



# Sometimes It Takes a Disruption to Rethink Your Partnership

## FIVE LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID-19

### The Need

In late 2019 and early 2020, the world changed as the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly spread across the globe. Every person was affected as schools and businesses shuttered. At FHI 360, a global development organization with a strong foundation in global health and a team of medical doctors and public health experts focused on infectious disease, it was clear that much would be asked of us in the months and years to come. Nearly immediately, FHI 360 was able to apply its expertise and networks with health systems across the world to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic in partnership with our existing funders, including USAID and the Centers for Disease Control.

The economic impact on businesses was also severe but given that our networks in the private sector were less well-developed than those in the public sector, it was more challenging for us to find a pathway to contribute. For this reason, FHI 360 connected with a partner outside our typical partner profile—an Asia-based strategy consulting firm, AWR Lloyd. AWR Lloyd has more than twenty years of experience in Asia and a large existing list of corporate clients, many of whom now needed expert health advisory services to keep their doors open. Through a merged offering that combined FHI 360’s public health expertise and practical knowledge of national health systems with AWR Lloyd’s deep understanding of business operations and analytics, we worked with several companies to advise on how to protect their workers and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on their broader stakeholder communities, while maintaining their operations and minimizing COVID-related financial loss.

When the U.S. Department of State announced their COVID-19 Private Sector Engagement & Partnership [Fund](#), we saw a unique opportunity to leverage what we had learned in initial engagements with companies in the Middle East and the Pacific Islands, to provide an open-source toolkit that could help many more businesses in Southeast Asia, as well as bespoke advisory services to an additional cohort of companies.

### KEY PARTNERS:



**Banpu PLC**  
Sector: energy  
6,000+ employees

**Central Pattana**  
Sector: retail and others  
5,000+ employees

**Siam Rajathanee**  
Sector: outsourcing  
8,000+ employees

**Singha Estate**  
Sector: real estate  
Nearly 2,000 Employees

## What did the project seek to accomplish?

With support from the Office of Global Partnerships at the U.S. Department of State, FHI 360 and AWR Lloyd launched the **Partnerships for Business Resilience and Recovery in Southeast Asia** project (PBRR) to foster a more resilient private sector across Southeast Asia. The project's goal was to equip businesses with the tools to:

- Safely resume, adapt, and accelerate operations
- Balance financial stability and workforce safety
- Build resilience to the current pandemic and future crises
- Share insights, best practices, and innovations from the private sector

To achieve this, we:

- Cultivated 11 private sector partnerships with diverse companies in Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia.
- Developed and disseminated a detailed COVID-19 Southeast Asia [Business Resilience Toolkit](#).
- Delivered 28 trainings to partners and Thai micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) on the toolkit and other business resilience programming.
- Provided technical assistance in assessing and developing action plans to addressing expressed private sector interest on improving workforce mental wellbeing.

Under PBRR, we built a pipeline of high-impact companies applying PBRR tools and approaches and scaled up access to resilience technical assistance across more than 100 MSMEs in Thailand. Overall, PBRR and its partners laid the groundwork for continuation of private sector actions towards a sustainable and more responsive, responsible, and resilient private sector in Southeast Asia.

## PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS BY THE NUMBERS



Figure 1: Project Accomplishments by the numbers

“ Working across sectors on a one-year project in a time of crises and rapid change required us to be open, humble learners, ready to quickly adapt. In this spirit, we offer a few lessons we learned about working with the private sector during our year-long sprint. ”

## What we Learned

### Be flexible



Perhaps the most important lesson our team learned was that we must be agile and responsive to operate in rapidly evolving situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The advisory offerings companies paid for in 2020 were less in demand in late 2021 when the project began roll-out, given vaccine development, improved treatments, and easing government restrictions. Companies surviving the pandemic thus far had already developed at least minimum business continuity plans. By 2022, even as omicron peaked in Southeast Asia, private sector leaders clearly expressed fatigue with planning around (or even discussing) COVID-19. Instead, there was deep demand for thinking broadly about resilience to current and future economic shocks in general. The project refocused on business resilience of the future and offered services like risk management, workforce mental wellbeing programs, and ESG/sustainability advisory services.

### Design together



“One company cannot navigate all new challenges alone. – Wittapon Jawjit, Banpu PLC HR Director”

Given that the project period was only one year, activities started quickly. A non-linear iterative process of understanding the demand, challenging the assumptions, redefining the problems and co-designing with the partners was our adaptive pathway in forming the current partnerships. Together, FHI 360 and AWR Lloyd consolidated and expanded our most important lessons and tools regarding COVID-19 business continuity planning into a toolkit that could be shared broadly and help us connect with more companies interested in advisory services. We expected the toolkit to be critical to initiate new business partnerships. As such, we spent a lot of time developing a high-quality (and lengthy) technical resource that we thought, based on our earlier experience, would be of most use to private sector partners.

Early in the project, we did see partners finding value in this in-depth resource, but as the external environment and partner interest shifted, a technical resource of this depth and breadth simply couldn't keep up. In a future iteration, we would work with a small set of partners to build shorter knowledge resources *with, not for* them, on topics of shared interest. For example, we may co-develop tools via rapid and iterative market surveys and audience testing.

### Relationships take time



PSE is relationship-based work, and meaningful relationships take time. Brunese, et al. (2021) described five types of private sector functions (Figure 2)<sup>1</sup>. Our experience is that each takes time and trust to establish, with the highest level of partnership (Co-Partner) requiring the most. Yet, time was at a premium in a short duration project, and COVID-19-related restrictions on in-person meetings were an additional complexity to build interest and new relationships quickly. On average, even working through

<sup>1</sup> Brunese P, Lee MK, Yih Y, Croft M. USAID PSE Process Analysis Executive Summary; 2021 Sept. Award No.: AID-7200AA18CA00009. Sponsored by USAID. Available from: [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00Z4CT.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z4CT.pdf)

our team’s existing networks, it took us about four to six months to form partnerships with large corporations and approximately two to three months for medium and small enterprises.

	Financial Support	Design involvement	Implementation involvement
<b>Financial Supporter</b>	High	Low	Low
<b>PSE Participant</b>	None	Low	High
<b>PSE Collaborator</b>	Low	Moderate	High
<b>Financial Collaborator</b>	High	Moderate - High	Low-Moderate
<b>Co-Partner</b>	High ( <i>plus innovation, technology, thought leadership</i> )	High	High

Figure 2: Five types of private sector functions within the development sector (adapted from Brunese, et al., 2021)

Relationship development did not always follow a predictable path of growth. In one partnership, we found after months of positive, exciting discussion that the champion for our partnership left the company and we found ourselves back at the start, cultivating a relationship with a new hire. Ultimately, we were able to develop a joint deliverable that added value to our partner, but the staffing change significantly slowed the relationship’s growth. While this is an inherent vulnerability in a new partnership, we learned to mitigate this risk by cultivating multiple relationships within a company.

Some things we did right: we checked in often to build familiarity. We clearly communicated our timelines and expectations, knowing that they might be different for our partners who were unaccustomed to collaborating with donor-funded projects. We provided free advisory services where we felt that the chance to work together and demonstrate our value-add could help grow the relationship. And, critically, we recruited staff to lead the project directly from the private sector, who brought the experience, language, and networks we needed to connect with corporate partners. In the end, our partnerships were a blend of PSE & Financial Collaborators and PSE Participants. The stage has been set to develop some of these into Co-Partners in the future.

Something we would do differently next time: we would invest more time working through business networks where we could more efficiently connect with many companies at once and gain credibility through association.

**One size does not fit all** 

Differences in country context and company profile can make a significant difference in the services needed. Our project had the broad mandate to support economic resilience and recovery across SE Asia and, as such, it was critical for us to consider the country and local context our partners were operating within, including COVID-19 numbers and government restrictions. The relevance of each service needed to be considered once we pivoted to broader resilience messages. For example, when we began advising on employee wellness and mental health programs, we had to consider how this message would be received in various contexts, as in many Southeast Asian cultures mental illness is stigmatized and discussing mental health concerns is considered taboo. Private sector champions were key to setting the tone for their workplaces.

We worked with companies of different sizes in this project as well, which required contextualization. Many of the large multinational companies we collaborated with had already developed extensive business continuity plans, while some small and medium sized businesses only possessed a standard government-guidance preparedness plan. Seeing the diversity of where our partners were in their existing planning for business resilience made clear that we needed to move beyond our standard toolkit to offer bespoke services for large corporations and targeted trainings and technical assistance on the most urgent topics for small and medium sized enterprises.

Importantly, some of the smaller companies we worked with struggled to access our pre-developed resources, which were originally available only in English. Later we translated all materials and trainings to Thai, which helped us reach a much larger number of small and medium sized businesses in Thailand, but still left out corporate leaders more comfortable in other languages. In short, while there were certainly shared needs and interests across our portfolio of companies, the project needed to contextualize the services we provided to be most effective.

### SUCCESS STORY:

**Siam Rajathanee** is an outsourcing company that experienced significant issues with turnover during COVID-19, especially among their 4,000+ drivers. In response to this, Siam Rajathanee sought PBRR's advisory services to help determine if mental wellbeing issues were affecting their turnover problem and, if so, what they could do to address it. PBRR designed and conducted a mental wellbeing survey and received responses from more than 2,000 drivers. Using the survey results, PBRR held a co-creation workshop with Siam Rajathanee and developed a recommendation report. Siam Rajathanee utilized the learnings and recommendations to create the Perd Prutu Chai or "Open Heart" program, which provides knowledge sharing on mental wellbeing every month, alongside on-call support for those who are struggling.

### Redefine leverage



Leveraging the contributions of the private sector was a major goal of the project. For the purposes of this project, leverage is defined as private sector resources that increase the scale, effectiveness and/or sustainability of development outcomes. Initially, our team understood our leverage plan as providing services to companies that they would pay for directly, as we had seen in our corporate engagements in 2020. However, as the urgent business need for operational advisory waned in 2021, we found companies less willing to pay for these services. The team then faced the question of how we might achieve our leverage goals. Ultimately, leverage comes from value. What was our value proposition to companies in the transition between "public health emergency" and "new normal"? And if not payment for advisory services, what could companies provide to advance the project's goals?

“ Through trial and error, our team learned that we could unlock significant contributions from the private sector by advising on health and development-aligned best practice, making a clear business case for our partners, and then letting them apply those interventions and approaches to their operations at their own expense.”

For example, we worked with one company to co-design a mental health and well-being program, beginning by providing a mental health skills assessment to supervisors at the project’s expense. Now the company is rolling out the assessment to all staff at one large work site and planning an employee assistance program that covers mental health services. Similarly, based on our engagement with another partner, the company established an annual allowance for employees to use for enhancing their own mental wellbeing, instituted a work-from-anywhere Friday policy, and are working with their health insurance provider to add a mental health benefit. Finally, PBRR discovered an alternate source of leverage from the private sector via a reciprocal contribution with SkillLane to create a widely accessible ‘audible toolkit’ in Thai.

Given that this was a one-year project, much of the leverage partners will contribute to this solution will be generated after the project end date. Taking this approach of co-creating solutions with the private sector allowed the project to connect deeply with corporate resources, including their time and expertise, to sustainably fuel solutions beyond the project period. Offering our advisory for free, at least initially, allowed us to move quickly, avoiding robust procurement processes, and demonstrate our value.

Perhaps a hyper focus on leveraged funds, outside of any other type of corporate asset, makes sense in an infrastructure building or capital markets project where the goal is to use donor funds catalytically to de-risk or attract much larger private investments. But on projects seeking to drive more complex outcomes, such as improved health and well-being across a region, we found it makes sense to think more holistically about the broad array of assets a company has, including their leadership’s time and attention, access to supply chains, changed policies affecting thousands of employees, or their public platform. Sometimes, cash is the least valuable thing a company can provide.

### *Overall, what did we learn about the effectiveness of social sector organizations in supporting business adaptations in the face of crisis?*

During a global crisis, we often face an overwhelming amount of information, unprecedented challenges, and contradictory views. Private sector alone cannot manage everything on their own. This calls for commensurate and concerted actions from public, social and private sector to foster economic resilience. The classic funder-doer relationship doesn't always work. Companies’ interests in environmental and social issues and the impact they have on their business and stakeholders is much broader than that, as are the non-financial resources they can bring to bear. Similarly, non-profits are much more than project implementers; these organizations often house experience and expertise on ESG issues and deep insights into key stakeholder groups.

*“Building new effective and long-term partnerships can spur innovation and create new paths for development solutions to accelerate progress at the country and community level.” - U.S. Department of State*

## HOW THEN CAN ACTORS IN BOTH THE PRIVATE AND SOCIAL SECTORS MOVE INTO A NEW STORY?

Typically, the solution is unknown at the outset. So, we need to move away from promoting predetermined solutions towards permitting joint ideation. One part of the answer to this complex question is for partners to come to the table as equals and listen well to each other's needs and abilities. Mutuality is critical in cross-sectoral partnerships. It is important both to know who you're talking to and know who you are.

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### Know who you're talking to...

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When talking to a company, we found it to be critical to know about that company's business and industry, including competing pressures of other macro trends or crises they might be managing. We also needed to understand who in the company we were speaking to, what that person's role was, and what kind of decision-making authority that person had. Our ask for each company was different, depending on the kind of footprint and assets they had, and what they could bring to a collaboration.

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### Know who you are...

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Similarly, it was important for us, as a social sector organization, to know what assets and areas of expertise we had, approaching the negotiating table as an equal partner, not as a transactional service provider. Whether or not our partners approached us with the same understanding of our ability to advise on public health issues and their implications for their business was a success factor in our engagements with them. We often found that companies' interest in collaborating with us grew as they got to know our team and its capabilities.



Working across sectors can sometimes feel uncomfortable, as partners discover mismatches in expectations, work styles, timing, decision-making processes, language, and metrics. Our project team experienced a bit of each of those. But our experience is that these differences can be bridged when there is a shared challenge and a clear, mutual value proposition.

As our planet moves into the “poly-crisis” era due to climate change, creating a just, livable society will take all of us. Business leaders must increase their agility in managing multiple competing crises at any given moment. And the social sector must learn to unlock our assets, previously available only to donors and development sector actors, to increase the knowledge base for our full ecosystem needs.