

Building a Working Definition of Partnership

African Partnerships for Patient Safety (APPS)

African Partnership for Patient Safety aims to establish sustainable partnerships between hospitals in Africa and Europe. Hence one of the key starting points for discussion is the meaning of partnership, and its role in the development and spread of patient safety in Africa. The term partnership does not have a straightforward meaning. It is typically used interchangeably with collaboration, coalition and joint working. Although some believe there are differences between these terms, others assume they are synonymous.

Considering some definitions and reflections may be a useful starting point in building a working definition of partnerships.

- The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines partnership as “the state of being a partner - the partner being a person or organisation who shares or takes part with another or others, in terms of risk sharing, business, profit and so on. It is usually business related.”
- “Collaboration is the development of a model of joint planning, joint implementation, and joint evaluation between individuals or organizations” (El Ansari & Phillips, 2001)
- “Partnership is a dynamic relationship among diverse actors, based on mutually agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labor based on the respective comparative advantages of each partner. Partnership encompasses mutual influence, with a careful balance between synergy and respective autonomy, which incorporates mutual respect, equal participation in decision-making, mutual accountability, and transparency.” (Brinkerhoff, 2002)
- “Partnership involves a social system or entity based on an agreement between participating organizations to collaborate on a common goal in which benefits and risks, as well as resources and power are shared fairly.” (Eilbert & Lafronza, 2005)
- “Partnership is a means of balancing power and acknowledging absolute interdependence. At the *policy* level partnership is attractively simple and economically sound, where resources are pooled. At the *local* level different skill mixes are pulled together to promote health or safer communities, while at the *individual* level partnerships can deliver support to individuals, enhance self-esteem, or change community norms. In the health-promotion field, at the *micro* level are partnerships which do not seek to affect the underlying systems or architecture, while at the *macro* level alliances and partnerships seek to affect the structural determinants of health. At the front line, however, partnerships are employed to deliver a complex range of services that change as community needs change and successful partnerships need to make a difference to the lives of people.” (El Ansari & Phillips, 2001)
- “The collaboration inherent in a partnership is more than a mere exchange – it is the creation of something new, of value, together.” (Kanter 1994)

Another concept that is clearly related to partnership formation is “twinning”. It is the fundamental mission of the Tropical Health Education Trust (THET), who defines the concept as “the establishment of a formal link between a specified department/institution in the UK and a corresponding department/institution in the developing world, to facilitate an accurate assessment of need and consequently to ensure effective mutual collaboration at all levels.” (Macdonagh et al, 2002).

Reflecting on the above, some critical building blocks for a working definition of partnership emerges. These include:

- Absolute Interdependence;
- Mutual Accountability;
- Collaborative Relationship; and
- Shared Power

Building on the above a potential working definition of partnership for African Partnerships for Patient Safety can be postulated:

Partnership can be defined as a collaborative relationship between two or more parties based on trust, equality, and mutual understanding for the achievement of a specified goal. Partnerships involve risks as well as benefits, making shared accountability critical.

References

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