example, 59% of the public look to CSOs for reliable research and solutions, whereas 13% trust the government, 14% trust the media, and only 4% trust corporations. This gives CSOs the legitimacy and the responsibility to make the initial leap to a new model for social change.

Despite this potential, CSOs underestimate their role. The research shows that while CSOs underrate their own effectiveness, corporations find partnerships with CSOs to be significantly effective in bettering their business practices. A 2016 study on corporate-CSO partnerships by C&E Advisory revealed that 87% of CSO respondents (compared to 100% of business respondents) state that partnerships between the sectors improve business understanding of social and environmental issues. Moreover, 51% of CSO respondents (compared to 59% of their corporate peers) state that such key partnerships help to change business practices for the better.

As much as we see a role for the private sector in contributing to development, this data asserts that they cannot do it alone. CSOs are desperately needed in order to “fill in relationships, knowledge, and resource gaps” for corporations and governments as they develop better practices and positively contribute to the global triple bottom line.

If the other sectors find partnerships with CSOs to be beneficial to changing their practices for the better and civil society is demanding the engagement of CSOs to ensure as much,

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8 Ibid
10 Ibid
then why are CSOs perceived as so inefficient? C&E Advisory’s analysis of over 118 leading companies and CSOs reveals a potential answer:

"We noted that over a third (36%) of [CSO] respondents’ organisations, either lack a sufficiently enabling environment to sustain deep, problem-solving partnerships, or do not value such partnerships. This compares to 16% of companies with an insufficiently enabling environment, with none of the latter disagreeing with the value such partnerships can yield." 13

This evidence illuminates a striking and surprising breakdown in the effectiveness of partnerships—the CSO’s ability to sustain deep partnerships due to “lack of strong and clear leadership support, siloed working, the absence of clear incentives for internal collaboration, or lack of appropriate measurement and valuation of the contribution of such partnerships”. 14 After years of launching and studying partnerships, it seems that in many cases there just isn’t enough structure to support the long-term success of partnerships. Surprisingly, the breakdown may be structure itself.

**Making the Leap from Partnership to Purposeship**

As evidenced in nature, most relationships are born out of reciprocal benefits. Partnerships tend to exclusively focus on an external altruistic aim (the development goal) rather than including formal consideration of the development opportunities for each partner. This narrow focus on the goal often leads to transactional, procedural, and project-based development with a shallow level of partner engagement.

Nature reminds us that engagement itself is the starting point. It reminds us that organisms work together because they generate mutually beneficial outcomes. Since the current partnership model does not overtly address these outcomes, such priorities are often converted into hidden agendas and compromise transparency and trust — key components for the foundation of a good relationship.

**THE PURPOSESHIP APPROACH**

The model of Purposeship seeks to reclaim the foundations for a good relationship, reestablishing transparency and trust as indispensable values for cross-sector collaboration. In order to embrace this new model, all three sectors must engage in relationships that are flexible and responsive to emergent needs and solutions (the Foundational Principle of Adaptability), be accountable for their own unique role in promoting development (the Principle of Utility) and contribute to the development goals of each partner (the Principle of Mutuality).

Purposeship asserts that the intentional, conscious, and even uncertain journey toward solving a problem is more important than the assumptive strategies of traditional partnerships. This is precisely because Purposeship recognizes that pre-determined solutions run against the course of nature itself, which is in constant motion. The concept of Purposeship humbly recognizes that there is no single solution to these problems, and that even if there were a solution, no single individual or organization would be equipped to effectively address it.

Purposeship opens up the space for transparent engagement and trust-building, enabling partners to develop one another in the process and contribute to systemic change.

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14 Ibid
Changing the Language of Partnerships

The language of partnerships has been useful for elevating cross-sector and multi-stakeholder approaches into the mainstream development agenda. However, the pervasive breakdowns in this approach have since made the partnership vocabulary diluted, tired, and confusing. Moreover, the diversity of partners and programs that have operated under this umbrella term have made it a dangerous catch-all for describing a broad spectrum of collaborative activities. This breakdown has blurred partners’ understanding of what a partnership is: some may view it as a shared value approach, whereas others in the same partnership may simply see it as an updated term for a traditional donor-grantee relationship. In order to take partnerships to the next level, there is a need to change the game. To do it right, we must change the name.

The language of Purposeship elicits for-purpose relationships and affirms that building them is just as important as achieving the development goal. Because relationships take work, Purposeship requires partners (now agents) to be actively engaged instead of being passive suppliers.

What Makes Purposeship Different

Purposeship fully embraces the concept of Collective Impact, in which agents first agree on a common understanding of the problem, identify common indicators to hold themselves accountable to, and then enable the process itself to reveal emergent solutions.

However, the Purposeship model is different in that it extends the notion of Collective Impact back to the agents themselves. Because Purposeship draws much of its inspiration from nature, the model asserts that all agents within the Purposeship should be positively impacted from the experience — just like any healthy relationship. In practice, this means that each agent in the Purposeship has the duty and the responsibility to share, promote, and enhance beneficial outcomes for other agents in addition to the fulfillment of the Purpose. In this sense, Purposeship requires a commitment to Shared Purpose, in which all agents work toward beneficial impacts for the Purpose as well as for the other agents involved (the Principles of Utility and Mutuality).
Perhaps one of the most straightforward ways to describe the difference between partnership and Purposeship is the concept of “going together” versus “growing together” (See Figure 2). Partnerships focus on the task of “going together” by bringing a group of organizations to the starting line and moving in unison toward a development goal. Purposeships view agents at different starting lines of their own, dependent on their own development. Additionally, Purposeships do not necessarily require the full participation of all agents to walk alongside one another throughout the process; it is understood that targeted resources will be employed when the emergent solutions call for them.

Given that CSOs are in the business of development, they have the expertise to catalyze the shift to Purposeship.

In the case of traditional partnerships, CSOs tend to act as project managers, monitoring the pre-determined procedures of partners in the achievement of the development goal. On the other hand, the Purpose-Driven CSO views agents through the lens of a relationship manager and tends to an ever-changing portfolio of the resources, capacities, and needs of each agent. This enables these CSOs to match emergent solutions with targeted resources, while also staying abreast of the individual developmental opportunities for each agent. Given this portfolio approach, Purpose-Driven CSOs operate by tracking resources and needs in a more flexible and nodular way, rather than through standardized and linear means.

To illustrate, Figure 3 represents the traditional project management model that CSOs typically employ. In this model, CSOs assign single or multi-stakeholder partners to individual projects that connect with their mission. Partners essentially become suppliers and the CSO is generally not strategically aware of their partners’ individual development goals. As a result, partners are less committed to the delivery of the resource and CSOs may rely on contractual arrangements or memorandums of understanding to ensure their dedication. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the CSO identifies a variety of projects, manages a series of corresponding partners that deliver the required resources, and anticipates that the projects uniformly and comprehensively contribute to the organization’s mission. The focus of this kind of CSO often becomes project management rather than mission delivery.
The Purpose-Driven CSO looks beyond the partner’s role as a predictable supplier and instead focuses on their dynamic contributions to emergent solutions. Beyond having an understanding of the strategic resources partners can provide to achieve the mission, this kind of CSO is also keenly aware of the development opportunities and interests of each partner. By going one level deeper and recognizing the various developmental needs of partners, Purpose-Driven CSOs effectively transform the partner relationship from one of supply to one of agency, in which partners (now agents) are invited to share their own development goals as well as identify their potential contributions to the Shared Purpose. By empowering agents to share needs and identify solutions, CSOs are able to pool new knowledge and resources while simultaneously giving back to agents by incorporating their development goals into the Purposeship. As such, the Purpose-Driven CSO recognizes that agents (such as communities, other CSOs, corporations, and government entities) each possess a spectrum of ever-changing needs and resources.

Figure 4 shows the management model of the Purpose-Driven CSO, in which two-dimensional nodes (representing agents) are more reflective of the needs and resources at any given time. Driven by the Shared Purpose and supported by the Principles of Purposeship, the Purpose-Driven CSO does not observe nodes as fixed in place, but sees them as constantly moving in order to best identify and respond to emergent solutions and opportunities.
One strength of this approach is the recognition that each agent has needs and resources relative to other agents, rather than the traditional partnership approach which views agents as natural recipients or suppliers. In the case of Purposeship, agents are not limited to these distinctions and therefore transcend former power imbalances. For example, the Purposeship model recognizes that communities are much more than beneficiaries — they are dynamic contributors to the development needs of other agents.

Adopting a Purpose-Driven approach disarms an additional power struggle: when agents are committed to the development opportunities for other agents, the Purposeship can transparently identify and facilitate transformative development. By doing so, Purposeship encourages all agents to be drivers of the Purposeship and share ownership of the engagement process. It is these kinds of relationships — based in trust, transparency and commitment — that can lead to meaningful systemic change.
**THE PRINCIPLES OF PURPOSESHIP**

Adaptability is what defines the Purposeship space. As such, all activities that occur within the Purposeship are based in this foundational principle. The Principles of Utility and Mutuality are brought to the foreground, representing the functional role of Purposeship. When put into practice, agents track the feedback loops of the functional principles, monitoring the push-and-pull between the two to ensure the balance of equitable outcomes for the Purpose and the agents themselves.

![Figure 5. The Principles of Purposeship](image)

It is understood that the Principles of Purposeship are constitutive in that all agents that enter into the Purposeship space are required to adopt and demonstrate a commitment to the principles in their own right. Once operating in the Purposeship space, these principles also serve a facilitative role, meaning that they provide the basis for interaction between agents throughout the Purposeship and guide all activities within.

**Adaptability**

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.” — Charles Darwin

**Principle**

Agents shall consciously adapt to achieve the Shared Purpose.

**Definition**

Adaptability is the capacity to consciously adjust ideas and behaviors in strategic response to changing circumstances. It is based on continuous learning and improved understanding. As a natural process that is characteristic of any evolving organism, Adaptability is a key capacity for an organization to develop, to survive, and to accomplish its goals. In the case of Purposeship, Adaptability is the foundational characteristic required of all agents, demonstrating that each is fundamentally committed to a constant and intentional analysis of themselves and their environment. This enables agents to identify and respond to emergent solutions and remain aligned with the Shared Purpose.

**Application**
An agent that is fundamentally committed to Adaptability not only engages in adaptive behavior, but does so at a conscious and proactive level. The adaptable agent views this as a strategy in itself and finds success in regularly measuring and responding to stakeholder demands and needs. Adaptable agents embrace ambiguity as part of a continuous learning process and focus on improving their capacity to adapt accordingly.

The adaptable agent is able to adapt because it has determined its core essence and stays true to its values, even in an ever-changing environment. This agent has an understanding of its non-negotiables and ensures that adaptability does not infringe upon them.

Criteria
An agent that embraces the Adaptability Principle shall:

- Commit to conscious adaptation, which is central to survival and to the fulfillment of the Shared Purpose;
- Monitor the environment within the Purposeship (the Shared Purpose), as well as beyond the Purposeship (own environment and stakeholders);
- Analyze and incorporate relevant knowledge and understanding; and,
- Respond by adapting thinking and actions as needed to fulfill the Shared Purpose.

Utility

“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” — Aristotle

Principle
Agents shall contribute to the fulfillment of the Shared Purpose.

Definition
Utility describes the capacity to generate benefits that satisfy needs. The level of Utility is determined by the effectiveness of the efforts and resources used to meet needs. In the Purposeship context, the relationship of the needs with the unique resources of each agent determines the timing, scope, and relevance of each agent’s contribution in the achievement of the Shared Purpose. Given their shared commitment to Utility, agents are compelled to contribute in the most practical, beneficial, and efficient way.

Application
The Utility Principle describes the relevance of each agent’s unique contribution to the fulfillment of the Shared Purpose. Contribution is defined as insights and resources that an agent can bring, as well as changes to the agent’s own organizational strategy and behavior that align with the Shared Purpose. Because Utility is concerned with the quality and timely fulfillment of the Shared Purpose, Utility is used to measure and confirm the indispensability and impact of each agent’s individual contribution.

The Utility Principle determines the ideal level of efforts and strategic resources that each agent is capable of contributing to the Shared Purpose. Given the complexity of challenges in pursuit of the Shared Purpose, it is understood that agents are encouraged to determine their own Utility as well. This means that agents actively engage in the identification and evaluation of their contributions to efficiently and effectively fulfill the Shared Purpose.

Beyond identifying the type of contribution, Utility also dictates the ideal scope and timing of the agent’s contribution. It recognizes the ways in which emergent needs and solutions can challenge an agent’s ability to deliver. The Utility Principle mitigates this challenge by aligning each agent’s expertise with needs early on in the Purposeship. By tapping into each agent’s most powerful assets and capacities, the Utility Principle eases the issue of
emergent needs and solutions and empowers agents to deliver what they do best. As such, Utility requires that each agent is aware of the value of their contributions and makes the appropriate preparations to deploy them as needed in the context of the Purposeship.

The Utility Principle ensures that all activities geared at fulfilling the Shared Purpose are consistently useful. Given the evolution of the Shared Purpose and the agent’s abilities to fulfill it, the Utility Principle is what determines the active contributions of particular agents, the dormancy of other agents, and the introduction of new agents to the Purposeship.

Criteria
An agent that embraces the Utility Principle shall:

- Commit to contributing to the fulfillment of the Shared Purpose;
- Understand that contributions are defined as insights and resources that an agent can bring to the Purposeship, as well as changes to the agent’s own organizational strategy and behavior that align with the Shared Purpose;
- Identify contributions that the Shared Purpose requires from all agents, including itself, and consider suggestions from other agents about its own contributive capacities;
- Enable the Purposeship to ensure the usefulness of all agents’ unique contributions and commit to providing its own contributions in the most practical, beneficial, and efficient way; and,
- Recognize that the contributions to the Shared Purpose vary in timing and scope.

Mutuality

“All life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality; tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” — Martin Luther King, Jr.

Principle
Agents shall intentionally enhance beneficial outcomes for the other agents in pursuit of the Shared Purpose.

Definition
Mutuality is the quality or state of interactions in which each agent benefits. As a natural evolution of cooperation, mutual interactions give way to interdependent and enduring relationships. In the Purposeship context, Mutuality enables the interdependent beneficial outcomes generated through the Purposeship that are valuable to agents. As such, benefits are intentionally reinforced by agents in order to stimulate the meaningful engagement of others and promote mutual development for themselves.

Application
The Mutuality Principle describes the symbiotic nature of the Purposeship that empowers agents to concurrently develop while pursuing the purpose. It facilitates the concept of “growing together”, which not only encourages agents to meaningfully contribute, but also lays the foundation for the positive transformation of each agent.

Through engaging in the Purposeship, agents can expect to attain beneficial outcomes and consequently understand and promote the development interests of other agents. Through this understanding comes the opportunity for agents to proactively address each other’s expectations for development. By openly engaging in mutual development, agents may improve transparency in the relationship, avoiding “hidden agendas” and building trust.
Importantly, the Mutuality Principle causes agents to be more invested in the pursuit of the Purpose. Agents understand that by contributing through the Purposeship, they are increasing beneficial outcomes for themselves.

Criteria
An agent that embraces the Mutuality Principle shall:

- Commit to the mutual development of agents as an integral component of the fulfillment of the Shared Purpose;
- Understand that all agents have the right to receive beneficial outcomes from the Purposeship;
- Identify beneficial outcomes that the Purposeship can provide for all agents, including itself, and consider suggestions from other agents about its own development; and,
- Enable the Purposeship to ensure the equity of agents’ beneficial outcomes and that it corresponds with the expectations of each agent.

CONCLUSION

“Implementation is not just about quantity. It is also about doing things together, uniting around the problem. Inclusive partnerships must be a key feature of implementation at all levels: global, regional, national and local. We know the extent to which this can be transformative. The sustainable development goals provide a platform for aligning private action and public policies. Transformative partnerships are built upon principles and values, a shared vision and shared goals: placing people and the planet at the centre. They include the participation of all relevant stakeholders, in which mutual accountability is critical. This means principled and responsible public-private-people partnerships. – UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon”

The mounting needs for people and planet require partnerships to take on new approaches. Purposeship, developed a year before Ban Ki-moon spoke these words, brings tangible principles to this transformative vision. It is time for implementation and research on the impacts of this kind of a shift in focus — moving from indicators to relationships and from procedures to principles.

Purposeships empower a network of relationships that are smart, strategic, and sensitive to emergent solutions. Lines of communication are open in all directions and agents are empowered to share ideas for growing together toward the Shared Purpose. Inspired by natural law and by the dynamic ways in which organisms interact, Purposeship is sensitive to the dynamism of development and enables agents to respond to emergent needs and solutions in real-time.

Let us not forget that just like a school of fish, relationships can be guided by three simple principles: trust your neighbor, swim together, and when the destination is uncertain, always turn toward the center.

This is the power of Purposeship.

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