



# How to be a good minor partner: A study of INASP's role in the Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone partnership

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### How to be a good minor partner:

### A study of INASP’s role in the Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone partnership

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Cover image by V Schaeffler, taken during a role play at a critical thinking workshop in 2019 co-facilitated by INASP and members of the AQHEd-SL Critical Thinking Taskforce

### Acknowledgements:

We are very grateful to everyone from the AQHEd-SL partnership who took the time to respond to our questions. Thank you to INASP programme staff for feeding into the development of the initial learning questions and to Hannah Lewis for providing feedback on the first draft of this report.

The Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone (AQHEd-SL) partnership is funded by the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as part of its SPHEIR (Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform) programme.



SPHEIR  
Strategic Partnerships  
for Higher Education  
Innovation and Reform

## Executive summary

Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone ([AQHEd-SL](#)) is a four-year project bringing together higher education institutions (HEIs) across Sierra Leone to improve quality management in higher education and support the introduction and implementation of outcome-based education.

INASP's role in AQHEd-SL since the inception of the project has been to support the training of lecturers in critical thinking skills and the implementation of technology-enhanced teaching and learning approaches. In addition, since April 2020, INASP has been providing communications support to the project, particularly in writing and editing longer publications, doing social media, and supporting the engagement with the funder and higher education sector outside Sierra Leone.

INASP is a minor partner in the project, with staffing levels in the last year of the project equivalent to 0.6 FTEs. With AQHEd-SL coming to an end in 2021, INASP wanted to learn more about our experience of being a minor partner in a Sierra Leone-led project with many partners. We saw this as an opportunity to explore ways that INASP is a good partner and what we could do better, especially in Southern-led projects. It was also an opportunity to learn a bit more about the wider partnership dynamics within AQHEd-SL and also to inform INASP's approaches to partnerships in situations where INASP is the project lead.

We identified the following learning questions:

1. How effectively has INASP supported Southern leadership in AQHEd-SL?
2. How do INASP values and approaches fit within overall AQHEd-SL project aims and approaches?
3. What does INASP's experience about being a non-leading partner tell us about how our partners might feel and act in INASP-led projects?
4. How does the experience in AQHEd-SL chime with experiences in other projects where INASP has been a minor partner?

To answer these questions, we conducted interviews and focus groups with 21 stakeholders from across the project, 10 in Sierra Leone, four international partners, a representative from the funder and six INASP staff or former staff.

### How effectively has INASP supported Southern leadership in AQHEd-SL?

Overall, we found good evidence that INASP has supported Southern leadership in AQHEd-SL.

- In the area of **critical thinking**, respondents gave generally positive feedback about INASP's work in the project and the approaches that saw a shift in ownership from INASP to Sierra Leonean partners as the project progressed. There were some challenges that arose around perception of who was responsible for financial decisions and management within the project, which impacted some perceptions of INASP's work in this area.
- In the area of **communications**, INASP's support was appreciated but not widely known about within the project partners. As we took on this role halfway through the project and it was done remotely, this communications work was more like consultancy work than partnership. However, it supported the project to share its outputs more effectively with the funder and other external stakeholders.
- In the area of **finance and management**, there was positive feedback about INASP's ways of working and how this supported the project. From INASP's perspective, the approaches taken in Sierra Leone by the AQHEd-SL leadership provided valuable insight for INASP to incorporate into projects that we lead.
- At the stage of **consortium building and proposal writing**, there were some tensions around defining roles and clarity about INASP's part within AQHEd-SL. These tensions were exacerbated by some of the expectations of the fund manager.

### How do INASP values and approaches fit within overall AQHEd-SL project aims and approaches?

- Responses suggested that INASP's values (In it together, Making change last, Every voice counts, Doing things right) were reflected and appreciated in our approaches to AQHEd-SL. However, there were some tensions. These included some tensions at the proposal writing stage around roles for international partners and in facilitating workshops with partners that took different approaches. There was a need to do work well within the roles defined by the project. There was also a recognition that face-to-face meetings are important for relationship building in

a partnership but are in tension with INASP's desire to reduce climate impact and the realities of a pandemic.

**What does INASP's experience about being a non-leading partner tell us about how our partners might feel and act in INASP-led projects?**

Drawing on the findings for the previous two learning questions, we developed the following recommendations for good practice in leading partnerships:

- Understand context
- Recognise partners' skills and gaps
- Define roles within the partnership clearly
- Establish good communications from the start
- Ensure financial decisions are clear and transparent
- Ensure reporting processes are understood, feasible, and accepted
- Work on building relationships
- Encourage local teams and connections
- Build in capacity development and local ownership
- Make all partners visible

Following on from this study, INASP will be considering this third learning question further and reflecting on the experiences within AQHEd-SL in the context of other projects where INASP is a minor partner to address the fourth learning question.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 AQHed-SL and INASP's role

The Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone (AQHed-SL) project is bringing together higher education institutions across Sierra Leone to work together to enhance the quality of higher education. The project is achieving this by developing integrated structures of quality regulation at a national and institutional level and implementing outcome-based education that is relevant to key economic sectors (see box).

The project is led by University of Sierra Leone in close collaboration with King's College London and includes higher education institutions across Sierra Leone, as well as other national and international partners. INASP's overall role is as a minor partner, with staffing levels in the last year of the project equivalent to 0.6 FTEs.

INASP's role in the project, according to AQHed-SL's initial project workplan, was to "provide training and support to develop and build pedagogical skills, enabling faculty to deliver a high-quality, outcome-based, student-centred learning experience in support of critical thinking (CT) and evidence handling". The training was meant to use "pedagogic approaches blending online and face to face training, using a variety of interactive adult learning methods, keeping students engaged while they learn".

As the project has progressed, INASP has also been engaged more to provide communications support to AQHed-SL, especially to ensure communications-related milestones were met and to support sustainability beyond the funded period of AQHed-SL. Since April 2020, INASP has been providing communications support to the project, particularly in writing and editing longer publications, doing social media, and supporting the engagement with the funder and higher education sector outside Sierra Leone.

## 1.2 Background to the study

With AQHed-SL coming to an end in 2021, INASP wanted to learn more about our experience of being a minor partner in a Sierra Leone-led project with many partners. We saw this as an opportunity to explore ways that INASP is a good partner and what we could do better, especially in Southern-led projects. It was also an opportunity to learn a bit more about the wider partnership dynamics within AQHed-SL and also to inform INASP's approaches to partnerships in situations where INASP is the project lead.

We therefore conducted some research that can inform the following learning areas:

- The thinking about future higher education initiatives in Sierra Leone
- INASP's pathways of change and new ways of working as outlined in its [2020-2025 strategy](#)
- The project's evaluation

This piece of research collates the thinking of various INASP partners that we have worked with on the project as well as the experience of INASP project staff. Thank you to everyone who shared their thoughts with us.

## ASSURING QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone (AQHed-SL) is bringing together higher education institutions across Sierra Leone to improve quality management in higher education and support the introduction and implementation of outcome-based education. It aims to bring about a student-centred focus within higher education across the country, leading to a more responsive and capable national workforce.

The partnership is led by the University of Sierra Leone, working with Njala University, the University of Makeni, Tertiary Education Commission, Sierra Leone Institution of Engineers, the 50/50 Group, Milton Margai College of Education and Technology, Freetown Teachers' College, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology, Eastern Polytechnic (all in Sierra Leone), and King's College London (UK), INASP (UK), and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (US).

AQHed-SL is funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) as part of its SPHEIR (Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform) programme to support higher education transformation in focus countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

This report describes the methodology used for this piece of research and provides a summary of the responses received. It also discusses what we can learn from these responses, in INASP, in AQHEd-SL and in the wider SPHEIR programme. The report draws conclusions about what makes a project effective and inclusive and what that means for future projects.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Learning questions

In consultation with INASP’s wider programme team, we identified the following learning questions:

1. How effectively has INASP supported Southern leadership in AQHEd-SL?
2. How do INASP values and approaches fit within overall AQHEd-SL project aims and approaches?
3. What does INASP’s experience about being a non-leading partner tell us about how our partners might feel and act in INASP-led projects?
4. How does the experience in AQHEd-SL chime with experiences in other projects where INASP has been a minor partner?

We agreed an approach to primarily address the first two questions in the main research phase, with recommendations made for the third question. Following the publication of this report, we will share the findings to INASP partners in AQHEd-SL and other projects, as well as the SPHEIR team and invite feedback on our findings and the recommendations in response to the third question. We will also present the findings to INASP programme staff as the catalyst for internal discussions and learning particularly about the fourth question.

### 2.2 Interviews

To learn about these questions, we sent emails to our contacts from AQHEd-SL project teams, as well as finance management and the project partners University of Illinois and 50/50 Group. We asked them to answer some open questions about INASP’s contributions to the project. The questions focused on whether their expectations were met when they collaborated with INASP and their thoughts on involving international partners in a project like AQHEd-SL in general. We gave our contacts the choice to reply by email or make an appointment for an online chat.

We had intended for the critical thinking taskforce (CTTF) to share their feedback in a focus group discussion. However, one CTTF officer preferred to answer by email and two other officers were interviewed separately due to technology and timing issues preventing a group meeting.

We also contacted the participants of the 2019 critical thinking (CT) workshop and asked them to answer questions by email (see box as an example of the type of questions asked).

Furthermore, we spoke with the SPHEIR fund manager about their view on the project partnership.

#### Questions to CT workshop participants

- a) What was your experience with the critical thinking workshop that you attended in 2019 and/or any subsequent workshops facilitated by the critical thinking taskforce? Was there any lasting impact – for example have you or your colleagues done anything differently after the workshop(s)?
- b) What do you think of INASP's role in the 2019 critical thinking workshop and/or the project overall?
- c) What do you think of the critical thinking taskforce's role in this workshop, any subsequent workshops and/or the project overall?

The following table shows the number of responses we received by type of the respondents. Please note that the response from 50/50 was a team response but submitted and counted as one response. The 50/50 response has not been included when counting the numbers by gender; however, it is likely that more women than men contributed to the team response.

We had also a focus group discussion with INASP staff, past and present, who had been working on the AQHEd-SL project, and one staff member shared feedback via email.

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Total responses</b>                             | <b>21</b> |
| <b>Partners from a Sierra Leonean organisation</b> | <b>10</b> |
| <b>Critical Thinking Taskforce officers</b>        | 3         |
| <b>Workshop participants</b>                       | 5         |
| <b>Others</b>                                      | 2         |
| <b>International partners</b>                      | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Based in Sierra Leone</b>                       | 3         |
| <b>Based overseas</b>                              | 1         |
| <b>Fund manager</b>                                | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>INASP staff/former staff</b>                    | <b>6</b>  |

|                           |    |
|---------------------------|----|
| <b>Female respondents</b> | 11 |
| <b>Male respondents</b>   | 9  |

### 2.3 Limitations

This was deliberately a small project, conducted within a relatively short time frame, a constrained budget and competing time pressures for both interviewers and interviewees. As a result, we were unable to speak with everyone who might have a perspective on this topic. In particular, we were unable to speak with many of the people directly involved with AQHEd-SL communications.

In addition, although we asked similar questions, there were some inconsistencies in interview approach and format depending on the nature of the contact and technical constraints. We tried to avoid interviewing people about our own work. However, this was sometimes unavoidable – and we are aware that there is a potential for bias to be introduced when the party conducting an interview is also the subject of the interview.

Despite these limitations, the responses to this study were considered and detailed. Throughout the project we were aware of the need to balance what is useful to AQHEd-SL and the wider SPHEIR programme about the project more generally and what is useful to INASP in relation specifically to our role within the partnership. We believe that this study presents a valuable snapshot of perspectives on the partnership in general and INASP’s role within it.

### 2.4 Comments from the report authors

This study primarily focused on perspectives of INASP’s role within AQHEd-SL from other stakeholders within or connected to the project. However, the report authors are the key INASP staff members involved in AQHEd-SL and so it seemed important to also share our perspectives. Some of the feedback is woven through this report but we have also included our personal reflections at the end in Annexes 1 and 2.

The following sections discuss findings relating to the first three learning questions and what we can learn from those findings.

### 3 Learning question 1: How effectively has INASP supported Southern leadership in AQHEd-SL?

The responses highlighted that INASP’s support is interlinked with the support of local and other international partners. In this section, we report on how INASP’s collaboration with other partners, in the work strands critical thinking and communications, contributed to the project aims.

#### 3.1 Critical thinking

**Respondents gave generally positive feedback about INASP’s work in the project and about the approaches that had a shift in ownership from INASP to Sierra Leonean partners as the project progressed. There were some challenges that arose around perception of who was responsible for financial decisions and management within the project, which impacted some perceptions of INASP’s work in this area.**

#### What contributions have our partners seen and how have they been perceived?

The responses show that INASP was perceived as fulfilling the role that was described in the workplan: *Providing training and support to develop and build pedagogical skills and enabling faculty to deliver a high quality, outcome-based, student-centred learning experience in support of critical thinking (CT).*

When being asked about INASP’s contributions, the respondents mentioned INASP’s support with training of trainers; awareness raising; and capacity building support around teaching and learning critical thinking skills. It was pointed out that INASP exposed lecturers and other staff to high-quality material. INASP’s support helped lecturers to make their teaching more interactive and student-centred and to improve students’ CT skills. The capacity building was not only delivered through training on an individual level. It was also mentioned that the institutions changed their way of teaching, for example through improved ways of learning assessment.

*“I think the best contribution that INASP has had is that everybody that has been part of that critical thinking training has really benefited ... especially those who received it directly from INASP, at the beginning of the project, they really enjoyed the workshop. So I think it was really interactive, [...] and I think it gave very practical things that lecturers could do to foster critical thinking skills in their students. And everybody who was part of a workshop at the beginning, they are still talking about the things that they learned two and a half years later; and I think that’s a huge achievement in and of itself.”*

(Response from project management about INASP’s contributions)

In terms of teaching and learning approaches, the CT snippets and technology-enhanced learning with MoodleBoxes<sup>1</sup> were mentioned. There was the opinion that lecturers were excited about this exposure to technology; receiving equipment such as MoodleBoxes, modems or even USB sticks was seen as adding value and helping motivate people to contribute to the project.

The workshop participants described the CT trainings as “timely”, “great”, “exceptional”, “most interesting” and “eye openers”. They talked about the following learning areas: lesson planning based on learning objectives; teaching methods to enhance students’ learning and learning assessment; and the underlying pedagogical theories. They said they applied their learning by improving their teaching techniques, lecture planning and learning assessment. They had observed that their students were more actively engaged in discussions, came up with arguments in response to questions, and were overall grateful and motivated to attend class. One respondent mentioned that the CT workshop helped him when writing a book on teaching. Beyond their individual learning and learning application, the participants mentioned that the training was cascaded to colleagues and helped with revising the curriculum.

Some respondents reported contributions by INASP that went beyond the workplan description. This included helping with the inclusion of CT into the curriculum development or contributing to broader pedagogy, and gender, equity and inclusion aspects in collaboration with Illinois and 50/50. It was

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<sup>1</sup> For more on how technology such as MoodleBoxes is used in AQHEd-SL see Schaeffler, V. (2021) Adapting online approaches to context: an example from Sierra Leone’s higher education, INASP paper. <https://www.inasp.info/publications/adapting-online-approaches-sierra-leone>



particularly highlighted that INASP brought in concrete helpful examples around gender aspects such as case scenarios.

## How have INASP and the critical thinking taskforce collaborated to embed teaching and learning of CT skills?

Having discussed the project needs in the initial CT workshop session in 2018, the idea of driving the CT aspects of the project by local champions was shaped to embed teaching and learning of CT skills in the institutions. With the support of some project leads, interested people in all anchor institutions as well as the waterfall institution EBKUST were found. In July 2019, this group of people met for a workshop facilitated by INASP for training and team building activities. Some of these champions volunteered to prepare and co-facilitate a three-day CT workshop for lecturers later that year.

However, it was only in April 2020 that a more formalised critical thinking taskforce (CTTF) was installed, by putting together Terms of References and electing a local chair. Project management supported the taskforce by giving some project budget for the CTTF officers' communication requirements (modems and internet bundles) as well as for their release times so that the officers had some dedicated time for the taskforce work.

COVID-19 accelerated this development because the CTTF's work and communication between INASP and the officers would have been completely disrupted without providing modems. During university lockdown, internet access through the universities was no longer possible and the officers needed to have modems at home. In addition, travels from the UK weren't possible and INASP could not facilitate face-to-face trainings anymore.

The CTTF experienced this formalisation of their team as a boost for their motivation to champion the CT aspects in their institutions and across the project partners. They became more visible and were included in pedagogy trainings that Illinois was leading on. In 2021, project management decided to provide some budget for institutional trainings so that the CTTF officers could embed teaching and learning for CT skills even further.

*"[...] these CTTF officers, let them have clear terms of reference, because that was a problem initially, when INASP finally added this critical thinking officers. Initially, they did not make provision for them in the INASP projects. And so that was not encouraging to the officers. And it actually led to some lack of attitude or some kind of demotivation for the taskforce officers. And so that was really seen only after one year or so, when us, the initial taskforce officers, spoke with Veronika. And then some negotiation started on having a budget exclusively for the CTTF officers. And from that point on, we started seeing the enthusiasm and the support, the collaboration, and institutions start to get the awareness"*

(CTTF chair)

It is worth noting that we observed some confusion about who was responsible for providing funds for the CTTF officers. As the establishment of the taskforce had not been foreseen in the initial project workplan and budget, INASP initially reimbursed the CTTF expenses such as travel and accommodation costs, modem purchases and internet fees through its budget. Therefore, INASP was perceived as being responsible for providing CTTF funds but obviously could not pay for salaries or give release times. As the need for a dedicated CTTF budget became clear, project management arranged that release times and the officers' expenses were included in the budgets of the officers' institutions.

INASP's role evolved to being a mentor, providing material, guidance and assistance with coordinating the taskforce's work, for example the preparation of trainings and monitoring and evaluating the results.

*"Working with INASP has actually helped me [...] to learn a lot about critical thinking, about soft skills, and being exposed to materials, I was exposed to new knowledge. And it was really giving me [...] exposure in so many aspects in the area of critical thinking. INASP has been great in that, and also working with INASP has actually pushed me to the point of believing that's a lot to read on critical thinking."*

(CTTF chair)

The CTTF officers had, of course, much more insight into the institutional needs than INASP, which is important for embedding teaching and learning of CT skills in the institutions. When the 2019 workshop participants were asked about what they had observed from the CTTF's role, they mentioned the following elements: facilitating CT sessions in the project's pedagogy training; cascading of the CT training in the institutions; fostering shared understanding of how to develop CT skills in higher education; ensuring that learned skills are implemented; contributing to the inclusion of CT skills during the curriculum revision; assisting with the development of a special foundation module.

The installation of the CTF was perceived as very useful and successful by project management and partners although the response by project management suggests that some earlier coordination within the project could have helped the CTF to fulfil their role even better and to avoid the duplication of some project work. In particular, the training of quite a high number of lecturers on CT was seen as a big success.

*“... despite the fact that at times, they [the CTF] were kind of pushed to one side and not included centrally, the further along the project we've got, even when Veronika was just working with those critical thinking guys, and we had sort of forgotten them a little bit in the central part of the project, they were still operating and still having an impact in their institutions.*

*And I think that was even more important than having specific AQHEd activities relating to them. Because what you had was people [...] taking up the skills they had learned and passing them on to other lecturers ... So people were actually implementing what they had learned directly in their institutions, rather than it having to be kind of driven, essentially, by the project management here. And so by the time we figured out that all of this was going on, we started trying to include them more in the project.*

*And they already had a really good sense of what their role was, and how things will move. ... when we started including them more in things like pedagogy training, we then gave budget to allow people to cascade that training in their own institutions. I've actually been really impressed by the capacity of some of those people, considering they haven't had that training from INASP for a long time ... all of the interactions since then [since COVID-19] have been online; they still managed to that point where they can pass it on to other people. And I think that's again, another success.”*

(Project management response)

However, the future of the CTF after the end of the project is seen less clear. Some respondents mentioned that they are concerned the CTF won't be able to work beyond the project end despite seeing the need for further invention in the institutions to reach sustainability, due to a lack of funds.

Some ideas to increase the sustainability came up. There was the idea to connect quality assurance officers and CTF officers to sustain the implemented teaching and learning approaches. As the CTF chair has both roles this could be a feasible option. And INASP will assist the CTF in the remaining project time to upload training material and teaching & learning resources to a project repository so that lecturers can access them more easily.



Former INASP Programme Specialist Anne Powell speaking at an AQHEd-SL gender workshop in 2019

## How was the training and support delivered and what can INASP learn for future projects?

Project management observed that participants really enjoyed the CT workshops and their interactive style. Nevertheless, it was pointed out that training material was sometimes not appropriate for the pre-knowledge level of participants. For INASP, it was particularly difficult to assess the appropriateness of training material and review approaches when working fully remotely since the pandemic prevented international travel. It was difficult or not possible to receive information about participants in advance due to very late or no communication of participant lists. It was also challenging to use the participants' feedback for future improvements. One respondent pointed out that academics may not want to admit that they haven't understood some training contents. We may conclude that we need to think through even better how to assess the existing knowledge levels and training needs better.

Although collaborative work between the pedagogy, CT and gender and diversity strands were perceived positively, some respondents felt the collaboration could have been better coordinated. This was not necessarily seen as shortcoming of INASP's work or behaviour; it could be argued that such coordination should have been set up more explicitly in the workplan and supported by the leading partner. However, some learning may be that INASP as a non-leading partner could have pointed out the opportunities for intensified collaboration with other partners such as Illinois and 50/50 better and could have been more persistent in asking for support to establish the collaboration more formally. There was also the observation that one barrier of a closer collaboration around the pedagogy trainings were the differences in the training approaches and interaction styles of INASP and Illinois.

There was the suggestion of considering whether international partners could mainly contribute in the first year(s) of a project to build training capacity with the intention that local facilitators can take over in the final years. To ensure sustainability, all international partners should have the objective of building capacity so that local partners can take over work as the project progresses.

This opinion mirrors INASP's approach in the AQHed-SL project in the area of the critical thinking work. INASP supported the building of a critical thinking taskforce (CTTF) whose members were trained in a workshop in 2019, later co-facilitated a CT lecturers' training in the same year and took over the CT training sessions from 2020.

However, this approach hadn't been shaped and budgeted for in the workplan. This resulted in a lack of budget for this approach and, consequently, in very limited possibilities of delivering facilitation training to the local CTTF officers. The CTTF's prime responsibility for delivering training was accelerated by the pandemic as INASP could not travel to Sierra Leone anymore. INASP took over a kind of mentoring role for the CTTF officers, helping them with preparing the CT sessions and the training material. However, there was feedback, in particular from new CTTF members who had not attended the initial training in 2019, that they would have appreciated a sound training to improve their facilitation skills.

Illinois went a different way of delivering its pedagogy trainings, as explained by one facilitator:

*"We had designed our workshops to stand on their own, including the original onsite workshops and the videos that were developed later in the project."*

These videos were developed during the pandemic since the Illinois facilitators couldn't travel to Sierra Leone.

There were pros and cons of the pandemic impact seen:

*"Of course, Covid changed that dynamic. However, we were able to come up with the video series as a replacement for on-site visits. The disadvantage was that we missed the personal interaction with the respective audiences. The advantage was that the videos are a record of our content that will be of greater long-term value to Sierra Leone and the perpetuation of the AQHed-SL program goals than just a series of one-time, on-site workshops."*

Both training approaches were seen as valuable as expressed by one respondent:

*"INASP and Illinois both delivered [...] really good training that was really impactful, especially those first steps of training where people started to understand about [...] soft skills and critical thinking and Bloom's taxonomy. [...] there were things, people are still talking about them today."*



### 3.2 Communications

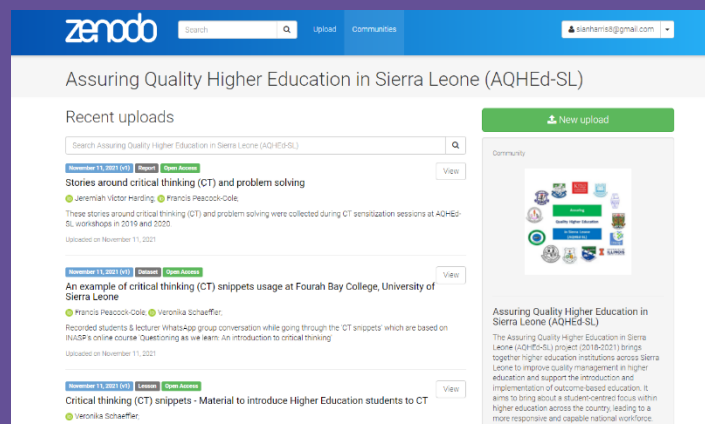
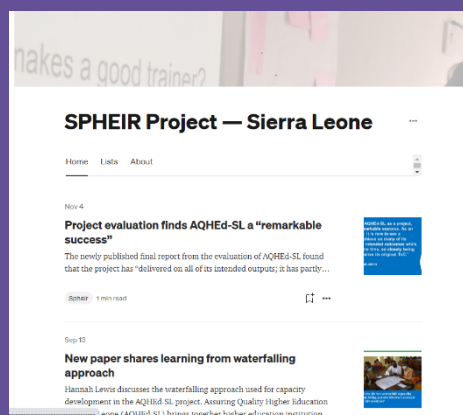
In the area of communications, INASP’s support was appreciated but not widely known about within the project partners. As we took on this role halfway through the project and it was done remotely, this communications work was more like consultancy work than a partnership. However, INASP’s communications did support the project to share its outputs more effectively with the funder and other external stakeholders.

INASP became involved in assisting with communications during the second half of the project. Although not all partners have been aware of INASP’s communications contributions, one member of project management felt that this role may have been even more important than the contributions around CT.

*“... that has been more impactful to the broader project than even I would say, the critical thinking side of your work. You know, the critical thinking side has impacted lectures; the comms has impacted the project, and the project visibility. [...] if we'd have had external sort of comms support from the beginning of this project, we would have been in a very different situation; we wouldn't probably have ended up in a situation where people didn't know our successes [...], and have an external evaluation for the midpoint review [...] because people would have known the great work that we're doing through outcomes.”*

(Response by project management when being asked about INASP’s contribution to the project’s communications work)

The importance of communications - and how international partners can play an important role in capacity building in this function - was a key learning of the project. Local partners may not be used to communicating in a way that reaches or is aligned to the expectation of the Northern fund manager and/or donor. The lack of communication of the project outputs and outcomes to these bodies resulted in poor ratings in interim reviews. The project needed to invest much time and effort to turn this around and present their achievements to the reviewers. This could have likely been prevented by better support in communication and reporting from the beginning.



Aspects of AQHEd-SL communications supported by INASP: media engagement, social media, blog and development of a repository for long-term availability of outputs from the project

### 3.3 Finance and management

**In the area of finance and management, there was positive feedback about INASP's ways of working and how this supported the project. From INASP's perspective, the approaches taken in Sierra Leone by the AQHEd-SL leadership provided valuable insight for INASP to incorporate into projects that we lead.**

Communication between the project's financial management and INASP's finance staff was perceived as working quite well and INASP was able to transfer learning from AQHEd-SL to TESCEA.

INASP finance found it easier and obviously less work to handle the finance in AQHEd-SL as a non-leading partner than in their leading role in TESCEA.

*[...] they're easy to talk to whenever you send emails [...] they get back to you, try to fix things for you. Not necessarily they can fix it at the first time, but they keep trying.*

(INASP finance about the communication with AQHEd-SL finance management)

*"[As a non-leading partner] you just needed to follow. If you have any problem, just go back to them; they were solving it for you. For TESCEA, it is complete different, you have to design and think about what could go wrong, how to solve it. If the partners have problems with the Excel version you have to solve it."*

(INASP finance staff)

Some of INASP's finance staff gave the feedback that they could learn from AQHEd-SL's due diligence and reporting procedure for the TESCEA project. INASP could see what worked well and what was challenging when filling out reporting templates because they were too complicated. INASP used this learning to draft a simplified version of the reporting template for TESCEA to make the process more straightforward for our partners in that project. We suggest documenting such good practice for future projects so that setting up the reporting system becomes easier and quicker.

The COVID-19 pandemic actually had the effect that the communication among project partners was re-defined and further online communication channels, supported by technology such as personal modems and the use of Zoom, were perceived as positive progress.

### 3.4 Consortium building and proposal writing

**At the stage of consortium building and proposal writing, there were some tensions around defining roles and clarity about INASP's part within AQHEd-SL. These tensions were exacerbated by some of the expectations of the fund manager.**

However, there were also more challenging times when communication between Sierra Leone and the UK was seen as a work barrier, in particular in the early stages of the consortium building and project implementation. One staff member described, for example, the proposal writing as "last minute panic", in particular with defining the finance aspects; INASP's expertise in proposal writing was asked for very late in the process.

*"AQHEd suffered in the same way that other SPHEIR projects, including TESCEA, did at the outset in that; once selected, the further requirements to secure funding were substantial, especially for dispersed teams, and difficult to achieve well in the time available given the time that partners could devote, the level of documents required, and the funding to convene the partnership."*

*"A specific challenge in AQHEd was that it was firstly a partnership of SL institutions, and each wanted to bring their respective and pre-existing international partners into the arrangement. To a certain extent the national partners were still building their own country-level partnership (trust, ways of working, shared goals), and there was no process to identify what needs they had, and which international partners could serve [those needs]."*

(INASP staff member)

The limited capacity in consortium building and proposal writing in-country makes it challenging to write a proposal for a one-country project with multiple national partners. International partners cannot fully cover these missing local skills since they miss the insight and reputation with the local partners and there is also the risk that they drive their own agenda. It was difficult for the local partners to identify the right way in such a proposal and consortium building process, since the international agencies' advice differed, and these agencies could obviously not be seen as impartial when having or aiming for own responsibility and roles within SPHEIR and AQHEd-SL.



For INASP, a further challenge was that while Sierra Leone colleagues valued our expertise and had valued our previous work, it was harder for those who had not worked with us to understand our capacity development approaches. INASP staff observed that it was easier for the international university partners to make their potential contributions understood; this may also be that they already had staff in Sierra Leone and the work of international university partners was more relatable to the experience of the local university partners.

### 3.5 Partners' role specification and work coordination

INASP staff felt that the support partners' (50/50, Illinois, INASP) roles was not specified clearly from the beginning. The challenging remote communication added to some misperception of INASP and its role. Our research shows that not all respondents were clear about INASP's role. INASP was not visible for all partners; some respondents just were aware of changes triggered by the SPHEIR project in general but not of INASP's role in the project. Some partners in Sierra Leone found it confusing to distinguish between INASP, University of Illinois and even the SPHEIR fund manager.

INASP staff felt sometimes that some better coordination of their work with other partners such as Illinois and 50/50 could have been helpful and added to achievements. This research confirms that other partners' staff have perceived it similarly. When asking for support in installing better coordination from project management, some space for communication between Illinois, 50/50 and INASP was created, but the collaboration continued to be challenging. One respondent expressed the problem in this way:

*"It can be difficult to bring together (international) partners with very different working styles and interaction with partners."*

Some learning can come out from having observed 50/50's role. INASP staff felt their role had not been specified very well; it felt more like "ticking the box" of gender and diversity than a thoughtful consideration what needs to be done. It was initially difficult for 50/50 to figure out what the project wanted them to do and how to do it. Learning for future projects could be that gender and diversity aspects need to be woven in through all project strands. One should have a partnership agreement that outlines gender and other equity aspects as integral part of the project so that everybody gives space for these aspects.

Similarly, the recognition of the need for communications support came towards the end of the project. While relationships began to be built and stories from the project told, it felt like a missed opportunity to embed communications processes into the project from the start to enable capacity development and sustainability. In particular, there was insufficient time for the INASP communications specialist and the publicity officer at University of Sierra Leone to develop as effective a working relationship as we would have liked. This is in contrast to the relationships developed in the CTTF, which started much earlier in the project and involved working together in face-to-face activities.

Some staff found the lack of clarity on INASP's role had a surprisingly positive side. INASP did not have to deliver any milestones and that gave space for co-designing the critical thinking strand with local partners by trying out approaches and re-adjusting them when COVID-19 kicked in. Our capacity building role was not outlined in much detail in the workplan. That enabled us to build local capacity with CT champions in a more explorative way, adjusting it to the changing local context and making decisions with a smaller group of people without always checking with or reporting to project management.

In addition, having only a small team from INASP involved helped us to be more agile and responsive. On the other hand, having two different and largely not overlapping roles meant a lack of internal communication within INASP until the last year of the project.

### 3.6 What can INASP learn for future projects?

The internal communication could be an area to be looked at better from the beginning. This could have improved the collaboration between the partners, for example around pedagogy training including gender and diversity aspects, as mentioned above. In a country like Sierra Leone with a lack of access to digital information, the distribution of information and material needs to be thought through diligently.

It was also mentioned that the communication between local and international partners may have needed more attention due to the different communication styles. International partners that weren't based in Sierra Leone were often excluded from discussions that happened mainly face-to-face in Sierra Leone. The dynamics changed slightly during the COVID lockdowns when meetings had to happen online.

However, the exclusion of international partners from some project discussions could also have had some advantages by preventing international partners take too much over the project agenda – a risk uttered by a local respondent. For example, the CT strand was represented from 2020 mainly through the CTF; while contributions to project partner meetings were prepared by INASP and the local CTF chair together, the chair or another CTF officer represented the CT strand at most project meetings.

In terms of communication styles, international and local partners may need to learn from each other from the beginning. One respondent brought the example that people in Sierra Leone may often not be open to talk with new contacts before having met them face-to-face. But again, COVID may have helped to change the dynamics here slightly; INASP staff were able to communicate and collaborate with some new CTF officers very well through Zoom and WhatsApp without having met them before. The strong CTF team building efforts from the beginning could possibly have helped with that. For example, the CTF chair visited the new CTF officers and included INASP staff through Zoom in the site visits.

### 3.7 General reflections on projects in the Global South with international partners

#### *What did our partners say about integrating international partners in a Southern-led project?*

Please note that the responses are highlighting general benefits and risks without judging whether that was applicable to any specific international partner in AQHEd-SL. However, it gives a good insight in pros and cons that need to be considered in any future projects.

The following benefits of integrating international partners were reported by our Sierra Leonean partners:

- The expansion of thought patterns; getting insight in a variety of points of view and perspectives; an outsider perspective can be in particular valuable
- Exchange of ideas; sharing of experience of working with consortia and individual institutions in other parts of the world
- Supporting the development of new skills and new knowledge gain through knowledge transfer
- Sharing best practices and expertise
- Raising the visibility of local partners
- Access to resources – human resources as well as material

One respondent also mentioned the benefits that international partners have when joining a project like AQHEd-SL:

- Exposure to other countries
- Accessing insight to the country context
- Higher visibility and usage of international organisation's material as partners in the country refer to it

In Sierra Leone, assistance with grant management through King's was seen as essential. Further input that the international partners brought to the project was described by some respondents:

- Modelling a new style of teaching and learning through interactive workshops. Sierra Leonean academics tend to have a more lecture style because they are trained in lecturing and storytelling. That's partially also because of a lack of resources that can help make workshops more interactive such as flipcharts, marker pens or post-it notes.
- Expertise from working in other countries
- Introduction of technology such as MoodleBoxes

However, there were also some risks when integrating international partners in a project like AQHEd-SL. International partners may misunderstand the country context or even have a 'know-it-all' attitude despite a lack of contextual insight. This could lead, for example, to implementation difficulties due to the unfamiliarity with socio-cultural-religious dynamics. The example of dealing with seniority and hierarchical structures was mentioned; for example, contributions from youthful partners are not always respected in the same way in different countries.

International partners sometimes fail to recognise the value of local partners' contributions and do not handle a project as a true collaboration among equal partners. They may misinterpret local partners' input or even disrespect it. Diverse communication styles may add to collaboration difficulties.

International partners' integration obviously draws funds from the total project budget and therefore deducts resources for local partners. It was pointed out that the project leadership needs to make sure from the start that normal staff fees do not get inflated to consultancy costs. Furthermore, the difficulty to

come to fair salary payments for local and international staff was discussed. It can cause some tension that local staff members perceive the higher international staff payments as unfair but obviously international staff would not accept the lower in-country standard because of very different operating and living costs between countries.

### **3.8 What feedback was given by the SPHEIR fund manager?**

The fund manager's view is interesting because it not only reflects their view on the AQHEd-SL partnership dynamics but also compares the project to other SPHEIR projects, one of these being the INASP-led TESCEA project.

In terms of INASP's own role in AQHEd-SL, we were almost invisible to the fund manager. The respondent knew about the role that INASP had around critical thinking and that INASP helped with communications but had not been in direct contact with INASP staff. In the six-monthly review meetings, AQHEd-SL leadership had not included INASP or other international partners with the exception of King's due to their financial management role. In the interview with the fund manager, it was mentioned that they would have preferred greater inclusion of all partners. Ensuring visibility and inclusion of all partners when leading projects could be some learning for the future.

At the beginning, the fund manager felt the project ownership by the Southern partners was diluted due to King's financial and project management role. The fund manager acknowledges that this leadership support through King's was brought in externally by the funder and made leadership dynamics initially challenging. However, after some time, they felt the appointed local director brought back the perception of ownership that was crucial for the credibility of the project while King's support with financial management gave them the space for effective and efficient project implementation. All in all, the fund manager has perceived AQHEd-SL as a Sierra Leone-driven project with much less visibility of international partners than in other SPHEIR projects. A result of this Southern ownership is that SPHEIR saw less disruption in AQHEd-SL due to COVID-19 than in other projects.

The project outline gave the partners the chance of connecting the key sectors in the country and bringing together the higher education institutions whereas, before the project, there was competition and lack of communication between them. It was very important that key authorities like former vice chancellors or Deputy vice chancellors were among the key leaders in the project to give the project credibility and bring the right stakeholders together. King's support was helpful in assisting with "smooth logistics of meetings and discussions and planning". Here, they felt it was important that relevant King's staff members were based in the country.

Some learning for future projects could come out of that, in terms of supporting Southern leadership, it is important to specify clearly the support by international organisations that is needed. It also indicated the advantages of having more presence in a country when helping with the convening of stakeholders.

The fund manager pointed out that it would be too simplistic to conclude that, for single-country projects, Southern leadership is always preferable. They mentioned an example of a UK-led project in Somaliland that they believe works very effectively.

## 4 Learning question 2: How do INASP values and approaches fit within overall AQHed-SL project aims and approaches?

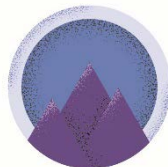
Responses suggested that INASP’s values (In it together, Making change last, Every voice counts, Doing things right) were reflected and appreciated in our approaches to AQHed-SL. However, there were some tensions. These included some tensions at the proposal writing stage around roles for international partners and in facilitating workshops with partners that took different approaches. There was a need to do work well within the roles defined by the project. There was also a recognition that face-to-face meetings are important for relationship building in a partnership but are in tension with INASP’s desire to reduce climate impact and the realities of a pandemic.

INASP’s work and approaches are underpinned by four core values:



*In it together*

We collaborate with our partners and those we serve to understand where we are needed, and the expertise that each party brings to the table. We co-design and co-develop solutions as teams. We speak up when needed and are equally open to being challenged by others. Together, we learn and evolve.



*Making change last*

Lasting change is our goal. We aim for a destination where we are no longer needed, and work hand in hand with our partners to get there. We are bold and try new ideas as an integral part of learning what works.



*Every voice counts*

Everyone has a contribution to make, and is listened to with deepest attention. We embrace differences and believe that diversity makes our understanding of the world more robust. We recognise the innate worth of all people and actively seek to address issues of power and equity within our work.



*Doing things right*

We are proud of what we do and uphold the highest standards of personal and professional honesty and behaviour. We are fair, and open in our decision making and hold ourselves accountable to delivering the best work.

Some responses indicate that INASP staff members were able to translate INASP’s values and approaches into valuable and well-perceived project achievements.

### 4.1 In it together

INASP’s approach of collaboration, co-design, and learning and evolving together was realised through the collaboration with the CTF such as the co-facilitation of trainings and the co-design of learning methods. This became even clearer when we could not travel to Sierra Leone anymore and had to find online learning methods that work in a country that still has very weak internet access.

*“[...] if an international organization just come into the country without kind of creating that foundation or relationship with the local people, then it will be difficult. But INASP, I think, has gone past that point, because there are local people now that you can collaborate with, that you can work with. And so that’s what kind of ease the stress in terms of operating in Sierra Leone, the benefits are so so much.”*

(Sierra Leone partner voice)

## 4.2 Making change last

The results of this research highlight the importance of understanding the context and culture of the country you work in. Many of the risks in working with international partners mentioned by AQHEd-partners were relating to international partners misunderstanding or ignoring these aspects (as discussed in the previous section). One of INASP's approaches to understand context and culture better was using the results of a desk-research context analysis that was conducted during the SERKS project in 2018. Another, even more important, way was the initial workshop session with AQHEd-SL partners as well as meetings with leading project partners including 50/50 that we utilised to listen and get more insight into the project and country context.

One of the most crucial decisions was to build a critical thinking taskforce (CTTF) with local lecturers and quality assurance staff that helped us to transfer our expertise around CT to the local context and culture. Our research shows that this approach was perceived positively by local and international partners.

*"[...] the approach used in terms of adding critical thinking taskforce officers in various institution is and has been the most crucial aspect in terms of them achieving their goals. So going forward, when once INASP is contacted, or contracted for such a responsibility, [...] try to have people to work with on the ground. Because these people can relate to their colleagues or their own continent. And they know probably the approach to use in terms of getting people to believe in whatsoever INASP is pushing."*

(Sierra Leone partner voice)

The experience supporting communications in the last 18 months of the project also revealed the potential to demonstrate this value if communications is embedded earlier in a project. In the final months of the project, we have begun to see the relationships building and a shared vision of communications that could have been more sustainable and enabled more capacity development if started earlier in the project.

## 4.3 Every voice counts

We received the feedback that INASP is good in listening and thoughtful. A CTTF officer mentioned that INASP was able to amplify their voice when the CTTF officers highlighted the problem that there was no budget in the project for their work. This helped to solve the problem and make the CTTF work more successfully:

*"And then some negotiation started on having a budget exclusively for the CTTF officers. And from that point on, we started seeing the enthusiasm and the support, the collaboration [...] and institutions start to get the awareness".*

## 4.4 Doing things right

INASP staff was perceived as "professional", "gracious and accepting", and bringing in the right technical expertise. Project and financial management observed and were grateful for INASP responding quickly to requests, being open to discussions and acquiescent to decisions made by project leadership.

*"In the area of financial reporting, INASP has been great. We received reports on time and with fewer or no queries compared to other partners involved in the project. INASP has been one of our best partners in the areas of responding to emails that concerned project activities."*

(Response from finance staff based in Sierra Leone)

## 4.5 Tensions when living our values

Some INASP staff felt that not all project leads were supportive of INASP being included in the project bid. The feeling was that some individuals in Sierra Leone pushed INASP's involvement and it was not made clear enough what expertise INASP would bring in and what role we would play. Obviously, that raises the question whether we were indeed "In it together".

One (international) respondent pointed out that more reflection may be needed at the start of projects about which expertise and skills the individual international partners can bring to the project. There was the feeling that existing relationships between local and international partners can be overemphasised when putting together a consortium. Furthermore, there can be a concern that international partners may tend to take over project roles without enough reflection because of conflicting interests such as the



urgency of fundraising for the own organisations. The point was made that project leads need to examine the partner landscape diligently when setting up a project to ensure there are no local partners who could provide the same or even more insightful input in the required areas of support.

Sometimes it was also challenging to follow our “Every voice counts” value. For example, when co-facilitating workshops with another partner, INASP staff realised that their way of facilitation differed from INASP’s and did not give much space for lecturers to bring in their own knowledge and expertise. We wanted to give a different example of workshop engagement by giving space for discussions and sharing of knowledge and expertise among the participants. However, when doing that, some people were eager to discuss more general issues relating to the project management and workshop organisation, not related to the contents of our CT session. We had a sense that participants saw international partners as one party dealing with the management of the project and the workshop organisation, which was not our role. It was difficult to contain this discussion, making clear that we can only pass their concerns to project management while nevertheless giving the feeling that their “voice counts”. This situation was challenging to handle since the learning objectives of our session were defined differently and we did not want to spend too much time with discussions that were not directly related to the topic.

*“I think it’s a balancing act [...] as an organisation that values adult learning principles, active learning, critical thinking and facilitation when you’re participating in a workshop which someone else is running and it’s not being run in that way.”*

(INASP staff while relating AQHed-SL experience with a similar experience in TESCEA)

In the communications team, INASP staff found it difficult just having been given a small non-leading role at the start of the project when little or no communications outreach was happening. Experience from another SPHEIR partnership, TESCEA, revealed that communications, especially with SPHEIR, as well as within the partnership, is very important and ideally should be embedded from the start of a project. There is this tension of trying to “do things right” while acknowledging the role that you have given.

A comment from the management team, which some INASP staff agreed with, was that it may be helpful having staff living in the project country for increased insight and credibility. INASP staff who have not been to the country at all felt it was particularly challenging to build strong connections with local people when the connection is only remote.

However, INASP wants to reduce our travelling, even once COVID-19 allows, in order to lower costs and carbon footprint. The right balance therefore needs to be found unless we have associates in the project country. INASP staff felt that this is particularly challenging in a country like Sierra Leone where the internet connection is still quite poor, calls are frequently disrupted, and partners often cannot understand each other well in online meetings.

*“I don’t feel like I’ve really had a connection [...] I know a lot about what goes on in the project, but I don’t feel the people in the project have felt any connection with me. And a large part of that I think is because I’ve not been to Sierra Leone.”*

(INASP staff member)

INASP staff mentioned that it is very valuable to have conversations with local partners, for example workshop participants, during tea and lunch breaks. However, it can be very challenging.

*“... when you’re at a workshop in a hotel in wherever, Sierra Leone, Uganda, are you just a facilitator? And you’re just there between nine and five, [...] you go sit with only your UK colleagues at breakfast, at lunch and dinner, [...] if you separate yourself from your partners, they will feel separated from you. Whereas if you integrate yourself with them in a social aspect, in a workshop, and I will admit it’s sometimes hard. I find it hard because sometimes it’s so intense [...] but you have to sort of break through because, in fact, that helps build the partnership in a way that’s really intangible. And I think, especially if white colleagues going and [...] if you separate yourself like that, it makes it feel very Northern versus Southern and in a very uncomfortable way.”*

(INASP staff during focus group discussion when talking about international project partners)

It is also important to recognise that partners from the project country may want ‘down time’ in breaks where they can catch up with friends and colleagues and may not always want to make small talk with international partners. We observed that, after a full workshop day in Sierra Leone, the local partners wanted to have time for other duties or just relax, instead of having dinner together.

Some learning could also come out of the relation between USL as project lead and King’s having some control over the funds. INASP staff felt that caused some friction in the beginning of the project, which

the SPHEIR fund manager also observed. Project management reported that the key for making the collaboration successful was a close relationship between the project director from USL and the project manager from King's; they kept each other informed and attended meetings, for example with the fund manager, together. A clear message needed to be sent to the funder / fund manager that both need always to be copied in when sending messages. The value of being 'In it together' needs to be formalised where there is shared leadership.

Some tensions were also reported from an international partner in terms of how much salary was paid to staff. Sierra Leoneans in the finance team could see that international staff members were paid much higher rates than local staff. In the INASP focus group discussion, staff also working in TESCEA reported similar tensions, in particular as INASP as leading partner would have such a high percentage of the budget to be able to accomplish its management tasks. It was pointed out that SPHEIR rules said that the normal staff salary day rates in the country would need to be taken; that obviously does not give any leeway to counteract any inequality. In other projects with consultation fees, that may be easier. However, it was also raised that the living costs in a country would need to be taken into account to make it fair. And projects should try to cover as much work as possible with local staff but there are limits when certain expertise in a country does not exist. For AQHED-SL, for example, project management mentioned that certain technical communications expertise that the British funder would expect is not currently available in Sierra Leone.



*Role playing during a critical thinking workshop co-facilitated by INASP and the Critical Thinking Taskforce in 2019*

## 5 Learning question 3: What does INASP's experience about being a non-leading partner tell us about how our partners might feel and act in INASP-led projects?

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This research has revealed some important themes for INASP and others to bear in mind in forming good partnerships, especially where partners are dispersed across several countries:

- **Understand context and recognise who has particular skills in this area**  
To ensure the partnership – and the partnership's work – are as effective as possible, it is important to understand the context in which the project is operating and to understand which partners within the project have the most knowledge and experience of the various aspect of the project's context.
- **Recognise skills and gaps**  
Key to ensuring appropriate roles for international partners is to recognise the needs of the project and the gaps in technical expertise that can be drawn on externally.
- **Define roles clearly**  
Ensuring everyone understands the various roles of each partner helps to prevent duplication but also helps ensure people have a clear idea how they should work with each other.
- **Establish good communications from the start**  
This means internal communication among the project partners as well as external communication with the funder/fund manager and local stakeholders. The more partners and stakeholders are involved, the more important an explicit communication strategy becomes. The right style and channels for the communication need to be identified and supported.
- **Ensure financial decisions are clear and transparent**  
This includes being clear and fair in situations where variations in cost of living mean that day rates vary between partners.
- **Ensure reporting processes are not too complex**  
Ensure that expectations around financial and other reporting are clear and are not more complicated than they need to be.
- **Work on building relationships**  
Ideally, this involves building face-to-face relationships, which can become stronger if there are staff in country. This may be an area that INASP can build on through its shift to a dispersed associate model. It is also important to build in time for relationship building even where partnership interactions are predominantly virtual.
- **Build in capacity development and local handover**  
Where particular partners from outside the project country provide specific technical expertise, build in capacity development, for example through training of multipliers, and handover so that, over the course of a project, this technical expertise can shift to the project country.
- **Encourage local teams and connections**  
In a project with many partners, team members, especially those with fewer hours devoted to the project, can become siloed in their activities. It is important to ensure that within each partner organisation there are connections made and information shared.
- **Make all partners visible**  
Ensure that the roles and contributions of all partners are recognised internally but are also visible to relevant external stakeholders such as the funders. The communications team will play a supportive role to make this happen.

## 6 Final reflections

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AQHEd-SL has been an interesting project to be part of. The complex nature of the partnership, alongside other challenges including internet problems and the COVID-19 pandemic, meant that the process was rarely simple. However, current indications are that it should have a lasting transformative impact on Sierra Leone's higher education. In addition, as this mini research project demonstrated, it provided a valuable opportunity to be part of and learn from being part of a Sierra Leone-led project.

We are grateful to everyone who shared their thoughts for this research and hope that this report can provide insight for building successful future partnerships.

We would welcome feedback on this report from partners within AQHEd-SL and on other projects. In INASP we will also be using these findings to reflect on other own experiences in other projects to better understand how to form and be part of effective partnerships for lasting impact in the future.

## **Annex 1: Author perspective: Dr Veronika Schaeffler, Programme Specialist (critical thinking), INASP**

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When comparing AQHEd-SL with other projects that I was involved in – within and outside SPHEIR, there are some unique experiences that made this project quite special to me. I hope sharing my experience could not only help INASP learn within its journey to more Southern-led projects and intensified work in coalition with our partners but also be useful for future projects in Sierra Leone.

- 1) INASP has not been in a leadership role. We were able to support the project's critical thinking (CT) strand that we were involved in, by listening to our partners in Sierra Leone and just supporting their decision-making processes by sharing our expertise and ideas, rather than feeling the responsibility to shape the outcomes.
- 2) The CT strand has been one of the smaller project elements without any milestones defined in the project workplan. This led to the freedom of trying out things, learning from the experience what works and what does not, without the pressure that something had to be delivered by a certain deadline. The downside was that it took time to find a way to work with the project and finance management to provide more resources for this strand in the country so that the critical thinking taskforce (CTTF) whose establishment hadn't been considered in the project workplan and budget was empowered to do substantial work.
- 3) I travelled on my own to the first CTTF workshop, which was used for learning exchange, team building and shaping the CT work. I feel that made it easier for me to bond with the CTTF team although it was only a one-day workshop since there wasn't any separation between a UK team and the locals for the whole day.
- 4) Our involvement in this project was not a main focus of INASP's programme work. After the initial project manager left INASP, I took over the full responsibility for INASP's involvement in the critical thinking strand, without having a team within INASP that I really could share my experiences with. That was challenging but on the other side led to an even closer connection to the CTTF and constant learning exchange, in particular with the CTTF chair.
- 5) It was very interesting to observe the evolution of leadership within this project. There appeared to be shifting power dynamics as it unsurprisingly took time to grow the local leadership in an environment with little experience with UK-funded project requirements, while King's role moved from overall project co-leadership to a supportive role for the financial and logistical management side. My perception was that the challenging mid-term review helped to strengthen the local leadership and participation; the presentation of the increased local ownership was very positively received by the fund manager and led to a motivation boost among the project partners.
- 6) The COVID-19 pandemic with all its challenges had also some positive impact on the CTTF's work. Our team recognised quickly how important it will be to keep up communication channels among the CTTF officers and to INASP in the UK, when lockdowns would result in disconnection from the university networks, travel bans wouldn't allow face-to-face meetings and border closing wouldn't allow INASP staff to travel to Sierra Leone. The CTTF chair and INASP worked very closely together to get funding for and purchase modems and internet bundles to allow continuous communication. This situation triggered also some rethinking and innovative ideas such as the CT snippets and Zoom classes. The CTTF officers learned very quickly to work in an online environment. Local ownership of the CT strand was accelerated with INASP's role becoming limited to supporting training and material preparation and MEL without participating in the delivery of the CT work. All this led to a higher visibility of the CTTF among the project partners and more support from project management. To a certain extent, the CT work appeared to be even more effective despite the challenging environment.



## Annex 2: Author perspective: Dr Siân Harris, Communications Specialist, INASP

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AQHEd-SL was an exciting project to be involved in that achieved a lot, on a large scale, in a relatively short space of time, even with the additional challenges of internet issues and the pandemic. Being a part of this project has been a highlight of my role at INASP over the past two years.

However, I have some reflections about challenges, what worked and ways this might have been improved:

### **Involvement from the start**

I regret not having been involved more fully from the start, as I was with the TESCEA project, which is INASP-led. Having communications embedded from the start of a project enables closer relationships to be built with partners across the project. That would have enabled me to provide communications support and capacity development across the project where required. It would also have meant a more strategic approach to communications as part of project sustainability so that there was not such a rush at the end of the project to try to tell stories and gather materials required for ongoing work and partners' future plans.

In TESCEA we developed a communications strategy at the start of the project, with all the partners involved, and each partner nominated people to be part of a communications working group. This seemed to create a shared ownership and opportunity for communications contacts to provide capacity development and feedback to each other. It also helped to build relationships. However, it should be acknowledged that, as all the partners became busier on project work, the communications working group stopped being well attended and, in practice, the vast majority of communications in TESCEA has also been led by INASP.

### **Face-to-face meetings**

Particularly in the case of AQHEd-SL, relationship building would also have been helped if I had been able to travel to Sierra Leone and meet some of the project team face-to-face. This was a challenge with AQHEd-SL due to the poor internet connections, INASP being a minor partner and me only really being involved in the project from half-way through. (To some extent, this was also a challenge for me with TESCEA as I did not participate in any activities face-to-face in that project either, although the context and dynamics of that project's partnership were different).

### **Cross-project connections**

The short timescale for my involvement with AQHEd-SL communications, combined with restructuring with INASP, also means that it will not be possible to produce communications reflecting on common themes across the TESCEA and AQHEd-SL project, although I recognise that this is something that the fund manager has been doing.

### **Nature of the role**

This study confirms that few people within AQHEd-SL are aware of INASP's involvement with communications within this project. In a way, my role felt more like a consultant than a partner; this contrasts with INASP's experiences with the critical thinking work on the project. However, from a project management perspective, this may have been a simpler and more efficient approach for communications in the latter half of the project. Much time and energy had already been invested in building a large and complicated partnership and sustaining and strengthening the relationships within Sierra Leone was a more important priority for AQHEd-SL.

### **Opportunities to contribute to sustainability**

Despite not personally being well known within the project, I believe I have been able to help with communication with the funder and broader sector and put in place some systems that will support sustainable access to AQHEd-SL's output beyond the lifetime of the project. The use of openly available, free tools (Zenodo, Medium, Twitter, flickr) was an efficient way to build quite a significant body of output from the project with fairly low resources in terms of both time and budget.