

What do your partners think of you? **– and what international non-governmental organizations did once they found out**

Background

Since 2010, Keystone Accountability has been conducting benchmarked surveys of the partners of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Partners are asked to rate and comment on different aspects of the INGO's performance. The surveys are confidential and Keystone doesn't reveal respondents identities to the INGO. This provides local partners with a safe space to express their feelings about working with international partners and enables a more open, data-driven dialogue for improving performance by both. To date, 78 organizations have taken the survey (including Plan International, Oxfam International and Save the Children, UK, US and International) and 18 have repeated the process.

“Keystone’s surveys have provided us with invaluable information about the quality of our partnerships in development. This knowledge has been an important part of improving our relationships and programme performance. It is something that all development organisations should pay close attention to.” - Bruce Lawson-McDowall, Country Head, DFID Zambia

Context

There are repeated calls for more support for southern-based national non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations in development. This means increasingly INGOs are going to be working through local partners rather than directly with beneficiaries. For successful development outcomes the relationship between the INGO and the local partners are vitally important. Increasingly, donors are interested in this relationship and INGOs that can demonstrate that they are taking their partnerships seriously are well positioned for future funding.



Approach



Step 1 Design

The key way to understand a relationship is to ask the people involved and this is what Keystone's is helping INGOs to do through the Partnership Survey. The standard survey, covering trust, communication, financial and non-financial support among other areas of the relationship, provides information for benchmarking. INGOs also add customized questions.

Step 2 Data Collection

Keystone Accountability does the data collection and the survey is confidential which gives partners a safe space to give honest feedback. In most cases the survey can be done online but paper surveys have been used in some circumstances.



Step 3 Analyze

Keystone Accountability provides the INGOs with comprehensive benchmarked reports. But to put the data in context INGOs usually conduct their own analysis too – triangulating the survey results with other data they hold. Oxfam's senior management discussed the survey findings and developed a management response, which was provided to partners along with the survey results.

“Looking at WaterAid from the perspective of partners was a new and provocative experience for many people in the organization. It has provided much food for thought about what we can do better to develop more equitable, respectful and mutually accountable relationships.” - Louisa Gosling, WaterAid’s Quality Programs Manager

Step 4 Dialogue

This is the most important stage of the process – when INGOs take the results of the survey back to their partners and discuss together how they can improve. They reflect on what they learnt from the survey and discussed changes to the way they do business to incorporate their partners’ views. The survey is just the starting point and face-to-face discussion leads to greater understanding of the partners’ perspectives. Oxfam’s country offices [held meetings with partners](#) to share the results of the survey. This was an opportunity to better understand the partners’ perceptions and jointly work on actions that would lead to better engagement.



“The data was a gift. It came from over 800 partners. It pointed clearly to the fact that they did not think we engaged well with them. Having data, rather than anecdotes, helped everyone in Oxfam acknowledge that we needed to do better.” - Makarand Sahasrabuddhe, Program Quality Lead for Oxfam International



Step 5 Course Correct

Many INGOs have made concrete changes to the way they do business as a result of taking the survey.

WaterAid developed a [partnerships framework and toolkit](#) to provide practical guidance on the processes of selection, assessment, capacity development, communication, conflict resolution and partner exit. It also developed a guide for finance staff to reinforce good partnership practice and is carrying out annual partnership training for staff. Oxfam is

revising its guidelines for partnerships giving partners a bigger role in program design and review.

Peace Direct decided after taking the survey that [providing reports to their partners](#) would be an important step in improving their accountability.

“To have one-way reports does not reflect an equal partnership and does not keep partners informed of what is happening at Peace Direct and what they have done for us. By reporting to our partners every quarter they can see better what we are doing for them (often a lot is unseen) and they can direct us differently if they so wished.” - Tom Gillhespy, Head of International Programs at Peace Direct.

Following feedback from partners, Peace Direct also simplified partners’ reporting requirements switching to regular calls rather than written reports and ensuring partners deal with one person to avoid duplications.

Results

On-going feedback loops

INGOs that are serious about improvement continue to check the health of their partnerships. This can be done in various ways – by commissioning Keystone to periodically repeat the survey, like Peace Direct. Or asking for a lighter touch follow-up surveys like WaterAid and Oxfam.

Peace Direct also worked with partners to develop a ‘score card’ identifying the characteristics of a strong partnership. This is then re-evaluated with the partner every six months and forms the basis for discussion about how the partnership is going.



“Really it is about developing equal partnerships, sense of team and creating a Peace Direct ‘family’ where our partners are part of that.”- Tom Gillhespy, Head of International Programs at Peace Direct

Further reading

[Keystone Accountability’s website](#)

More information on [the Partnership Survey](#)

[The Feedback Commons](#) – Keystone’s online survey and benchmarking tool

A list of [published Partnerships Surveys](#)

[WaterAid’s blog](#) on what they did with the survey results

[What Oxfam did with the survey results](#)

[What Peace Direct did with the survey results](#)

What not to do with survey results – some advice from Keystone

1. Don't ignore it. Even if you don't like the results it is important to try and understand why your partners feel that way about your organization. The very best way to find out more about their responses is to talk about it with them.
2. Don't rush the dialogue. Don't send mass emails. Take time to go back to your partners and share the findings with them. Discuss with them why they responded as they did and see if they have suggestions for ways to improve the partnership. Having frontline staff do this informally as part of their normal interactions is easy and effective. This step is vital for making partners feel the value of giving feedback. It also means the next time you ask them for feedback, they will be happy to help.
3. Don't be exclusive. Share the results of the survey widely within your organization. There are many different departments involved in creating partnerships and they should all have a chance to digest the results and discuss ways to improve. [Publish it](#) on your website so donors and others can see how you are doing.
4. Don't duck the hard stuff. Making changes is not always easy but in some cases it is necessary. In the longer term not making changes can be worse. If partners are unhappy about things you can't change, explain to them why these things are fixed and try and come up with solutions together.
5. Don't think you are finished. Partnership is an on going process. You need to regularly check with your partners whether things are better for them. This can be done through light touch surveys using our online tool [The Feedback Commons](#) or by retaking the full partnership survey.