

# Building Connections with the Private Sector

## Private Sector Engagement Toolkit - Tip Sheet #6:

Making, building and sustaining connections with private sector firms is a first step to building a solid programing engagement, and among other things requires preparation, tenacity, and cultural competency

### Tips for MAKING connections:

1. Culture first! Make sure you understand local culture related to business relationships before reaching out to private firms. Use local field staff to advise on that and seek out additional resources (i.e. with private sector engagement experience) if necessary to fill out the picture.
2. Find good connectors (individuals who are already associated and engaged with the private sector) and build relationships with them. They can make introductions and point you in the right direction. But keep in mind that their background and motivation may conflict with ours.
3. Be prepared! Preparation includes understanding the sector / industry and the particular firm you are try to connect to. (See the Business Sector Scan Tool and the Firm Identification Tool for research approaches.
4. Have an understanding of the specific business model of a firm before starting to engage.
5. Go to where the private sector formerly meets and informally gathers. Go to business conferences and similar events to make connections. Always carry business cards.
6. Research business umbrella groups/ associations relevant to our sector, and meet the likely champions of our work. Having the support of a recognized business leader can help make things happen. If appropriate, ask for introductions and get contact information of prominent and relevant firms.
7. When you engage, articulate the “strategy” piece early; why you want to engage, what you can do, why it is important. Structure this to recognize the firm’s potential interest and impact on their future business.
8. Do informational meetings. These could be framed loosely on a program concept or simply to learn about their industry or sector. Do research, and be prepared and have a list of smart, relevant questions. Offer to stay in touch and do so. Cast your net widely then narrow down.
9. Make sure the private sector partner does not think you are there to steal their proprietary data or pass on secrets to their competitors or the government.
10. Make sure you are talking to the right person; someone that can be your internal champion and understands that engagement with Mercy Corps can support the interests of the firm.
11. Consider NGO consortiums. Creating partnerships with local NGO’s can help bridge differences and increase our credibility. This is especially helpful with MNCs or large firms. But make sure you have clear roles and responsibilities for those partnerships as well.

### Additional tips for BUILDING AND SUSTAINING connections:

1. Stay engaged and keep the conversation going. The private sector has different timelines and interests than us, and we may not be top priority. If you write to them and don’t hear back—write again.
2. When they do communicate, be responsive! Recognize that in many places – when it is in their interest - private sector partners operate on a quicker timeline than NGOs, so don’t delay in getting back to them.
3. Continue to make new connections. Things change, and just because we have what seems like a solid connection now, does not ensure we will have that going forward.

4. Be prepared to invest; it takes time and effort to build good long term relationships.
5. Revisit the “strategy” you have outlined and adjust it to reflect to changing context and dynamics.
6. Put a face to Mercy Corps if possible. Build relationships by engaging on a level that is not purely work-related (if feasible and culturally appropriate)
7. If a connection is not developing or getting lost, reassess and make sure it is still the right relationship. If so, reach out (i.e. set up a meeting or phone conversation) and find out why it has stalled; maybe priorities have changed or there has been staff turnover. Find out what can be done to restart the relationship.

## CONTACT

Mercy Corps Global Headquarters  
45 S.W. Ankeny Street  
Portland, OR 97204  
503.896.5000  
800.292.3355

Ted Volchok  
Senior Advisor, Economic and Market Development  
[tvolchok@mercycorps.org](mailto:tvolchok@mercycorps.org)

09-14