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Complexities and Opportunities of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships: A Case Study of Water Resource Management in Afghanistan

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Abstract: Water governance is a sensitive and contentious issue that requires multi-stakeholder participation and judicious use of technology. The new water law in Afghanistan focuses on the participation of stakeholders in water management, equitable water allocation, task division, and decision-making at the sub-basin, basin, and national levels. This paper looks at a multi-stakeholder partnership approach aligned with technological solutions designed by ICIMOD to facilitate collaboration for the purpose of addressing the key challenges and exploring opportunities for river basin management in Afghanistan. ICIMOD helped to broker a context-specific partnering approach to strengthen collaboration for water resource management by embedding the principles and frameworks of collaborating in cooperation and strategic partnership with the Partnership Brokers Association, which entails a shift from commitments to engage with stakeholders to codesigning and implementing activities based on partnering principles to achieve the goal of water resource management in Afghanistan. The paper highlights and discusses the various cases of the project that offer reflections on the participatory approach adopted and the value addition that each partner, on the basis of their strengths, brings to the partnership. The paper highlights the positive impacts that multi-stakeholder partnerships can have on overcoming the complex challenges faced in strengthening water resource management in Afghanistan.

Keywords: co-creation of knowledge; multi-stakeholder; partnership cycles; collaboration; remote partnerships; water resource management

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1. Introduction

Afghanistan is a mountainous country with over three-quarters of the land comprising mountains, and natural resources provide the livelihood basis for up to 80% of the Afghan population. Water is one of the major natural resources in Afghanistan, and its management is considered essential for the future development of the country. The country is affected by natural hazards such as floods, droughts, epidemics, earthquakes, landslides, avalanches, extreme temperatures, and drought on a regular basis. Recurrent floods affect thousands of people in several provinces of Afghanistan every year. Afghanistan is a high-risk profile country mainly due to a combination of climatic and natural circumstances. In addition, Afghanistan has been a country grown in the hotbed of socio-political conflict and economic vulnerability. Afghanistan also witnessed climate impacts such as periodic floods due to untimely and heavy rainfall, melting of snow and ice, a rise in temperature, etc. Based on the Global Climate Risk Index (CRI) developed by GermanWatch (Berlin, Germany, 2016), Afghanistan is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world regarding impacts of climate change, ranking second in 2014 in terms of

climate change impacts, having risen from the rank of 15th in 2013. It continues to remain at risk of extreme weather events, considering the number of fatalities as well as economic losses suffered.

Adding to the climatic, biophysical, and socio-economic drivers of water management is a decade-long war [1], which has caused disruptions to the governance structure in Afghanistan. A centralized structure for water management, coupled with overlapping mandates between various institutions, has resulted in unsatisfactory coordination within the water sector. Compounding the problems of water management and use is the general lack of information and data for planning, especially considering that an expansion of arid land-cover is expected in both regions of the Hindu Kush, leading to shifts in ecosystems [2], efficient institutions, organizational and individual capabilities, and effective rules and regulations. Although the Afghan government has prioritized the development of the water sector, the country needs adequate human capacity, an effective institutional setup, and managerial capacities to attain this objective [3].

In 2017, the government of Australia committed to supporting Afghanistan's water resource management in a project titled Strengthening Water Resources Management in Afghanistan (SWaRMA). Implemented by ICIMOD, it aims to co-create learning opportunities [4] by focusing on assessing water resources at various levels, monitoring the cryosphere and monitoring floods at the community level, developing and using water information systems, fostering integrated river basin management, and supporting Afghanistan's regional engagement. Designed as multidisciplinary project, SWaRMA was uniquely placed to bring together experts from different government line agencies, academic institutions, and national partners around the same table to discuss the issues of common concern. The multi-stakeholder partnership approach for the implementation of SWaRMA was vital to reflect on the complexity of the challenges, create a platform for dialogue, and enhance confidence-building among the stakeholders [5]. This paper analyses the functioning of multiple stakeholders' partnerships aimed at co-creating and co-learning opportunities. It highlights the successes and challenges in adopting a multi-stakeholder approach and the strategic shift from commitments to implementation that it enabled leading to ownership of the project grounded strongly in the principles and framework of partnerships to strengthen water resource management in Afghanistan.

2. Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Approach

The importance of partnerships has been recognized and accepted by governments, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, private sector entities, and all other major stakeholders globally [6]. Agenda 21, the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio + 20), titled "The Future We Want", the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, the Millennium Declaration, and the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States, are some examples of the global commitments to partnerships [7]. Multi-stakeholder partnership (MSP) was recognized as a vital approach for the implementation of sustainable development during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002 [8]. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 recognizes multi-stakeholder partnerships as an important mechanism for sharing and mobilizing knowledge, expertise, technologies, and economic resources to achieve the goal, particularly for the developing countries. It further seeks to inspire and promote effective partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships among public, public-private, and civil societies [9].

MSP is seen as a key approach for meaningful impact [10]. MSPs, public-private partnerships for development [11], cross-sector collaboration [12], and collective action [13] are means through which interested partners can collaborate on specific challenges and opportunities that achieve greater impacts collectively [14]. It also enables sharing of risks and benefits [15], often through additional focus on innovative, sustainable, efficient, and systemic approaches [8,13,16]. In remote partnering, people working in different

institutions share a common social or environmental purpose and are responsible to each other although they work mainly through long-distance—across different geographical locations and time zones, and diverse cultures—rather than face-to-face [17]. MSP is useful for strengthening engagement by institutions, as it offers a better approach and space for innovation and integration from different sectors which would lead to structured governance and sustainable solutions [15]

2.1. Why Partnership?

Partnership is a framework within which effective and efficient programs and projects can be delivered through the process of co-creating and co-implementing [18]. It requires different actors to contribute diverse resources, such as finances, knowledge, expertise, and networks to co-create and resolve challenges collaboratively and achieve the goals of the partnership. Projects fail in the long run because normally they cannot cope with the bottlenecks arising from various factors such as financial, geographical, socio-economic, political, and governance, which constitute barriers to partnerships [19]. Another reason is the lack of attention paid to these important factors during the initial phase of project planning or conception [15,18]. SWaRMA, from its conceptualization phase, focused on rigorous planning to bring the partners together, build capacities to enable partners to voice their concerns and expectations from the project, and identify the core strengths of the partners for strategic engagement and partnership. Partnership sessions and workshops were designed with a specific focus on partners and the partnerships approach based on the understanding that, if partnerships are to be successful, they must be grounded in the key principles of synergy, equity, openness, mutual benefit, and courage [18,20].

2.2. Partnership Principles

The Bali Principles for partnership serve as the guidelines for working together, which take into consideration aspects such as voluntary, self-organizing, multi-stakeholder approach, with shared responsibility, communication, and mutual respect, to mention a few. [21]. Proper understanding of, and attention to, the ‘nine building blocks’ introduced by The Partnering Initiative (TPI) are critical to the overall design, management, and implementation of a multi-stakeholder partnership [15]. TPI and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs model of the partnering process is divided into four main stages and twelve phases, and it is a shorthand method to identify the main stages in general collaboration and the different aspects that can be considered when working on such collaboration [22].

In the Partnership Brokering Association (PBA) approach, partnership principles are the moral rule or agreed upon beliefs that actions and shared principles are an effective way to bring all the stakeholders to a common understanding and agreed-upon framework of operation. PBA has proposed partnership principles (Figure 1), which are developed based on practice-based learnings from partnership practitioners from various sectors around the world [18]. PBA argues for giving equal, if not more, attention and care to the partnership process just as in the project cycle. PBA further emphasizes the need to have a framework that lays down a systematic approach and framework to manage the partnership process, so that it can deliver the envisioned project in the best possible manner [18]. ICIMOD has adopted PBA’s partnership cycle (Figure 2) [18], which offers a step-by-step process for developing and managing partnerships and is based on practice-based learning.

Why do partnerships need these CORE PRINCIPLES?



Figure 1. Core principles for partnerships and their impact. Source: The Partnership Brokers Association [18].

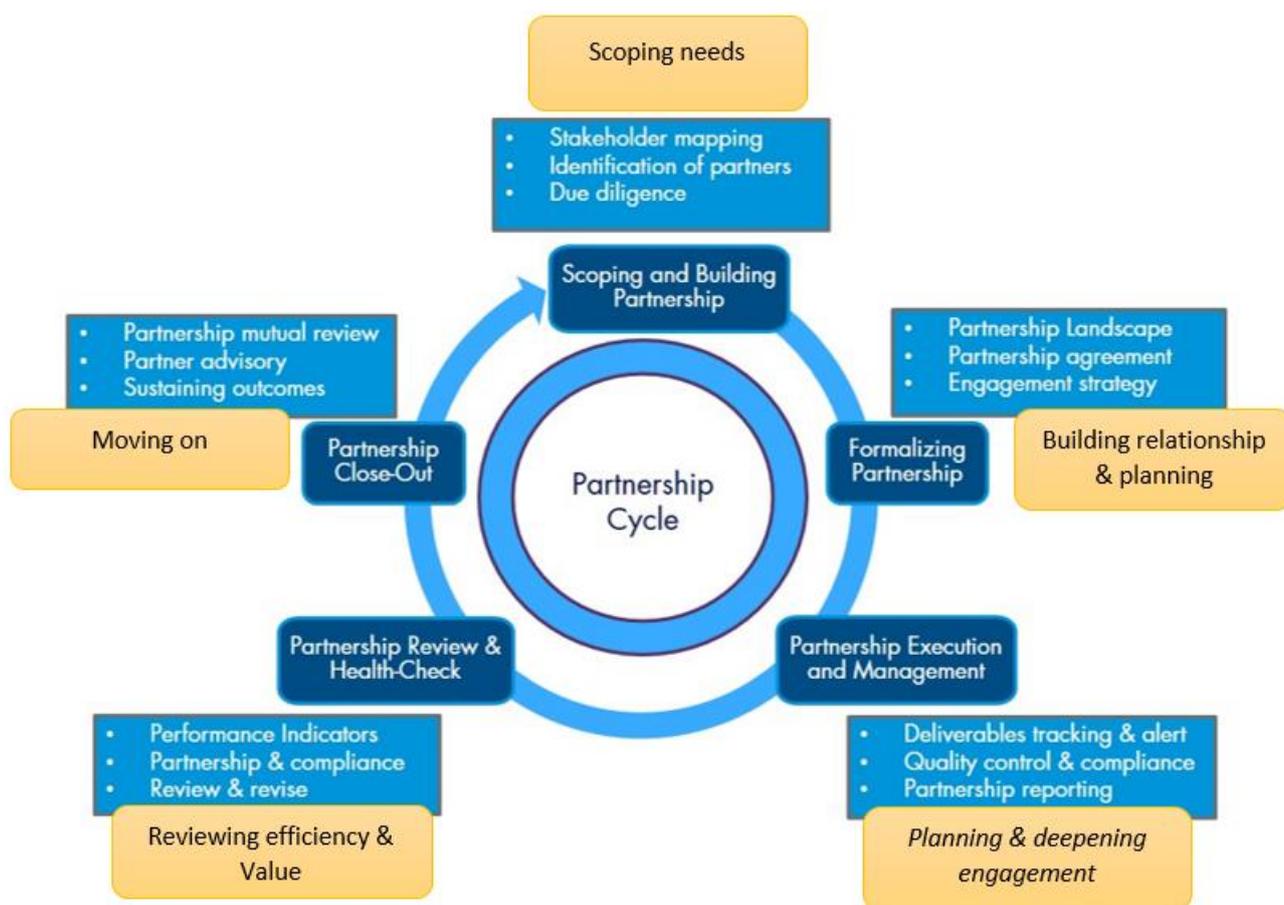


Figure 2. ICIMOD’s partnership cycle framework (ICIMOD partnership manual).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Conceptual Framework

SWaRMA partners jointly conceptualized the seven partnership principles with the objective of capturing the discussions, developing contextual partnership principles, ensuring mutual accountabilities, and building a common partnership approach as follows:

1. Support, share knowledge and information, and conduct activities jointly.

2. Allocate roles and responsibilities considering the mandate of each partner.
3. Be receptive and adaptable to changing circumstances.
4. Discuss the concerns, ideas, and agendas openly.
5. Design a results-oriented clear vision and implementation.
6. Take measures to establish openness and mutual accountability about the progress of the projects and agree on the timeline to share progress reports.
7. Consider gender inclusion and empowerment as important components of the strategy in designing interventions.

SWaRMA adopted and tested ICIMOD's partnership framework, consisting of five key phases of building an effective partnership along with its fifteen sub-phases, while managing the partnership (Figure 3). The framework was customized for the Afghan context to fit in with the implementation modality of SWaRMA by adding value through innovation, quality, and legitimacy. It also considered the buy-in of integrated solutions, attaining sustainability and appropriateness, and increasing the likelihood of implementation, which would ultimately result in the achievement of the project and individual partners' objectives.

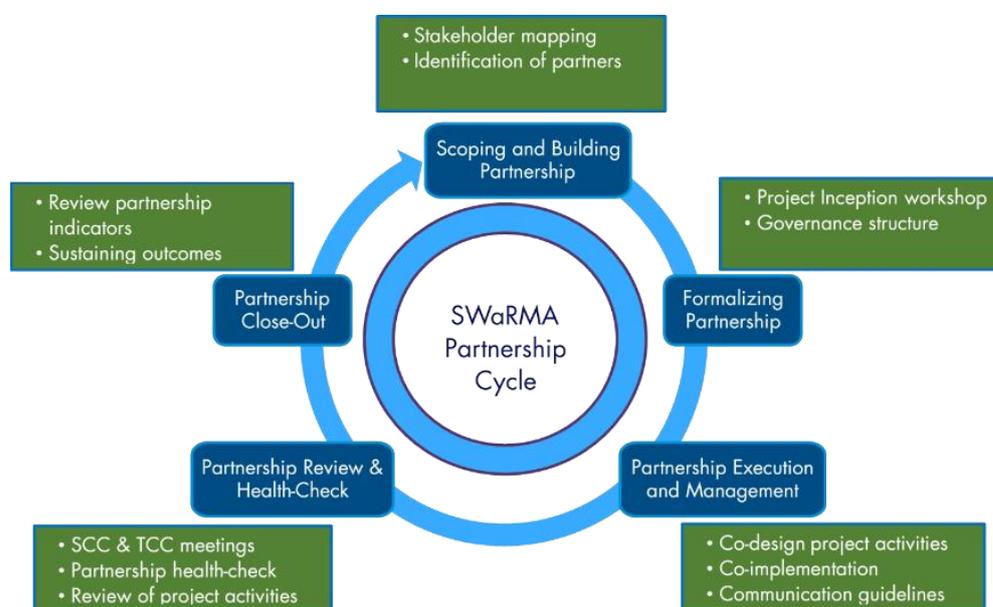


Figure 3. SWaRMA's conceptual framework for partnership cycle.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The research adopted qualitative and quantitative methods to collect information and analysed it to establish a link between different partners and its partnership approach. Both secondary information and literature on partnership principles, frameworks and approaches, and documents and publications related to water resource management in Afghanistan were reviewed to contextualize the partnership landscape and bring clarity to their roles and responsibilities. To understand the partnership cycle, a review of the role and contribution of partners and the partners' commitment to set objectives and different processes of the project cycle were completed. We also undertook the following: a study of the joint inception of the project to strategize activities; partnership meetings to mutually discuss and address the challenges and opportunities in partnership and project implementation; a theory of change to chart the common vision and roles; a project closing meeting to review the project and discuss a sustainable exit strategy; and a self-assessment (baseline, endline, and tracer) of capacity to identify needs and to assess whether the expectations had been met.

The primary survey targeted key informants, which was accompanied by focus group discussions with representatives from partner organizations (government and

academic institutions) and interviews with external experts on partnership management. The questions that guided the discussion by partners to elicit the value added by the multi-stakeholder approach in implementing WRM in Afghanistan included the incentives/benefits of the partnership, possible institutional contributions towards the implementation of SWaRMA, and possible synergies with other programs that have been or are being implemented in Afghanistan. The information collected from various sources were validated and analysed to derive conclusions regarding the multi-stakeholder partnership approach (Figure 4).

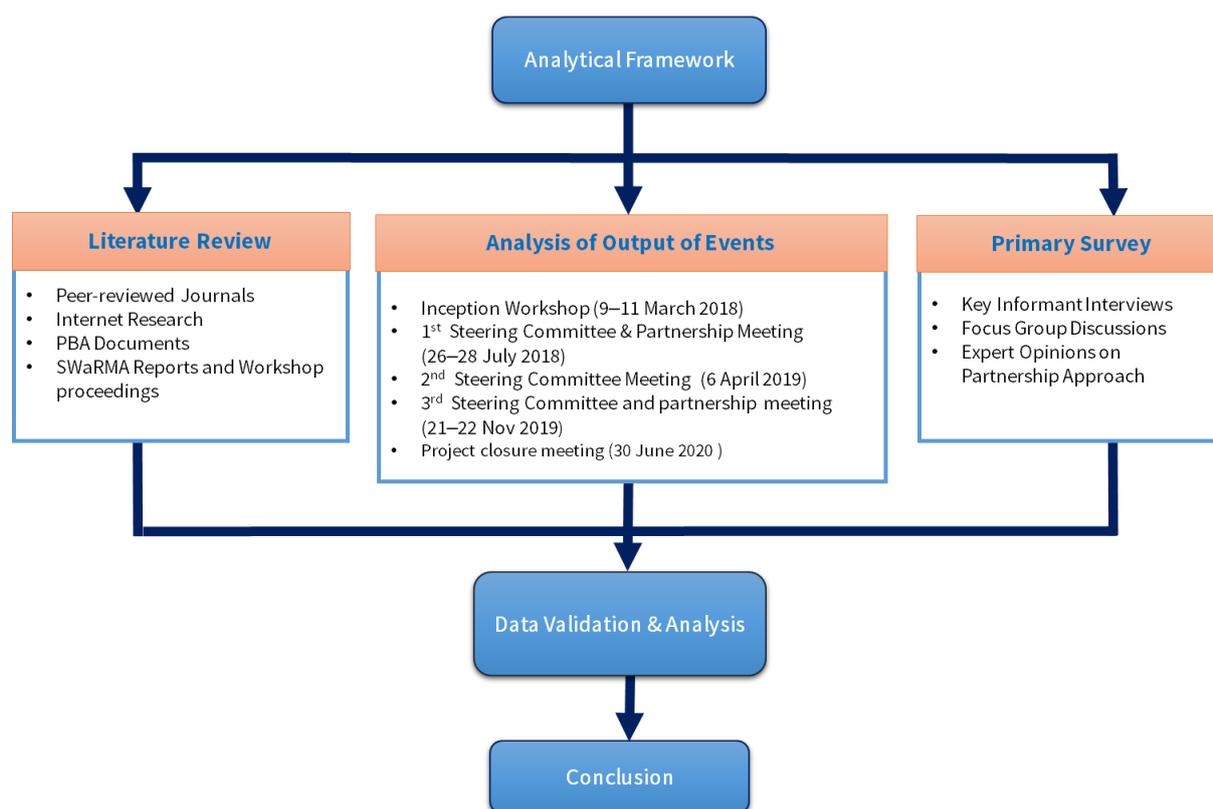


Figure 4. Analytical Framework.

3.3. Partnering Organizations

The key partners in the SWaRMA were the government of Afghanistan, the government of Australia, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO), and ICIMOD. The government of Afghanistan identified several focal ministries and resource agencies to take part in the project to support its diverse dimensions. A distinctive characteristic of the partnership was that a significant proportion of the interactions took place remotely, as there were constraints on traveling to project locations for partners. However, face-to-face activities were conducted for training and Steering and Technical Committee meetings. Therefore, the partnership intentionally planned complementary processes and activities that made the best use of the opportunities to address the challenges caused by the context in which project activities were conducted. Another characteristic that distinguished SWaRMA was its inclusion of several Afghan partners, with individual objectives and interests, in the partnership from the inception workshop itself to co-create and manage the project. A detailed mapping of stakeholders at the inception workshop [5] helped the partners to arrive at a collective agreement on their roles and responsibilities in working on the IRBM approach in Afghanistan through sharing knowledge with each other while maintaining their core competencies (Table 1).

Table 1. Contributions to the SWaRMA Initiative Identified by the Partners.

Categories of Organizations	Name of the Organization	Contributions Identified by the Organizations
Government Organizations	National Water Affairs Regulatory Authority (NWARA)/previously Ministry of Energy and Water (MEW)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate among all partners • Technical lead from Afghan side • Provide physical office space and field facilities • Co-organize workshops, trainings, etc. • Support for regional co-operation
	Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical assistance for water availability, flood monitoring, WRM, and Water Information System • Support for regional co-operation
	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional cooperation • Administrative facilitation.
	Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linkages with communities • Flood resilience and monitoring at community levels • Sharing early warning information with communities
Academic Institutions (Government)	Kabul University (KU) and Kabul Polytechnic University (KPU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize workshops and seminars • Provide research expertise • Become the repository of the technical skills and know-how for sustained technological development in the country
Non-Governmental Organizations	Agha Khan Agency for Habitat (AKAH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical assistance for flood monitoring at the local level • Field activities • Linkage with ANDMA and MEW • Up-scaling and out-scaling of CBFEWS
Australian Partner	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of standards and lessons • Technical inputs • Co-creation of knowledge products • Roadmap for water information system • Basin scale water analysis and link between the scales of assessment
Intergovernmental Organizations	ICIMOD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall coordination • Technical support • Co-generation of knowledge (through various events) • Validation of data quality • Develop remote-sensing-based materials • Preparation of awareness materials for dissemination

Source: SWaRMA Project Inception Workshop, March 2018 [5].

4. Results and Discussions

SWaRMA adopted the institutional partnership cycle as a partnership framework. Since every partnership is unique in terms of its purpose, composition, opportunities, and challenges, every partnership needs to be treated as unique [22]. SWaRMA, thus, customized the partnership interventions based on the needs of the project and collective understanding of the partnership. The unique features of this partnership were the inclusion of mandated government agencies as key stakeholders, limitations on travel, security concerns, number of stakeholders, short project period (2 years), and the significant capacity building components. As all the stakeholders agreed on the need of a well-designed partnership framework to address these unique features, SWaRMA revised the key interventions of the partnership framework. From inception of the implementation of SWaRMA,

there was realization of the need for partnership interventions to fit the purpose. There was recognition that, as it is ultimately people (representing different stakeholders) who co-operate to deliver the project objective, allowing adequate space to discuss and review the partnership is important, especially in a multi-stakeholder partnership like SWaRMA. SWaRMA carried an additional advantage in that it combined the best skills and core competencies of different Afghan organizations, ranging from government and academia to non-government organizations as well as an end-user of the knowledge product. It was based on a defined partnership framework committed to co-creating and co-developing strategies for water resource management in Afghanistan, which was compelling needs and expectations of the stakeholders. The results and discussions were presented among the stakeholders based on the conceptual framework customized for SWaRMA.

4.1. Scoping and Building Partnerships

When developing partnerships to address project goals, it is important to understand the landscapes of stakeholders who either could influence project implementation or be influenced by it. Therefore, a preliminary survey of stakeholders was conducted to take stock of their overall perspectives, particularly, their interests and drivers for wanting to enter the partnership, before inviting them for further discussion.

At the initial discussion with these stakeholders, SWaRMA faced challenges of control and communication among the stakeholders, as multiple government agencies were involved. Stakeholders were communicating without a clear communication channel and plan due to which some of the stakeholders felt left out or not informed. All the stakeholders were not on same page in terms having common understanding of the project. This was mainly due to lack of clarity regarding the roles of the respective agencies, which resulted in confusion about the partnership's purpose, its objectives, and how to measure its success [23]. Among the stakeholders were those who were contributors to the project and those who had little to contribute but stood to benefit. The partnership approach created an enabling environment in which to carry out the stakeholder consultations where the challenges could be elicited and discussed in a transparent and amicable manner. From the inception, SWaRMA focused on these partnership challenges to clarify and understand the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder by identifying the value addition that each stakeholder would bring to the project and the individual interest each stakeholder could reap from being part of the project.

The clarity attained regarding the roles, contributions, and benefits of stakeholders helped to ease the tension caused by ambiguity of stakeholder roles and their individual interests. This approach also facilitated the mutual development of strategies to implement the project for the purpose of improving the status of water resource management in Afghanistan. The clarity on roles and the transparency maintained by the partners also created a strong foundation for SWaRMA to reach a successful conclusion.

“This partnership helped to bring all the partners together but stand out point was that due to this partnership we could have a bigger picture of WRM in Afghanistan together, which really empowered everyone through knowledge sharing and capacity building”, NWARA, KU & NEPA.

4.2. Formalizing Partnership

After the identification of stakeholders and mutual agreement on implementing SWaRMA, the focus of the partnership approach shifted to the formalization of the partnership with the stakeholders to ensure the commitment of all involved. A partnership workshop was conducted to ensure a collective and common understanding of the project and its activities among the partners, to discuss and agree on the implementation modality, and to develop a governance structure for the partnership. Through the facilitated discussion, stakeholders agreed on the common objective, shared and individual interests,

co-creation of the design of solutions, sharing of risks and benefits, mutual accountability, and a principled approach to working together [17,21].

The partners collectively developed a partnership success indicator at the inception to measure the success of the partnership during the closure. They agreed that there should be clarity with regard to future strategies and actions beyond the two-year project period and resolved to achieve at least 80% of the project objectives and outcomes. A well-established and functional partnership engagement mechanism and an appropriate work management model and applications were jointly envisioned.

A governance structure, including a steering committee to oversee the progress of different partners and a technical coordination committee to ensure the technical quality of the partners' work, were drawn up through a consultative approach and through discussions with all key stakeholders. This was accomplished through a facilitated structured discussion that was able to address the expectations of stakeholders and partners.

All the partners agreed on the governance structure of the partnership comprising of the Steering Committee, Technical Coordination Committee, Operational Focal Persons, and Programme Management Unit.

The partners agreed to name MEW (Ministry of Energy and Water), government of Afghanistan, as the institution that best fit the mandate based on suggestions made, and it was chosen as the focal ministry for SWaRMA and, thereby, the Co-chair of the Steering Committee, Technical Coordination Committee, and Co-facilitator of the Operational Focal Persons group.

Due to limited travel possibilities for stakeholders who were based outside Afghanistan, meetings of the Steering Committee were held three times during the programme and the meetings for the Technical Coordination Committee were held quarterly. The stakeholders also agreed that ICIMOD and CSIRO would join the meeting remotely. It was also agreed that the trainings would be organized in Afghanistan as much as possible to incorporate more beneficiaries. However, in instances where the resource persons were not able to travel, the stakeholder agreed to conduct some of the trainings outside Afghanistan or at ICIMOD, depending on the resources needed for the trainings.

Although building a governance structure and decision-making process for a partnership is complex, it is an effective way, nevertheless, to ensure the sustainability of the partnership as it allows stakeholders to collectively decide on the governance structure of their partnership. In the case of SWaRMA, the governance structure was formed through a participatory mechanism during the inception workshop where a steering committee and technical committee were agreed upon to provide strategic and technical direction for the project and for all the partners involved. The partnership was further consolidated by developing an integrated work plan, including the partnership building process, the theory of change and impact pathway, the monitoring and evaluation framework, the communication and outreach activities, and the capacity needs assessment. These mechanisms have enabled developing strategies mutually to implement the project in order to improve the status of water resource management in Afghanistan. A positive outcome of the formalization process was the clarity that the partners achieved on their roles and responsibilities as well as their ability to arrive at a common understanding on expectations from the project. Another benefit of formalizing the process of partnership was that the stakeholders learned to overcome their sense of unease in negotiation and their expectations from each other, which further strengthened relationships among them and supported the planning process by engaging all involved in the project.

“Timely updates, communications, a consultative decision-making approach were some of the key features of this partnership.” —Kabul Polytechnic University.

4.3. Partnership Execution and Management

Sustaining a partnership is a continuous process. In the case of SWaRMA, the partners adopted and implemented a partnership approach that created a conducive environment in which they could share feedback and opinions. It prioritized the capacity enhancement of individuals and institutions in the belief that enhancing the capacities of partners in the project would contribute to organizational development in the longer run. SWaRMA conducted several capacity enhancement events with the aim of making the partners more responsive and competent. While conducting the sessions and workshops, SWaRMA ensured that the programme was focused on enhancing the capacity of each stakeholder. Decisions were made and tasks were developed on specific focus areas to ensure that there was full participation and involvement of the participants.

SWaRMA made a conscious effort to ensure that the project activities were co-designed and co-implemented in close consultation with the partners and stakeholders. To support the process, communication guidelines were developed together with stakeholders to ensure clarity around the lines of communication and to avoid any confusions and misunderstandings.

As agreed upon, the management hierarchy of the governance structure of SWaRMA consisted of the Steering Committee, which was responsible for taking strategic decisions to programme implementation. Likewise, the Technical Coordination Committee was responsible for the decisions to be taken at the programme implementation level, while a focal person was nominated from partner organizations to facilitate day-to-day operational issues and contact on a regular basis. The ICIMOD programme management unit was responsible for the management and coordination of the programme and served as a link between the Steering Committee and Technical Coordination Committee. The operation of the project faced challenges due to remoteness of the project sites, which made reaching them difficult, and the inability to hold face-to-face meetings with the partners.

To ensure effective execution, SWaRMA partners agreed to share the responsibility of results-based monitoring and reporting. They ensured that the implementing institutions regularly monitored and reported on progress for both reflection and shared learning purposes. A bi-annual consolidated report to provide updates on the review mechanism was presented to the President's Office in Afghanistan by NWARA to fulfill its commitment to the Afghan Government.

All the partners in the project recognized the value addition generated by the SWaRMA partnership approach in the context of strengthened strategic and regional cooperation. Not only did the partners come to regard the project as their own, thereby creating greater chances of sustainability, but it created a higher likelihood that better quality development solutions as well as co-development of solutions will be adopted and up-scaled, even after the phase out of the project. Thus, the co-design and co-implementation of solutions through the partnership approach certainly aided in the planning process and in deepening engagement among the stakeholders.

This partnership helped to bring all the partners together, but the stand out point was that due to this partnership we could have a bigger picture of WRM in Afghanistan together with stakeholders in all the areas which really empowered everyone through knowledge sharing and capacity building—MAIL.

4.4. Partnership Review and Health Check

Through the partnership approach, SWaRMA managed to implement a well-structured review of partnerships to assess the partnership health through the examination of some important components (e.g., strategies, governance structure, communications, emerging challenges, and opportunities) and their effectiveness. This was a collective process which helped the partnership to continually evolve and improve for sustainable impact. SWaRMA considered partnerships to operate on an open-ended basis, building monitoring, review, and evaluation into the project cycle to ensure the appropriateness,

effectiveness, and efficiency of the project. The health check of the partnership approach [17,24] focused on the successes as well as areas for improvement, unforeseen benefits (tangible and intangible) from the partnership, and possible partnership modalities for future implementation. The partnership review and health check provided opportunities to discuss and resolve issues and to analyse the benefits and costs of being involved in the partnership. During the implementation process, there were also changes in perception and expectations among stakeholders about each other.

Such outcomes were made possible at a facilitated partnership review, where partners arrived at common understandings on issues through discussion. A facilitator held meetings with each stakeholder separately to understand their concerns, challenges, and achievements. The key concerns and achievements were then discussed together with all the stakeholders at a workshop facilitated by a partnership broker. These workshops, held annually, helped to gauge the health of the partnership and to decide upon remedies, where necessary, to make it healthier.

The partners felt that the partnership approach adopted by the project was of significance in ensuring effective engagement in the implementation and decision-making processes. It created a conducive environment and provided a strong platform for cooperation among the various stakeholders, both within Afghanistan and at the regional level. This not only led to successful implementation of activities during the project period but cultivated interest in the Afghan partners to continue the work beyond the project period. This also helped in the review process of partnership activities. A collective review of project partners highlighted the successful outcomes of the partnership, among them, the establishment of the first benchmark glacier in Afghanistan, wide adoption of the J2000 hydrological modelling in Afghan river basins, establishment of a science-based multi-stakeholder partnership and platform at the national level along with regional linkages, enhanced knowledge on Multi-Scale Integrated River Basin Management, a clear roadmap for water information system, shift to adoption of technology for flood monitoring, and opportunities for gender integration in water resource management in Afghanistan. The tracer survey and capacity self-assessment conducted for evaluating the project's effort on effectiveness in strengthening capacity at individual and institutional levels showed that approximately 80% of the participants were confident and able to use the knowledge gained independently. Similarly, 50% and above thought that their knowledge had significantly increased due to taking part in project activities.

Such reviews helped in understanding what was working well in the partnership and what needed to be done differently. They also ensured better accountability among the stakeholders as everyone had a platform through which to raise questions and to arrive at collective decisions. This also improved the efficiency and value addition due to the SWaRMA initiative.

“It has been a good growing partnership, which has evolved with a lot of positive energy and all the partners in table providing their best of the effort. Timely updates, communications, consultative decision-making approach were some of key features of this partnership” – MEW.

4.5. Partnership Close Out

SWaRMA brought all the stakeholders together for the project closing meeting to reflect upon the successes, areas to improve, and the way forward. A conducive environment was created where partners could give feedback and voice opinions, both in a group setting and in one-on-one sessions. The partners discussed possible options for continuing with the partnership begun under SWaRMA. They emphasized on the importance of the partnership and agreed to continue with the project in some way. Among the options discussed were scaling, innovating, and continuing with some of the key activities. The partners resolved to move ahead with a short-term and long-term strategy for SWaRMA. The short-term (1-year) strategy would focus on high priority areas based on the needs

identified by partners. The long-term (5-year) strategy would focus on developing a joint proposal and reaching out to various agencies for funding opportunities.

Following the discussion on devising a strategy to move on, the partners reviewed the partnership success indicators adopted and promoted for the multi-stakeholder partnership for co-creation of knowledge in SWaRMA. The following success indicators were collectively evaluated by the partners in the partnership session of the closing workshop.

- Clarity on future strategies and actions beyond the 2-year project period: it was found that 12.5% of partners felt that this was not their priority, while another 12.5% felt that they needed to focus on this aspect now. An additional 37.5% of the partners said that while they had some ideas, these needed further discussion within the group. Only 37.5% believed that they were already had a clear idea on future strategies and actions.
- Achievement of 80% of the project objectives/outcomes: According to 31.3% of the partners, the partnership had achieved the success indicator, which means that more than 80% of the project objectives/outcomes have been achieved. Similarly, 68.2% of the partners said that the project had achieved more than 60–70% of the anticipated total project outcome.
- Well-established and functional partnership engagement mechanisms: None of the partners believed that the partnership had failed; nor did they express uncertainty regarding its success, or they were not sure. It was found that 27.78% of the partners believed that the partnership was functional while another 66.67% believed that it was quite functional, as evident from the results. The remainder, at 5.56%, believed that this was an excellent partnership mechanism.
- Availability of an appropriate work management model and applications: While there was no disagreement among the partners regarding this indicator, 5.56% were not sure about the model. However, 44.44% of the partners believed that the model was satisfactory while another 44.44% felt it was good. The remaining 5.56% believed that the model was particularly good.
- National partners explore opportunities to transform the project outcome towards a longer-term engagement with other relevant stakeholders: Only 5.56% of the partners said that they were yet to explore opportunities. Moreover, no one expressed hesitation regarding this question. While 55.56% of the partners said that they had already started to explore opportunities, another 33.33% expressed clarity about it. In addition, 5.56% of the partners said that they were already exploring long-term engagements with other potential stakeholders.

The partnership close-out is an integral part of the partnership approach to facilitate a systematic closure of the partnership. In the final stage of the partnership cycle, partners need to follow the closure procedures and decide on their next steps or discuss issues of concern for the next phase/cycle. In all situations, the partners should consult and discuss the next steps, agree on the way forward, and agree on the message to be communicated outside the group and how the experiences and learning of the projects can be disseminated. If the partnership has been successful and goals have been achieved, at this stage of the partnership cycle, the focus will be on what must be done to sustain the partnership. A well-designed and consultative process towards the end of the project is critical in ensuring that all the partners who were engaged in the partnership get a chance to reflect on their experience.

“Managing a multi-stakeholder project is a tough task, but ICIMOD has fulfilled the project expectations exceedingly well” MRQ. Director General of Natural Resources Management Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) Afghanistan

“Working in seven thematic areas, SWaRMA supported the government of Afghanistan in capacity enhancement in water resources management and in achieving progress under the UN Sustainable Development Goal 6. These efforts

have also been synchronized with the country's national goals related to water resource management." KMT. General Director of National Water Affairs Regulation Authority (NWARA) Afghanistan

5. Conclusions

Afghanistan's water law emphasizes stakeholder participation in the management of water resources, equitable water allocation, stakeholder participation in decision-making, and task division at the sub-basin, basin, and national levels. To support the implementation of the water law, a multi-stakeholder partnership approach was introduced by SWaRMA. It prioritized building an environment of trust, openness, and ownership among the partners working in the field of water resource management in Afghanistan.

A multi-stakeholder partnership approach is an important tool to address complex challenges, which require the coming together of diverse stakeholders with a shared understanding of the situation, problems, and requirements, and who can agree on an approach to address it. Partnership is not just about agreeing to work together but, more importantly, about the willingness to co-design, co-develop, and co-implement solutions that are complementary and are the product of collective action. Partnerships can also lead to emotional bonding between the people and/or institutions that they represent so that each partnership is bound to be different, requiring that they be treated as different on the basis of need, expectations, drivers, and scope. This entails adoption of new approaches and roles that are the most suitable for the context when implementing technology and innovations for water resource management on the basis of mutual agreement between the stakeholders.

SWaRMA's success was evaluated by the stakeholders through mutual agreement because they understood that their perception of its successful implementation was subjective. Hence, it would be useful to measure the impact. One way to do this was to collectively develop indicators of partnership and to review those indicators at the end to see how the partnership evolved and what went well and what could have been done differently. Lessons from the SWaRMA suggest that multi-stakeholder partnerships are a sustainable approach for complex problems, which help to make the implementation process more open, provides room for addressing mutual expectations, and improves accountability and shared ownership for the implementation of water resource management. This becomes more pertinent when there are limitations on travel to project sites for some stakeholders who must, therefore, rely on the other stakeholders for implementation of the project.

For long-term sustainability, the partnership approach for project should be carefully designed to include an exit strategy that is agreed upon by the stakeholders. Equitable engagement of stakeholders based on their areas of interest, expertise, and potential contributions can aid in sustainability. If the partnership can address the needs/expectations of the partners while addressing project needs, it would make the partnership stronger and strengthen mutual accountability. The partnership itself needs to be a process to deliver the outcome of the project. If the partnership process is designed in consultation with all the stakeholders, it can add great value to the project and its sustainability.

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