

What makes alliances last?

A landscape review

When executed well, coordinated action by organizations pursuing a shared goal can effect change at an impressive scale and yield inspiring results. Collectives or alliances allow multiple stakeholders to join forces for a common goal, leveraging their diverse strengths and resources to play a more influential role in their area of work. There are thousands of alliances across the globe; these vary widely in purpose, size, scope, financing, and impact. One such alliance is the recently formed Condom Alliance in India — India's first alliance of condom manufacturers, marketers, domain experts, implementation agencies, and donors — aimed at reviving the condom market in the country. With support from USAID, the Sustaining Health Outcomes through the Private Sector (SHOPS) Plus project helped establish the Condom Alliance and is supporting the Alliance to think through its strategy over the next two years.

In an effort to inform the Condom Alliance's potential paths to sustainability, SHOPS Plus conducted a landscape review consisting of a rapid desk search, followed by key informant interviews (KIIs) with eight alliances from across the world, to understand what makes an alliance sustainable. This brief shares findings from the review on best practices for ensuring a sustainable alliance and highlights examples of existing alliances most relevant to the Condom Alliance as it evolves.

A. Insights from desk search

To identify key lessons on sustainability, we began our landscape review with a rapid desk search on the global alliance landscape. In our search, we used the following definition of an 'alliance': a partnership of multiple independent organizations that work together in a coordinated manner to make progress toward a shared long-term goal. We also filtered results to just those alliances that exhibited the following characteristics:

- Have been in existence for more than two years (the critical point that the Condom Alliance will soon be reaching)
- Have demonstrated progress toward a shared goal (to exclude dormant or ineffective alliances)
- Have active participation from multiple members (given the Condom Alliance's large member base)
- Have some element of self-financing, which is a critical element of sustainability

Our search revealed 30 alliances and two influential reviews. The first, a Harvard Kennedy School review (2017) of more than 100 partnerships spanning companies, governments, and civil society, found that four types of collaborations were best suited for scaling up business engagement in sustainable development (see Figure 1). These collaborative pathways lie on a sliding scale that categorizes them according to the amount of control exercised by each alliance member, engagement between alliance members, and scale of potential alliance outcomes.

We used this scale to identify the collaborative pathway that the Condom Alliance in India has adopted and categorized the 30 alliances along these pathways (designated with blue circles in Figure 1). The Condom Alliance exists as a platform that fosters collaboration between condom manufacturers, retailers, and other contraceptive industry players who typically compete against each other for condom sales in the Indian market. Therefore, we consider most of the actions and engagement by the Condom Alliance to fall in the third pathway ('industry-level, precompetitive business alliances'). Out of the 30 identified alliances,

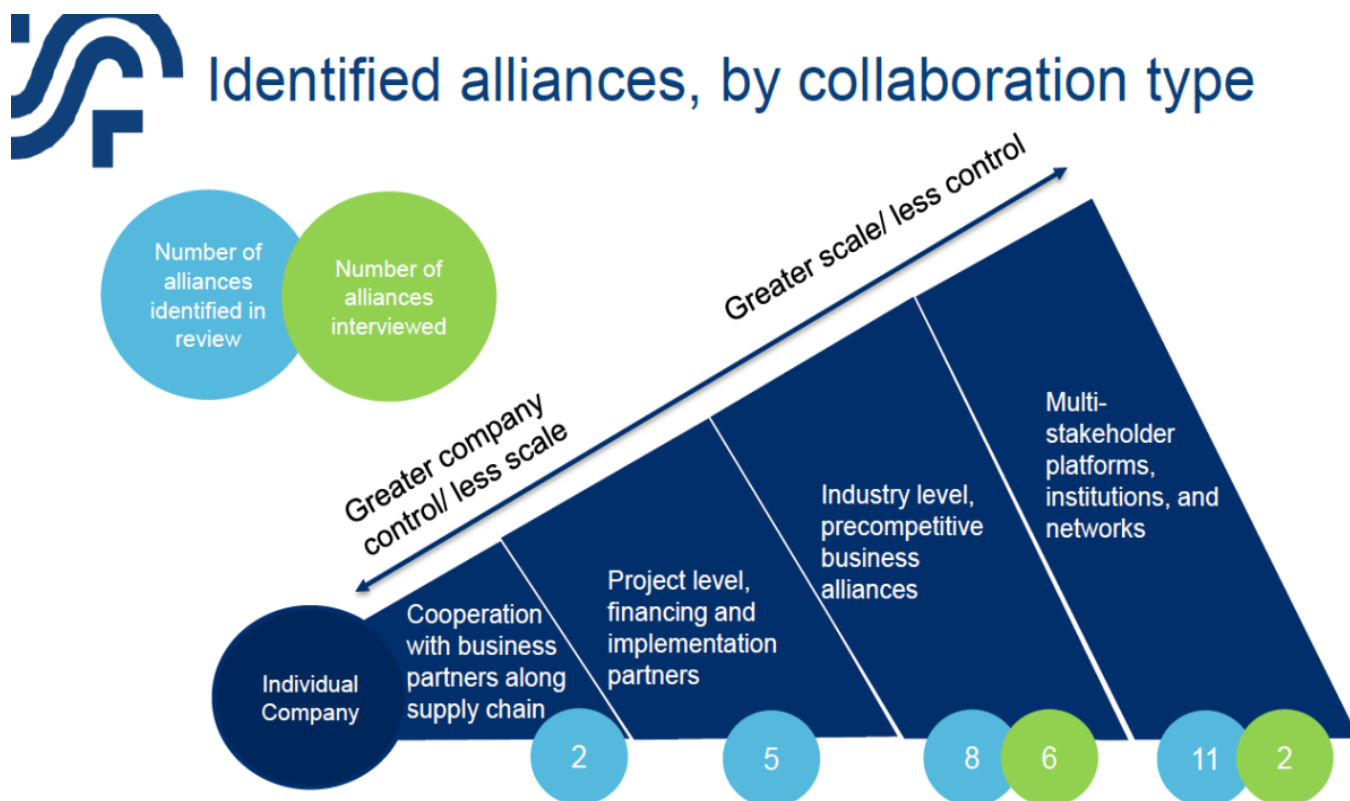
we conducted KIIs with eight alliances, which were selected based on their meeting the criteria of relevance to the Condom Alliance and responsiveness to our request for interview.

The second review, a Stanford Social Innovation Review article (2011), identified five conditions that must be present for successful collective impact (see Box 1). These conditions were present in the eight alliances we subsequently studied in-depth through KIIs and are important for the Condom Alliance to consider. Additional features and learning from KIIs are summarized in the next section.

Box 1 What ensures collective success?

1. Common agenda
2. Shared measurement systems
3. Mutually reinforcing activities
4. Continuous communication
5. Backbone support organizations

Figure 1. Collaborative pathways to scale engagement



Adapted from: Business and Sustainable Development Commission, and Corporate Responsibility Initiative, Harvard Kennedy School

B. Takeaways from key informant interviews

For the analysis, we looked at sustainability through the twin lenses of member retention and adequate funds to run the Alliance’s core activities. We held KIIs with eight alliances (see Box 2) to understand factors that are important for the sustainability of an alliance — such as member engagement, financial underpinnings, and governance structures that work or do not work — but are not discernable from a desk review. Through these KIIs, six main themes emerged: inception and growth, membership, funding, governance, evolution, and leadership and knowledge management. Key takeaways from our interviews with leaders of the eight alliances are presented below, organized by these themes.

Inception and growth

1. Getting an alliance up and running takes about five years.

Our KIIs with the selected eight alliances showed that the phase in which these alliances first formed and experienced rapid growth, before reaching a stable plateau, was about five years’ duration. All the alliances, except the Health Workers for All

Coalition (HW4All Coalition), had taken at least five years to reach a mature stage; the HW4All Coalition is still less than five years old. The five-year timeline also reflects in the terms that many alliances have set for their secretariat. For example, Advocating Reproductive Choices (ARC) has a five-year tenure for hosting the secretariat.

Each of the interviewed alliances had been created through seed funding from donors or founding members. A common agenda for collective action had brought the founding members together (see Box 2).

“ Like-mindedness, a common vision, and agenda are the critical ingredients for success...members’ recognition that it cannot be done alone independently, but that we need to work together with each other to achieve it. ”

Amanda Banda,
Health Workers for All Coalition

Box 2 Alliances selected for conducting key informant interviews

Name of alliance	Founding year	Founding donor	Common agenda at inception
Asia Pacific Malaria Elimination Network (APMEN)	2009	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Australian government	To focus on malaria elimination
Advocating Reproductive Choices (ARC)	2005	Packard Foundation	To introduce injectable contraceptives in the public health system and to expand the basket of choice for women
Health Workers for All Coalition (HW4All Coalition)	2018	WEMOS through its donor funds	To unite the civil society worldwide to advocate around equal access to skilled human resources for health
Kenya Healthcare Federation (KHF)	2004	Private sector donors	To champion public-private partnerships (PPPs) for better health care
International Food and Beverage Alliance (IFBA)	2008	Membership fee/equal donations by the 12 founding members	To empower consumers to eat balanced diets and live healthier lives, in support of the World Health Organization’s efforts to improve global public health
Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)	1997	Unilever and the World Wildlife Fund	To address shared concerns about the devastation of cod stocks in Canada
Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition (RHSC)	2004	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	To ensure that all people in low- and middle-income countries can access and use affordable, high-quality reproductive health supplies
Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform	2002	Unilever, Danone, Nestlé	To develop and promote a sustainable approach to agriculture

2. Developing and promoting a clear member value proposition is critical to attracting members.

A clear member value proposition (MVP) — defined as members’ recognition of the value in coming together as an alliance — is critical to drawing new members and keeping existing members engaged. Most alliances acknowledged they had spent considerable time on developing and promoting their MVP during the alliance’s inception and growth phase.

3. The initial choice of members is strategic and one that impacts the MVP.

The choice of including or deliberately not including certain potential members was a decision that founding members of the eight alliances had invested time in and made strategically. For example, Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition (RHSC) included corporate representatives from the manufacturing sector because they were core actors in the alliance’s work on commodity supplies. In contrast, Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform decided not to include NGOs as members because it felt that NGOs come with strong agendas that could dilute the alliance’s value proposition for the private sector.

“ *You have to be a member-led organization, for the members, of the members, by the members... A member-led organization has to be clear on its member value proposition...I have to have my value proposition clear and protected. It is not a science, it is a dance.* ”

Adrian Greet,
Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform

“ *They need to understand what they will receive from being a member of the coalition, like support, recognition, cross-learning.* ”

Prerna Puri,
Advocating Reproductive Choices

Membership

4. Ongoing member engagement and interest determine success.

The KIIIs highlighted that continuous member engagement and interest is a critical determinant of an alliance’s sustainability. Member engagement has implications for all other requisites/functions of an alliance, including funding; the two are in fact interdependent. If members are engaged and see value in keeping the alliance alive, they are able to navigate through funding options and raise resources to sustain the alliance. For example, RHSC did not begin as a membership organization but as a work stream among donors; however, the commitment and engagement of its members grew over time, transforming RHSC into a full-fledged alliance sustained through funds pooled by members.

5. Members crave continued engagement and results.

Alliances often try to meet the need for member engagement through two main approaches. One approach is to organize events and achieve public milestones; for example, organizing workshops, regular interactions among members and with external stakeholders (such as government), and/or campaigns. In the other, they may empower and encourage members to take within their own organization actions that link back to the alliance’s goal; for example, promoting the alliance’s agenda online or providing a platform to other members to showcase their work. Larger alliances have platforms that allow for frequent, broad communication, such as through a monthly newsletter. Each of the eight alliances has a user-friendly website or a website where content is frequently updated. Websites of many of them, such as RHSC and SAI Platform, feature latest industry data, press reports, information on initiatives, etc., making them a great resource for both members and external stakeholders.

Governance

6. Sustainable alliances have robust governance structures in place.

All the alliances we interviewed have clear charters, manuals, and terms of reference around governance and principles of member engagement. The majority also have a standalone non-profit or another organization that runs the alliance as the anchor organization and operates/serves as the secretariat.

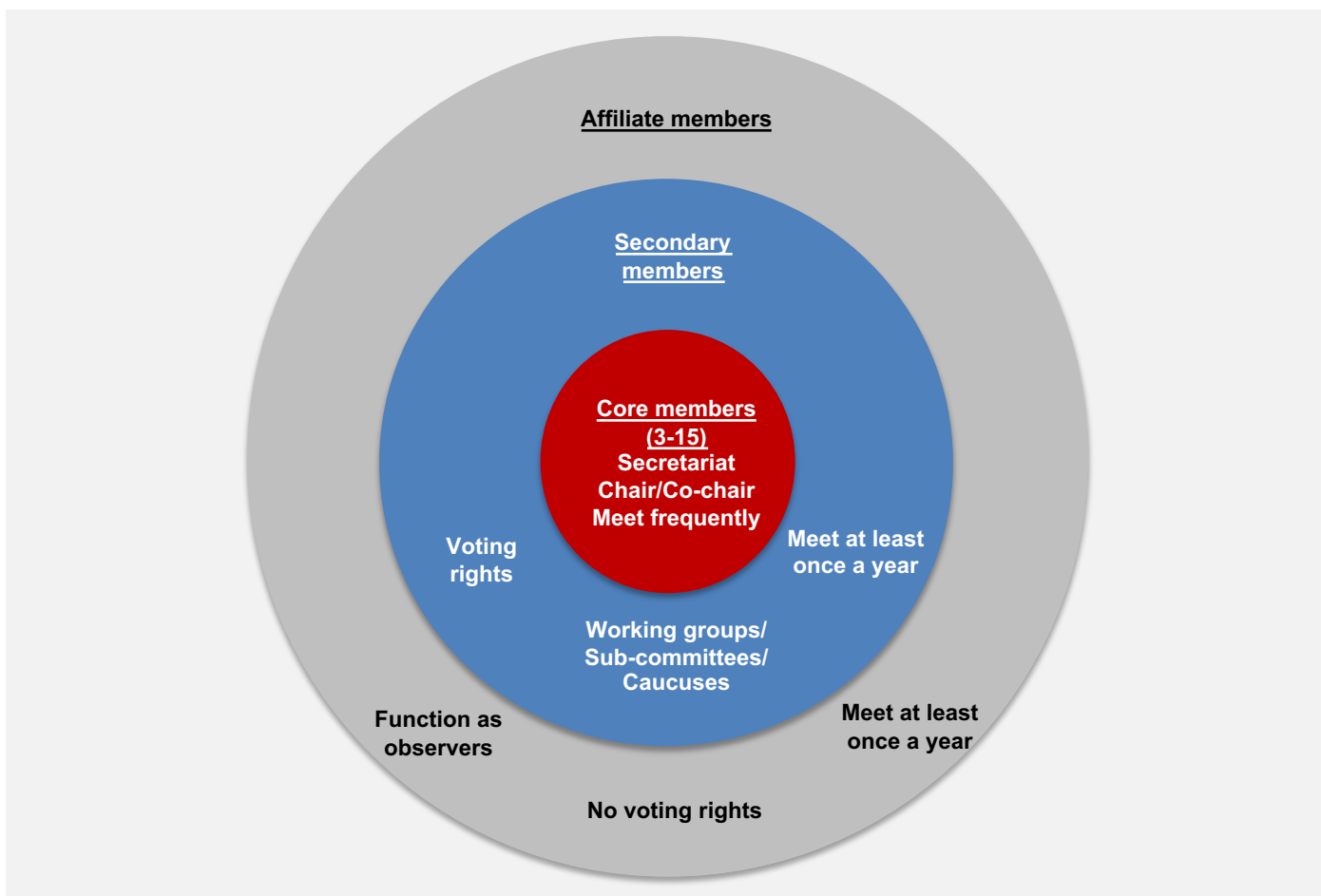
In terms of governance and membership structure, members could be categorized into three groups (see Figure 2). The core group tends to be relatively small, with about 3–15 founding members or donors. Members in the core group had remained constant for all alliances except Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and Kenya Healthcare Federation (KHF), both of which elected core group members with a tenure, and SAI Platform, which had expanded the group to bring in more diversity and voice. This group serves as the secretariat or the secretariat reports to this group. The core group has the ownership of the alliance, and its

leadership is largely selected/nominated from among them. Members of the core group decide the direction of the alliance, meet frequently, and, in most cases, are responsible for securing resources to sustain the alliance.

Outside of the core group is typically a larger group of secondary members who meet less frequently and have voting rights. This group expands as the alliance expands to bring in more working groups, sub-committees, or caucuses (as called by different alliances). The sub-committees or working groups are created to address specific themes that members have a common interest in or to focus on a particular issue. These are the engines that drive the coalition forward over the years. These working groups all have a chair/co-chair and are not permanent in nature.

Last, there are affiliate members or observer members; this group includes those who want to be associated with the alliance but do not necessarily have the same visibility. It consists of private sector organizations and, sometimes, faith-based organizations. These members meet at least once a year or more often when needed.

Figure 2. Snapshot of governance structure in alliances



Funding

7. How alliances are funded influences their priorities.

The KII's led to a key learning with regards to funding: the type of funding affects the nature of activities the alliance implements (see Table 1). The alliances we interviewed mostly had hybrid funding models, with a mix of membership fee and donor-funded support; here it should be noted that in their initial years, each of the eight alliances had been funded by one or more donors (see Box 2).

As an alliance expands and progresses in its lifecycle, it seems a best practice to charge a membership fee to establish the value that membership in the alliance brings. However, several of the eight alliances we interviewed continue to weigh the merits and demerits of charging a membership fee. For example, ARC has always worked through a collective effort rather than membership fees but is now leaning toward the decision to charge a membership fee. In contrast, RHSC has decided against charging for membership due to a number of concerns: first, the process of managing the membership fee initiative appears too cumbersome for the limited amount of funds it could potentially raise; second, whatever fee is charged would inevitably be too high for some and insignificant for others; and third, the question of whether donors

would have to pay a fee to retain membership even if they had provided grants or seed funding. Importantly, RHSC's core and other activities total over \$7 million a year, a sum that could not be easily replaced by annual membership fees.

MSC is unique in that it does not have a membership fee but instead earns 75 percent of its revenue from licensing the 'MSC Ecolabel' to certified partners. This revenue is collected by MSC International, a for-profit company owned by MSC, and the earnings are transferred to MSC. The remaining 25 percent comes from donations and grants from governments (Germany, European Union, etc.), private foundations, and philanthropic organizations (mostly American).

In addition to donor funding and membership fees, some other revenue generation activities were also reported by some alliances. For example, RHSC charges a general membership meeting fee, which varies by the nature of organization and the income level of the country where the organization is based. SAI Platform also levies event charges, which are more for non-members, but members also need to pay. Its projects also get funded by members. For instance, if ten members want to do a project that costs \$100,000, they may put \$5,000 each, totaling \$50,000; SAI Platform may then put in an additional \$30,000 and pay the remaining \$20,000 from a foundation/external funding.

Table 1. Types of funding and implications

Type of funding	Strengths	Limitations
Single donor Ex: ARC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting is simplified. Financing stream tends to be consistent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Donor has a large say in the strategic direction of the alliance. Alliance is vulnerable to failure if the donor exits.
Donor pool Ex: RHSC, SAI Platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enables alliances to leverage funds from a diversified pool, comprising different types of organizations (donors, multilateral organizations, private corporates, etc.) that fund what they see value in. Reduces dependence on a single source of funding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires additional dedicated personnel/human resources and well laid-out processes to monitor and report fund use.
Membership fee Ex: SAI Platform, KHF, and International Food and Beverage Alliance (IFBA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collection of funds through membership fees works well for independent/registered organizations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funds collected through membership fees may not be sufficient for alliances to function. While more than 95 percent of SAI Platform's activities are funded by membership fees, it constitutes only 20 percent of the overall funds for MSC and KHF.
Revenue-generating activities Ex: SAI Platform, RHSC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows alliances to get supplementary funds through event fees, etc., to fund specific work streams/activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The funds collected are only a small proportion of the alliance's overall funds. Additional reporting is needed.

Evolution

8. It is common for alliance focus to evolve over time in line with the needs of members and the environment.

Alliances evolve their focus over time to match the emerging needs of members and the dynamic context of their work. Most alliances we studied had evolved in two ways: i) in terms of their work/activities and ii) through the alliance's growth and members' increased commitment as the group matured.

Most alliances had been formed with a specific, sometimes topical, agenda that evolved over time. For example, ARC was formed with the focused but limited agenda of introducing injectable contraceptives in the basket of choice. Once that goal was accomplished, members felt a need to revisit the alliance's mission. Hence, ARC's agenda evolved to focus on expanding the contraceptive method mix. For some of the alliances we interviewed, the scope of work evolved as they matured. The initial priority was to get the alliance together and operating, and so the focus in the early stages was on establishing and running the secretariat. Once that was established, members' interest drove the alliance's work. For example, in the initial years, RHSC focused on secretariat-related tasks. Its activities are now being expanded and represented by working groups and caucuses.

Knowledge management and leadership

9. Investing in knowledge management allows the alliance to capture the lessons learned.

The KII's highlighted knowledge management and success planning as critical to capture the institutional history of an alliance. Building a repository of knowledge based on an alliance's experiences and learning is important to inform and guide its work. However, in many instances, despite a well-designed process for the secretariat's transition, a change of hands resulted in missing pieces in the story of the alliance's journey. As those initially running the secretariat moved on, they took with them institutional memory and learning. A robust knowledge management plan would avoid this critical loss.

10. Invested leaders are essential for long-term sustainability.

All the alliances we interviewed had leaders invested in and driven by the alliance's purpose. They were dedicating substantial time (usually pro bono) for its work, including fundraising, getting new membership, and providing oversight to the secretariat.

“ We (the coalition) are a function of evolution. The way we are today is not because we were initially designed that way. It's the result of evolution over a decade and a half. Both our core agenda and the coalition's expansion is driven by member's interest and initiatives. ”

John Skibiak,

Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition

C. Lessons and recommendations for the Condom Alliance

The Condom Alliance has had an impressive beginning. It has been able to convene diverse organizations, including almost all of India's key condom marketers, donor organizations, and organizations working with youth. It has a functioning secretariat, unanimously ratified charter, and clear governance manuals. The Condom Alliance has also shown the important role it can play: during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Alliance proactively participated in a constructive dialogue with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, to represent condom marketers and express their challenges in a unified voice. The government paid attention to the Alliance's assurance that sufficient production capacity existed within the country and restrictions were not needed on condom exports to ensure sufficient domestic supply during the pandemic. The Alliance conveyed that exports in the medium term would allow marketers to generate revenue, especially in view of the diminishing domestic demand due to the

challenges arising from COVID-19 related lockdown and restrictions on movement.

The Condom Alliance has been periodically sharing data and analysis with its members, such as key data insights from IQVIA and findings of a behavioral economics study, and is on the cusp of triggering investments in new products (market validation and testing/go-to-market strategies) with condom marketers.

However, while the Condom Alliance's journey so far has been positive, focused attention on some key aspects will be critical to sustain the alliance long term. Our landscape review has provided valuable insights that can inform the Condom Alliance's journey forward and impact the achievement of its aims. Box 3 below summarizes what the Condom Alliance has done right so far and recommends what it should do going forward.

Box 3 Condom Alliance: What it has done right and what it should do going forward?

	Condom Alliance has followed best practices by having:	Going forward, we recommend the Condom Alliance should:
Inception and growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defined a member value proposition (MVP), unifying condom marketers Attracted a diverse set of core and secondary members Consciously limited core membership to condom marketers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attract marketers who are not currently part of the Alliance Enhance its MVP and identify steps to maximize it Propose milestone events/campaigns/advocacy products every year to ensure sustained recall of the MVP by members and relevant stakeholders
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up a functional secretariat through SHOPS Plus/Abt Associates Established governance mechanisms, which are consistent with those of the interviewed alliances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure funding and establish a full-time secretariat Define the selection process and terms of reference for the Alliance's chairperson Develop a public platform (such as a website) and a regular publication (such as a newsletter) to facilitate regular internal and external communication
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Witnessed strong member buy-in Expanded membership to organizations working with youth, digital agencies, think tanks, and multilateral donors aligned with the Alliance's agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasize the need for core members to own the Alliance and drive it forward Develop a member formalization and engagement strategy
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secured funding for almost two years from USAID 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in building the Alliance's reputational capital Secure funding for the next 3–4 years to sustain the secretariat
Evolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Led a dialogue with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, during the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing value to stakeholders beyond just Alliance members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to strengthen the spirit of shared value from the condom category's growth, facilitating engagement and dialogue with the government and the private sector Continue to align member interests with the Alliance's agenda of category expansion
Knowledge management and leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conscious documentation of the various governance documents, such as the charter, membership manuals, and terms of reference Built a group of champions who have supported the Alliance's work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan transition of the Alliance's institutional history to the new secretariat Work toward selecting an invested chairperson

1. Condom Alliance should plan to invest in the remainder of its five-year incubation period.

As the Condom Alliance develops its sustainability plan, it would benefit from planning strategies and resources to address two questions: i) how to keep members engaged and ii) where to get the resources to fund the secretariat for at least three more years. Having a larger secretariat during the growth phase — to set up the alliance and strengthen membership — will be critical. The secretariat can initially be equipped with three full-time staff members and subsequently transition to a leaner or expanded team in accordance with its needs. A part-time secretariat has not worked in the long term for most alliances (for example, RHSC and SAI Platform) because alliance work required substantial, dedicated effort, which is a challenge when people work pro bono/part time.

In the next one to two years, the Condom Alliance should focus on enhancing its MVP, formalizing membership, and furthering its reputational capital. Its activities should include strategic communication, creation of knowledge management assets (including digital), and identifying and leveraging champions for the Alliance. Unlike the alliances we interviewed, the Condom Alliance does not have a medium for broad, frequent communication, such as a monthly/quarterly newsletter or a website; therefore, these will need to be created and promoted. The Alliance could explore the donor pool model, which creates a resource pool of funds from multiple sources (see Table 1). This approach will allow the Alliance to leverage diverse funding resources (philanthropic and corporate donors).

2. The Alliance should focus on effectively communicating its MVP.

As the Condom Alliance moves forward, it should focus on effectively communicating and promoting its MVP. To be able to do that, it must clearly identify action steps for how members can maximize the MVP, for example, certain members engaging in certain activities, etc. The Alliance needs to plan a calendar of events and activities, ensuring short-term wins to maintain momentum and sustained recall to be regarded as a thought leader in the condom landscape. Additionally, it is important that the Condom Alliance identify/elect an invested chairperson to steward the effort and provide leadership, vision, and oversight to the secretariat.

3. Condom Alliance should continue to undertake activities that build trust among its members and other stakeholders.

Given that almost all of the Alliance members are direct competitors to one another, trust building among them will be critical. The Alliance must ensure complementarity and not competition among members by promoting activities aligned with category growth. Advocacy for trust building between different stakeholders, especially government and private sector, is important. The effort can focus on promoting shared value that the category's growth will bring for both the government and the private sector.

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