A short guide to partnerships by David Wilcox

Introduction

The aim of this guide is to highlight issues and offer some guidance in three circumstances:
- Starting a partnership
- Managing or being involved in a partnership
- Engaging with a partnership 'from outside.'

The first draft of the guide was written for people involved in local regeneration partnerships – amended for a workshop on academic partnerships. Partnership issues are fairly universal!

The issues important to you will depend on when and where you stand in relationship to the partnership, and I have tried to indicate that in the guide. The guide covers:
- What are partnerships – the benefits, barriers, and challenges?
- Thinking about partnerships – some models
- Reality checks and tips
- Key issues

There is deliberately some overlap between the sections because I think it is helpful to look at partnerships from different angles.

What are partnerships – the benefits and barriers

You may come across several different types of partnerships:
- Large 'official' partnerships set up by major institutions.
- More bottom-up partnerships initiated by nonprofit organisations or groups.
- Short-term alliances created around a particular project or programme.
- Other forms of collaboration to share information and offer mutual support that may be better seen as networks.

It is difficult to provide a formal definition of partnership that suits all circumstances, but the key characteristic is that **the partners aim to achieve something they could not do alone, by pooling skills and other resources. To do this they need a shared vision of their goals, and a way of working together which realises this ambition. This may involve a long-term formal structure, or a shorter-term agreement.**

In each situation there will be some benefits and opportunities in partnerships working – and also some barriers, and challenges in making the partnership work. For example:

Benefits and opportunities
- Making one plus one equal more than two – sharing ideas and resources towards common goals.
- Gaining access to the skills of others.
- Mutual support to maintain enthusiasm and commitment.
- Learning from seeing things differently, through others' eyes.
- Ability to secure funding that requires partnership working.
- Opportunities to reach a wider audience.

Barriers and challenges
- Suspicion of others involved, and lack of trust.
- Fear of losing a separate identity.

- Unacceptable inequalities of power and control.
- Failure to recognise different personality types and communication styles.
- Lack of clarity on roles, responsibilities, and leadership.
- Confusions about the nature and style of involvement – by representation or participation.
- Time necessary to develop relationships and feasible plans.

Thinking about partnerships

This section offers models for thinking about partnerships: the ladder of participation; three different perspectives on partnership; and the idea of the life cycle of a partnership.

Partnerships that may not be – the participation ladder

In real partnerships the partners have some equality and are collaborating to do something everyone agrees about. Unfortunately, partnership has become something of a spray-on word, and you may be called a 'partner' but find you don't really have much say in what is going on. Here's some theory…

In 1969 Sherry Arnstein, writing about citizen involvement in planning in the US, described an eight-step ladder of participation. The steps relate to how much control people have in relation to the main power holders. I have altered this to five stances and suggest that partnership occurs at the levels of deciding and acting together. In some circumstances less involvement may be appropriate – but it shouldn't be called partnership. There's more on this in my Guide to Effective Participation.[1]

Arnstein's original ladder, 1969. Suggests top of the ladder is best – but powerholder often keep people down.	Revised version DW 1994 – horses for courses. Sometimes just consultation is appropriate – but partnership is deciding and acting together.

[1] Guide to Effective Participation available at http://www.partnerships.org.uk/part

The model, described in more detail in the participation guide, suggests that not everyone will wish to be as involved as everyone else. It depends on how important the issue or project is to them. How involved people are may also vary over time.

If you are engaging with a partnership, where are you on the ladder – what is on offer? If you are starting a partnership, what influence are you offering others? Here's some of the things you may hear (or say) and some questions to ask.

> "We are in partnership with our community ". (Who in the community? What influence/power will they have? What help will they get?)

> "We want everyone to be involved." (Does everyone want to/need to be involved? Perhaps some people want more involvement than others).

> "We want one or two representatives." (Why not use other ways to help other people be involved.)

> "We don't have time to involve more people." (Why not have a planning weekend or other event with a facilitator).

> "We really value volunteers." (Why don't you give them more help and do things in ways they can understand?)

Three ways of looking at partnerships

I find it helpful to use a 'three-bubble' diagram to look at partnerships through three different perspectives:

- The 'business' that the partnership is doing… the projects and the funding necessary to achieve its goals. Also, the paperwork and jargon that can be baffling to anyone trying to engage with the partnership.
- The structure that binds the partners together, expressed in a constitution or agreement, meetings, and procedures.
- The people involved. All too often we forget that people differ in personality type, and ways in which they prefer to communicate and work. Some people love 'blue skies' thinking – others the practical details. Some can digest lengthy reports, others prefer a diagram. Some people may revel in committee work, while others are much better at the essential networking that goes on between formal events.

Looking at partnerships like this helps emphasise that we need all three elements. People and a structure can end up as a talking shop if they don't have projects, a plan, and some resources. People with great ideas and funding need to get organised. And it is no good having great plans, funds and a constitution if you don't have people with the necessary skills and confidence.

Partnerships need partners – and people with some shared gaols and values. As we'll see from the issues discussed below, partnerships are about relationships and need trust in order to work. See the discussions of these issues at the end of the guide.

Money

Projects

Business

Paperwork

Trust
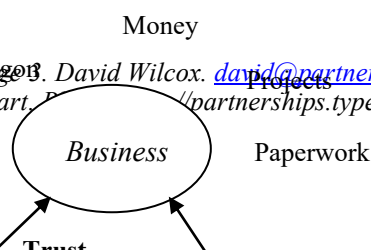
Life cycle of a partnership

Partnerships are best seen as processes to build relationships and get things done – not just formal structures. There will be different challenges at different times in the life of a partnership, whether you are starting or involved in the partnership, or getting engaged from outside.

At the outset, it is important to reflect on the benefits and some of the barriers – see above.

Here are four key stages in the life of a partnership. There is a longer discussion on the Our partnership web site[2] based on phases of connecting, contracting, conflict, collaborating, and closing. See also The Guide to Development Trusts and Partnerships[3] for the process of setting up a formal partnership.

Initiating.
- Recognise that who started the partnership will influence its initial style of operation…. and this may need to change.
- The spark for starting may be, for example, funding… but may not be enough in itself to keep the partnership together in the longer term. See 'visioning' below.
- Reflect from the outset on whether you need a substantial partnership, or a 'lighter' or shorter-term arrangement.

Starting
- Review what is already happening in the field, and who's who.
- Look at other partnership projects and programmes for ideas.
- Get to know your partners, their styles of working and preferred means of communicating.
- Run a 'visioning' workshop to share understanding of problems, projects, and activities to meet your goals.
- Set up interim arrangement for making decisions, staffing, administration, project management.

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[2] The Our partnership includes a longer discussion of partnership lifecycle. http://www.ourpartnership.org.uk/anncmnt/anlist.cfm?ANID=28

[3] The Guide to Development Trusts and Partnerships. http://www.partnerships.org.uk/part

- Develop a business plan that includes training and support for partners as well as project development, funding, staffing, constitution, or partnership agreement.

Doing
- Develop and start projects.
- Pay attention to partners and the people involved as well as the projects, with training, support, and socialising.
- Involve others outside the core partnership where they have a stake in projects and/or your overall programme.

Following through – or finishing
- Reflect on what's working and what isn't.
- Plan for the longer-term – or finishing. Is your partnership still really needed – is it adding any value?

Reality checks and tips

Here are some reality checks to help you decide how much involvement in a partnership you are being offered – or want. There are also some tips on engaging with partnerships, and for building partnerships.

Reality checks: how much participation do you have (or want) in the partnership?

These are developed in part from bench marking criteria developed for Yorkshire Forward[4]

How much **influence** do you have/are you seeking in the partnership?
- Are you recognised and valued as a partner?
- Are you seeking/given representative status, and/or involved in decisions in other ways?

How **inclusive** is the partnership?
- Is the diversity of interests affected recognised?
- Are equal opportunities policies in place and implemented?
- Are volunteers valued?

How good is the **communication**?
- Is communication two-way and suitable to your needs and style?
- Are programme and project procedures clear and accessible?

Does the partnership develop **capacity**?
- Are key interests resourced to participate?
- Are understanding, knowledge and skills developed to support partnership working?

Tips for engaging with partnerships
- Be clear on what you want out of the partnership.
- Check how much influence is offered (where are you on the ladder of participation?)
- Find out who controls the money, and who makes decisions.
- Don't end up as a 'token' representative.

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[4] Benchmarking Active Partners http://www.yorkshire-forward.com/display.asp?docid=155

- Don't accept committees as the only ways to do things – suggest workshop or other events as well.
- Look for allies – build relationships. Be sociable.
- Put yourself in other people's shoes – help them get what they want.
- Keep asking 'why.' Is there a hidden agenda?
- Ask for the partnership to communicate in ways you can understand.
- Ask for a mentor who will work with your group if that would help you.
- Build your own 'constituency' and credibility.
- Be honest – build trust.

Tips for partnership building

- Clarify your own goals in forming a partnership. What are you looking for – and what are you offering?
- Find out what is already happening in the area, who's who, and who might be a partner or involved in other ways.
- Spend time getting to know potential partners.
- Think about partnership as a process of forming relationships to do things, not just a structure. Make commitment, and trust, the centre line.
- Run a workshop with partners to develop a shared vision and plan that process, built around the tasks and projects to achieve your goals. Check if you really need a partnership rather than a network, or other alliance.
- Set up interim arrangements for decision-making. Decide the precise structure after you are clear what it is you are trying to achieve. Then develop a partnership agreement or – if appropriate – constitution.
- Respect the different personality types of those involved, and their different communication styles. Use a mix of methods to communicate, including electronic if possible.
- Organise around tasks and projects, with a leader for each task group.
- Develop a business plan covering projects, core costs and staffing, funding, and structure.
- Be prepared to deal with conflict among partners and members of communities. In doing that focus on outcomes and how to get them to overlap.
- Look at options. There is usually more than one way of getting what you want to achieve.
- Look outwards as well as inwards. Practice the community involvement you may be urging on other organisations!

Key issues

Here are some of the key issues and challenges for partnerships, identified in the workshops. There is a longer A-Z at the Partnerships Online site[5]

Accountability

Accountability means knowing who is answerable to whom - often difficult in a partnership where paid staff have different employers and volunteers a range of allegiances. To clarify accountability in practice, consider: Who can stop someone doing something? Whose permission is needed for someone to act? Who pays them? Think of accountability through a process of community involvement as well as representation, and in relation to specific projects as much as structures.

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[5] A-Z of partnerships and networks. http://www.partnerships.org.uk/AZP/A-Zp.htm

Added value

The partnership must be adding some value to what is happening already – or there isn't much point in setting it up (see benefits and opportunities above). Partnerships can outstay their initial purpose; in which case it may be time to plan an exit. (See the lifecycle above).

Confidence

We are all confident and capable in some circumstances – at home, with friends, at work. However, new settings can challenge anyone's confidence… so make sure new partners are welcome, introduced to the way the partnership works, and given training and support where needed. Expect the same if you are engaging with a partnership. Confidence can be undermined by the use of jargon, and a failure to understand different communication styles. Some people love paperwork; others prefer face-to-face explanations. Email can be a blessing for fast communication – but for others technology can sap rather than build confidence. Respect differences.

Control

Control in partnerships tends to lie with those who have the money, skills, and administration — however well-intentioned they may be in seeking to involve others. For that reason, partnerships formed around existing organisations may seem very unequal to other participants. Ways around this include:
- Checking whether 'partnership' is the right label for what is being attempted. Would consultation or contract be more appropriate? (See ladder of participation above)
- Being explicit about accountability and terms of reference.
- Setting up formal partnerships when the aim is to share control.
- Dispersing control by creating a network structure around projects.

Delivery

At the end of the day partnerships are about delivering projects or activities, which benefit those involved, or others. It is tempting to try and jump straight to the action – however, recognise that work is needed to get agreement on what needs to be done, and how to do it. See Lifecycle of a partnership.

Expectations

Conflicts can arise in partnerships because people are looking for different things and may not understand each other's hopes and expectations. That's one reason why it is important to see partnership as a process of creating a shared vision, building trust, and learning to communicate. See Lifecycle of a partnership.

Learning

If partnerships are processes, one of the main activities for those involved should be learning…. how to understand and engage with others, how to deal with new challenges. Reflect on whether the way the partnership operates helps everyone concerned learn and develop new skills and ideas. Is it all formal committees and paperwork, or are there more creative sessions and opportunities to work with others? Some formal training is also likely to be necessary.

Ownership

Partnerships work well if those involved feel some commitment, and that comes from being involved in developing the vision, plans and projects. A sense of 'not invented here' kills partnerships, which is why those who 'own' the partnership at the outset will do well to share that stake with others.

Participation

Participation is used here to describe a process by which individuals, groups and organisations are consulted about or have the opportunity to become actively involved in a project or programme of activity. See the ladder of participation above. Partnerships require participation – but not all participation is a partnership.

Power

Issues of power and control are central to the development of partnerships. For example:

- Do all key interests have an equal ability or opportunity to participate in developing in the partnership if they wish?
- Who designs the partnership building process; to whom are they accountable?
- Who sets the timetable and controls the funds?
- Who makes the final decisions?

The rhetoric of partnership can often be used to disempower people if it is used - consciously or unconsciously - to mask these fundamental questions. Partnerships should aim to increase the 'power to' of partners – their confidence and ability to participate and deliver - while avoiding imbalances of 'power over' that are unacceptable to some partners.

Representation

The conventional way to address accountability of the partnership is to elect or appoint people from different interest groups to the partnership. However, this may not be enough to ensure the involvement of wider interests, and it may lead to over-large committees or working groups. It is easy for representatives to become just tokens. In addition to appropriate representation, look for other ways to involve key interests in the work of the partnership. See the Guide to Effective Participation referred to elsewhere.

Resources

Resources are more than money. In starting or running a partnership look for other groups that may be prepared to share premises, equipment, staff, contacts, and ideas if there is also something in it for them. One of the main reasons for partnerships is to reduce the need for new resources.

Structure

In forming a partnership, there may be a temptation to look for a model constitution, and to think that in agreeing membership, committees, procedures, and legal formalities you have created a partnership. These arrangements may be necessary – but the precise structure should be designed to fit the purpose of the partnership. Set up some interim arrangements for decision-making while you work this out and consider whether you need a new organisation or whether written agreements between partners will be enough.

Timescale

Partnerships almost always take longer than you think – so draw up a timeline reflecting the lifecycle (see above), mark out the different tasks, see what has to happen before what, and put some dates along the line.

Trust

The heart of partnership working is building relationships and trust. That takes time and more than formal meetings. Work on projects together, however small; socialise; share ideas; be open and honest with your partners; put yourself in their shoes and try and help them achieve what they want.

Values

Values – together with trust – are key elements in building the relationship essential for successful partnerships. Values are statements of what we consider important. Since they may be emotive, political, and difficult to express, they are frequently hidden. However, it is difficult to understand each other or reach agreement if we are unclear about values. In groups where there may be underlying differences of values it is often most productive to concentrate first on what there is in common by discussing outcomes — what you would like to happen at the end of the day — and how you can get there.

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