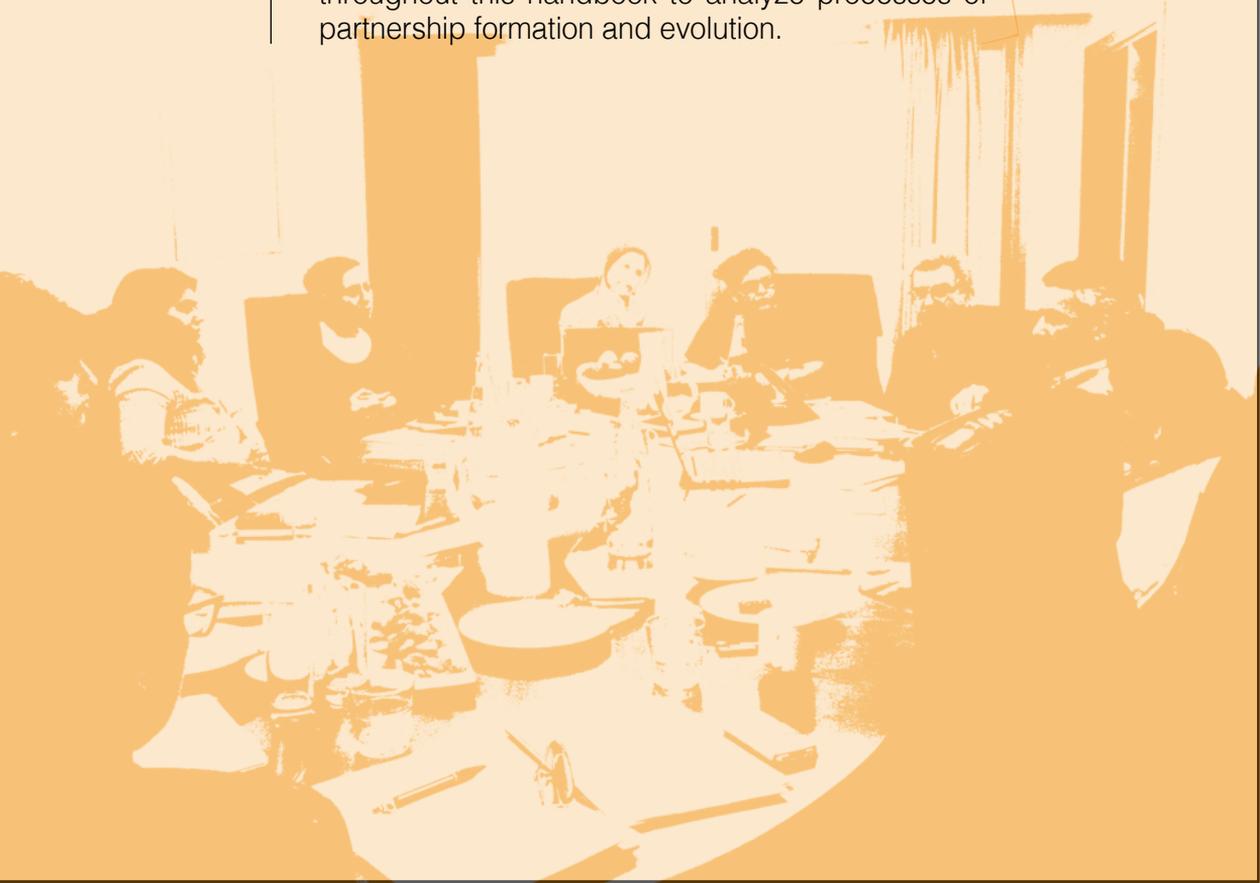


# 2

## Joint Action Space - A conceptual introduction

CSOs often create programs in partnership with other CSOs, government agencies, academic institutions, businesses, and members of the public. This section presents the concept of a “social space” as a framework for understanding how to build synergistic partnerships that achieve more than each individual organization on its own. The social space concept provides the basis for ideas such as a “joint action space” and a “learning space” that are used throughout this handbook to analyze processes of partnership formation and evolution.



## What happened in the Incubator project?



*The Incubator project was designed as a partnership among CSOs with different specializations, with the explicit intention to enrich the knowledge and widen the field of influence of each organization. The project was initiated by Masar, who early on in the development process partnered up with two local organizations- SAWA and Duroob- and one European organization- Anne Frank.*

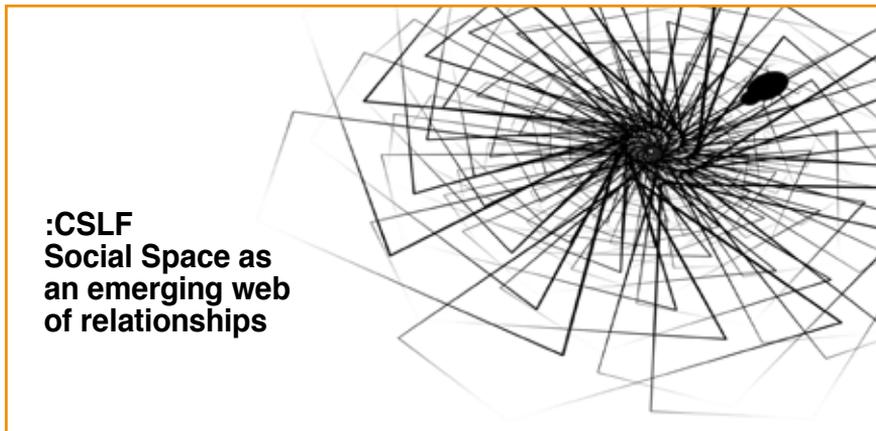
*The guiding concept was to bring together organization from different thematic fields to enhance learning opportunities and reduce competitiveness. In the case of the Incubator project, the most important element in choice of partners was trust, based in prior experience. The central reason was the financial risks associated with the funding scheme, in which the applicant, Masar, was required to take responsibility vis-à-vis the funder for the partners operations.*

*The two main training programs in the Incubator project, Training of Trainers and Service Learning Course, were not designed prior to the beginning of the project, but rather the design process was built-into the program. In both cases, the designing was the task of teams in which members from all local partners were participants. This created a very high degree of interdependence and uncertainty among actors, especially for those who were not part of the partner organizations' leadership (ToT participants). At the same time, this structure, in which various levels of partner organization were involved, is what ensured that no partner held a monopoly over the creation of the activities.*

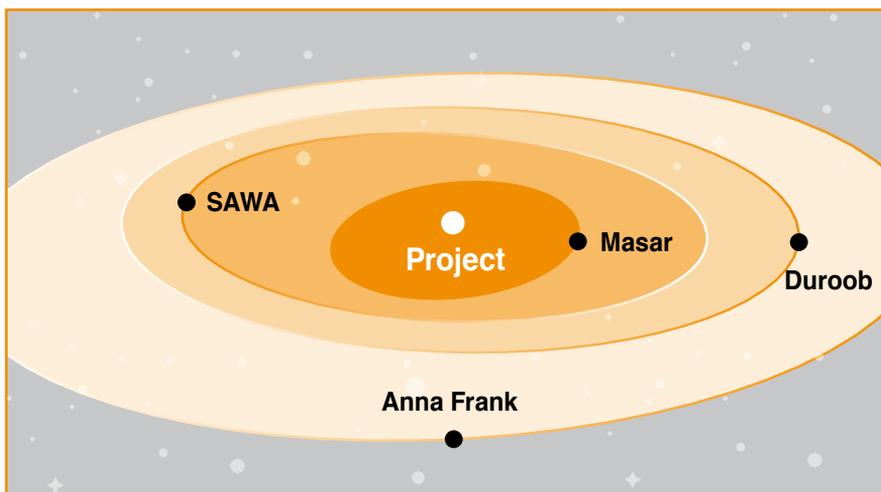
*The actual character of the partnership between the CSOs in the Incubation Project emerged naturally over time and not from a specific plan. Members of CSOLF used different metaphors to capture the nature of this emergent process. One of CSO director compared the process to collectively building a spider web. The connections between the organizations were built one by one. Each of these connections was local and focused on a particular point of interdependence among two actors, or more. No one really knew what these connections would lead to. Over time, however, a clear pattern took shape and, like a spider web, the partnership was very strong and resilient, despite frequent shocks.*

*The program manager used the metaphor of a solar system. Each of partners within the program had its own unique orbits. The project itself became a new force that pulled each of the three CSO's into a somewhat different orbit. Eventually the partners realigned their orbits around the project to create a coherent and stable pattern. Each CSO, of course, maintained its own unique orbit as well.*

*These two metaphors capture two important feature of the type of partnership building process discussed in this handbook.*



*The first feature as reflected in the web metaphor is the importance of building relationships between the organizations and among organizational members at every level. The assumption is that there is a large gap between declarations of collaboration and a real, working partnership that people experience in their everyday work. This gap is filled through these relationships. So that, to the extent that these relationships are strong and resilient, the partnership will be strong and resilient.*



*The solar system metaphor focuses on the balance that needs to be achieved between an organization's normal worldview and way of doing things (its orbit) and the new orbit that emerges in the context of the partnership. The project orbit is new and different for each of*

*the organizations, but each of them also maintains its own orbit as well. One implication of this metaphor is that a project must develop a clear and autonomous nucleus or center with the “gravity” to pull the partner organizations out of their normal orbits. A project it is likely to revolve around a single CSO unless it differentiates itself and possesses sufficient attractiveness and strength. The stronger the pull of the partnership, the greater the pull will be on the orbits of each partner organization.* >>

## **What brings CSOs together?**

Inter-organizational partnerships are sometimes initiated by one or more CSOs who perceive the joint activity as a means of achieving common goals or as a common means for achieving different goals. Partnerships may also be the result of mandates from funders or administrators who believe that bringing together CSOs in joint projects is an important means of increasing the impact and cost effectiveness of programs. In this case, the funder might decide who are the actual partners to the project, or as in the case of the EU, reward the existence of a partnership, leaving the choice of partners to the organizations themselves.

Irrespective of the forces leading to the formation of the group of CSOs, under a program, the ways organizations are related to each other can vary substantially. We identified three major types of relatedness underlying partnership formation, which are not mutually exclusive:

- **Thematic field.** When different CSOs work in the same thematic field (e.g. promoting gender issues, human rights), partnership is seen as a way of overcoming *fragmentation*, in which each CSO focuses on only a part of the picture, as well as potential *redundancy*. Partnerships hold potential for them being able to see and address the field as a whole.
- **Capabilities.** When partners are often chosen in order to bring different capabilities (e.g. research, advocacy, educational programs) to achieving a common goal, the partnerships become means for creating complementariness that enables a systemic, comprehensive and holistic approach.
- **Common history.** When partners are chosen based on a history of common organizational or personal histories, it injects an important element of trust into the partnership. When organizations and individuals share a common history that instills trust, it enables them to manage the considerable risks entailed by each CSO's being dependent upon another other for ensuring project success.

Looking beyond idealized notions of partnership, actual choices are also often made due to real constraints, such as geography or eligibility for

funding. The understanding that organizations come together in complex ways makes it evident that the agreement of organizations to come together for a given project does not constitute a partnership in the sense described in the introduction, but at best cooperation.

## **Partnerships as “joint action spaces”**

The concept of **social space** provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding partnerships. Social space is different from physical space. When people say they are “close” to someone, in the sense of having an intimate relationship, they are talking in terms of social space and this closeness can exist regardless of physical proximity.

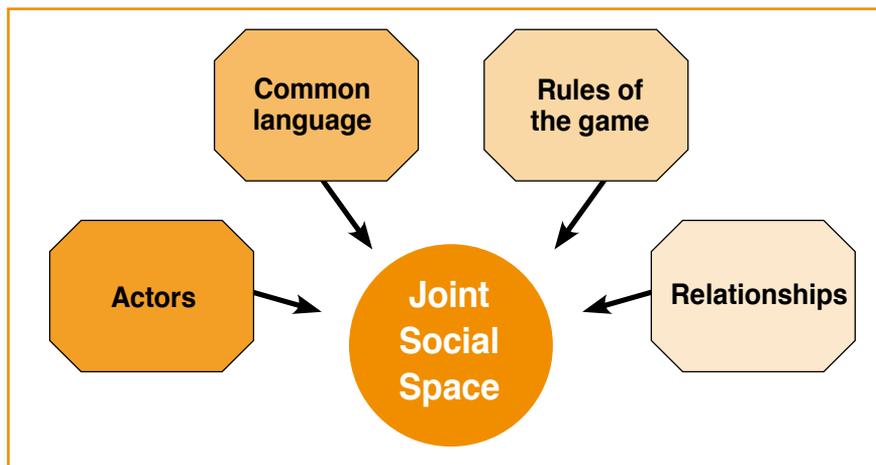
Social spaces emerge when people put their thinking and feeling into action and elicit responses from other(s), which then shape their own thinking, feeling, and action. If this kind of interaction is temporary or fleeting, then a social space is unlikely to form. However, when interactions are sustained over time, patterns emerge “in between” people and connect among them. These patterns that connect are social spaces. They are invisible, but very powerful, because they shape the way people think, feel, and act in that particular relationship.

Partnerships are a particular kind of social space. They are patterns that connect the partners in ways that are more than, and distinct, from the individual partners. One way of looking at these spaces is through the degree to which partners actually interact. At one end of the continuum (cooperation), a partnership may simply consist of dividing up program tasks and resources. In this model each partner contributes its piece of the overall puzzle, but there is little on-going joint action or interaction among the partners. At the other end of the spectrum (collaboration), a program is put into practice through intensive interaction and interdependence among the partner organizations, thus forming a new **joint action space**.

Although partnerships require formal organizational structures from the very beginning of their work, *formal structures do not constitute joint action spaces*. Rather, these spaces *emerge* from the on-going interaction among the partner organizations. The emergence of a joint action space is a gradual process that takes time and involves a relatively high degree of uncertainty. The uncertainty stems from the fact that, despite project planning, it is impossible to predict the nature of the partnership until they emerge through interaction around central project tasks and problems solving along the way. The partnership, as a joint action space, gradually differentiates itself from the partner organizations until it takes on a distinct identity of its own, while never being fully independent of the partner organizations.

The identity of a particular partnership can be characterized in terms of the four components of any social space:

(1) the actors that are connected by the space, (2) the nature of the relationship between these actors in terms of relative power and hierarchy, (3) the meanings that form the basis for a common language that hold the space together, and (4) the “rules of the game” that guide behavior in the space. These components can be elaborated as follows:



**Actors:** In order for a healthy, productive partnership to emerge, members of the different CSO's/stakeholder groups need to meet and interact regularly within the joint action space of the project. Project activities should be designed in a way that not only fosters interaction but also makes actors from different group dependent upon each other for carrying out their tasks. Furthermore, when the leadership of the partner CSOs work together as part of project activities, it increases the likelihood that a strong partnership will emerge and the partners will see themselves as belonging to something that is differentiated from, but deeply connected their organizations.

**Relationships.** One of the difficult, but often overlooked, challenges in partnerships is the creation of a new set of relationships that is distinct and different from those that exists in each organization. Within the joint action space, members of different organizations work with others who are outside their normal role definitions and hierarchies. Therefore, the emergence of partnership depends on the ability of the various actors to work less through the exercise of formal authority and clear roles and more through collaboration. Learning to relate in less hierarchical ways may be a threat or an opportunity for project actors from different organizations. The nature of the relationships that form is one of the important factors in

differentiating the joint action space from the partner organizations and in stimulating the emergence of healthy, productive partnership.

**Common language:** The emergence of a joint action space depends the development of a distinct, common language within the partnership. Each partner organization most likely has its own language that expresses how the organization perceives its mission within the context of its specific field, society, etc. As partners interact, they speak to each other in these different languages and need to develop shared concepts and terms that characterize the program's field of interaction. Participatory goal setting plays an important role in beginning this process because the partners from different organizations promote their own meanings and negotiate common ones as they craft their goals statements. Through subsequent interaction, program actors should develop a language that is differentiated, at least to some extent, from the language of the partner organizations. If this does not happen, program actors are likely to feel that they may be working together, but they are actually working separately.

**Rules of the game:** When members of partner organization work together in a joint project, they bring different sets of "rules of the game" for guiding behavior. The rules of the game tell people how things are done, how to act with others, and how to solve problems. When actors in a project come up against others who think, feel, and act according to different rules of the game, they need to "negotiate" new rules that make sense to all the actors. This negotiation process usually involves a series of stages. Initially members of different organizations see others as acting in strange or even inappropriate ways. If they learn to accept, or even appreciate, difference and to see the sense in what others do differently, it leads to an assimilation of some of those differences into their own behavioral repertoires. If not, then it is likely to retard the development of the joint action space and the emergence of healthy, productive partnership.

This handbook is based on the assumption that the potential in partnerships can only be realized when partners form a joint action space. A joint action space creates a basis for developing the synergy that can expand the realm of what is possible for each individual organization on its own. Nevertheless, joint action space is a necessary but not sufficient condition for synergy. As will be seen, the process of developing a productive joint action space is complex task that requires serious attention and on-going learning.

