



COLLABORATING WITH CLARITY



EASTERN CAPE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

March 2026



INTRODUCTION:

On 17 March 2026, practitioners and facilitators from across the Eastern Cape gathered for a Community of Practice (CoP) session focused on collaboration in After School Programmes (ASPs). The session was a space for honest reflection, shared learning, and practical problem-solving, drawing on real experiences from the ground.

The CoP was designed with three core intentions:



To build a clearer understanding of what healthy collaboration looks like in practice



To introduce a practical tool to help organisations assess and guide their partnerships



To encourage a shift towards more intentional and structured ways of working together

“There is a common misconception that collaboration requires organisations to give up control, or that partners must be doing the same work to collaborate effectively.”

—TLT Partner



A key takeaway was that collaboration is not about sameness or loss of independence, it is about building purposeful relationships. Strong collaborations are grounded in clarity, mutual understanding and shared purpose, rather than uniformity of activities.

Yet many collaborations, while still functioning, are running on assumptions. Partners share a goal but have never quite found the time to sit down and agree on how they will work together to reach it.

Relationships are built on goodwill, but without a clear roadmap.

Many participants shared their experiences of these "messy collaborations", and there was relief in naming it. People had been navigating this complexity alone, assuming it was particular to their situation. Discovering it was a shared experience created space for more honest reflection and helped surface what is getting in the way.

A challenge that resonated strongly across the group was the gap between what people say, what they know and what they actually do.

Participants understood, in theory, that collaboration should begin with clear conversations about expectations, roles and ways of working. In practice, however, these conversations were often skipped or rushed. Because they were not documented, whatever was agreed faded, becoming informal, open to interpretation and difficult to return to or hold anyone accountable to.



Three themes emerged as essential to discuss and define early in any partnership:

The Weight of Unspoken Power

Running quietly beneath most collaborations is a theme that participants did not always name directly, but that shapes everything: **power**.

In many partnerships, decision-making authority is informally tied to resource contribution. The organisation bringing more money, more staff, or more infrastructure often sets the direction, and the less-resourced partner follows.

This can happen without anyone intending it, but the effect is real.

Smaller organisations described holding back: not raising concerns, not making requests, not feeling entitled to shape the collaboration they were supposedly equal partners in.

Equity in participation does not happen by itself. It must be deliberately designed and documented into the way a collaboration is structured. Without that intention, partnerships risk reinforcing the very imbalances they could, with care, help to address.

“Equity in partnership does not happen on its own. It has to be deliberately designed.”

Ask yourselves



- Who makes decisions in this collaboration, and how?
- Are all partners genuinely able to raise concerns or push back?
- What would a more equitable structure look like?

Clarify Lines of Leadership

A common challenge is that parties in a collaboration are unsure of who is responsible for holding the partnership together.

Does accountability sit with one organisation, or is it genuinely shared? Without clarity on this, even well-intentioned partnerships can drift — decisions stall, accountability blurs, and the partnership slowly loses direction.

It is essential to discuss and clarify roles and responsibilities as early as possible, support this with an MoU, and create management mechanisms to ensure all parties are fulfilling their commitments.

Ask yourselves



- Who is responsible for keeping the collaboration on track?
- How will we make decisions together?
- What happens if one party is not fulfilling their role?

Memorandums of Understanding

More Than a Document

It is important to have an MoU in place for any partnership or multi-stakeholder arrangement. Even more important, though, is ensuring that all parties are clear about what the document says and what they are signing up for.

The presence of a document does not create shared understanding - that requires ongoing conversation, and a willingness to revisit and revise as the partnership evolves.

Ask yourselves



- Do all partners know what the MoU says?
- When last did you review it together?
- Does it reflect how the partnership is working today?



“An agreement that lives in a filing drawer is not really an agreement. It is a starting point that was never followed through.”

TAKE ACTION:

Collaboration Checklist



To help guide future collaborations and ensure your organisation is having the important conversations and asking the right questions, the CoP produced a **Collaboration Checklist**, which you can find here:

[Collaboration Checklist](#)



After School Programmes are encouraged to use this tool to reflect on current partnerships, initiate critical conversations, and strengthen how they work together over time.

Collaboration does not break down because organisations are unwilling, it breaks down because key elements are left unspoken, undefined, or assumed.

If you are working with partners, consider:



What assumptions are you making?



What intentions have not been stated?



What has not yet been defined?

At the heart of meaningful collaboration is a shift from informal association to deliberate, clear partnership. That requires more than goodwill. It requires clarity, structure, and a willingness to have the conversations that are most often avoided.

Engage with the checklist and reflect on your current partnerships:

What is one conversation that has not yet been had — or was had too quickly?

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