

## Terms of Reference and Ground Rules for Partnerships

Consensus decision-making is a group decision making process that seeks solutions that are broadly acceptable, and that ideally can be supported and defended by each individual in the group, even if the solution is not the “favorite” alternative of a particular individual. Consensus does not require unanimity and no participant can expect to have a veto. No participant is obligated to support, including in connection with any other organization with which the participant may be associated, any particular position taken by membership of Partnership.

Consensus is defined by Merriam-Webster as, first, general agreement, and second, group solidarity of belief or sentiment. It has its origin in the Latin word *cōnsēnsus* (agreement), which is from *cōnsentiō* meaning, literally, to feel together. It is used to describe both the decision and the process of reaching a decision. Consensus decision-making is thus concerned with the process of deliberating and finalizing a decision, and the social and political effects of using this process.

Below are key Terms of Reference and Ground Rules to consider for an effective, consensus-based Partnership.

### I. TERMS OF REFERENCE

#### A. Roles & Responsibilities

##### 1. Mission

The mission of a consensus-based partnership is typically to establish a collegial forum for discussion, information sharing, problem-solving and decision-making, in order to accomplish actions such as follows:

- increase the exchange of ideas and collaboration through cooperative and consensus-building dialogue aimed at meeting (and modifying, as necessary) project goals and supporting the implementation of projects
- review and evaluate the implementation of policies
- improve transparency, and shared analysis of data
- improve the interactions and develop a cooperative and beneficial dialogue and shared analysis between coalition partners and stakeholders on issues related to the projects
- provide recommendations that improve relationships regarding specific areas and topics of focus, such as equity.
- To complement but not substitute established engagement mechanisms.

##### 2. Structure & Composition

A Partnership is usually comprised of a Steering Committee, with Co-Chairs and members, and a Working Group, with Co-Chairs and members.

## I. Steering Committee

- Specify that members must agree in good faith to the Terms of Reference and Ground Rules of the Partnership. Note if membership can be terminated for not adhering to the Partnership's Terms of Reference and Ground Rules.
- Partnership co-chairs and members should actively engage with their respective constituents and/or stakeholder groups to hear concerns and ideas that should be addressed by the Partnership.
- Commitment: Because some Steering Committee's actionable items may be complex, ask members to serve for at least one year (with the exception of those whose organizational positions change yearly) and do the preparation necessary to participate actively in all meetings.
- Specify the term of service on the Partnership Steering Committee (e.g., twelve months), the time of year covered by this term (e.g., January through December), and whether or not it may be renewed.
- Confidentiality: Members are expected to keep proprietary information confidential, as necessary.
- Outside Communication: As a general rule, members are expected to refrain from quoting, characterizing, or judging the statements/views of their fellow members or appearing to speak for the entire Partnership when discussing the Partnership's activities outside of Partnership meetings. Members are free to discuss what they personally have said in Partnership meetings with the exception of information deemed confidential by the Partnership.
- Decisions by Consensus: To the maximum extent possible, the Partnership will be expected to reach conclusions through consensus as defined by the Partnership's Ground Rules. The Partnership will be facilitated in order to promote discussion and decision-making. Gathering input should be done with intentionality and focus to ensure aspects are considered on a recommendation without unduly delaying the discussions of the Partnership. Identify which entities should have representatives on the Steering Committee.
- Specify if Co-Chairs and members of the Steering Committee will be appointed by consensus.
- Specify the number of seats on the Steering Committee (e.g., 15-20).
- Name the specific representatives (e.g., names of organizations, community groups, anchor institutions) that serve on the Steering Committee. You may also wish to name the type and number of seats (in the Committee) for each representative (e.g., 2 seats for Community-Based Organizations, 2 seats for Employers, etc.).
- State whether or not members of Working Groups (e.g., chairs or co-chairs) have a seat on the Steering Committee and if members of the Steering Committee can participate in Working Groups.

- Specify how often (e.g., annually) the Partnership will consider extending membership to newly constituted or identified groups, and the criteria for including these groups.
- Identify if Steering Committee Co-Chairs represent a specific stakeholder group.
- Specify how often the Steering Committee will convene and if it may convene unscheduled Partnership Steering Committee meetings.
- Specify whether or not membership on the Steering Committee is by position and by the named member without substitutions.
- Specify how often membership will be re-evaluated (e.g., annually) and if it may be modified.
- Specify if additional representatives from stakeholder groups may be invited to present or attend the Partnership Steering Committee meetings from time to time.
- Specify if, when and how Working Groups will be created (e.g., as needed, at the direction of the Partnership Steering Committee).
- Specify if and how the Partnership will share updates on the Partnership's work with other organizations, and name these organizations or types of organizations.
- Specify how often the Partnership will review its purpose and charge (e.g., every three to five years), and if it will modify both accordingly.

## II. Working Groups

- Specify that the Working Group quantity and thematic focus will be determined by the Partnership Steering Committee and will be subject to change.
- Name and describe each Working Group and its purpose and core task(s), with one paragraph for each Working Group. Specify how often each Working Group will convene (e.g., six times a year) and who will decide the frequency of convenings (e.g., "as deemed appropriate by each Working Group's Co-Chairs").
- Specify if the Partnership Steering Committee may add or retire Working Groups from time to time, modify the missions of Working Groups and create informal arrangements across Working Groups to work on particular issues.
- Specify when Working Group Co-Chairs will report on their progress (e.g., at the Partnership Steering Committee meetings).
- Specify that each Working Group will be led by two Co-Chairs, and which entity will select the initial Co-Chairs (e.g., community members on the Steering Committee). Specify that subsequent community Co-Chairs will be

selected by the community Working Group members with consultation as appropriate by the Steering Committee community members.

- Working Group Co-Chairs and members should actively connect with their constituents to hear their concerns and ideas on topics to be addressed by the Working Group. In cases where a topic is complex and spans the realm of several Working Groups, the appropriate Working Group Co-Chairs should confer on best fit for discussions including as needed, convening joint-meetings.
- Membership: Specify the composition of Working Groups, and note that all members of the Working Groups, regardless of origin or affiliation, agree to be bound by the Partnership Terms of Reference and Ground Rules. Note that the Steering Committee may review Working Group membership and terminate it if a member does not adhere to the Partnership Terms of Reference and Ground Rules.
- Specify how individuals from stakeholder communities may bring their concerns to the Partnership (e.g., by contacting the Co-Chair of the relevant Working Group). After reaching consensus with their Co-Chair counterpart, the Co-Chair of the relevant Working Group may want to invite the individual to attend a particular Working Group session to present his/her concerns.
- Specify the term of service on each Working Group and what months this term will run.
- Specify if the term of service on the Partnership Working Group may be renewed.
- Group Size: The group size for the Working Groups should be kept small enough to allow for effective discussion but large enough for diverse perspectives and expertise. Specify if representatives from the Steering Committee (e.g., from community organizations) may select someone annually to serve on each Working Group. Specifics on final size should be determined by each Working Groups' Co-Chairs.
- Commitment: Because some issues may be complex, members of the Working Groups are asked to agree to serve on the Working Groups for at least a year and do the preparation necessary to participate actively in all meetings.
- Confidentiality: Members are expected to keep proprietary information confidential, if the group has been asked to do so or if there is a consensus among Working Group members to do so.
- Outside Communications: As a general rule, members are expected to refrain from quoting, characterizing, or judging the statements/views of their fellow Working Group members or appearing to speak for the Working Group when discussing the Working Group's activities outside of the

Working Group. Working Group members are free to discuss what they personally have said in the Working Group with the exception of all information that is deemed confidential.

- Decisions by Consensus: To the maximum extent possible, Working Groups will be expected to reach conclusions through consensus as defined by the Partnership Ground rules. Specify if Working Groups will be facilitated in order to promote discussion and decision-making. Members of the Working Group may from time-to-time wish to reach out to their constituents/stakeholders to garner reactions and understandings of impact prior to weighing in on final recommendations. Members are encouraged to share options, respecting any proprietary information that is confidential. Gathering input should be done with intentionality and focus to ensure aspects are considered on a recommendation without unduly delaying the discussions of the Working Group.

### **3. Meetings**

- Specify when the Partnership will convene and how often it will convene (e.g., month or quarterly). Partnership co-chairs should determine when meetings will occur and if additional meetings are necessary.
- Specify whether or not meetings will be professionally designed and facilitated in order to promote discussion and reach decisions by consensus-building.
- Meeting agendas and supporting documents should be prepared and distributed before meetings.
- Meetings should be documented, and meeting notes distributed to Steering Committee members following the meeting.
- Specify whether or not meetings will be open to the public.
- Specify any COVID-19 rules related to in-person meetings.

## **II. GROUND RULES**

1. Partnership members (defined as Steering Committee members and Working Group members) will engage in facilitated discussion, which allows for the voicing of different opinions and holds everyone in the room responsible for a successful collaborative process to the maximum extent possible.
2. The Partnership members participate as representatives of their organization or geographic area. Members will take care to delineate their personal views from organizational interests in The Partnership deliberations.
3. When speaking with others outside the Partnership (such as the media), Partnership members should indicate that they are not speaking on behalf of the Partnership and present only the views of their organizations or their personal views, as the case may be.

Members will conscientiously refrain from expressing, characterizing, quoting or judging the views of others. The Partnership Steering Committee Co-Chairs may speak from time to time on behalf of the Partnership.

4. Each member of the Partnership takes responsibility for attending regularly-scheduled meetings, reading distributed materials, honoring confidentiality of sensitive materials and promoting the overall success of the Partnership.
5. Each member of the Partnership agrees to reach decisions by consensus to the maximum extent possible with the guidance of the Co-Chairs and impartial facilitation.
6. The Partnership members will be aware of the limited time in the meetings and will therefore express themselves succinctly to allow time for others to share their thoughts and opinions.
7. The Partnership members agree to accept impartial facilitation and to accept staff support from a lead partner.
8. The Partnership members will attend an orientation organized by the Partnership Steering Committee with support by facilitators.