

Multi-Sectoral Partnerships and Power

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Acronyms

CBOs	Community-based organizations
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
EFA	Education For All
FTI	Fast Track Initiative
GAVI	Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
IGOs	Intergovernmental organizations
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

Summary

Public-private partnerships are considered critical to implementing the new global 2030 sustainable development agenda. How such partnerships are established and enacted will impact more or less positively on sustainable development for all. Sustainable development problems cannot be defined separately from the system from which they emerge. Public-private partnerships are a complex intervention into that system. This paper advances a systems understanding of the ways in which power relations in specific contexts may shape partnerships, influencing which partners may be included and excluded (elements); how these elements relate to each other (relations); and the partnership that is produced (system). This paper indicates that there is little room for complacency. Transformative development solutions require partnerships to be a crucible for transformation; currently, they are not. However, they can usefully be supported to fulfil their transformative potential. A systems approach, coupled with a keen eye for asymmetries of power, can lead to new ways of mapping and evaluating partnerships for more equitable partnering behaviours.

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Public-Private Partnerships and the SDGs

The head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) described 2015 as a “once-in-a-generation opportunity for global development” (Lagarde 2015). A series of global summits hammered out a number of agreements, including in development financing (July 2015), sustainable development goals (September 2015) and climate change (December 2015). Previously, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) urged governments to do more of the same, that is to bring about a quantitative shift in social policy provision. In contrast, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demand that all economic, environmental and social development partners work toward qualitatively different goals in a qualitatively different way. First, the goals are qualitatively different, in proposing a rebalancing of economic, environmental and social inequalities and in recognizing the systemic links among the 17 goals. Second, diverse development ‘partners’ are urged to work together for a “revitalised Global Partnership ... bringing together Governments, civil society, the private sector, the United Nations system and other actors and mobilizing all available resources” in order to achieve sustainable development for all (UN 2015a: 28/§60).

These inclusive partnerships are assumed to be “built upon principles and values, a shared vision, and shared goals that place people and the planet at the centre, [and] are needed at the global, regional, national and local level” (UN 2015b). Rhetorically this ambition may be justified. Yet it is not rigorous to assume that development goals are shared among diverse partners, much less the principles and values underpinning them. In network terms “each node [or partner] enters the network [or partnership] with a distinct set of goals. Only a portion of these goal sets overlap” (O’Toole and Meier 2004: 684). Equally, different logics, principles and values motivate the reward structures of the diverse sectors to be mobilized in multi-sectoral partnerships (Chowdhury 2012; Thornton and Ocasio 2008).

Thus, more critical analysis is required in order to move beyond partnership remaining no more than “a ‘feel good’ panacea for governance without a pragmatic grasp of what it is and how it differs from business as usual” (Brinkerhoff 2002b: 20). However, nor should such analysis simply dismiss partnerships as ‘business as usual’ under the same master as always. Partnerships have the potential to be significant new crucibles in which development solutions will be forged. Therefore, this paper analyses practices of partnership and considers the potential of a systems approach that “maps, observes, and listens to the system to identify the spaces where change is already happening and try to encourage and nurture them” (Ramalingam 2014).

Changing practices of cooperation and collaboration at global, regional, national and local levels require the consideration of partnership as a new and different phenomenon. The increasing prioritization of multi-sectoral partnerships in policy discourse and also in practice mean they can no longer be disregarded as marginal phenomena (Börzel and Risse 2005). For the purposes of this paper, multi-sectoral partnership is defined as formally including state, business and civil society partners. Equally, there are many ways to categorize multi-sectoral partnerships, such as according to the different purposes they might serve. For example, Bull and McNeill (2007) differentiate among operational

partnerships, advocacy and resource mobilization partnerships, and policy partnerships. Rather than focusing on their stated purpose, this paper examines the ways in which different actors from different sectors may be differently involved inside partnerships, and the potential effects of power outside and within multi-sectoral partnerships on partners, the partnership system, and partnership outcomes.

While many analyses exist of the contributions and roles of states, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), businesses and civil society organizations in development, few studies consider the ways in which actors from these different sectors are formally brought together in multistakeholder partnerships to address a development problem. In the absence of such research, we are left with an inadequate analysis that creates the conditions for ill-informed policy decisions and the perpetuation of extant power hierarchies. Thus, existing analyses cannot illuminate the ways in which organizational actors from within these different sectors interact (more or less formally) with each other, instituting new multi-sectoral global networked structures through these relationships (Reinicke 1999; Stone 2008). Since relations among heterogeneous actors are at the heart of partnership, it is not possible to develop a convincing account of partnerships and development without understanding these relationships and networks. This background paper analyses the relationships and strategies employed by the totality of actors—from many different organizations and sectors—as they interact in multi-sectoral partnerships.

Partnerships and Power: What Do We Know?

Networked partnerships tend to be viewed uncritically, such that Slaughter (2004: 167) assumes that networks possess “general virtues of speed, flexibility, inclusiveness, ability to cut across different jurisdictions, and sustained focus on the specific set of problems”. Furthermore, a technical narrative of more equal reallocation of benefit and risk among private and public sectors dominates.¹ Yet there is mounting evidence that partnerships’ internal dynamics and external impacts contradict these assumptions.² It is impossible to explain these partnership processes and effects without considering questions of power. For the purposes of this review of partnerships and power,³ the partnership literature can be classified into four main schools of thought:

1. Normative: partnerships are ethically appropriate to achieving sustainable development
2. Instrumental: partnerships serve to maximize efficiency
3. Technical monitoring and evaluation of partnerships
4. Instrumental: partnerships legitimate private sector profit-making

The majority of partnership research falls into the first two—optimistic—categories, whereas the last two tend towards pessimism. In all four categories, the treatment of power is problematic.

¹ Forrer et al. 2010; World Bank Institute 2014.

² Faul 2016a; Jomo et al. 2016; Koppenjan and Enserink 2009; Mazzucato 2013; Pishchikova 2014.

³ For this paper I reviewed partnership research carried out in the fields of development studies, international relations, organizational research and evaluation studies. It was beyond the scope of this review to also consider environmental studies, although many environmental case studies were analysed in the partnerships literature reviewed.

The first group of authors construct ‘partnership’ as the most ethically appropriate form of designing and implementing development solutions, and as a development solution in itself. This normative orientation prioritizes the social logic of inclusion and participation of traditionally marginalized social actors in partnerships (Buse and Harmer 2007; Reid et al. 2014). This optimistic view is promulgated mainly by NGOs, multilateral agencies, and partnerships themselves.⁴ Thus, partnership is an extension of “the emergence of a new—still incipient, reality and understanding of ‘public’ and ‘private’ not as incompatible and rival, but as mutually re-enforcing elements” (Kaul and Ryu 2001: 1).

A second group of researchers foregrounds market logics in highlighting the instrumental role for the private sector as an actor in—and partner for—sustainable development. Businesses are seen to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the use of available public resources; the transfer of knowledge; and the design and implementation of development solutions.⁵ Thus, partnerships should efficiently “combine public financing, regulation, and private market participation” (Schmidt-Traub and Sachs 2015: 34).

The third type of analysis tends to examine partnerships and their outcomes as technical issues that require technical solutions that must be measured and reported. This literature focuses on the evaluation of outcomes, usually by external consultants.⁶ These evaluations tend to identify the ways in which the activities and outputs of partnerships are not living up to their promise, with a particular focus on inclusion, fiscal management and efficiency.

Yet inclusion does not guarantee participation; and partnering among such diverse sectors does not only present technical challenges. Thus, a fourth group of authors offer a different—more pessimistic—perspective on partnerships being “viewed somewhat naively as inevitable ‘win-win’ relationships” (Utting 2000: 4). These authors focus on the negative instrumental purposes that partnerships may serve.⁷ Thus, rather than enabling the transformative capacity of partnerships, “the incorporation of civil society actors ... is seen as a necessary condition for the legitimization of the liberalising agenda” (Higgott 2000: 143). ‘Partnership’ can thus be seen as an intervention that changes the context, definition and delivery of what might be considered public services (Brinkerhoff 2002b; Krahmann 2003).

These four categories can be placed in a matrix showing how optimistic or pessimistic they are against the extent to which they prioritize eco-social or bureaucratic and market logics (figure 1). For the purposes of this review, ‘bureaucratic logic’ comprises approaches put forward by national or international bureaucracies that prioritize technical monitoring and reporting up a hierarchy of accountability. I define ‘market logic’ as prioritizing financial profits that will be created by seeking efficiencies in production and service delivery, often in new markets opened by partnerships.⁸ In this logic, any social and environmental costs that are generated are considered ‘externalities’ rather being internalized onto balance

⁴ GAVI 2015; GPE 2011; OECD-DAC 2015.

⁵ Agranoff 2003, 2007; Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Forrer et al. 2010; Koppenjan and Enserink 2009.

⁶ Bezanson and Isenman 2012; Cambridge Education, Mokoro Ltd., and Oxford Policy Management 2010; World Bank Operations Evaluation Department 2004.

⁷ Beck 1992; Jomo et al. 2016; Mazzucato 2013.

⁸ ‘Market logic’ usually prioritises competition for customers, however this is rarely a feature of development partnerships.

sheets. In contrast, an ‘eco-social logic’ would prioritize achieving social and environmental benefits and minimizing environmental and social costs above maximizing financial profits (Koehler 2016). This eco-social logic would embed economic functioning (and profit-making) within a consideration of what is socially and environmentally appropriate.

Figure 1: Partnership logics and optimism/pessimism

	Eco-social logic	Market or bureaucratic logics
Optimistic	(1) Normative: ethically appropriate form	(2) Instrumental: form that maximizes efficiency
Pessimistic	(4) Instrumental: legitimating device	(3) Evaluation of efficiency: Promise > achievements

Source: Author.

Thus, this review of partnerships literature identified four strands of research: an optimistic view of partnerships as the most ethically appropriate organizational form or as an organizational form that maximizes efficiency and a pessimistic view based on rational evaluations of efficiency or partnerships as legitimating economic liberalization. In all four approaches, the ways in which authors incorporate notions of power is problematic. In the first three, power is absent; in the fourth it is all-encompassing. In contrast, this paper uses a systems approach to consider the different ways in which existing power asymmetries can be reproduced inside partnerships and what actions can increase the potential for transformative change for sustainable development for all.

Partnerships as Systems

In response to widespread mechanistic readings of development interventions converting inputs directly into outcomes, there has been an increased interest and demand for the application of systems thinking in development research and practice.⁹ Systems thinking is recognized as having untapped potential, first in deciphering the complexity of a partnership as a system (figure 2), and then in applying this understanding to design, implement and evaluate partnerships to maximize partnership dynamics and impacts, as I discuss in the recommendations at the end of this paper.

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