AI ON MSD: PARTNERS

We've written before about the need for our industry to develop the Win-Win-Der app to help MSD programmes find desirable partners. Who wouldn't be down to "swipe right for *sustained* development, not just for tonight?"

I'm sorry to report that this may be the only app in our field that hasn't been developed yet. And there may be a real need for it. We've just completed another Making Market Systems Work training and some participants said that what kept them up at night was finding partners (not *those* kind – we were in Bangkok, after all!) Sounds like the good people of development could use OMG's digital expertise on how to find people to work with.

So, OMG, how can I find partners?

Ah, the eternal quest for the perfect MSD partner – like dating, but with less wine and more PowerPoints. If you're out there wandering aimlessly, hoping for Prince Charming of development to swoop in, let me bring you back to reality. Finding a partner isn't about standing around with a sign saying, "Looking for Sustainable Solutions."

A good opening, OMG. I agree. So, what should I do?

Here's how you do it:

1. Look for aligned interests, not charity cases

Stop chasing those do-gooders who think sustainability is the word you want to hear. Find businesses that want to grow but can't because of constraints in the market. If they need more reliable supply chains, productivity-enhancing technology or access to finance, they're ripe for a partnership. If your potential partner asks how much funding you're offering upfront, that's a red flag. You want a business whose primary concern is growth, profit, market share, quality – not your development dollar. They should see your support as a springboard, not a crutch.

Again, I can't disagree, OMG. But this is a well-established mantra, surely? Interests between a business and a donor-funded programme will never completely align. Nor should they. They exist for different purposes. The art is in finding that temporary, specific, timebound interest to do something differently that benefits their business, and as a result people who need a job, more income or better goods and services.

2. Local champions over big names

Big multinationals might look shiny and impressive, but they don't care about your market. Find small or medium-sized local firms with the potential to scale. They're the ones that'll stick around when the going gets tough – not disappear when their CSR budget shrinks.

Fake news. Size isn't the only thing to consider, at political rallies or in international development, but it matters. Time and again, we see that the interventions that benefit hundreds of thousands of people are with large firms. They often have the ability and incentive to innovate, to buy and sell more (or better), whether that's fertiliser, seeds, toilets, fish or solar panels. With all due respect, we'll have to agree to disagree on this one, OMG.

3. Talk to industry bodies

Yeah, I know, it sounds a bit old-school, but business associations, chambers of commerce and trade groups often know who's legit and who's blowing smoke. They can point you to businesses looking for real market solutions, not charity handouts.

LOL. Not to beat you while you're down, OMG, but this is a naïve view. Some of these organisations themselves are the recipients (or worse, creations) of handouts, propped up by unsustainable donor funding rather than providers of useful services for their members. Not to mention the micro political economy at play here – individual interests don't disappear when the association badge comes out. Some representative organisations behave like gatekeepers instead of door openers, taking care of their buddies and seeking rent from everyone else.

4. Test their appetite for change

Before you "partner up," throw out a challenge: are they willing to shift operations, adapt business models or invest in new market opportunities? If they're all about "we've always done it this way," run. Fast.

OK, you're redeeming yourself, OMG. Is a prospective partner "all mouth and no trousers" or somebody that will actually "put their money where their mouth is"? Look beyond their mission statement and reassuring platitudes for tangible signs of track record or momentum for change. Structure your deal so that they have to pull out their cheque book first to see if they really are serious.

Not your finest guidance, my dear OMG. Nice of you to show up and offer a synthesis of what others have said on the world wide web, but I'm not sure my troubled partner-seeking colleagues will be in any better position after your advice. I guess this serves as a reminder that there aren't shortcuts in development and there is still plenty of need for us humans to engage in the messy 'how to' of making markets work.

Some old-fashioned human intelligence reminds us that there's no substitute for leg work – and some serendipity – when seeking partners to work with:

- **Get out there:** You are unlikely to find partners sat at your desk, trawling the internet. Go out and meet people, professionally and socially, be that in check-in or check-out queues, marketplaces, parties or mosques.
- **Move out of your comfort zone:** Don't look for the usual suspects. We tend to gravitate to people like ourselves, with similar backgrounds, culture, language, education, status, etc. That's the way to find more development workers, not business partners. Go to new places, engage with new people. Change your discovery settings. Solutions often come from unsuspected places.
- **Do your research:** Not into partners, but into sectors, trends, challenges and opportunities. The more you know, the more people you'll get to know. You become interesting because you know stuff. Prospective partners might even come to you because of your charm, wit and insight… and not because of your big wad.
- **Triangulate:** Don't just rely on a single source, follow multiple leads, get second or third opinions. Speak to OMG's BMOs too. Just don't trust everything they say.