

BPD Classic Hits Series

Taking the Mythology out of Partnerships - A view from the ground up

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Working in partnership is a logical response to today's development challenges. Most organisations recognise that they cannot achieve their aims by working on their own. By working together, there is greater possibility to innovate, have an impact, reach scale and achieve some measure of sustainability. For all of these reasons, some believe that partnerships are clearly a major part of the solution. Others believe that though partnerships are a good idea, the language of partnership "*may conceal far more than it facilitates*".² Finally there are those who feel that partnerships are indeed part of the problem – that they allow partners to abdicate their responsibilities, they may leave some groups (government in particular) more dysfunctional, and they may promote a new 'partnership elite' that still marginalises or circumvents some stakeholders.

Defining our terms

In the water and sanitation sector, partnerships aimed at providing water and sanitation services in poor communities make sense. Partnerships may have a wide variety of objectives along a spectrum from the more specific task-orientation (like the installation of 500 water connections) to the more systemic aimed at changing rules (e.g. the development of new regulatory standards) or behaviours (like a national/global hygiene promotion programme) (see Figure 1 overleaf). In their most comprehensive form, they might, for example, aim to bring together economists and financiers with their understanding of the costs of providing a service, engineers who can adapt technologies to meet different situations, social development professionals who recognise the tangible and intangible benefits (and challenges) of providing services in poor communities, and environmentalists with a view to how the resource fits into the wider picture. More recent partnerships have sought to bring in partners from outside the sector with

BPD's definition of partnerships

Partnerships involve two or more organisations that enter into a collaborative arrangement based on:

1. Synergistic goals and opportunities that address particular issues or deliver specified tasks that single organisations cannot accomplish on their own
2. Situations where individual organisations cannot purchase the appropriate resources or competencies purely through a market transaction
3. An understanding that the context will change and thereby constructs created will need to evolve and eventually morph into institutionalised mechanisms and practices.

¹ Please note that the opinions expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily of BPD.

² Runciman, D. Guest Lecture, University of Cambridge Post-graduate Certificate on Cross-Sector Partnerships, September 2004.

expertise in health, education and environmental issues.

Whilst the theory sounds good, the term *partnership* still elicits much confusion. In the water and sanitation sector, and presumably in others as well, the term is often used to describe widely different constructs from loose networks and alliances to more institutionalised joint ventures. Commonly-used definitions tend to be too simplistic. They refer to their voluntary nature, shared or pooling of resources, capitalising on synergies, etc. Such definitions tend to mask the various obligations to participate, the overemphasis placed on financial above other kinds of resource contributions (like convening power, technical expertise, etc.), and the distinct differences between organisations that make partnership processes so challenging. Clearly partnerships involve some form of horizontal decision-making (i.e. shared power), valued contribution of all resources brought to the table, and flexibility to adapt the objectives and activities as circumstances dictate. (We must be somewhat careful because in many countries, the term partnership refers to a legal, contractual construct - although we are not using the term in this way.)

BPD's definition (see box on page 1) has been adapted from one created by the London-based think-tank AccountAbility (see www.accountability21.net). Part 1 of BPD's definition is fairly common and well understood. Parts 2 and 3 are perhaps the more interesting elements that lead to discussions around power and mutual need, donor/funder and recipient relationships, the "value" or quality of the relationship beyond the transaction, the ultimate goals of the partnership and how credibility will be derived over the lifetime of a changing set of partnership circumstances.

Historically BPD's focus has been on flexible multi-stakeholder partnerships that can be found within and under what are commonly called Public-Private Partnership arrangements. For example, under a macro management contract that delegates or authorises total or discrete responsibilities for the delivery of water services to a private company, a variety of different relationships can exist with the aim of getting water and sanitation services to underserved communities. These could include non-transactions-based three-way relationships between municipalities, a private company and NGOs or community based organisations (CBOs).

Such multi-stakeholder partnerships are thereby different from Public-Private Partnerships in a few key ways. PPPs in the water sector usually refer to legally binding contracts with clear vertical accountability structures based on a relationship between two signatories. As the table below suggests, the relationships are different in other ways as well.

As noted in Figure 2 overleaf, BPD sees partnerships somewhere along a continuum between networks and joint ventures. Networks are generally looser arrangements with presumably less risk, generally less tangible aims (around knowledge sharing, for example), lower commitment levels and where

accountabilities between the participating organisations are at a minimum or more loosely defined. Joint ventures are where participating organisations' identities are largely subsumed under a new institution, accountabilities between partners are high, accountabilities externally are also high and generally focused around contractual relationships with clients and customers. As individuals from partner organisations are engaged in relationships further to the right of the spectrum, a key decision is often around their professional identity and who they are representing – this is evident in the simple test of knowing whether to hand out the business card of their employer organisation or of the partnership or joint venture.

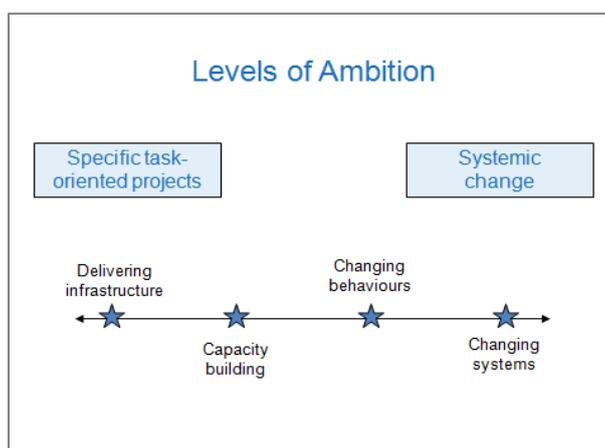


Figure 1

Distinctions between PPPs & MSPs	
Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)	Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs)
Contracts or transactions-based arrangement with clear vertical accountability structures	Less emphasis on transactions with significantly more emphasis on horizontal accountability among the partner institutions ³
Specific performance targets / deliverables and timeframes	Greater flexibility around targets, deliverables and timeframes as they are expected to emerge organically as the context evolves
Operate within legal / regulatory constructs	Partners operate within legal / regulatory construct but the partnership itself is unregulated
Limited stakeholder engagement that is clearly proscribed in the agreement	Extensive stakeholder engagement is considered a critical success factor

Exploring partnership myths

In working with a wide variety of partnerships over the past several years, BPD has come to a number of key conclusions around multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Firstly, given the flexible nature of their objectives and goals, **partnerships are rarely simple**. Partnerships bring together often conflicting and complicated sets of organisational and individual behaviours, biases, interests, etc. Governance and accountabilities, as well as commitments and deliverables, are often moving targets. Although the language of partnership (which focuses on mutual trust, transparency, equity, etc.) suggests a certain harmony, partnerships are a constant negotiation between the partners.

Partnerships often involve an un-stated or unresolved competition between partners. Such competition can be over ideas, ownership, constituencies or other aspects of the partnership. In its simplest form, in the water and sanitation sector, a partnership could easily bring together a private company, a local government and an NGO engaged in communities targeted for expansion. Each might easily have different perceptions about what would best meet the needs of a poor community. With the right spirit, this competition can challenge partners to innovate and scale new heights. With the wrong spirit, this competition can undermine relationships, challenging the partnership’s survival.

Related to the point above, the overarching mission of the partnership will probably revolve around a goal with which none of the partners would (openly) disagree. Contrary to the literature though, **it is highly unlikely that partners will share a common vision of how to get there**. Whilst every partner will be in favour of ensuring service delivery to the poor, views around technology choice, cost recovery, expansion targets, etc., are likely to be different. The reason that they come together in the first place is to benefit from this diversity. Thus partners must

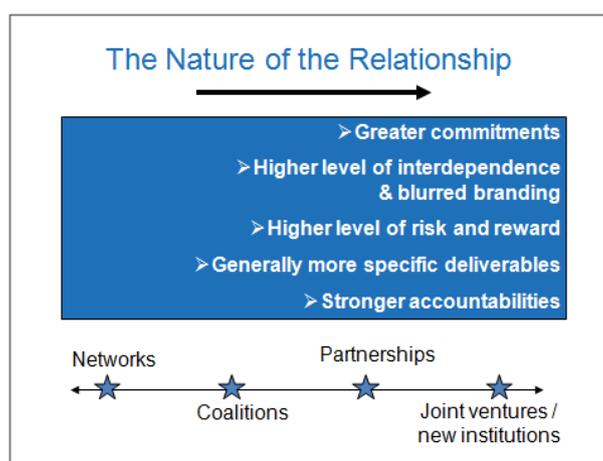


Figure 2

³ The one caveat is that often the funder or financier has the hierarchical edge and may use this power in the partnership to their advantage.

have a common definition of the project or task, though with some flexibility about how the interventions will progress.

BPD has even come across same-sector partnerships between different NGOs whose language was sufficiently similar to suggest that they shared the same vision of how to get from point A to point B. Exploring below the surface though resulted in a clear distinction between how, for example, each NGO involved in the partnership defined poverty alleviation. One viewed poverty alleviation as the result of installing basic infrastructure that then allowed poor households to meet their basic needs; one NGO viewed poverty alleviation as a function of providing choice and empowering poor households to make decisions; and a third NGO viewed poverty alleviation as best met once social safety nets were in place that allowed poor women in particular to pursue livelihoods. Each of these has different implications for resource allocation and approaches to prioritising roles and responsibilities.

Although we understand more and more about what makes some partnership processes more effective than others, the unpredictability of partner organisations and the diversity of the contexts need to be taken into account. **Each partnership is different and thus must be tailor-made for its own context.** It is this context that dictates the drivers that, either through incentives or obligations, compel partners to participate. Although the processes of forging a robust dialogue between the partners may be transferable across partnerships, partnership models themselves will not be transferable from one context to the next. The strengths and circumstances of “similar” institutions will not be the same in different places.

Partnerships between institutions are rarely trust-based, though they must be based on respect of partner contributions. Partners must trust the process of the partnership and feel confident that their interests, concerns and grievances will be heard and responded to. The process of partnership thus suggests that partners will be part of the debate that determines why certain suggestions will be taken forward and others will not. Individuals may come to trust that their counterparts will “behave in a certain way” but such assumptions may lead to complacency that then stifles innovation or de-emphasises accountability.

Whether there is a choice to partner or not and with whom also needs to be better understood. **The term “voluntary” with regard to partnerships can be very misleading.** Partners must need each other to ensure meaningful collaboration. In some cases, organisations may get to choose with whom they work. Whether based on familiarity or some other selection criteria, partners need to be careful that the mechanisms and behaviours within the partnership do not become exclusionary – making it difficult to bring in new partners when the need arises.

Finally, **partnerships are not meant to be permanent** but a transitional mechanism until practices become more institutionalised or transactions-based. Once formed though, partnerships (like other relational forms) have a tendency to be self-perpetuating at whatever cost. What constitutes success and thereby why and how a partnership would ideally end should be part of the discussions as the partnership is established.

The reality is that most partnerships are hard work and, drawing from the context of BPD’s historical focus, require the same emphasis on operations and maintenance as the water and sanitation systems that they seek to put in place.

Building Partnerships for Development (BPD) is a non-profit charity that improves the provision of water and sanitation services in unserved and poorly served communities by ensuring that partnerships are effective and appropriately ambitious. Please see www.bpdws.org for more information.

