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Building Partnerships When the Funding Is Gone

A field guide for the post-foreign-assistance era

A Links Global thought leadership article by M. Sanchez, founder of Links Global, a communications firm working at the intersection of trust science, narrative design, and civic engagement. Part of the Links Global article series: Contemporary Challenges. Drawn from 25 years of field practice and evidence-based research in strategic communication, public engagement, and institutional trust.

In Brief

Foreign-assistance agencies and similar funders did more than pay for programs. They organized partnerships: convening, vetting, de-risking, and connecting organizations that would otherwise never have met. This article explains what that infrastructure actually did, why the sector's reflex responses will not replace it, and what partnerships organized around shared value rather than shared funding require.

For decades, the architecture of international development, global public health, and social sector collaboration was built on a specific funding model. The United States government, through its foreign-assistance agency and a network of related agencies and mechanisms, provided a significant portion of the financial infrastructure that made partnerships between governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and private sector actors possible. This funding did not just pay for programs. It paid for the relationships, the coordination mechanisms, the technical assistance, and the institutional capacity that allowed organizations in different sectors and different countries to work together toward shared goals.

That infrastructure is now substantially disrupted. The withdrawal of US government funding from large portions of the international development and global health landscape (through a combination of policy decisions, budget reductions, and the dismantling of funding mechanisms that took decades to build) has produced a crisis that the sector is still in the early stages of understanding. The US foreign-assistance agency ceased operating as an independent agency on July 1, 2025, after the administration announced in March 2025 that 83 percent of its programs would be terminated; the remainder moved to the State Department. A Lancet modeling study published in June 2025 projected more than 14 million additional deaths by 2030 if the cuts continue, including more than 4.5 million among children under five.

The programs that have lost funding are visible. The partner organizations that have closed or contracted are being counted. The populations that are no longer receiving services they depended on are beginning to experience the consequences. The news coverage, the advocacy, and the institutional response are all focused, appropriately, on the immediate losses.

What is receiving less attention is the structural question that the immediate losses are raising: what does partnership look like when the external funding that previously organized it is no longer available? How do organizations that built their partnership models around shared access to donor funding reorient those relationships when the funding is gone? And what does the post-foreign-assistance funding environment actually require, not just in resource mobilization terms, but in terms of the relationship architecture that makes effective partnership possible without external funding organizing it?

These are the questions this article addresses.

What Foreign-Assistance Funding Actually Did for Partnerships

To understand what its removal requires, it is necessary to be clear about what foreign-assistance and similar funding mechanisms actually did for partnership formation and maintenance: beyond providing the resources that funded program activities.

It provided a common framework. Foreign-assistance funding came with monitoring and evaluation frameworks, procurement standards, financial management requirements, and programmatic reporting structures that created a common language and a common set of expectations among organizations working within the same funding ecosystem. Partners who had never worked together before could begin collaboration with a shared operational framework already established. The funding organized the relationship as well as the work.

It provided legitimacy signals. Access to foreign-assistance funding served as an external legitimacy signal for organizations working in complex political environments. The US government's institutional presence (its diplomatic weight, its bilateral relationships, its convening power) provided cover for civil society organizations working on sensitive issues in contexts where that cover was genuinely protective. The loss of this signal is not purely financial. It is a change in the political environment within which partnerships operate.

It reduced the transaction costs of partnership. Formal funding mechanisms, however bureaucratic, reduced certain transaction costs of partnership formation: they provided standardized contracts, established accountability mechanisms, created enforcement structures for partner commitments, and generated documentation that could be used for future partnership formation. Building a partnership without this infrastructure requires organizations to develop their own equivalent structures, which is possible, but requires investment and expertise that the external funding previously subsidized.

It created density. The concentration of foreign-assistance funding in specific issue areas, geographies, and organizational types created networks of organizations working on related problems with some degree of shared orientation. These networks facilitated the informal relationships (the conference conversations, the shared technical communities, the peer learning and referral networks) that often produce more durable partnerships than formal funding mechanisms. When the funding contracts, so do these networks, and the informal relationship capital they represent.

Understanding these functions clarifies what the post-foreign-assistance era actually requires: not just alternative funding sources, but alternative structures for the coordination, legitimacy, transaction cost reduction, and network density that foreign-assistance funding provided.

What Does Not Work in the New Environment

Before describing what does work, it is necessary to name the strategies that will not be adequate to the current moment, because the sector's initial response to funding loss is often to reach for familiar tools that are not calibrated to the scale or nature of the disruption.

Donor diversification as the primary strategy. The sector's default response to funding loss from any major source is to identify alternative donors: other bilateral funders, multilateral institutions, private foundations, corporate social responsibility programs. This is necessary but insufficient in the current environment for a specific reason: the scale of what US foreign-assistance funding represented in specific issue areas and geographies is not replaceable by donor diversification in most cases. The EU, FCDO, and other bilateral funders are facing their own resource constraints (the OECD projected a 9 to 17 percent fall in official development assistance in 2025, with cuts announced for 2025 to 2027 by eleven members of its Development Assistance Committee, including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom; the OECD's preliminary data later put the actual 2025 fall at 23.1 percent in real terms) and are also managing the ripple effects of US withdrawal from multilateral commitments. Private foundations, however generous, operate at a scale fundamentally different from bilateral government funding. Donor diversification will replace some of what has been lost. It will not replace most of it.

Programmatic contraction as the response to funding loss. Many organizations in the sector are responding to funding loss by contracting their programs: reducing the scope of their work to what existing funding can support and waiting for the funding environment to stabilize. This is financially rational. It is strategically problematic, because the organizations that contract most aggressively are typically the ones that will have the fewest assets (relationships, institutional knowledge, community presence) when the funding environment does eventually recover. The organizations that maintain their connectivity, their technical capacity, and their partnership relationships during the disruption, even at a cost that is not fully covered by current funding, will be better positioned when circumstances change.

Coalition-building for advocacy purposes only. The sector's traditional response to threatening policy changes is coalition-building for advocacy: uniting organizations around shared positions, coordinating communications, and directing collective voice toward the political actors whose decisions produced the threat. This is appropriate. It is not sufficient. Advocacy coalitions that do not also develop the operational and resource-sharing relationships that would allow member organizations to maintain their work in the absence of the funding they are advocating to restore are building the appearance of collective strength without the substance.

What Partnership Actually Requires Without External Funding

Effective partnership formation and maintenance in the absence of external funding organizing infrastructure requires a shift in partnership logic, from funding-organized collaboration to value-organized collaboration.

Partnership organized around shared value creation, not shared funding access. The most durable partnerships in the current environment will be those organized around what the partners can create together that neither could create alone, not around shared access to a common funding source. This requires a different kind of conversation at the partnership formation stage: not "what funding can we both access?" but "what can we each contribute, what can we each gain, and what outcomes would a genuine partnership between us produce that individual organizational action would not?"

This conversation is harder to initiate and harder to conclude than funding-organized partnership conversations. It requires organizations to be honest about their actual capacities, their actual limitations, and their actual interests, which are not always aligned with the programmatic interests they represent in donor-facing conversations. But partnerships built on this foundation are more resilient to funding disruption, because they are not contingent on the continued availability of the external resource that organized the relationship.

Partnership built on complementary capacity, not competitive positioning. In funding-organized partnership ecosystems, organizations in the same programmatic space are simultaneously partners on funded projects and competitors for limited funding. This creates a structural ambivalence in partnership relationships that limits the depth of collaboration. In the absence of shared funding access as the organizing principle, organizations have greater freedom to develop partnership relationships organized around genuine complementarity, where each partner's strength addresses the other's limitation, rather than around the management of competitive dynamics.

This requires organizational honesty about limitations that most organizations are reluctant to acknowledge in competitive funding environments. It also requires trust that the partner will not exploit acknowledged limitations in future competitive contexts, which is a more demanding trust requirement than funding-organized partnerships typically generate.

Resource sharing as a partnership architecture. In the post-foreign-assistance era, partnerships that involve genuine resource sharing (staff time, organizational infrastructure, technical expertise, community relationships, data, platforms) rather than only shared program delivery have greater sustainability than those that do not. Resource-sharing partnerships create mutual dependencies that maintain the relationship between funding cycles and across funding disruptions. They also create the kind of organizational interdependence that motivates both partners to invest in the relationship's health independent of specific program requirements.

Community-anchored partnership formation. The partnerships most likely to survive the removal of external funding organizing infrastructure are those that are anchored in community relationships (with the organizations, leaders, and networks within the communities being served) rather than those anchored primarily in donor relationships. Community-anchored partnerships have a legitimacy basis that is independent of external funding: the relationship with the community is itself a value that motivates and sustains the partnership. Donor-anchored partnerships, when the donor withdraws, lose their primary organizing principle.

The Trust Architecture of Partnership After Foreign Assistance

There is a trust dimension to the post-foreign-assistance partnership challenge that deserves explicit attention, because it is the dimension most likely to determine which partnership relationships survive the disruption and which do not.

Foreign-assistance-funded partnerships often developed within an accountability structure that was external to the partner relationship itself: the donor's contractual requirements, reporting frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms provided the accountability infrastructure that the partnership needed to function. Partners were accountable to each other partly because they were jointly accountable to a third party whose continued engagement depended on their performance.

When that external accountability structure is removed, partnership relationships must develop their own. This is harder, because it requires the partners to develop mutual accountability mechanisms without the organizing leverage that external accountability provides, to build the trust architecture that makes accountability meaningful in the absence of enforcement by a third party.

The organizations best positioned to build this trust architecture are those that have invested in the relationship dimensions of their partnerships (in genuine knowledge of each partner's organizational culture, decision-making processes, and institutional values) rather than only in the programmatic dimensions. They know what their partners care about, what they are capable of, and what they are unwilling to compromise. This knowledge makes accountability conversations possible in a way that purely programmatic partnership relationships do not.

Building this knowledge in the current disrupted environment, when organizational bandwidth is constrained and survival concerns are immediate, is difficult. It is also the most important investment organizations can make in their partnership resilience.

The Strategic Opportunity Inside the Disruption

The current disruption is genuinely severe. Programs are ending, organizations are contracting, populations are losing services they depended on, and the institutional knowledge embedded in the partnerships that foreign-assistance funding organized is being lost faster than it is being documented.

But disruption of an established system also creates opportunities that the system's stability was suppressing. The foreign-assistance-funded partnership ecosystem had significant dysfunctions: power imbalances between funders and implementers, between Northern and Southern partners, between large organizations and the community-based organizations closest to the populations being served. The accountability structures organized around donor relationships sometimes ran in the wrong direction: toward donor satisfaction rather than community benefit. The funding-organized partnership logic sometimes produced partnerships of organizational convenience rather than partnerships of genuine complementarity.

The organizations that use the current disruption to build genuinely complementary, community-anchored, value-organized partnerships (that do the hard work of developing trust architectures adequate to the environment they are actually in) will emerge from the disruption with partnership capital that is more resilient and more productive than what the previous funding ecosystem organized.

That is not a silver lining that makes the current losses acceptable. The losses are real and the harm is real. It is a strategic observation about where organizational investment in the current environment is most likely to produce durable returns.

Partnership in the post-foreign-assistance era is harder. It is also, potentially, more genuine, if the organizations navigating the disruption make the right choices about what to prioritize when the external funding that previously organized their relationships is no longer available to do that work.

Where This Fits

The trust architecture described here is the partnership version of the discipline Links Global applies to institutions and their publics. The Links Global Trust Audit™ and the NSI™ white paper describe the institutional side; the Case Study Library, Volume 2 shows what happens when a consortium, not a single client, is the one that has to hold trust.

Schedule a conversation with Links Global: www.linksglobal.org

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