US Forest Service
Partnership Capacity Assessment Tool

Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Overview of This Tool

This Partnership Capacity Assessment Tool (AT) will help the Forest Service manager or unit (e.g. field office staff, ranger district, forest level, or other team) to: assess the strengths that enable your team to conduct a partnership or develop a collaborative working relationship with non-Forest Service groups; think through areas that may need attention; and identify clear actions to maintain your strengths or enhance those areas you wish to develop further.

The AT can be used by a variety of teams or units of the Forest Service. It can be used as a stand-alone tool during the annual work planning process, as part of the business planning cycle, or as part of the Forest Service's conceptual "Learn While Doing" model for working in collaboration and developing partnerships.[1]

A unit's partnership capacity depends not only on the individual team members but also on how the unit functions as a whole. The AT will ask you (either individually or in a group setting) to describe your unit's current partnership situation and to answer questions about the six major elements of your unit's partnership capacity:

- Resources;
- Culture, Attitudes and Procedures;
- Past Experience and Current Opportunities;
- Incentives and Barriers;
- Staff Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities; and
- External Relationships.

The Partnership Capacity Assessment Tool consists of four Sections and an Appendix:

Section 1. *Introduction*. This introduction provides background information and assessment tool instructions.

Section 2. *The Context*. In this section, you will briefly examine your group's priorities for the next year and think about existing or potential partnership opportunities.

Section 3. *The Assessment Tool*. This section presents you with a series of statements to evaluate and score, to assess the six major elements of your unit's partnership capacity listed above.

Section 4. *Analysis and Action Steps*. In this section, you will obtain a visual representation of your unit's partnership capacity, reflect on positive and negative factors associated with your scores, and plan the next steps for sustaining your strengths and developing new ones.

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[1] Pinchot Institute. 2002. Report to the USDA Forest Service on Phase II of the Partnership Development Program. "Learn While Doing": A Model for Working in Collaboration and Through Partnerships.

Note the AT is not intended to assess the feasibility of, or to develop plans for a specific partnership or collaboration opportunity, or to prioritize existing efforts.

Some Philosophy on Partnerships and Collaboration: Elements of Success

In the Forest Service, we tend to use the terms *partnership* and *collaboration* interchangeably, often using *partnership* as a short-hand to refer to both types of relationship. Although points of intersection exist between the two, they are not exactly the same. *Collaboration* generally implies a search for common ground involving diverse and conflicting interests in resource management issues, whereas *partnership* refers to an effort with a more specific end result, more limited scope and timeframe, and fewer participants and interests. Successful examples of these different types of efforts, however, retain many common features representing three dimensions of success: *relationships*, *process*, *and substance*:

- **Relationships** must provide mutual recognition and respect, and improve participants' capacity to solve problems together.
- The **process** must treat all participants fairly and consistently and comply with applicable procedures and laws.
- **Substance** decisions made by the partnership or collaboration must be solutions that can be implemented, that satisfy interests better than efforts the participants could achieve on their own, and that can be corrected or modified in the future.

Together, the following features of relationships, process, and substance can build the foundation for partnership/collaboration success:[2]

- **Mutual Benefits and Responsibility**. A partnership is a mutually beneficial, voluntary, and desired arrangement to accomplish mutually agreed upon objectives. All parties share in the decision-making process and responsibility for outcomes, and no one person or organization has the lead. Achieving mutual benefits must be done without conflict of interest.
- **Careful Management**. The group must: 1) clearly define participant roles and responsibilities; 2) establish clear ground rules and protocols; and 3) establish informal and formal communication links with the public, the media, and other governmental agencies.
- **Compliance with Legal Requirements**. Both the agency and nonprofit partners must comply with legal guidelines and policies that govern their status and partnership involvement. The group must be knowledgeable of legal requirements that constrain their decisions and of the legal authorities to enact decisions.
- **Good communication**. Participants must communicate effectively and continually check-in with one another on progress.
- **Clear objectives**. A partnership is not itself a goal, but rather a means of achieving a goal. There should be clear objectives, and these should include projects or plans that change the way things are done on the ground.

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[2] Based on: RESOLVE, Inc. 2001, pp 1-3. *Assessing Issues and Challenges Related to Implementation of the Willamette Restoration Initiative Restoration Strategy*. And Bingham, Gail, Juliana Birkhoff, and Janet Stone. 1997. "Learning together to improve the resolution of public policy disputes." *Resolve* 28:1, 3-5.

- **Agreed-Upon Scope**. There must be agreement on the scope of a partnership, including the scale, extent, and intent of the partnership effort.
- **Sufficient Resources and Information**. There must be sufficient resources – including time, staff, information, data, skills, and money – for the partnership or collaboration to succeed.
- **Planning for Implementation and Evaluation**. Participants should agree on the steps they each will take to implement their plans, and on measurable outcomes to gauge effectiveness.

Collaborative groups must make additional efforts to ensure:

- **Inclusion**. Collaborative planning and forest management efforts must include all parties with a stake in the results. The process must treat all participants fairly and consistently, and allow participants to have adequate consultation with constituencies and control over the process.
- **Incentives to Participate**. Stakeholders in a collaborative effort must have sufficient and continuing incentives to participate.
- **Accountable Representation**. The participants who represent groups or organizations must effectively speak for the interests they represent and be accountable to their constituency or agency.
- **Level Playing Field**. The partnership or collaboration must ensure equal opportunities to participate, access to relevant scientific and technical information, and skill building for participants.

For additional resources, please visit the Forest Service Partnership Resource Center [website](#).

1.2 Process: Instructions for using the Assessment Tool

The Assessment Tool presents a series of questions to help you or your unit reflect on experiences and attitudes about partnerships and collaborative decision making. The best way to complete the exercise is in a group setting with your team members and perhaps partners.

Depending on your circumstance, completion of the AT on a personal level can provide benefits to advance your capacity to participate in effective partnerships.

Using the AT in a Group

If you fill out the AT as a group, we recommend that you work together in the same room and assign team members to several roles – facilitator, note taker, researcher. A team member trained in facilitation (or meeting management) should manage the session. One team member should also take careful notes to provide the team with a record of how they reached their answers for the AT questions. You may also need to assign research tasks ahead of the session to ensure that your group has all the necessary data for completing the AT together.

Working in a group will likely yield diverse and valuable discussions about each question. However, the process can be lengthy; the group may need two to three hours to adequately discuss all of the questions.

By completing this exercise, you are trying to create a picture of your unit and its partnership capabilities. Be sure that all participants agree on how you are defining the scope of your team

or unit. Do not push for agreement on each question; instead let the diversity of views be recorded. Make sure you fully explore the many roles and skills represented by the team as you answer the questions.

You might consider involving existing or prospective partners in your discussion (or ask them to fill out the AT separately), particularly if your unit is experienced in partnerships and collaboration and you already understand most of your strengths and barriers. Such units have found that including partners in the assessment gave rise to incredibly valuable dialogue and insights into both strengths and barriers.

Completing the AT as Individuals.

If time or logistics constrain your group from completing the AT as a team, individuals can fill it out on their own, and one person can tabulate the results. We strongly urge you to meet as a group to analyze the results and determine your Action Steps (Section 4).

Scoring.

Each element in Section 3 has a set of statements that represents a desired outcome. Assess how your unit's efforts are progressing toward these desired outcomes using the following scale:

- **3** – **Always true**. This is a real strength of our unit.
- **2** – **Often true**. We have the capacity, but need to improve or do more.
- **1** – **Occasionally true**. We need to make significantly more progress.
- **0** – **Never true**. No real effort or activity in this area.

There is a maximum of 3 points per statement. After you complete all the sections, add up your scores, record in Section 4.1, and fill in the attached chart and/or the tables in Sections 4.2 and 4.3.

This assessment will be useful to the extent that it is based on accurate information. It is easy to inflate your ratings or answers to "look good" – after all, you are assessing the organization in which you work. But this is *not an examination*, and there is no right or wrong answer. The aim is not to get the highest score possible, nor is anyone going to use this information to "grade" you or your unit in any way. This is a developmental exercise; the aim is to provide yourself with accurate feedback which you can use to develop your unit's capacity and make decisions for its future. The AT works best if you make a *balanced assessment* of your unit's capabilities – being neither "too hard" nor "too soft".

Section 2: The Context

Begin by filling in the following three tables, which will help you put into context your answers for the assessment in Section 3. Table 2.1 is important because partnerships should be seen as one of many tools for accomplishing your goals. Table 2.2 will be useful as a reminder of your unit's past experience, which you should use as a basis for your responses in Section 3. The AT will provide valuable information and planning ideas for the prospective projects you list in Table 2.3.

If possible, it is recommended that the individual team / unit members fill out these Section 2.0 tables ahead of meeting as a group to conduct the rest of the assessment. Different staff members will likely have different priorities, and these should be discussed to determine which are the most important for the group as a whole, with a focus on those most likely to have partnership opportunities.

Table 2.1. Key priorities or goals for your unit in the next year.

Key priorities or goals for your unit in the next year Can we accomplish these on our own?	Yes	No

What are the primary existing partnerships or collaborations that you want to maintain and nurture? In some cases there is an ongoing partnership that has developed a project, and in other cases a project is underway relying on a partnership to succeed.

Table 2.2. Primary existing partnerships or collaborations and goals.

Existing Partnership or Collaboration (Partner and Project)	Key Partnership Goals
a.	
b.	
c.	
d.	

What key ideas or important projects are you considering that internal staff members and outside groups (e.g. national, state, and local governments; Tribal governments; non-governmental organizations; or businesses) requested or suggested?

Table 2.3. Proposed partnerships or collaborations and goals.

Proposed Partnership or Collaboration (Partner and/or Project)	Key Partnership Goals
a.	
b.	
c.	
d.	

Section 3: The Assessment Tool

As described above, you will now have the opportunity to characterize the progress your unit has made in each of the seven general categories that are relevant to your unit's overall capability to engage in partnerships. For each category, you will be asked to make a judgment about a set of statements, essentially answering the question, "How true is this statement for our unit?" Each of the statements represents a desired outcome relevant to the category, although you may notice some overlap in these statements. This is natural, because these categories are part of a whole picture, and because many desirable characteristics have more than one benefit. Please use the following scale, and mark the degree to which your unit's efforts are progressing toward these desired outcomes.

- **3** – **Always true**. This is a real strength of our unit.
- **2** – **Often true**. We have the capacity, but need to improve or do more.
- **1** – **Occasionally true**. We need to make significantly more progress.
- **0** – **Never true**. No real effort or activity in this area.

There is a maximum of three (3) points per statement. After you complete all the sections, add up your scores, record in Section 4.1, and fill in the attached chart and/or the tables in Sections 4.2 and 4.3.

Please remember that there is no "right" answer to any of these questions. Your best judgment *is* the right answer, because the tool's most important value is the opportunity for thoughtful reflection that it seeks to give you. Don't be too hard on yourself, but don't try to inflate your answers either. The point is an honest self-assessment that will assist in choosing next steps, either to maintain your strengths or develop new ones.

3.1 Resources

Time

_____ Our unit can devote time to partnerships or participation in collaborative efforts in concert with our ability to perform major tasks.

_____ Once our unit sets aside the time for partnerships and collaborations, we do spend the time needed for building relationships and fulfilling our commitments to those activities.

Staff

_____ Our unit has a "partnership specialist" or has been working with a "partnership specialist."

_____ Interested staff members who have the right mix of knowledge, skills and abilities are available for existing or new partnerships or collaborations.

_____ In our unit, people stay in place long enough to complete partnerships and collaborations.

_____ Our unit is organized so that if one person devotes time to partnerships or collaborations other staff will not suffer.

Money/Investments

_____ Our unit has enough money to cover our costs for individual partnership and collaboration activities.

_____ Our current budget requests would provide sufficient funds to allow us to leverage some of our dollars in activities with partners.

_____ When our unit sets aside funds to leverage support for partnerships or collaborations, we are able to retain it through to the end of the effort.

_____ Our unit has used a "Friends of the Forest" program to solicit funds and/or other in-kind resources for partnerships and collaborations.

_____ **Resources Score: 0-30** _(Add the scores for this section, and write the total here)_

3.2 Culture, Attitudes, and Procedures

_____ Our unit works well as a team internally, both on specific projects and overall.

_____ People are able to raise issues and discuss differences openly and constructively, even with those to whom they report.

_____ Our staff members believe (or know) that members of the local community have important knowledge (and ideas on process) about the forest and resource management that could be valuable in a partnership.

_____ Our staff is at least as diverse as the population of the region within which we work.

_____ Staff members and managers in our unit see partnerships and collaboration as a positive way of conducting business, and managers are receptive to suggestions for partnerships from staff members.

_____ USDA legal staff interprets laws and regulations in ways that help facilitate partnerships and collaborations.

_____ Our unit understands the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) and does not invoke it to resist partnerships and collaborations.

_____ Personnel policies and procedures support staff participation in partnerships, even when they involve night and/or weekend activities.

_____ Requests and directives to support partnerships and collaborations are clear and consistent from our forest supervisor and unit supervisor.

_____ Our unit has good mechanisms for staff to ask for help when they run into difficulties, and staff feel comfortable asking for help.

_____ **Culture Score: 0-30** _(Add the scores for this section, and write the total here)_

3.3 Past Experience and Current Opportunities

_____ Our unit has a history of supporting partnerships and collaborative stewardship.

_____ Our unit is engaged in partnerships or collaborative efforts at this time.

_____ Our unit is currently being asked to participate in future partnerships and collaborations.

_____ Our unit has ideas for initiating partnerships and collaborations with others.

_____ Our unit has evaluated the potential associated with these opportunities (either initiated by others or ourselves) and sees them as positive.

_____ Our unit has specific plans for future partnerships and collaborations, with staff and resources identified for them.

_____ Our unit's goals and objectives have been advanced by our past participation in partnerships and collaborations.

_____ The results of past or current partnerships and collaborations have been worth the time and effort spent.

_____ Our unit has discussed lessons learned from our past experience and the majority of our staff are aware of what was learned.

_____ Our unit has incorporated lessons learned from past experience into our current practices.

_____ **Experience/Opportunities Score: 0-30** _(Add the scores for this section, and write the total here)_

3.4 Incentives/Barriers

_____ Our unit has budgeting processes that facilitate partnerships and collaborations (e.g. there are ways for getting additional funding for partnerships).

_____ Our unit's performance measures (targets) allow us to report on our partnerships and get recognition for them (there are internal incentives and rewards that encourage partnerships and collaborations).

_____ At least some members of our staff have personal performance expectations that include participation in partnerships and collaborative efforts.

_____ Our unit sees partnerships as more than a policy directive from upper management.

_____ Our unit is flexible in its approaches and implementation of policies and procedures and, thus, allows staff latitude for working with partners in different ways, depending on the circumstances.

_____ Our unit does not lose allocations or appropriated funding when we are successful with partnerships.

_____ Our unit rewards action and results more than planning and paper work.

_____ Our unit encourages staff to build relationships with external groups.

_____ Our unit provides training opportunities to those who engage in partnerships and collaborative efforts.

_____ Projects done through partnerships have less red tape to deal with than they otherwise would have had.

_____ **Incentives Score: 0-30** _(Add the scores for this section, and write the total here)_

3.5 Staff Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

_____ Our unit understands the social, political, and economic contexts within which our partnerships or collaborative projects will take place.

_____ Our staff members are skilled at clearly communicating what they want, listen well to one another and to outside stakeholders, and suspend judgments until everyone has been heard.

_____ Our unit members understand (overall) a variety of techniques used to collaborate with outside groups and how to decide which ones to use in different situations.

_____ Our unit members understand how to invent more options to suit everyone's needs, to develop joint, objective criteria to evaluate options, and to develop agreements with clear implementable terms.

_____ Our staff members understand the pitfalls that can occur in partnerships and ways to avoid them.

_____ Our staff members know whom to include in partnerships, who should come to what meetings, and how to develop strong relationships and rituals that build trust.

_____ Our staff members are skilled at organizing projects with clear objectives, milestones, assignments, and follow through.

_____ Our staff members understand the importance of effective meetings for partnership development and project implementation, and they are skilled at managing meetings (e.g. clear agendas, full participation, and time management).

_____ Our staff members are skilled at helping the partnership be productive between meetings.

_____ Our staff knows whom to go to for help when difficulties arise.

_____ **Knowledge Score: 0-30** _(Add the scores for this section, and write the total here)_

3.6 External Relationships[*]

_____ Our staff is actively engaged in activities sponsored by a wide range of the communities of interest and communities of place that are relevant to our goals and objectives.

_____ Our staff is on a first name basis with leaders within most of the relevant communities of interest and communities of place.

_____ Our staff has positive relationships with our current partners and participants in collaborative projects.

_____ The majority of our staff has relationships with external groups.

_____ Over the past few years, our staff has been engaged in partnerships or collaborative projects with many different kinds of stakeholders.

_____ Our staff has lots of experience developing positive relationships with different kinds of people and groups.

_____ Our community and non-governmental partners would say that we are good partners to them, and that our unit assists them in achieving their goals.

_____ Our community and non-governmental partners express understanding of our planning and project management objectives, processes, and policies, and they would say that we understand their views, interests, and constraints.

_____ Community and non-governmental organizations with whom we have not yet developed partnerships express understanding of our planning and project management objectives, processes, and policies, and they would say that we understand their views, interests, and constraints.

_____ Our unit has repeated requests to engage in a partnership or collaborative effort from groups that have been our partners in past efforts.

_____ **External Relationships Score: 0-30** _(Add the scores for this section, and write the total here)_

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[*] Such as national, state, and local governments; Tribal governments; non-governmental organizations; and businesses.

Section 4: Analysis and Action Steps

4.1 Plot Your Score

For each of the sections above, record your score here.

_____ 3.1 Resources Score

_____ 3.2 Culture Score

_____ 3.3 Experience/Opportunities Score

_____ 3.4 Incentives/Barriers Score

_____ 3.5 Staff Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Score

_____ 3.6 External Relationships Score

For each score, color/shade from zero to number, or place a dot within each section of the inner circle of the chart on the following page to create a picture of your organizational strengths. It will be easiest to do this by hand.

Partnership Capacity Assessment Tool
Organizational Strengths
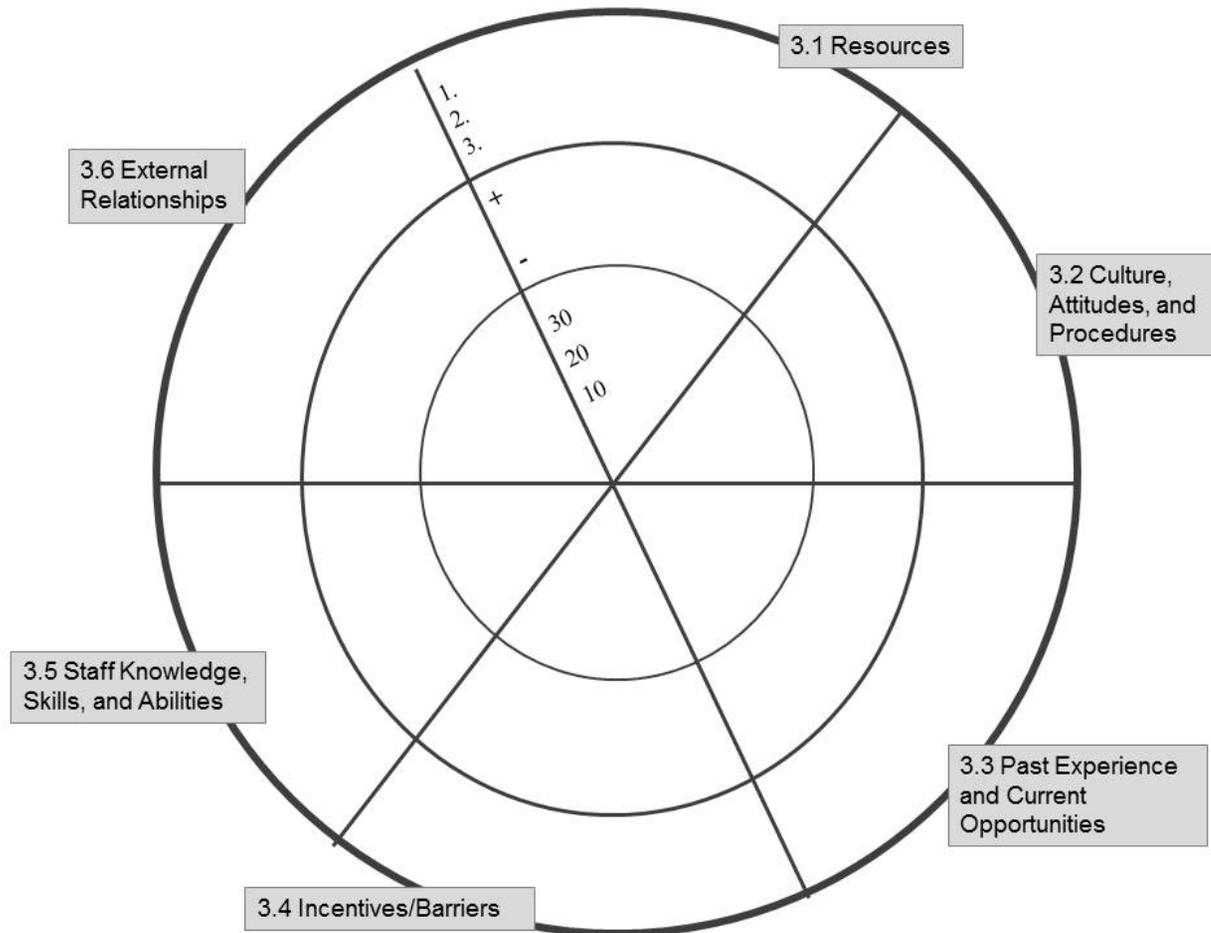
Figure 1. The partnership capacity assessment tool organizational strengths schematic allows a unit to create a picture of their organizational strengths.

4.2 Analyze Both Positive and Negative Factors

Now review the pattern reflected in the inner circle of the attached circle chart. For most units, this will be an uneven pattern. This is normal. The segments of the circle that extend out the furthest show where your unit has concentrated its development so far. If your unit is not well developed in any area, don't give up – just consider asking for help or devoting more resources to your action steps. For those rare units that are well developed in all areas, you may want to find a mirror to look yourself in the eye and ask how honest you were with yourself! And if you were, be sure to continue to invest the resources that have gotten you where you are.

The next step is to fill out below and/or on the second (middle) ring of the circle chart a few ideas about why you think you have (or have not) developed your strengths in each of the segments. You may want to review your assessment of the statements in each section – look for 3's and for 0's or 1's. What do you think the most important internal or external factors have been that influence where your unit is at this time? Write down both positive and negative factors. You can choose to do this only for the one or two areas of greatest strength and one or two areas where your unit has developed the least, or for all segments if you have time.

Finally, review the factors you've identified and highlight one or two positive factors that you want to be sure to maintain and one or two negative factors that you would like to do something about.

Factors concerning resources (3.1).

Positive	Negative

Factors concerning culture, attitudes and procedures (3.2).

Positive	Negative

Factors concerning past experience and current opportunities (3.3).

Positive	Negative

Factors concerning incentives and barriers (3.4).

Positive	Negative

Factors concerning staff knowledge, skills and abilities (3.5).

Positive	Negative

Factors concerning external relationships (3.6).

Positive	Negative

4.3 Plan Your Next Steps

Now that you have a picture of your organizational strengths, write below and/or on the outer ring of the circle chart, what you can do to develop your unit's capacity. Options include: providing leadership in specific ways, adding to your budget, providing training, encouraging internal communications and knowledge sharing, changing performance measures or job descriptions, offering rewards, creating more flexibility, exploring the feasibility of a partnership that has been suggested, etc. Remember to consider these options in the context of the picture you developed of your unit in Section 2, especially considering the prospective partnerships and collaborative efforts you listed in Section 2.3. If you can, note who takes the action and when it should be taken.

Actions to strengthen resources (3.1).

What Action Will We Take?	Who Will Do This?	By When?

Actions to strengthen culture, attitudes and procedures (3.2).

What Action Will We Take?	Who Will Do This?	By When?

Actions to build on past experience and strengthen current opportunities (3.3).

What Action Will We Take?	Who Will Do This?	By When?

Actions to strengthen incentives and reduce barrier (3.4).

What Action Will We Take?	Who Will Do This?	By When?

Actions to strengthen staff knowledge, skills and abilities. (3.5).

What Action Will We Take?	Who Will Do This?	By When?

Actions to strengthen external relationships (3.6).

What Action Will We Take?	Who Will Do This?	By When?

TOGETHER WE CAN DO MORE THAN WE COULD BY OURSELVES