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Cross-Sector Collaboration at Scale

Strategic Insights from a Study of 15 Years of GoTeach and YouthCan! Global Partnerships

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Executive Summary

Building and sustaining long-term cross-sector partnerships is a significant challenge for managers. While many ambitious initiatives fail to move beyond an initial agreement, the 15-year journey of GoTeach and YouthCan! initiatives, a collaboration between the DHL Group and SOS Children's Villages, provides a successful case with a global impact. This partnership successfully transitioned from a bilateral pilot in four countries to a global multi-stakeholder initiative spanning 60 countries and nearly 400 local partners. This report distills the strategic mechanisms that enabled this growth, moving from a "good start" to a sustained and impactful global presence.

The core of the initiative's success lies in a process model driven by three interconnected pillars: goal orientation, coordination, and evaluation. Strategic coherence was achieved by pivoting from a traditional "fundraiser" mindset to a shared logic of youth employability and local ownership. To manage the resulting complexity, the partnership's governance evolved with a "regional backbone" structure, applying the principle of subsidiarity to balance global standards and local operational freedom. Crucially, evaluation was used as a "staircase" for growth, and empirical evidence of impact served as the primary trigger for scaling decisions, utilizing data as a strategic learning tool.

Scaling was achieved through five distinct pathways: geographic replication, deepening activity intensity, onboarding global partners, leveraging organic local growth, and deploying digital offerings. As the initiative matured, the introduction of global frameworks demonstrated that standardization can drive motivation when it provides a clear structure for impact without stifling local innovations. For practitioners, this journey offers six guiding principles: anchoring the vision, adapting governance, iterating via impact, cultivating shared ownership, scaling with sensitivity to partner differences, and balancing structure with innovation. Ultimately, this report shows that impactful collaboration at scale requires a persistent focus on shared goals and organizational flexibility to adapt governance as partnerships mature.

Introduction

Establishing successful cross-sector partnerships is a complex managerial challenge that goes beyond the initial agreement. Although many committed initiatives fail to progress beyond a promising start, the 15-year collaboration between the DHL Group and SOS Children's Villages provides a proven roadmap for sustained success. This study analyzes the evolution of GoTeach and YouthCan! initiatives, global youth employability programs that successfully scaled from four pilot countries to a multi-stakeholder partnership spanning 60 countries and nearly 400 partners. By distilling the managerial strategies that allowed this partnership to thrive for over a decade and a half, this report offers actionable principles for practitioners seeking to bridge the gap between initial strategic alignment and a long-term global impact.

About the Study

This report is based on a longitudinal process study conducted at ETH Zurich, Switzerland, in collaboration with DHL Group and SOS Children's Villages.

Timeframe: A 15-year retrospective and real-time analysis (2010–2025).
Main sample: 30 semi-structured interviews with global/regional managers from SOS Children's Villages, DHL Group, additional corporate partners, and external advisors.
Additional sources: Archival data including annual "Facts & Figures," Theory of Change documentation, and multi-year evaluation reports.
Objective: To develop a process model that explains how long-term collaborations maintain strategic coherence while adapting operationally.

The Issue: Beyond a Good Start in Partnerships?

It is a common misconception that a strong initial agreement and shared enthusiasm are reliable indicators of long-term partnership success. In reality, cross-sector collaborations are highly prone to failure, frequently experiencing breakdowns or failing to realize their goals, even after formalizing written intent to cooperate. A "good start" is merely an entry point, while the true challenge lies in sustaining momentum through the complexities of long-term implementation.

The risks of failure are evident, even in high-profile collaborations. For instance, a volunteering partnership between the global logistics corporation TNT and the World Food Programme exhibited significant tension and challenges for volunteers. Similarly, a major textile multi-stakeholder partnership has come close to collapsing because of misalignments across different negotiation tables. These failures stem from a set of organizational and relational challenges, including:

- **Diverging Ambitions:** While partners may start with aligned goals, their strategic priorities and levels of ambition often drift apart over time.
- **Operational Friction:** Unclear roles, expectations, and passive engagement can quickly erode the trust necessary for adaptive governance.
- **Lack of Internal Buy-in:** Without deep support within both organizations, initiatives remain "islands" that are easily abandoned during leadership changes.

The stakes for failure have moved beyond operational losses to include severe reputational risk. In an era of heightened public scrutiny, organizations face significant backlash if their collaborative claims are perceived as “greenwashing” or “social washing”—disingenuous efforts prioritized for reputation over an authentic societal impact. To mitigate this, partnerships must move beyond “classic fundraising” toward a model in which a shared purpose consistently guides every strategic decision. However, fear of harm can prevent transparent communication, making it even more difficult to build the trust required for effective collaboration. Especially as partnerships scale, the complexity of managing multiple local contexts and stakeholders requires an even more robust, impact-oriented logic to maintain strategic coherence.

The Case: A 15-Year Development Journey

The evolution of this joint initiative between the DHL Group and SOS Children’s Villages demonstrates that scaling a global partnership is a non-linear process. From initial negotiations and four pilot countries to volunteering activities in 60 countries with almost 400 partners, the partners strategically adapted and developed their collaboration in four phases.

Phase 1: Piloting and Proof of Concept (2010–2013) The initiative began in 2009/10 when DHL sought a program to foster employee engagement and a sense of belonging through social responsibility. They identified youth transition from school to work as a critical, underrepresented global issue and approached SOS Children's Villages (SOS) as a partner because of its international reach and strong local infrastructure. The first pivot occurred in the negotiations when local ownership and income became central pillars of the concept.

- **Action:** Pilots were launched in 2011 in **Madagascar, Brazil, South Africa, and Vietnam**. Advancing a local initiative, global partners chose Madagascar specifically to pilot in a challenging environment to serve as a definitive “proof point” for the mentorship model.

- **Turning Point:** A 2013 qualitative proof-of-concept evaluation confirmed the effectiveness of role modeling, where corporate employees interacted with youth. This evidence helped transform local skepticism into a waiting list of countries eager to join the partnership.

Phase 2: Concept Refinement and Organic Scaling (2014–2016) Following the pilot’s success, the partnership rapidly scaled to 26 countries.

- **Backbone:** This growth was managed by introducing Regional GoTeach Managers, who provided the necessary operational link between the global headquarters and local implementation.

- **Impact:** In 2015, the partners co-developed a formal Theory of Change. This allowed the program to move beyond counting activities to tracking actual outcomes for youth in internal databases.

Phase 3: Multi-Stakeholder Scaling and Digitalization (2017–2022) In 2017, the bilateral DHL-SOS partnership was complemented by the SOS-led YouthCan! multi-stakeholder initiative.

- **Expansion:** The initiative grew to include five global corporate partners, with new members profiting from former experiences while building their own formats with local SOS associations.

- **Digitalization:** The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the launch of YouthLinks, a digital platform that enabled remote mentorship, allowing the program to reach youth in rural areas outside major urban centers.

Phase 4: Reinforcing Impact Orientation (2023–present) The current phase focuses on maturation through the use of global frameworks.

- **Standardization:** To improve global comparability and impact, the GoTeach framework now requires at least three high-impact activities (from a portfolio of formats) for every participant.
- **Status:** While global growth has stabilized, the network has seen an explosion in local engagement, reaching approximately 400 local partners worldwide by 2024.

The Model: Key Drivers for Development

Despite the complexity and challenges along the way, the initiative has prevailed and has proven to be successful. The analysis offers a perspective on long-term partnership success beyond a single "alignment" event. It points to three interrelated mechanisms that were employed in partnership development, leading to a closed feedback loop process model of development.

1. **Goal Orientation:** The shared purpose (here, youth employability) anchors all the decisions.
2. **Coordination:** Adaptive structures provide the means to act on aligned goals at scale.
3. **Evaluation:** Closing the feedback loop triggers goal recalibration and coordination.

Figure 1 depicts the combination of the three mechanisms, which are further detailed in the following sections.

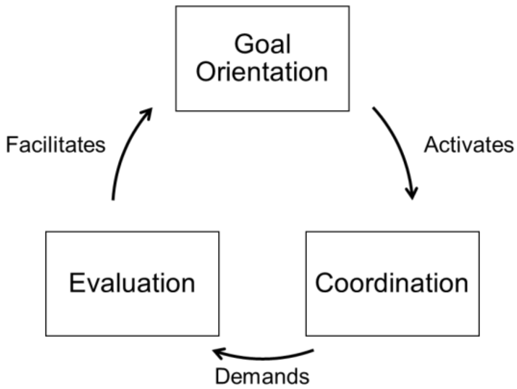
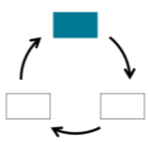


Figure 1: Process Model for Partnership Development.

Goal Orientation – From "Fundraiser" to "Strategic Partner"



The Strategic Pivot (2010)

The success of this partnership was not immediate. The initial negotiations in 2010 were marked by significant cultural gaps. The NGO (SOS Children's Villages) initially met the corporate partner (DHL) with a "classic fundraiser mindset," focusing on brand usage and financial sponsorship.

The turning point occurred when both parties moved toward a shared logic of local ownership and local income. Instead of top-down sponsorship, they co-created a model in which local SOS and DHL branches were directly responsible for the outcomes.

The Anchor: Sustaining Ambition over 15 Years

Goal orientation served as the "guiding star" for the next decade and a half, developing the initiative toward its vision.

> *"Everything that happened over the past 15 years was already embedded in the initial idea. So we didn't know exactly when we would be where, but in 2010 we knew what we eventually wanted to achieve, and basically we've just spent the last 15 years trying to close that gap. So... the fundamental intention and agreement haven't changed."*
> ***Partnership Manager***

By keeping the vision present, partners could continuously prioritize efforts to remain beneficiary-centric in their activities.

- **Stability of Vision:** Although operational tactics changed, the fundamental goal (youth employability through employee volunteering) remained the same.
- **Beneficiary-centricity:** Decision-making consistently prioritized the needs of the youth over individual corporate or nonprofit branding goals.
- **Motivation:** For the "GoTeach community," this shared ambition provided a powerful motivator that sustained their engagement, even during organizational shifts.

Adaptive Coordination – Navigating Global Complexity

The Evolution of a "Regional Backbone"

Coordination in the partnership was never static but an emergent process that adapted to the initiative's growing scale. As the program expanded from four to 26 and then to 60 countries, the coordination mechanisms had to become increasingly differentiated.

- **Regional Coordinators:** The introduction of regional roles was a decisive development, creating a vital link that allowed headquarters to provide a strategic framework while leaving the actual implementation to local actors.
- **Cross-Level Dialogue:** Strategic development formats were created in which regional and local colleagues participated as equal partners alongside global headquarters, ensuring that local expertise shaped the global strategy.

The Principle of Joint Responsibility

A core tenet of the partnership's coordination is the belief that impact is a joint task, not the sole responsibility of the nonprofit organization. From the beginning, DHL and SOS agreed to jointly develop their impact. While SOS is responsible for collecting qualitative indicators, the task of defining and thinking through those metrics is understood as a shared responsibility. This joint ownership prevents the "sponsorship silo" where the corporate partner merely writes a check and waits for a report.

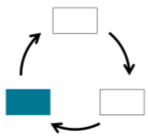
Local Ownership and Adaptation

The coordination model is built on subsidiarity: global management provides the strategic framework and materials, but what happens on the ground is determined by local partners.

- **Tailored Interventions:** Local SOS and DHL contacts are required in every country, allowing them to plan activities based on the specific needs of local youth.

- **Differentiated Needs:** This allows the partnership to maintain a global framework while allowing for widely varied interventions relevant to the local socioeconomic context.

Evaluation – The "Staircase" to Informed Decision-Making



In many partnerships, evaluations are considered secondary reporting requirements. In this initiative, however, the commitment to "evaluate as quickly as possible" was embedded from the very first pilots. Evaluation was not merely used for accountability but functioned as a sub-objective that triggered each new phase of growth in the program.

The partnership's evidence base evolved through what managers described as a "staircase" model. Each step provided the specific evidence required to justify the next level of investment.

- **Step 1 - Proof of Concept (2013):** Qualitative interviews confirmed that the "spark" of role-modeling—where corporate employees interact with youth—was effectively motivating participants. This evidence turned local skepticism into interest from several countries.

- **Step 2 - Refining the Model (2015):** A major mixed-methods evaluation led to the co-development of a formal Theory of Change. This shifted the partnership from counting activities to tracking actual outcomes for youth in SOS Children's Villages' internal databases.

- **Step 3 - Standardizing for Impact (2023):** Evaluation revealed that high-intensity participation led to significantly better youth outcomes. This triggered the creation of a global framework, making high-impact activity clusters mandatory in 57 countries worldwide.

Structured Flexibility: The "Standardization Surprise"

In 2023, the partnership introduced a global framework that made specific activities mandatory across 57 countries. Managers expected resistance because this limited local freedom.

- The Result: While voluntary adoption did not happen, further training on the framework and making it mandatory led to comprehensive adoption and sparked new initiatives locally.
- Why it Worked: It provided a much-needed structure for impact, replacing "one-off events" with consecutive activities. Local teams found it motivating, providing a structure while leaving room for local innovation.

The Process Model in Action: Partnership Phases and Cycles

The study portrays the initiatives' development through iterations of the process model, underlining the importance of repeated efforts and a feedback loop for successful long-term partnerships. Figure 2 depicts the major process cycles in the four partnership phases.

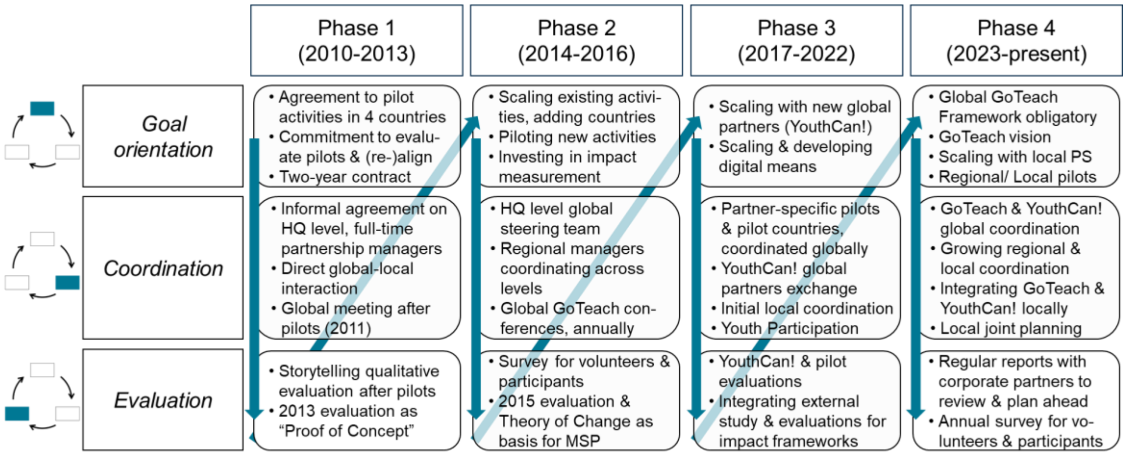


Figure 2: Four Partnership Phases and Process Iterations.

The Growth: Strategic Pathways to Scaling Impact

The 15-year journey of GoTeach and YouthCan! revealed that the initiative employed five distinct scaling pathways, each offering unique managerial challenges and strategic advantages.

1. Geographic Replication: Expanding to New Countries

The partnership began with a focused pilot in four countries (2011) to prove the "role model" concept. Once the 2013 "Proof of Concept" evaluation demonstrated success, interest surged, leading to a waiting list of eager country organizations. By 2023, the initiative was active in almost 60 countries.

> ***Key Learning:*** Scaling across borders requires an operational backbone. The introduction of regional coordinator roles was pivotal in allowing the expansion to jump from ten to 26 countries while maintaining local embedding.

2. Deepening Impact: Increasing Activity Intensity Within Countries

As the initiative matured, the focus shifted from adding countries to increasing the "intensity" of engagement for each participant country. The 2023 global framework formalized this requirement by mandating at least three distinct activity touchpoints for each youth to ensure measurable impact.

> ***Key Learning:*** "Depth" can be as valuable as "breadth," but partners must actively manage the quantity-quality trade-off when communicating this shift. When standardizing, a balance between subsidiary innovation and standards must be established.

3. Multi-Stakeholder Growth: Onboarding Global Partners

In 2017, the partnership complemented the bilateral agreement with the YouthCan! platform, bringing additional global corporate partners to broaden the expertise and resources available for the initiative.

> ***Key Learning:*** Onboarding global partners provides significant scaling potential per partner but requires a significant upfront investment in alignment. Global partners bring high complexity and demand more coordination and evaluation than do local counterparts.

4. Organic Scaling: Leveraging Local Partnerships

While global partner growth remained selective, the number of local partners exploded, reaching approximately 400 by 2024. These local alliances allowed for grassroots engagement that was highly relevant to each specific national context in which they operated.

> ***Key Learning:*** Local partners are often easier to integrate. They benefit from existing structures and targeted support, allowing for organic growth that is less complex to manage than negotiations at the global level.

5. Digital Scaling: Reaching Youth via Technology

The launch of the YouthLinks platform (2018) provided a scalable way to offer mentorship and peer support remotely. This digital pathway was dramatically accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling partnerships to maintain their impact during lockdowns.

> ***Key Learning:*** Digitalization is a key tool for equitable access. It allows reaching people in remote areas outside major cities, where corporate volunteers may not be physically present.

Ways to Scale: The Global vs. Local Paradox

The study highlights a distinct difference in scaling success:

- Local Success: The initiative grew explosively at the grassroots level, reaching about 400 local partners by 2024. Local partners drive growth organically as they are easier to align with existing structures.
- Global Friction: Conversely, growth via global corporate partners remained limited, both in the number of partners and individual activities. Global alliances face much higher coordination barriers and “layered interaction arenas” that can slow progress.

The Leadership Playbook: 6 Guiding Principles

The 15-year evolution of GoTeach and YouthCan! This study offers valuable lessons for managers seeking to scale social impact through complex alliances.

1. Anchor the Vision (Goal Orientation)

Establish and continuously reinforce a shared, ambitious vision. Success depends on linking daily activities directly back to this motivating purpose to prevent “strategic drift” over time.

2. Adapt the Governance (Coordination)

Develop coordination that evolves in response to the partnership’s scale, scope, and diversity. Prevent overload or disengagement by differentiating coordination roles across organizational levels.

3. Iterate via Impact (Evaluation)

Move beyond “accountability-only” reporting. Use evaluation as a learning tool, where transparent evidence is used inclusively to guide adaptation and scaling decisions.

4. Co-Create, Don’t Sponsor (Shared Ownership)

Cultivate a culture of joint responsibility for outcomes. Trust is built through shared accountability and collaborative problem-solving rather than a “client-service provider” relationship.

5. Context-Sensitive Scaling (Partner Sensitivity)

Recognize that scaling with local partners (which allows for organic growth) poses different challenges than scaling with global partners (which requires significant upfront investment in alignment).

6. Structured Freedom (Standardization vs. Subsidiarity)

Introduce standards and frameworks deliberately and iteratively. Communicate a clear rationale for new standards while leaving space for contributors to innovate within that framework.

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