



ANNUAL REVIEW OF SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS

RESEARCH

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assess if they are helping or hindering change.

We have most recently been using this framework as a partner with NHS England on a programme entitled "Health as a Social Movement". This aims to grow the impact of social movements by working with teams who are developing new ways to support and deliver healthcare in communities across the country. For this project we are convening institutional stakeholders with community health workers and voluntary sector partners from a wide array of community-driven health projects, and supporting them to develop, test and spread social movements that aim to improve health and care outcomes.

An example of one of the change initiatives is a community health action group that formed during a protest against the temporary closure of the local community hospital in South Cumbria. The hospital had closed due to lack of staff and an 18-month campaign to hire replacement GPs had failed to attract a single candidate. In response to the protest, the local NHS team invited the protest group to help with the recruitment effort. The resulting Millom Health Action group produced a recruitment video, which attracted 5,000 views a week and successfully recruited three GPs. An NHS partnership formed called Better Care Together, and is now working with the group to use new technologies as well as creative community-led endeavours such as support groups, and volunteering initiatives to deliver more services and information where people are. The RSA is now working with this group, among others, to use the systems mapping and co-design process to identify entrepreneurial ways to scale and spread the impact of their efforts. By looking critically at the work to date and setting goals for change by the end of the programme, we are supporting the group to co-design new ways to think about commissioning and prototype initiatives that could lead to real reductions on system pressures.

Making Change Happen in a Complex World

At the RSA, we believe that when we think about the pursuit of progressive social change, *we should care as much about how we achieve that change as about the goals we pursue*. Making change in systems as complex as public health may seem insurmountable. Indeed attempts to do so at scale are where some of the greatest failings in policy have played out in the past. By applying the 'think like a system, act like an entrepreneur' mindset, we do not attempt to take on grand societal challenges in their

entirety, instead we look to identify nimble opportunities for change within the system, test prototypes and support successful efforts to grow and influence other parts of the wider system.

We see that tackling social change is an ongoing, collaborative, iterative process, and one that does not proceed in a linear fashion with a clear start and end point. We can no longer hope to end a change process with one perfect policy solution or achieve salvation in a single start-up. Policy is of course part of the change process and entrepreneurs will always bring fresh ideas, but positive social change really occurs when these are parts of a bigger shift. As the late systems thinker Donella Meadows once said: "I don't think there are cheap tickets to system change. You have to work at it, whether that means rigorously analysing a system or rigorously casting off paradigms. In the end, it seems that leverage has less to do with pushing levers than it does with disciplined thinking combined with strategically, profoundly, madly letting go."

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ARSP 'Thought Gallery' contribution

Rescuing the Collaborative Paradigm from its Supporters?

[1] The Many Challenges of Reaching Paradigm Status

When science historian Thomas Kuhn¹ provided the most popular and contemporary definition of paradigms as "universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of researchers", he actually laid the foundation for a more controversial use of the concept of a paradigm, as 'a solution in search of a problem'. What James Austin in 2000 dubbed the 'collaboration challenge'² quite quickly became known as the 'partnering paradigm' after it was embraced by thousands of governments, international organizations, companies and NGOs over the next decade. Roundtables, coalitions, platforms, public-private partnerships... all have been introduced as solutions for complex problems for which individual sectors and actors are unable to devise adequate approaches. With the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, partnering has reached institutional status as one of the five founding principles for increased impact (see diagram). Partnering serves as the linking pin between the



four other founding principles (Peace, Prosperity, People, Planet) ultimately serving the 17 interconnected SDG aims to be reached by 2030. Can partnering live up to its paradigmatic status? Should it? And how can we learn from partnering practice to enhance its effectiveness, assuming it has such paradigmatic status with many of its early adopters?

It is precisely because of this assumed status that partnership practice and research has also been criticized, by



cynics who never ‘believed’ in the paradigm in the first place, but also by serious scholars, who are supportive of the trend, but critical of the way it is playing out at the moment. The critique follows a number of lines of argument. First, partnering is criticized for not adequately – or measurably – addressing the manifold problems for which it is introduced. A second form of critique includes: sub-optimal partnering configurations³; not addressing the actual complexity of the problem⁴; a too dominant private sector⁵; too limited ambitions; non-optimal issue-partner fits⁶; and over-ambition that creates all sorts of ‘collaborative complexities’⁷. Thirdly, ill-conceived partnerships have been criticized for undermining the legitimacy of the whole phenomenon⁸, for instance owing to overly optimistic or superficial claims, subdued responsibilities, or poor governance structures⁹. In response, many have

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reiterated that collaboration does not come easily, hence success cannot be assured¹⁰ and partnerships cannot be considered panacea for development problems¹¹. The effectiveness of partnering is highly context dependent and susceptible to change. Building up partnering experience requires a learning approach that in turn requires an open attitude on the part of practitioners. However, here the paradigmatic status becomes a burden. Practitioners may not wish to open up their activities to research, learn from ‘failure’, or may only be interested in ‘evidence-based’ experiences, in a more strict (controlled trial) type of research. The staunchest supporters of the partnering paradigm can be held partly responsible for this. They are not necessarily interested in understanding the complexities of the partnering process and/or contributing to more adequate research approaches, so as to define, document and follow failure as well as success. The ‘performance’ school of impact measurement, that is inclined to focus on gains without looking at indirect or longer-term

effects, can be seen as supporting this trend¹².

The partnership phenomenon, as well as research on (cross-sector) partnering, consequently suffers a comparable fate to the research on strategic alliances. This latter stream of research has closely followed waves of high profile mergers and acquisitions since the late 20th century. The study of strategic alliances/partnerships is much more established and has the benefit of longer-term hindsight and an easier benchmark of success and failure (profit/loss account for the involved companies). Studies arrived at very critical assessments of the logic and impact of strategic partnerships, with failure rates of 60% or more. Even the causes for this finding are known¹³: (1) lack of shared vision; (2) over- or under-investing; (3) poor governance; (4) lack of trust-building; (5) lack of adaptability. But the research has nevertheless not contributed much to improved alliance practice. The dismal practice repeats itself and the failure rate has hardly diminished. Research findings have barely registered with practitioners. The most critical researchers of strategic alliances were often disconnected from the actual practice of alliances.

If we take the parallel with what happened with strategic alliances seriously, we actually face a paradigm that has to be “rescued” from its – perhaps most articulate - supporters. Consequently many partnering arrangements run the risk of falling short of meeting needs, expectations and hoped-for goals. It remains difficult to document and learn from what *has not worked* to date and to focus on working more imaginatively, efficiently and effectively together. The knowledge about the current quality, practices and impact of partnering is fragmented, relatively superficial and most often not easily accessible to those working on the partnering frontline. There are few ‘safe spaces’ offering opportunities to learn from others’ experience or to seek support when things are not going according to plan. As a result, all too often partnering mistakes are repeated, resources wasted and targets are not met.

So, back to the drawing board of partnering research? Throw away initiatives? Or something else? My take on this is the latter: something else. In particular the answer to the failure of strategic alliances lies not in the critical approach to them – we know most of the sources of their failure – but in the poor management of the interface between

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practitioners and researchers, i.e. the science-policy interface. Strategic alliance scholars were often too late with their insights, applied inappropriate techniques or models (for instance abstracting from the political context or not taking the often ‘bounded rational’ mindset of corporate leaders into account) and operated too distantly from practitioners, without access to internal processes and/or without recognition of their relevance by practitioners. In order to learn from this experience, we need to redraw the science-policy interface, to reappraise (and perhaps rescue?) the partnering paradigm.

[2] The Partnering Paradigm Reframed

Such a reappraisal starts with a correct understanding of the antecedents of partnering. There are good reasons to consider cross-sector partnering appropriate under the following conditions:

- Partnerships are not a luxury but a necessity for addressing particularly ‘wicked’, systemic or complex challenges that exceed the capabilities and responsibilities of single sectors;
- Partnerships have the potential to create new solutions to existing problems, rather than compromises;
- Partnerships can build upon the pooled and complementary strengths of each sector
- Each sector requires opportunities to keep investing in its own strength and core capabilities;
- Although partnerships obviously are a means to an end, initially they can be considered as an end in themselves (for instance, by allying parties can reach a common understanding of a problem and/or reach goal alignment);
- Partnerships are not a panacea for all sustainable development problems: there exists a continuum of ‘multi-stakeholder’ approaches, linked to various

degrees of complexity, that require various forms of coalitions – no one size fits all;

- The risk of crowding out other important stakeholders looms large, so impact assessments become a vital part of any partnership dynamic – for participants as well as evaluators.

[3] Ten Requirements for Effective Partnering

In 2015, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as vice-chair of the Global Partnership of Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), asked a combined group of five reputable international partnering organizations to pool their existing knowledge and hands-on experience, to identify what it takes to raise the bar of partnership performance. They included: the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA), Partnerships in Practice (PIP), the Collective Leadership Institute (CLI), The Partnering Initiative (TPI) and the Partnerships Resource Centre (PrC). They created the *Promoting Effective Partnering* (PEP) initiative (see graphic).



These organizations agreed that there are no quick partnering fixes and that one collaboration model does not fit all. A further shared assessment was that a large number of existing ‘partnerships’ might not really qualify as partnerships, while many partnerships were underperforming. The urgency of this realization becomes clear if we understand that the ‘window’ of relevant partnering opportunity, when many organizations are willing to spend time and effort, might only remain open for a limited number of years and only if partnerships can deliver. The inclination to shy away from critical studies on partnerships then looms large.

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In short: the challenge is not necessarily that partnering will lose its popularity, but rather that the bar for partnering is set too low, which implies that partnering will lose its effectiveness and prove the cynics right. Partnerships can only make transformational change happen if core success factors are taken into account. Rather than set a standard for partnering, however, the five organizations agreed upon 10 requirements for “raising the bar for effective partnering” in support of the SDGs.

Effective partnering requires practitioners and researchers to:

- 1. **Break through** assumptions and preconceptions about each other;
- 2. **Recognise and relish diversity** as an asset rather than a problem;
- 3. **Properly value the many different contributions** each partner brings;
- 4. **Develop new skills** in partnership-building, collaboration brokering and collective leadership;
- 5. **Understand the systems and contexts** in which partnerships operate;
- 6. **Apply the highest standards**, rigour and accountability to all partnering endeavours;
- 7. **Invest in the partnering process** in order to optimise engagement and create the conditions for efficiency, innovation and sustainability;
- 8. **Learn** and be prepared to change course on the basis of growing insights;
- 9. **Be modest** in understanding their own limitations and abilities to develop sustainable approaches;
- 10. **Keep their eyes on the ball:** partnering is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Taking these requirements into account should help to rescue the partnering process from those supporters that have an unrealistic, overly optimistic or simplistic ‘belief’ in the partnering approach - i.e. possibly its staunchest supporters? The PEP approach is consequently not prescriptive. Rather it invites partners to question their own approaches, in order to determine what changes may be required to become more effective. This implies in particular: promoting greater clarity and coherence in the partnering discourse; providing better access to knowledge; creating a dynamic platform for learning and exchange for practitioners and policy makers, in a sufficiently safe space for experimentation and innovation, to enable more effective

partnering and the achievement of scale and impact; and offering access to a range of tailored support services.

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[4] The PEP Approach: 17 Factors for 17 SDGs

The most tangible result of this effort has become the PEP platform. It was launched at the Nairobi GPEDC ministerial meeting, in December 2016. In a process of bottom-up interaction with a number of stakeholders around the world, five generic areas and 17 sub-factors were identified that more or less cover all aspects of partnering processes. They can also be linked to consecutive phases of the partnering cycle. Nowhere on the PEP platform is there a claim of ‘best practice’ or well-defined steps for partnering. Wherever possible, the platform provides ‘navigation tools’ and ‘guiding questions’ (guiding heuristics) to help practitioners acquire the relevant knowledge.

The PEP platform is intended to connect practitioners with relevant researchers to create communities around critical areas of action research. One lesson learned from the strategic alliance research is also that research should be timely, critical and constructive. The website, as well as the community, is work in progress. The table shows a first personal assessment of the state of research in each of these areas (compare this to recent overviews by Branzei & Le Ber¹⁴ and Gray and Stites¹⁵). On the basis of this assessment, we should conclude that there is no area of partnering research that can claim to present solid results. But there are many promising pockets of research. You are invited to contribute – or, of course, to disagree with my assessment!

5 Generic Factor	17 Sub-factors	State of research*		
		weak	modest	solid
1. Context, reach and impact	Systemic change			
	Risk mitigation			
	Ownershipv			
	scaling			
2. Strategy and partnership development	Partner-issue fit			
	Diversity & complementarity			
	Mutual benefits & aligned purpose			
	Results orientation			
3. Collaboration and Commu-nication	Mutual engagement			
	Capacity development			
	Trust, power relationships			
4. Governance and Resourcing	Inclusive & transparent decision making			
	Partnership management			
	Sustainable business case			
5. Learning	Monitoring			
	Evaluation			
	Moving-on-strategy			

*personal assessment

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