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Guidelines for partner collaborations within Act Church of Sweden

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Introduction

Act Church of Sweden is an integrated part of the Church of Sweden and bases its work on an identity as a church and a part of a worldwide fellowship. As part of the worldwide church, the task of Act Church of Sweden is to participate in work for change together with and for people who live in vulnerable situations around the world. Our starting point is a life-empowering theology that is expressed through the active choice to be present among vulnerable people. Together with other churches, we share faith, experiences and tasks, and we contribute with our various abilities and resources. Like different parts of the same body, we in this fellowship are mutually dependent on and jointly accountable to each other. Our joint responsibility is to address the global challenges of our time, persevere in our work as well as to convey and be guided by the hope that a better world is possible. We want this broad and in-depth understanding of the fellowship within the worldwide church to permeate all our work.

Relationships and partnerships form the core

Act Church of Sweden¹ works together with churches, church-related development organisations, networks and other organisations within church cooperation, humanitarian assistance, long-term development cooperation, and policy dialogue and advocacy. Relationships and collaboration with sister churches and other organisations form the core of our identity and our daily work. Together with churches and local organisations we can contribute to solid, sustainable development in the contexts that our partners work in, and together we can strive towards attaining joint goals and visions. As a church in a global world, Act Church of Sweden also wants to learn from other churches' experiences and bring back what we have learnt to the work in our Swedish context.

Act Church of Sweden wants to contribute to a dynamic and democratic civil society. Churches and other organisations are important civil society actors that in their contexts have the function of carrying the voice of rights holders, acting both as watchdogs and organisers of services. Act Church of Sweden sees a role for churches and other organisations in the work to strengthen people as active participants in the churches and as rights holders and citizens in society. We believe that churches, ecumenical networks and other development organisations can contribute to democratising societies, be models themselves for a democratic culture, increase respect for human rights, make decision-makers available and accountable to their citizens, and contribute to sustainable economic and social development.

Act Church of Sweden performs limited operational work of its own outside Sweden and instead enters into agreements for collaboration with local partner churches and organisations. The collaboration can take place at many levels, comprise many types of commitments and can span long or short periods of time.

International ecumenical alliances

Based on our identity as a church, the ecumenical cooperation is particularly important to Act Church

¹ The guidelines refer to partnerships managed *at national level* by Act Church of Sweden at the Central Church Office.

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of Sweden. As part of a Lutheran church we have a special historical and theological communion within the Lutheran family of churches. The Church of Sweden also has a strong ecumenical identity that is expressed in particular through our membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC). This wide-ranging, in-depth understanding of the fellowship within the worldwide church goes beyond time-limited, results-oriented partnerships as we define them below in this document.

The Church of Sweden has been a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Lutheran World Federation (LWF) since these organisations were founded in 1948 and 1947, respectively. The collaboration within the LWF and WCC is characterised by joint work with other member churches and church-related aid organisations, and by resources being created for this in the form of support for strategic and programmatic work. Special agreements state the mutual expectations regarding commitments, follow-up and responsibility within this collaboration.

Act Church of Sweden is also a member of Action by Churches Together, ACT Alliance. ACT is one of the largest global faith-based alliances for humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and advocacy. Membership in the alliance enables Act Church of Sweden's strategies to be developed in close connection with the alliance's global strategy and undertakings. It also involves jointly agreed financial commitments in the form of membership fees and financing of the ACT Alliance secretariat.

All members of ACT are jointly responsible to make visible the identity and fellowship within the alliance. The WCC and LWF are closely connected to ACT, and Act Church of Sweden's sister organisations in Europe are also members of the alliance – and as a result the development within the wider ecumenical family is focused around and within these ecumenical bodies. These contexts are therefore crucial to the identity and activities of Act Church of Sweden.

Purpose and terms of reference

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide the framework for the purpose-driven collaboration that Act Church of Sweden has with various churches and organisations worldwide within the framework of its international work.² Here we describe Act Church of Sweden's view of partner collaborations, our role in relation to the churches and organisations that we collaborate with, our expectations of them, dialogue as a form of follow-up and learning, and how partnerships are initiated and concluded.

In this document, the word *partner* is used as a collective term for all sister churches and organisations with which we enter into special agreements for collaboration in order to contribute to mutually agreed goals. It is not, therefore, a document in which we state how the Church of Sweden promotes relationships and strengthens the fellowship between Christian churches bilaterally or within the framework of various ecumenical organisations. Nor does the document give a detailed theological explanation of our understanding of fellowship, *koinonia*, in the worldwide church. However, our understanding of *koinonia* is significant for the persistent, long-term approach that distinguishes our collaborations with many sister churches and ecumenical bodies.

² In other words, the guidelines do not regulate the relationships and partnerships that exist at diocesan and parish levels.

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Partner collaborations

A partner collaboration (partnership) can be defined as two or more churches or organisations having agreed to work together with a common purpose. This cooperation is characterised by organisational autonomy and equity³ in the relationship, mutual respect, joint quality and accountability. Together the parties develop commitments and goals for mutual learning. This requires an open and continuous dialogue between the partners.

The partner collaboration is defined in various types of agreements, contracts or other accord that clarify the purpose of the collaboration, the joint responsibility, the different roles, conditions, requirements for reporting, etc. as well as the planned results of the collaboration.

This definition does not include collaborations of a more temporary nature with resource organisations, participation in various networks or relationships with other stakeholders, e.g. work undertaken together with other actors in the field of advocacy, or communication/campaigns in Sweden. The Church of Sweden's own parishes and dioceses are principals/commissioning bodies to the international work and as such, they do not fall within the definition of partnership either.

Act Church of Sweden as a partner

Act Church of Sweden wants to create an enabling environment in its partnerships. Act Church of Sweden is working towards harmonising requirements and routines and wants to promote issues regarding an enabling environment for civil society globally and in the programme countries. Our view of mutual respect, joint quality and accountability is reflected in our internal work and in relation to partners. Our role is to facilitate and enable, not dictate and control. In this way Act Church of Sweden does not want to speak for, but instead to work towards enabling partner organisations to be heard in discussions and debates in society and as actors in their own right. Act Church of Sweden has undertaken to promote increased accountability in its partnerships and to dialogue with partners about how they in turn work on issues of quality and accountability. By following the partnership in dialogue and performing evaluations together with the partner, Act Church of Sweden seeks to bring about continuous joint learning.

Act Church of Sweden has adopted the Istanbul Principles for CSO (Civil Society Organisation) Development Effectiveness. This involves undertaking to promote increased development effectiveness and allowing this to be reflected in *how* we work with our partners. Act Church of Sweden shall work in its partnerships in such a way that we respect the independence of our partners and aim to establish equality in the distribution of power in the relationship. We want to work with our partners so that we strengthen each other, learn more from each other and become more effective in our joint work. Effective partnerships for development require long-term commitments based on trust, respect and solidarity, and in which needs and rights are at the core of the work.

³ Equitable partnerships

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Act Church of Sweden wants to be an active partner that contributes to strengthening churches and organisations in their specific roles and mandates. Act Church of Sweden can adopt various roles in relation to the partner churches and organisations that we work with, depending on the situation and the specific partnership. We want to accompany our partners, enable good conditions for their work and existence, challenge them to develop and strengthen their roles, and mobilise resources and support for their work. Depending on the specific collaboration, Act Church of Sweden can contribute with various types of support in a partnership:

Financial support

Financial support can be given to a partner in the form of core support, programme support or project support, depending entirely on the situation. Where the right conditions exist, core support can be one step in strengthening organisations to work in their own right and promote aid effectiveness.. In cases where core support is not deemed possible or relevant, but where Act Church of Sweden supports several related actions of a partner, a broader programme support may be considered. In our partnerships we want to promote long-term commitments, predictability and transparency, as well as harmonising requirements with other donors. The conditions for financing are clearly stated in the agreements entered into.

Capacity building

All collaboration with partner churches and organisations also aims to increase the capacity of the partner and of Act Church of Sweden. The collaboration shall be designed so that we mutually strengthen each other's ability and possibility to act. Act Church of Sweden has a holistic view of the term capacity and wants to help ensure that partners have the organisational prerequisites (systems, resources, abilities and relationships) to be and do what they were created for, i.e. to be able to fulfil their mandates and roles. Based on the dialogue between the parties, opportunities for specific capacity-building measures and joint learning are defined; with the partner's own definition of its capacity-building needs at the centre of this process. Capacity-building initiatives are planned and followed up on together, through close dialogue and joint initiatives.⁴ Any conversations about seconding staff resources should also be linked to the analysis of capacity and capacity-building needs.

Accompaniment and moral support

Many of Act Church of Sweden's partner churches and organisations operate in vulnerable environments and are themselves subjects of threats and retaliations. In certain cases the moral support and international backing provided through the collaboration with Act Church of Sweden are more valuable than the purely financial support. Act Church of Sweden therefore safeguards its role as an accompanier and wishes to contribute in various ways to increase the space for churches and organisations to act in their own right. This work is based on close and trusting relationships with the partner organisations and requires that we link the role of accompanier to the other work we perform in Sweden and internationally.

⁴ Act Church of Sweden's capacity-building work is defined in "Act Church of Sweden capacity-building manual".

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Networking and advocacy

Based on our platform in the Swedish and global civil society, Act Church of Sweden can contribute to linking partner churches and organisations to various arenas and networks, in which key issues are addressed. This is linked to the above points about capacity-building and the role of accompanier, in which our connections in Sweden and other countries can be used to reinforce a partner's work in various ways. This also gives Act Church of Sweden the opportunity to carry out advocacy work at relevant levels in issues that are important to partners and where our work constitutes a key link in the chain from the partner organisation's perspective.

Staff stationed abroad as a resource/method in the work

Staff stationed abroad play a decisive role in enabling relevant work and support in all above areas. Presence created through staff stationed abroad is often essential for understanding the context in which our partners work and for enabling development of more in-depth partnerships. Stationed staff play an important part in follow-up, capacity building and joint learning. They are important to the building of networks, more in-depth dialogue, and knowledge about the context to strengthen collaboration on joint areas for development. Staff stationed abroad also bring back knowledge, experience and competence to Act Church of Sweden's work, both locally in dioceses and parishes and at national level.

Starting a partnership

A partnership can be started in many different ways. Sometimes a thorough preliminary study is performed with an active search for a partner, while on other occasions the first contact is made in a completely informal way. In both cases the process starts with

- 1) *Identification of mutual interests, values, goals and priorities.* For Act Church of Sweden this includes checking these factors in relation to the Strategic Plan and country programmes, as well as other relevant policy documents. This includes identification of joint thematic areas.
- 2) The next step consists of *dialogue about the organisation's role and capacity* as well as strategies and opportunities for collaboration with the intended partner. This comprises a conversation about how Act Church of Sweden can best support the church or organisation to be and do what it has been created for.
- 3) In the cases where both parties are interested in proceeding towards a collaboration, the process continues by the organisation submitting an *application* that is processed by Act Church of Sweden according to established routines.
- 4) After that, an *agreement can be signed by both parties.* The agreement constitutes the starting point and basis of the formal partnership.

Partner criteria

Act Church of Sweden has the following basic expectations of its partner churches and organisations:

- Share the vision, values and basic mission with Act Church of Sweden.

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- Work with a rights-based approach using principles of participation, non-discrimination, empowerment, and accountability.
- Plan, follow up, evaluate and report on how resources are used and what results are achieved – and put lessons learned from this into practice.
- Have sound financial and administrative routines and undergo an annual audit.
- Conduct continuous anti-corruption work.
- Continuously work on a Code of Conduct for staff.
- Continuously work on the staff's development, rights and working conditions.
- Have integrity-based routines for processing feedback and complaints.

In cases where a partner cannot fulfil one or more of these criteria, Act Church of Sweden wants to conduct dialogue about and contribute to strengthening the capacity of the partner organisation within the relevant areas. That's why the above points form the foundation of Act Church of Sweden's dialogue with its partner organisations.

Specific criteria in the humanitarian field

For humanitarian work, partners are also expected⁵ to follow the basic humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence; the Sphere Standards; and the Red Cross's and Red Crescent's Code of Conduct for Disaster Relief.

Dialogue about a partner's role and capacity in preparation for a partnership

In preparation for a possible partnership, and during an existing partnership, Act Church of Sweden conducts dialogue with the (intended) partner organisation about the latter's role and conditions for working in terms of mandate, capacity and context. During this stage, the partner organisation also considers whether to enter into a partnership with Act Church of Sweden on the basis of its own motives.

Act Church of Sweden then undertakes an organisational assessment together with the intended partner using the above basic criteria. The organisational assessment is used as a starting point for the dialogue with the partner. This is a way for Act Church of Sweden to commence a dialogue about accountability issues that are important to our work, and the dialogue around these issues provides the basis for an analysis of the collaboration, for example, the opportunity to identify existing strengths or needs for mutual capacity-building. The purpose of the organisational assessment is to conduct a dialogue regarding the organisation's identity, organisation, governance and activities to identify opportunities for collaboration within capacity building and issues for further follow-up. The purpose is *not* to only select partners with a high level of capacity in all areas. The actual level of capacity is not therefore the central element; instead it is the continual dialogue and the process surrounding these issues that are the focus.

⁵ In accordance with Act Church of Sweden's humanitarian guidelines

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After completing the organisational assessment, the analysis can, if required, be conducted in greater depth in one of or more of the areas or a thorough system audit can be carried out. Supplementary conversations about partners' thematic capacity⁶ also need to be conducted in parallel.

The initial dialogue also includes a discussion about the time limits for the financial collaboration and the opportunities for phasing out Act Church of Sweden's support in the future. This encompasses conversations about the church's or organisation's own strategy for resource mobilisation and diversified financing.

Dialogue with partners for following up ongoing collaboration

One foundation for the collaboration is a joint endeavour to achieve mutual learning and development. This can only be achieved within the framework of an open and trusting dialogue with the aim of learning from each other's experiences. The dialogue helps to bring Act Church of Sweden closer to the reality that the partner lives and works in and is essential for being able to support the partner effectively.

The expectations stated above (partner criteria) are followed up on continually as part of the partnership. The partner dialogue is based on the collaboration agreement between Act Church of Sweden and the partner and covers issues regarding thematic and methodological aspects as well as quality and accountability. The dialogue shall be seen as an ongoing process throughout the collaboration and includes all contacts between the parties. The purpose of the dialogue is to continuously follow up on expectations and joint undertakings and it is part of the ongoing process for follow-up and evaluation. Act Church of Sweden has various tools for following up on the collaboration. The partners' capacity, results of their work and financing are monitored through visits to partners, ongoing contacts, partner assessments, spot checks, external audits. etc., but also in the form of the regular reporting stipulated in the agreement. Follow-up and evaluation always take place in cooperation with the partner and are above all used to identify areas for improvement and development, in which both parties take joint responsibility.

Through the dialogue, Act Church of Sweden also wants to obtain partners' opinions of our activities and our way of working. In addition to the continuous dialogue, Act Church of Sweden wants to invite partners to provide feedback, for instance through recurring partner consultations, partner surveys and through Act Church of Sweden's complaints mechanism⁷ that is open to all partner organisations.

Responsible phase-out

Right at the start of a partnership, planning also takes place for the possibility of eventually phasing out the financial and capacity-building support. A phase-out may become relevant in cases where conditions for the partnership change or when both parties feel that the work has reached a natural

⁶ In other words, capacity in relation to one of Act Church of Sweden's policy areas within which the collaboration would be relevant.

⁷ Complaints and Response Mechanism, CRM

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conclusion. The joint work shall therefore be run on assumptions of sustainability so that the result of the partnership can continue. Both parties shall therefore, in good time before an agreement expires, discuss the continued collaboration and, in relevant cases, jointly agree on a phase-out plan. This discussion should include the partner's ability to mobilise resources and diversify financing. It has to be underlined, however, that relationships, exchanges and networking with Act Church of Sweden can continue even without financial support.

In cases during an ongoing agreement period where a partner does not meet expectations or live up to jointly agreed commitments, Act Church of Sweden will, in the first instance, attempt to improve the collaboration through dialogue and help to build capacity, before any decision is made about ending the partnership.

Memberships in the WCC, LWF and ACT are permanent, so discussions about phase-out do not take place in conjunction with the renewal of agreements.