

BPD Classic Hits Series

Creating Space for Innovation - understanding partnership enablers¹

Ken Caplan / Revised December 2013

While the term ‘partnership’ suggests a certain simplicity and harmony, experience shows that multi-sector partnerships (MSPs) are challenging to create and harder to maintain. Specific skills are needed to work in partnership and the demands of MSPs require constant support from inception onwards. Such skills include the ability to anticipate the kinds of enablers and disablers that will impact on a partnership.

The term partnership elicits much confusion. It is used to describe widely different constructs from loose networks and alliances to more institutionalised joint ventures. Commonly used definitions are generally too simplistic and tend to mask or insufficiently value: 1) the various obligations to participate, 2) critical non-financial contributions, and 3) the distinct differences between organisations and individuals that make the partnership process so challenging.

Clearly partnerships involve some form of horizontal decision-making (i.e. shared power), different kinds of resources (beyond financing), and flexibility to adapt objectives and activities as circumstances dictate. While not interpreted as such in this analysis, the term ‘partnership’ in many countries also refers to a legal, contractual construct. BPD’s current (but constantly evolving) definition has been adapted from one created by AccountAbility:²

Partnerships involve two or more organisations that enter into a temporary or initially time-bound arrangement:

- 1) To take advantage of synergistic goals and opportunities to address particular issues or deliver specified tasks that single organisations cannot accomplish on their own as effectively;*
- 2) Whereby individual organisations cannot purchase the appropriate resources or competencies purely through a market transaction; and*
- 3) With the ultimate aim of institutionalising new mechanisms and practices that then make the partnership no longer necessary.*

Although partnerships can be formed for a variety of reasons, their primary purpose is generally to experiment with new products, services and/or approaches. Within these innovative frameworks, the level of ambition of MSPs may vary: do they seek to produce specific deliverables (like the installation of 500 water connections)? Or are they seeking more systemic change (like the development of new regulatory standards)? Against this context, it is critical to carefully analyse (and then frequently review) events, processes or other aspects that will slow down or prevent progress (disablers) or, on the contrary, speed up and assist it (enablers).



¹This paper has been extracted from a more detailed document by Peter Newborne and Ken Caplan under the same name. This longer document (found at www.bpdws.org) includes a dialogue tool for practitioners and partnership brokers and forms part of a series that also provides guidance on partnership agreements and partnership evaluation.

²AccountAbility is a London-based organisation with publications on Partnership Governance and Accountability (see www.accountability.org.uk).

Common Enablers and Disablers

Enablers and disablers overlap in many ways and can generally be grouped around three strands of inquiry:

- **Organisational cohesion**

Partnership practitioners often refer to the challenge of creating and/or sustaining the internal buy-in that allows them to pursue partnership activities with greater authority. Internal dynamics may be a hindrance or a help. Factors that warrant further analysis include the 'distance' between the partnership representative and the institutional decision-makers, and how much authority the former has to adequately represent the interests of their organisation. The distance of the partnership from the organisation's core business, combined perhaps with the organisational culture or spirit of innovation and experimentation, needs to be understood. This may also be reflected in the ability of the partner representative to overcome competition (for funding and other assets, ownership of ideas, etc.) within his or her own organisation. Partnership practitioners also need to ask whether the timing is right within their own organisation to pursue partnership goals with a particular set of partners.

- **Relationships between partners**

Many participants entering into a MSP, especially for the first time, report a steep learning curve. They speak of misconceptions amongst MSP participants of different sector perspectives and interests. Significant energy should be placed on understanding historical, 'cultural' or other contextual factors at an early stage of the partnership, without necessarily expecting full agreement. Of critical importance is a mutual understanding of the deal breakers, i.e. those events or decisions that would force one partner to exit. Rather than merely relying on trust between individuals, partners should ensure that the processes for making decisions, implementing activities and resolving conflict are as predictable as possible.



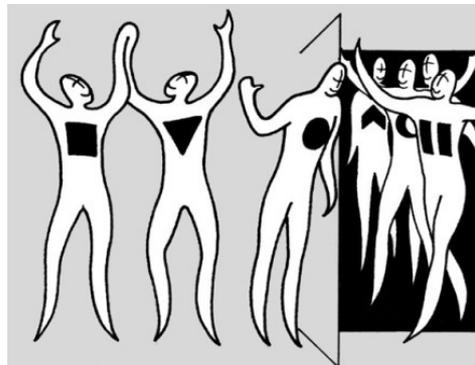
Decisions around who should be involved are important to MSPs. Greater inclusion can make partnerships more innovative – generating new ideas from a larger pool of participants. Many argue that, because it creates enhanced buy-in and more tailored solutions, greater inclusion ensures a greater chance of creating sustainable systems. More limited participation, on the other hand, facilitates the creation of more manageable, stronger accountability mechanisms (fewer players equals fewer people to keep an eye on). Whilst there are continued calls for all stakeholders to be involved in decision-making, in practice this can be both unworkable and unwieldy. For more broad-based partnerships, to facilitate stakeholder engagement and a consolidation of voice, different stakeholder groups, in the water sector at least, appear to be creating sector-based coalitions to channel participation. The challenge then becomes ensuring proper representation through these channels.

Issues likely to cause problems between partners may revolve around competitive advantage including: for companies, agreements over promoting their own brand versus generic branding; for the public sector, partner decisions that impact on its relations with other agencies; and for NGOs, those decisions that impact on their reputation and credibility. A second issue concerns valuing resource contributions when each partner feels that their contribution is undervalued, while a third involves differing expectations around timeframes, progress and public relations (including not just marketing the initiative but transparency around information-sharing that, again, may impact on competitive advantage). Supporting and/or participating in the establishment and development of a MSP is not the same as issuing a contract against pre-defined criteria. This pre-supposed flexibility and thereby unpredictability around outcomes unnerves some participants, donors included.

With regard to competitive advantage, an enabling response to such rivalries would be to ensure that the MSP is more programme than project focused, including more organisations and appealing to the wider business case for each type of partner (a larger overall market, more people served, greater voice for poor

people), i.e. paying more attention to the benefits to the sector as a whole rather than to specific organisations. The lesson seems to be that for more systemic change, the more organisations involved the better. Risk analysis and some greater understanding of the stakes for each partner will clarify issues around valuing resources. Finally, dialogue and regular review between partners is probably the only way to overcome different expectations.

Partnership building activities are often perceived by practitioners and external stakeholders closer to the operational level as slow and costly. Those involved often express surprise at the amount of time it takes to get a partnership initiative off the ground. Although a variety of discussion tools can now be used to ‘speed up the process’, partnership initiatives still require sufficient time to generate interests, ensure that incentives can be aligned, and obtain buy-in from related stakeholder groups. Defining quick milestones may be the only strategy to keep people together.



Generally the goal is for the partnership initiative to meet its objectives and then to close down, take on new objectives or transform into a different institutional form that may be more contract or transaction-based. The challenge thus becomes how and when certain innovations can become mainstreamed. The nature of creating institutions, however, also creates a focus on their own self-perpetuation. A frank discussion is necessary regarding the point at which partners would agree that the partnership has done the job it was established to do and can thereby be closed down.

- **Appropriateness of the MSP's scope**

Whether ambitious and aiming to effect systemic change or more modest and aimed at meeting the needs of a specific target community, overarching themes that influence how realistic the scope of the MSP is include: sufficient and readily available resources, adequate market knowledge, and appropriate communications to convince the sceptics. Each of these factors is influenced by the timing of the initiative.

MSPs can easily be overtaken by external perceptions, particularly where there is a lack of early success stories to demonstrate the value of the initiative. Again a pragmatic response would be to focus on reaching initial tangible achievements to demonstrate the value of its work. The current challenge of answering the sceptics is not helped by the lack of appropriate and effective mechanisms and frameworks to measure and evaluate both the processes and the outcomes of MSPs.³

Some challenges are more fundamental, however, and relate to normative debates around, for example, the role of the private sector in water and sanitation service delivery. More action may be needed to ensure that external stakeholders understand that a combination of public, private and civil society sector inputs may be the only way to achieve a particular objective. Otherwise governments allocating a portion of funding to MSP arrangements are likely to be criticised for ‘subsidising the private sector’.

Where communities have no experience with partnership activities or where they have participated in ineffective or poorly designed projects, partners will have difficulty aligning community interests around new innovations.⁴ Partnerships also need to recognise that they are not operating in a vacuum, and thereby must make special efforts to understand other initiatives that are likely to be impacted by, or impact on, the partnership.

³ For further analysis, the reader should refer to Caplan, et al *Assessing Partnership Effectiveness: Understanding the Drivers for Success* (October 2007) – available at www.bpdws.org

⁴ For example, a critical obstruction to local people developing innovative solutions was lack of access to credit; lack of recognition through land rights and lack of legal channels for expressing a grievance (an ineffective small claims court, the lack of an approachable help desk at the utility, etc.).

MSP practitioners often refer to what might be called “a partnership moment” – a specific point in time where the circumstances are right for a partnership initiative to flourish. The timing of the initiative can be hampered by any number of factors including upcoming elections, staff/boardroom changes, competition from other initiatives, etc. Assessing whether the time is wrong may be fairly straightforward. Assessing whether the timing is right, however, proves less easy.

Disablers Specific to International and Local MSPs

Many of the enablers and disablers discussed above easily resonate with MSP practitioners at the international or national and local levels. With regard to mechanics, competition and procurement rules stand out as the principal issue for initiating and operationalising MSPs internationally. More strategically though, at this level, the greatest risk stems from the wider thematic and normative discussions around governance and the roles of different stakeholders like the private sector or civil society organisations, shifts in corporate investment trends (as a function of political and financial risk), civil society voice, etc.

Unsurprisingly, at the national/local level, regulation is mentioned often as an enabling or disabling factor. Challenges here largely relate to the piecemeal approach that many partnerships choose to take; focusing on one aspect of a problem even though they might assemble a variety of actors to do something more systemic. Given all the effort it takes to bring different partners together, the overarching message is that partnerships should generally be more ambitious in their goals.

Strategies for Overcoming Disablers

According to BPD’s analysis, three basic strategies are possible to deal with a barrier. The partnership may seek to:

1. Influence or overcome the obstacle by, for example, appealing to decision-makers to change the rules or give special dispensation for a pilot approach;
2. Circumvent the obstacle by enlisting the support of new partners or other resources that allow for different approaches to be used; or
3. Redirect the MSP away from the obstacle by shifting the focus of the initiative or the project (i.e. away from a certain type of technology, approach, or geographic focus).

The challenge for partnership practitioners is to determine which of these strategies will contribute most to the effectiveness of the partnership. Planning ahead will reduce the likelihood of a MSP being over-stretched at a later date, by making a realistic assessment of level(s) of ambition and adapting plans and/or resources accordingly. Such planning, however, needs to carefully consider the dynamic nature of partnerships and how far a strategy to overcome one problem might lead to other unexpected and unhelpful outcomes. It is also essential that due attention is given to the power relations, politics and personalities that shape a partnership’s development.⁵

⁵ Though not discussed in detail here these issues are implicit throughout. With these aspects in mind, for further detail about the internal negotiations between partners, see: Evans, B., McMahon, J. & Caplan, K. (2004) *The Partnership Paperchase, Structuring Partnership Agreements in Water and Sanitation in Low-Income Communities*, BPD, London (available at www.bpdws.org).

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.

