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Partnership Working

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Abstract- The last decade or so has seen an increasing global shift in partnership emphasis as a core to a new form of governance. For successive UK Governments partnership and other forms of inter-organisational working have become increasingly central to UK public sector managers.

This paper will attempt to review the principal factors which may complicate the effectiveness of the strategy process in the context of partnership. In so doing it provides a historical review of motivation for multi-organisational partnerships, a discussion of the possible challenges in the diversity and structural dimensions and a review of the role of partnership managers.

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I. INTRODUCTION

An increasingly fragmented and diverse society means that government is looking for new ways to connect with citizens (OCED, 1999) and to respond to rapid economic and social changes and global economic competition (Carley et al, 2000). In the UK, fundamental shifts occurred in the underlying explanations of urban deprivation and in ideological explanations of urban deprivation by Government. Urban deprivation caused by economic restructuring, deindustrialisation and decline of the inner cities, stifled enterprise and crowded out investment from deprived area (Atkinson and Moon, 1994). These factors led to public resources constrains which motivated public service agencies to establish partnerships with the private sector (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998). Makintosh (1992) has contended that the benefits of partnership provided synergy and a way to overcome public sector constraints to get access to capital markets. It increased the need to co-ordinate and integrate the activities of different levels of government and numerous agencies and programmes (Cochrane, 1993). Also, it caused more difficulties in the achievement of strategic policy coordination in urban policy (Painter et al, 1997). Solving the many-sided inner city housing problems, rising crime rates, poverty and unemployment –all these so-called ‘wicked problems’ (Jackson and Stainby, 2000, p.12; Stewart, 1996) has required co-ordinated efforts of many different agencies (Hutchinson and Campbell, 1998, Dean et al 1999, Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998).

The successive UK Governments White Paper ‘Modernising Government’ and ‘Big Society’ idea promote the co-ordination of the public, private and

voluntary sectors (Cabinet Office, 1999, Pattie and Johnston, 2011). However, this orthodoxy of partnerships is more than facing the issue of resource dependencies (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998).

Overall, the rationale for public-private and community agencies collaborative/partnership working and the benefits these embody can be summed up in Huxham’s (1996) phrase, as a ‘collaborative advantage’. The assumed benefits of this are co-ordination, integration, synergy, innovation and leverage in terms of process objectives. Outcome objectives are better regeneration and improved economic prospects for areas (Lovering, 1995, Giddens, 1998, Carley et al, 2000).

This paper will attempt to review the principal factors which may complicate the effectiveness of the strategy process in the context of partnership. In so doing it provides a definition of partnership term and historical review of motivation for multi-organisational partnerships, then a discussion of the possible challenges in the diversity and structural dimensions and a review of the role of partnership managers are discussed.

The paper is based on the multi-organisational partnership conceptual framework of Huxham (1996, 2000, 2001) and also practical examples from partnership case studies in Britain, a specialist’s view in health and local authorities partnership working, are illustrated (Eden and Huxham, 2001, Huxham and Vangen, 1996, Dean et al, 1999, Carley et al, 2000, Williams, 2002).

a) *Partnership: definition*

There are various words and phrases such as ‘partnership’, ‘alliance’, ‘collaboration’, ‘co-ordination’, ‘co-operation’, ‘network’ and ‘joint-working’, which describe cross-organisational working (Huxham, 1996). However, one may use the terms partnership/collaborative working which are the most convenient terms to covers the wider aspects of cross-sectoral and multi-organisations joint working (ibid). Although there is no universally agreed definition of partnership, we employ the description of the term as ‘a coalition of interests drawn from more than one sector in order to prepare and oversee an agreed strategy’ (Bailey, 1995, p.1).

II. MULTI-ORGANISATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Stemming from work experience in not-for-profit agency the remainder of this paper would note that difficulties may arise in strategy development

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process and its implementation, even within single organisations. Perhaps, it may be explained by various professional languages, hidden competitiveness and 'hidden' interests to exert more influences on head manager of organisations. These factors usually pose challenges to managers and leaders of agencies where they should maintain awareness of the difficulties that may arise during the strategy process, brainstorming and its further implementation. Certainly, in this case, the professional skills and competencies of those managers who facilitate the process play a decisive role. In terms of the multi-agency partnership, the same process could be even harder. In the context of a partnership Joice (2000, p 190) makes a clear point that the process of setting up a partnership is quite different from a single organisations developing a strategy for new service delivery. The public managers have to be ready for quite different role and it requires imaginative lateral thinking of the feasible obstacles that may arise in strategy development which may cause 'collaborative inertia' (Huxham, 2001) in partnership working.

a) *Dimensions of diversity & progressing strategies*

This section discusses the main process-oriented themes in partnership process as well as structural issues such as ambiguity and complexity. These are inherent in collaborative forms that should be taken into account in partnership management and the aspects which make a barrier in partnership between organisations to promote partnership effectiveness. The issues are viewed not as performance factors, but simply as aspects of the nature of partnership/collaboration that may arise and need to be managed.

The development of a strategy for partnership could be regarded as a main element to direct and guide actions for achievement of target (Dean et al, 1999). In this respect, multi-organization partnership strategy development requires considering a number of important factors to pursue successful strategy development. Dean et al cites Hutchinson and Campbell (1998) who point out the following factors as critical to bear in mind in strategy process. These are shared vision, a common understanding of the problem, commitment between partners, clear goals and objectives, a commitment to adjusting the strategy if necessary (Dean et al, p.18).

However, the practical application of above noted key elements of successful strategy process has been questioned to some extent. The case study of The Lanarkshire Alliance in the UK conducted by Dean et al indicated that while there were positive views on building of shared vision and strategic objectives, considerable difficulties were pointed out in prioritising objectives and specifying particular actions. For instances, 88% of their questionnaire respondents agreed that strategic objectives had been determined, yet fewer responses (66 per cent) were noted who had expressed that

particular actions had been specified. It seems that the picture of taking specified actions is more complicated by higher level partnership type which can be seen by following cited interview lines: 'the strategic objectives are not yet matched by action programmes in all cases'; (cited in Dean et al, 1999, p23).

Dean et al further consulting with best practices in partnership strategy process stress the importance of setting indicators of success in order to monitor and evaluate the way of implementation of partnership strategy. Again, the level of development success indicator to monitor the process was found under-developed. The authors noted the importance of willingness to compromise in partnership strategy process, whilst in further our discussion the process-related barriers and challenges in compromise building in particular and in partnership process in general is highlighted.

b) *Managing Aims*

The potential for collaborative advantage is usually created by mobilisation of the different resources by partners. However, writers such as Eden and Huxham (2001) make a point that the agreement of the partners on a broad label for collaboration's purpose does not necessarily mean that they have a common reason of taking part there. For instance, based on one of the interviews for their research, Eden and Huxham (2001) point out that:

"a manager with whom we worked from an organisation, who was concerned to make partnership strategy, not surprisingly found herself grappling with the huge tensions which arose when two organisations tried to develop collaborative aims" (Eden and Huxham, 2001)

Depending on the significance of resource contribution to fulfil the aim of collaboration smaller resource contributors can commonly have less willingness than those who make the bigger resource contributions. For Huxham (2000), some partners can take part only because they are forced to do so in most cases by governmental pressure. Many of them can have 'hidden' interests (Huxham et al, 1996) and agendas (Huxham, 2000) in collaborative participation.

c) *Managing language and communication*

Organisational culture and professional language differences between organisations of professional groups may take place during the collaborative process (Huxham, 2000).

For instance, Alison O'Sullivan (2001, p.8) who had nine months partnership working experience for both Bradford health authority and council comments:

"During the nine month I have begun to explore the many differences...there are obvious differences in language and behaviour, styles of management and power...each organisation has its story to tell and its

own identity... many more differences, often subtle, are hidden in the ways of doing things and in the histories of each organisation..."

If one is to promote better understanding and consensus building in strategy process, one should recognize the importance of language and development of communication. Various styles and different customs and formalities are regarded as barriers for speaking the same language. To compare the language differences of two partner agencies in Bradford health authority and the local authority, the following practical example is worth pointing out (O'Sullivan, 2001). According to O'Sullivan the frequent using of military language by health service officers such as 'setting up the winter bunker' is viewed by local authority as reflection of the command and control method of managing. In contrast, the softer manner of language and the greater use of politically correct terms by local authority officers can be seen as vague and unclear way of expression for health service office representatives. It should be stressed, as O'Sullivan (2001) notes, first impressions have great importance in setting the tone and influencing individuals and organisation perceptions of each other. In this regard, one should avoid the misreading of these superficial differences which may lead to the development of all sorts of assumptions, if there is infrequent contact between partners.

Also, for instance, non-profit organisation's technical terms such as empowerment, cannot be understood by any other partners who are unaware of them. The culture and language of the police force can be stereotyped by their specific language (Huxham, 2000). The various professional languages and associated values within which different professionals work may cause misunderstandings during the collaboration. During the partnership working process, many people grasp differently the meaning from the same phrases because of various professional background (Huxham and Vangen, 2001). Huxham (2000) points out that representatives of community organisations can especially find it quite frustrating when they cannot understand the original meaning of a term being used by a speaker with a professional background. Although the latter may be comfortable with using those words, thinking that normal, non-

specialist, articulate language is used. This can, in turn, practically lead to the exclusion of community representatives from the process (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). It should be stressed that if the premise is accepted that community involvement in partnership is likely to make an urban regeneration development and implementation strategy more effective, then one should not lose sight of the exclusion of community representatives from the partnership process. Some writers such as Shein (1985) and Martin (1992) make a point that 'embedded in organisational culture is a mass of organisational procedures - the way an organization does things (Huxham, 2000, p.349). In the early stage of partnership it is a main task for partners to overcome cultural barriers, existing mutual mistrust and obstacles and sometimes traditional ways of working which are contradictory to partnership (Carley, M., et al 2000).

The examination of partnership working in Scotland conducted by Dean et al (1999) focuses on the relationships between high-level regeneration partnerships and neighbourhood partnerships. Their view accords well with the point noted above about placing a greater role on improved communications if better relationships and understanding between partners are to be achieved.

Dean et al, within their study of Edinburgh Partnership Group, note that in various levels of partnership activity there is a need for effective communication between the people who take part and interact in the partnership process. Moreover, the multi-level integrated partnership requires a greater emphasis on communication and sharing of information in relation to their strategies, priorities and activities between partner agencies. However, the research of Dean et al revealed the underdevelopment of communication and information sharing.

Table 1.1 shows the views of respondents concerning the communication effectiveness between the local and high levels of partnership. The respondents work in this geographical area where the multi-level and low level partnership take place. The table shows that slightly more half of all respondents (fifty three percent) agreed about the practicing of effective communication, whilst a quarter did not (ibid.).

Table 1 : Views on the effectiveness of communication between regional/city partnerships and local partnerships (%)

	All partnerships	High-level	Low-level
Agree there is effective communication	53	41	63
Neither agree nor disagree	22	31	13
Disagree	25	25	24
Number of cases	98	52	46

Source: Dean et al (1999)

Dean et al point out that:

"some participants in high level partnership thought the lack of communication problematic, identifying a lack of a sense of connection with locally based activity, and particularly, a lack of detailed knowledge. This had caused problems for participants in high- level partnerships when called upon to prioritize between rival bids for competitive funding programmes" (Dean et al, 1999, p. 84).

One can note that although the three different above-noted examples of partnership are various in terms of scope and geographical scale, the similar point related language differences and the emphasis for greater attention to build constructive communication as barriers in partnership strategy development.

d) *Managing power and trust*

The difficulties in communication, mentioned earlier, if not managed, may dominate and effect the working process of a partnership (Huxham, 2000), since 'trust and open communication are interrelated factors' (Hill, 2001, p.220). One of the main variables in determining whether partnership relationships between partnership agents are more collaborative or adversarial, depends on the degree of trust (Clarence, 1998). An untrusting relationship may arise because of power relationship concerns. One of the facets of this is a power struggle. Some commentators such as Gray (1989) argue that the real or perceived power disparities can usually take place between the organisations. In terms of public-private partnership in urban regeneration London Docklands development corporation case can be put forward as an example of disparity in power (Fainstein, 1995). For instance, Bob Colenutt, who was employed by local authorities to monitor Docklands development, pointed out: "Power in Docklands lies outside the people we represent. It's with the big developers, the London Docklands Development Corporation. The local authority have very little power". Local authorities powerlessness can be defined by its scarce resource contribution, although one should not neglect the central-local governments relationship at that time which led to private company dominance in public-private partnership. Although, the cited case goes back to recent history of partnership strategy implementation, nevertheless it can be regarded as evidence of power inequality, which arose because of level of resource contribution to partnership working. This is, perhaps, a learning example for current multi-agency partnership working and the overall effect on strategy development and implementation in urban regeneration.

Additionally Huxham (2000) who points out that, because of less resource contribution to collaboration, for example, small voluntary organisations are often overshadowed by major contributors. It should be

emphasised that power differences can extend further beyond the level of organisation to the individual representatives in a collaboration and affect their behaviour (ibid.). Here Huxham (2000, p.350) cites Hardy et al (1992) who notes that 'collaborations work best if the individuals involved in any management committee or similar structure perceive themselves being of approximately the same status'.

e) *Managing challenges of resources competition*

It has been claimed that within fragmented terrain, partnership may provide a means of co-ordination and developing strategic direction, and that the term embodies consensus and collaboration (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998). However, according to the research outcome of Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) this mode of governance involves the imperative to compete, challenging trust and mutuality. Within urban regeneration sphere organizations compete for gaining recognition its performance to demonstrate its achievement, value for money and effectiveness. The bidding process is manifested for City Challenge and Single Regeneration Budget schemes between partnerships and localities which may exclude voluntary and community organisations whose endurance depends on 'gaining access to winning partnership' (ibid., p.327). One of the local authorities has pointed out that 'there is a vast difference between a package of money and real inter-agency working. You can have the first with outright enemies!' (Cited in Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998, p327). According to Lowndes and Skelcher, competitive pressures can harden, once in receipt of grant funding. The distribution of funds for programme implementation challenges partnership leading to a market-style picture instead of collaboration. In this sense, it has been suggested that one should bear in mind the importance of the establishment of preliminary network relationships as one of the potential methods to manage the existing competition in resource allocation.

f) *Leadership*

To develop mutual aims, understanding and trust in the partnership process, there should be a leadership role to lead collaboration and he or she should be reflective a practitioner (Huxham, 2000). Local authority is seen to be more influential as a lead agency in many partnerships because of political position and democratic accountability to citizens. Partnership or collaboration action will not be developed if there is lack of leadership (Carley et al, 2000). For instance, as Carley et al note, the Glasgow Alliance experienced a lack of leadership until it was re-launched. From the part of local politicians there was no will to take on a leadership role. However, a rapid change occurred within the Alliance, once a new leader of Glasgow Council came to the administration and started to take part in partnership. Another example which shows the

importance of leadership in the early stage of partnership strategy development is provided by the following words of one Sheffield's City Liaison Partnership Group's member partner. He highlights that: "Good partnership leaders tend to be sharp people... and are determined to drive the agenda" (cited in Carley et al, 2000, p. 22).

Yet, everyone should take a leadership role to some extent, not only authority representatives. However, as Huxham (2000) points out, one should recognise that there can be many, who will prefer individualistic action whilst leading because of lack of experience. This can effect the outcomes. One of the challenges to be addressed in collaboration work in this case, perhaps, is to make an effort to strengthen around the collaborators, those who are less able on it.

Besides the diversity dimension there are structural issues one should take into account to make collaboration effective. As Giddens (1998) has argued, the action of people can be influenced by the structure, although it cannot prevent their intentional action (Huxham, 2001) Yet, partnership structure, which is a matter of further discussion in the next section, plays an important role in developing strategy and its further effective implementation. Also, as Huxham (2000, p346) argues, 'they determine such key factors as who may have an influence on shaping a partnership agenda, who may have power to act and what resources may be tapped...' in a strategy process of partnership.

III. PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURAL COMPLEXITIES

It has been noted earlier that besides the process-oriented forces that may cause barriers in partnership working there are also structural issues. This may amplify partnership strategy process difficulties.

a) *Ambiguity*

The clear understanding and agreeing of each members' involvement, one of the core detrimental attributes of collaborative working, and capacity it carries, may lack practical implication (Huxham, 2001). According to Eden and Huxham (2001) many different interests, reasons of individuals and organisations involvement with a collaboration raise questions of how they perceive or are perceived as being members. For instance, there can be cases where individuals, instead of considering themselves as being a full member, may relate themselves as a fund-provider organisation in partnership settings (Huxam, 2001).

Also, the point has been stressed that many partnerships may experience tensions in terms of the degree they include or involve to partner organisations on one hand, but are effective in streamlined decision-making and management processes, with reasonable numbers on the partnership board, on the other (Carley,

et al, 2000). For instance, the Capital City Partnership (CCP) in Edinburgh experienced the problem in terms of its board which grew up to 35 people and above. In turn it resulted in less productive discussion and reduced opportunities for any one representative to participate, making meetings unwieldy. Wilson and Charlton (1998) suggest that a well-balanced partnership may involve around 10-14 people. It should be particularly stressed that the setting up of a proper main partnership board is important for a consideration of strategy development issues for locality or area. It is also significant to establish an operational board, which would supervise particular requirements of urban regeneration programmes, funding and monitoring and evaluation in effective delivery of strategy (ibid.).

b) *Organisational membership and pluralism*

According to Huxham and Vangen (2000) one should be clear about the partnership structure. For instance, they put forward the Umbrella groups of community organisations and confederations of organisations, where the structural complexity led to representation of local authority both directly and indirectly in this sector (see figure 1). They note that a representative without a pure representative power or accountability may effect to the matter of real constituency.

The extended expansion of cross-relating partnerships in many areas in recent years has been called by Stewart (1998) a 'pluralism', which is one of the dimensions of structural complexity (Huxham, 2001). It may affect the implementation of partnership strategy creating 'partnership fatigue' which may derive from individuals' involvement in too many partnership initiatives. For example, Huxham and Vamgen (2000) illustrate a Bristol partnership case where twenty two key people are involved in fifty-six places in main nine Bristol's partnership structures (see, figure 2). Too many partnerships in one locality also lead to various sorts of meetings where the same individuals may keep attending different set of partnership bodies. For instances, a community director from City Challenge noted that:

'I do not care if I am elected because there is a lot of hard work - meeting after meeting and sometimes you think 'Is it worth it?' (cited in Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998, p.329).

Perhaps, one may consider the limit and effective number of setting up partnerships in one locality to avoid the frustration and fatigue of partnership participants.

c) *Dynamics*

The final dimension of structural complexity is continual change. It related to the UK central government's policy of promotion various new initiatives over the period which involves the alteration of purposes

of partnership effecting the sustainability of partnership (Huxham, 2000).

It should be noted that frequently emphasized the call for appropriateness of structure in partnership does not necessarily can ensure the effective implementation of strategy in itself (Dean et al, 1999). As Johnson and Scholes (1997) contends what is important is 'how the detailed aspects of the organisation design are 'hung' around structure' where communication, noted earlier, and inter- personal skills play significant role (Dean et al, 1999, p.39). The latter factor depends on how well partnership managers and participants' are able and inherent the quality and professional skills to manage smartly raised barriers in partnership strategy process.

IV. PARTNERSHIP MANAGERS: THE COMPETENCE OF BOUNDARY SPANNER

Some commentators, as referenced earlier, such as Joice (2000) and Huxham (2000), emphasised that the multi-organisational partnership working process needs careful management where partnership managers, or boundary spanner who need to possess and be equipped with set of embedded vital skills

(Williams, 2001). They are the people who facilitate the heartbeat of the process.

Throughout the paper it has been pointed out that the facets of the partnership working process in strategy development, which are subject to management, in this respect one should not neglect the importance and contribution of individual actors in the partnership process. The main difficulties highlighted in previous sections were building language and communication differences, trust and power disparity, and leadership matters. If these differences encountered are to be managed carefully one should maintain awareness of the need to possessing related experience, competence and skills, creative attitude and lateral thinking on the part of these managers. For instance, Williams (2001) has attempted to describe and categorise the necessary competencies of boundary spanners, reflecting the experiences of partnership managers. In doing so he surveyed boundary spanners with health promotion, crime, environmental, and community safety policy area specialization and also local agenda 21 co-ordinators in a local authority in the South Wales area, within which various agencies were involved in collaborative work (see Table 2).

	Phase 1			Phase 2		
Geographical Area	UK	Wales	Wales	Wales	Welsh local authority area	
Sample	Environmental & local Agenda 21 co-ordinators	Crime community safety coordinators	& co-	Health promotion specialists	Partnership managers	
Type of organisation	Local authority	Local authority		Health authority and NHS Trust	Local authority; NHS	Health Trust; Voluntary sector; Probation service; Youth offending partnership
Research Method	Postal survey	Postal survey		Postal survey	In-depth interviews	
Sampling Method	Opportunistic	opportunistic		opportunistic	Snowball	
Sample size	469	22		10	15	
Response rate (%)	50	54		100	100	

Source: Williams, 2001, p.114

On the basis of his research, Williams put forward the certain set of particular skills, personal characteristics and experience that may be required, yet they can be various depending on partnership case and circumstances. These are as follows:

- Communication/listening skills; ability to understand and see issues from other's perspectives are regarded as necessary skills to manage encountered differences.
- As it was noted, an interviewed boundary spanner maintained the awareness that there may be lack of authority lines over other partners, and managing power relationships in this case can be confronted by influencing, negotiation, mediation, brokering. This requires the persuasive, diplomatic and perceived legitimacy.

In the summary of his study Williams has highlighted some personal traits and also stressed the

related experience boundary spanners are expected to possess in enhancing partnership and collaborative effectiveness throughout policy development, implementation and delivery process.

Regarding complexity and interdependencies William's study isolates 3 main contributory factors to manage interdependencies – inter organisational experience; trans-disciplinary knowledge and cognitive capability. Personality traits being put forward are qualities such as honesty, reliability; tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty.

V. CONCLUSION

As one can note the paper has attempted to emphasise the main challenges and difficulties of working in partnership process that may cause barriers in effective strategy development and implementation.

It is difficult to come to a common agreement about the definite formula of success that would make the strategy process work effectively in the highly complex world of partnership. In other words, there is no ideal recipe of partnership success. It should be emphasised that 'even with the best will in the world, misunderstandings are likely to occur due to the diversity in language, values and culture' (Huxham, 2000, p. 351). However, those complexities highlighted throughout this paper should not be neglected and left in its own. For the author, one of the most convincing arguments comes from Huxham (2000), who maintains the importance of the recognition and understanding of complexity and diversity, that may provide a preparation for participants of strategy process - how to be creative and give sophisticated responses. Also, effective partnership working needs a strong commitment to partnership and change for both public managers as well as other participants of the process, if it is recognised that partnership working is the most sensible way forward to achieve 'collaborative advantage'.

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