REGENERATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Context note to explain our approach to partnerships

Clarifying notes

When we speak about regenerative partnerships, we are referring to something more than effective collaboration or transactional cooperation. A regenerative partnership is not simply a relationship formed to deliver a project, exchange resources or achieve a predefined outcome. It is a relationship that seeks to create the conditions in which all those involved can continue to learn, adapt, contribute and flourish over time.

Rather than viewing partners as separate entities pursuing individual interests, a regenerative approach recognises partnerships as part of a larger living system. The health of the whole depends on the health of its relationships and the ability of the different parts to remain viable and contribute to one another. This shifts the question from *"What can we get from this partnership?"* to *"What can we create, strengthen and regenerate together?"*.

Our hypothesis in support of regenerative partnerships

Partnerships are central to how we understand and practise systems change. The complex social, ecological and economic challenges we face cannot be addressed by any one organisation, sector or community alone. They require new forms of cooperation, to work across boundaries, disciplines and perspectives, recognising that the well-being of people, organisations, communities and ecosystems is deeply interconnected.[1]

As an organisation working towards more just and regenerative futures for people and planet, we believe that the way we build relationships must reflect the future we are trying to create. The founding principles of the Sustainability Institute encompass connecting people to knowledge, each other and our natural world. Our organisational values, ways of working, learning pedagogies and relational approaches are rooted in the understanding that meaningful change happens through connection, participation and collective agency. Amongst ourselves and within others, we focus on strengthening the attributes of joy, hope, creativity, ukama and agency.

[1] https://www.gaiaeducation.org/blog/57264-designing-regenerative-cultures-invites

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Our hypothesis is that partnerships designed around reciprocity, trust, shared learning, mutual accountability and long-term value creation are more capable of generating resilient and meaningful change than relationships based primarily on short-term transactions or individual gain.

This is because the challenges we seek to address are systemic, and a system cannot truly thrive if some participants consistently carry the risks while others capture the benefits.

Regenerative partnerships therefore require a shift from seeing collaboration as a means to an end, towards understanding relationships themselves as a source of resilience and regeneration. Cooperation does not emerge automatically; it needs to be intentionally cultivated through the conditions that allow trust, reciprocity and mutual benefit to develop over time.[2, 3]

By approaching partnerships regeneratively, we can move beyond simply coordinating activities towards building relationships and networks that strengthen people's agency, increase collective capacity, support learning and adaptation, and create benefits that extend beyond the immediate goals of any individual organisation or project.

What is our definition of regenerative partnerships?

Regenerative partnerships are values-driven, reciprocal and evolving relationships that bring people, organisations, communities and other stakeholders together to create the conditions for collective and long-term flourishing. They recognise that meaningful change emerges through interdependence, and therefore seek to strengthen not only shared outcomes, but also the relationships, capacities, trust and living systems that make those outcomes possible.

Further explanation:

They move beyond transactional models of collaboration by recognising that value is not simply exchanged between partners, but can be co-created and regenerated over time. This requires partners to consider how benefits, responsibilities, risks, resources and opportunities are shared, while remaining responsive to changing needs and contexts.

Regenerative partnerships are based on the understanding that relationships are living systems. Like living systems, they need care, exchange, diversity, feedback and the capacity to adapt. They cannot be sustained through control alone. They require trust, transparency, communication and a willingness to listen and learn from one another. [4]

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[2] https://museplaces.com/stories/the-power-of-partnership-in-driving-long-term-area-wide-regeneration/
[3] https://www.sustainabilityprofessionals.org/regenerative-partnerships-in-supply-chains-from-good-intentions-to-real-change
[4] https://museplaces.com/stories/the-power-of-partnership-in-driving-long-term-area-wide-regeneration/

Regenerative partnerships also recognise that collaboration must extend beyond human institutions. Human well-being is inseparable from the health of the ecosystems that sustain us. A regenerative approach therefore considers how partnerships can contribute to the flourishing of people and communities while also respecting and regenerating the natural systems within which they operate. [5]

Ultimately, regenerative partnerships are partnerships of stewardship. They recognise that no organisation or individual owns the future, and that our responsibility is to contribute to relationships and systems in ways that increase their capacity to remain healthy, adaptive, resilient and life-supporting.

Regenerative partnership traits

1. Reciprocity and mutual benefit

Regenerative partnerships seek to create value for all those involved rather than allowing benefits to accumulate primarily with one partner while others carry disproportionate risks. They recognise that sustainable cooperation depends on reciprocity, shared interests and a commitment to the long-term health of the system.

2. Trust, transparency and long-term commitment

Trust is built through honesty, consistency, transparency and open communication. Regenerative partners make their expectations, responsibilities and challenges visible, while approaching the relationship with a long-term perspective that allows trust, learning and collective capacity to develop over time.

3. Shared responsibility, accountability and power

Responsibility for the success of a partnership does not rest with one organisation or stakeholder alone. Regenerative partnerships recognise shared accountability for commitments, relationships and outcomes, while actively working to distribute knowledge, influence and decision-making power. They create opportunities for different partners to contribute their strengths, influence decisions and strengthen their own agency.

4. Deep listening and inclusion

Regenerative partnerships make space for different forms of knowledge, experience and expertise. They actively listen to the needs and perspectives of partners, communities and other stakeholders, recognising that meaningful collaboration requires participation rather than assumption. Listening is an ongoing practice that helps partners understand changing realities and respond more wisely.

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[5] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355282292_Regenerative_Collaboration_in_Higher_Education_A_Framework_for_Surpassing_Sustainability_and_Attaining_Regeneration

5. Adaptability, learning and systems awareness
Regenerative partnerships recognise that meaningful change cannot be achieved through rigid plans alone. They create space to experiment, reflect, learn from failure and adapt strategies as circumstances change. They also look beyond immediate project goals to understand relationships, interdependencies and unintended consequences, recognising that resilience depends on the health of the wider system.

6. Care for people and the living world
Regenerative partnerships recognise that human flourishing and ecological flourishing are inseparable. They seek to create conditions that support the well-being of people, communities and ecosystems, moving beyond minimising harm towards actively contributing to renewal, vitality and the capacity of living systems to flourish.

Regenerative partnerships do not only ask: What can this partnership achieve?

But also:

Who benefits and who carries the risks?

Whose knowledge, experience and perspectives are being included?

What capacities are being strengthened through this relationship?

How are we learning and adapting together?

Does this partnership leave people, communities and ecosystems stronger?

What conditions are we creating for continued flourishing after the immediate work is complete?

Practical ways to build regenerative partnerships

1. Start with relationships and a shared purpose

Take time to understand one another before focusing only on deliverables. Learn about each partner's purpose, strengths, needs, constraints and hopes for the future. Create space to develop a shared understanding of why you are working together and what wider change you hope to contribute towards. A strong shared purpose can help partners navigate differences and make decisions that remain connected to the bigger picture, rather than becoming focused only on immediate outputs.

2. Design for mutual benefit, shared responsibility and agency

Be explicit about how value, resources, opportunities, risks and responsibilities are distributed. Ask whether all partners have the ability to remain viable and grow through the relationship. Involve partners in decisions that affect them and avoid concentrating knowledge and influence unnecessarily. Recognise and build on the strengths that already exist within communities and organisations. A regenerative partnership should not create dependency; it should strengthen the capacity, confidence and agency of everyone involved.

3. Build for learning, adaptation and long-term impact

Create space to reflect together on what is working, what is not and what needs to change. Be willing to experiment, learn from failure and adapt plans as circumstances evolve. At the same time, look beyond the immediate project to consider what relationships, knowledge, capacities and systems need to remain in place after a specific intervention or funding cycle ends. Consider how the partnership affects people, communities and the ecosystems in which it operates, asking not only "Will this achieve our objectives?" but also "What relationships are we strengthening, what unintended consequences might emerge, and are we contributing to the long-term capacity of this system to flourish?".

4. Practise patience, care and commitment

Regenerative partnerships take time. Trust cannot be rushed, and meaningful collaboration often requires partners to work through differences, uncertainty and complexity together. Patience, consistency and care are therefore not peripheral to the work; they are central to what makes long-term cooperation possible.

At its core, building regenerative partnerships means choosing to see one another not simply as separate organisations with intersecting interests, but as participants in a shared and interconnected system. It means working together in ways that leave relationships stronger, knowledge richer, capacity greater and the conditions for life more able to flourish.

(Sources pertaining to traits and practical ways:
https://www.gaiaeducation.org/blog/57264-designing-regenerative-cultures-invites
https://www.sustainabilityprofessionals.org/regenerative-partnerships-in-supply-chains-from-good-intentions-to-real-change
https://www.fundsforngos.org/all-questions-answered/how-can-social-enterprises-incorporate-regenerative-business-practices/
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355282292_Regenerative_Collaboration_in_Higher_Education_A_Framework_for_Surpassing_Sustainability_and_Attaining_Regeneration)

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