

Local Cross-Sector Partnerships: Tackling the Challenges Collaboratively

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A Paper submitted to the **From the Field** section of Nonprofit Management and Leadership, August 2009. Provisionally accepted for publication April 2010.

Revised by the authors in line with editor's and reviewers' comments May 2010.

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Abstract

We focus in this paper on the challenges faced by local governmental (municipal) and third sector (nonprofit) organizations which seek to work collaboratively or 'in partnership'. We build on the findings of an action research project to draw out the practical implications of cross-sector working for the organizations involved. We describe jointly agreed suggestions for tackling the challenges which emerged when third sector organizations and local governmental agencies themselves worked collaboratively in a search for mutually acceptable solutions. Finally, we draw out learning points on cross-sectoral working for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers.

Introduction

The public policy drive to encourage collaborative or 'partnership' working across the boundaries of the governmental (public) and third (nonprofit) sectors is now well established in the UK as well as in the US (Austin, 2003; Glendinning et al, 2002; Kelly, 2007; Najam, 2000; Salamon, 1995).

Although this policy pressure for cross sectoral collaboration is strong and ongoing, there is evidence from both practitioner and researched-based accounts that, in practice, the *implementation* of collaborations across the governmental/third sector boundary can be problematic (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; O'Regan and Oster, 2000). It seems that tensions can arise, for example, around the representation of the different sectors; information-sharing; decision-making processes; and the distribution of power and resources.

In this article, then, we focus on this implementation issue. How can governmental and third sector organizations tackle the practical challenges of cross-sectoral working and develop their capacity to collaborate effectively - or 'work in partnership'- across sector boundaries?

After briefly reviewing the disparate existing literature on the *practice* of collaborative working between governmental and third sector organizations, we describe an action research project in the UK which aimed to improve cross-sector collaboration, specifically collaboration across the boundary between local governmental (municipal) agencies and third sector infrastructure organizations. We draw out the practical implications of implementing cross-sector working for the local organizations involved. We then set out some of the jointly agreed suggestions for tackling the challenges which emerged *when the third sector organizations and governmental agencies themselves worked collaboratively in the search for mutually acceptable solutions*. Finally, we suggest implications of

the project process and findings, for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers.

We use the acronym 'CSPs' to refer to cross-sector 'partnerships' and other kinds of cross-sector 'collaborations'. We use the acronym 'TSOs' to refer generically to 'third sector organizations' (including 'nonprofits', 'voluntary organizations' and 'NGOs').

The Practice of Government/TSO cross-sector working

The ideological, policy, organizational and pragmatic pressures for collaboration (or 'partnerships') across sectors in a variety of countries have been extensively explored by writers studying government/third sector relationships (eg Birrell and Hayes, 2004; Lewis, 2001; Cho and Gillespie, 2006; Ebrahim, 2003; Vernis et al, 2006). As the pressures for cross-sector collaborations have grown, researchers have begun to explore the practical implications for those organizations which respond to the pressures and engage in cross-sector collaborations.

For third sector organizations the implications include coping with rapid growth and change; learning to work according to governmental expectations and norms; responding to governmental accountability requirements; and, at the same time, retaining a focus on their own long-term organizational sustainability and independence (Mulroy, 2003; Harris and Schlappa, 2007). For governmental agencies, the challenges of CSPs include understanding the distinctive organizational features of third sector organizations and how those features affect matters such as sectoral representation, speed of decision-making, strategic planning and engagement in governance structures (Craig and Taylor, 2002; Hudson et al, 1999). For organizations in both sectors, there are challenges of understanding the institutional norms and environmental pressures faced by organizations in the other sector, sharing information and finding appropriate joint decision-making mechanisms (Linden, 2002; Shaw, 2002). The difficulties of finding appropriate and mutually acceptable governance structures for CSPs have also been noted (Hill and Hupe, 2006; Munro et al, 2008).

Many cross-sectoral partnerships are underpinned to some extent by governmental funding; sometimes specific funding to support collaborations. In the case of third sector organizations, they may be in receipt of grants or contracts from governmental organizations, perhaps even the same organizations with which they are formally also 'in partnership'. This financial nexus raises questions for both sectors, not only about appropriate accountability and monitoring mechanisms but also about the sustainability of inter-organizational relationships in situations of unequal power or in situations where one party feels they have little choice about their involvement (Brown and Troutt, 2004; Evans, 2007).

Those seeking theories and concepts to help them respond to these practical problems of implementing CSPs can draw on analyses of the partnership concept in public policy and the power relationships which underpin it (Brinkerhoff, 1999; McDonald, 2005; Whitehead, 2007), as well as on the growing generic literature on inter-organizational relationships (Connor et al, 1999; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Powell et al, 1996). In addition, studies of community involvement in partnerships shed some theoretical light on the operation of CSPs (Taylor, 2007; Pratchett et al, 2009). However, research to date has tended to look at the experiences and perspectives of the governmental and third sectors *separately*, thereby emphasising the differences between them and the barriers to their collaboration.

In this paper, by contrast, we consider the challenges of cross-sector collaboration from a local perspective and also through a cross-sectoral lens. We do this by building on the findings of an action research project in the UK in which we as researchers engaged with thirteen local governmental (municipal) authorities and with third sector 'infrastructure' organizations operating in those same local areas. We show how, through a collaborative exercise (called here the 'Partnership Improvement Project') in which *they themselves worked cross-sectorally on the common challenge of cross-sector working*, project participants from both sectors were able to achieve some consensus about practical ways of responding to the challenges of collaboration.

The Partnership Improvement Project (PIP)

The aim of the 'Partnership Improvement Project' (PIP) was to explore ways in which capacity for 'partnership working' between local governmental agencies and TSOs could be developed, especially in relation to the planning and funding of welfare services. The 'partnerships' involved senior local governmental officers and senior third sector managers meeting formally to discuss, for example, the development of new approaches to delivering services to young people or the introduction of specialist funding arrangements for smaller, community-based groups.

The PIP was initiated jointly by a quasi-governmental organization (the Improvement and Development Agency or 'IDeA') and a consortium of four national third sector infrastructure organizations. It was conceived as an action research project (Cairns et al, 2006) in which we and our colleagues(1) worked alongside project participants from both local government and the third sector, aiming to produce practically useful knowledge which could help build the capacity of organizations in both sectors to tackle the challenges of collaboration across sectoral boundaries.

Thirteen local study areas in England were selected in the first place, using a theoretical sampling approach (Yin, 2003) such that there was variation with

respect to size, location and social and political characteristics. In each of the thirteen areas, local government participants (senior officers with lead responsibility for cross-sector working with TSOs) and third sector participants (senior officers from local infrastructure organizations) were recruited through an open application process. In each area, there were between ten and fourteen members of the participant group, evenly split across the two sectors.

Four half-day research workshops were held in each study area, each facilitated by two members of the research team. Topics discussed and debated by project participants included: distinctive features of TSOs and local governmental organizations; perceptions of drivers, barriers and obstacles to cross-sector partnership working; and specific local challenges to improving cross-sector partnership working. All project participants were encouraged by the facilitating researchers *to model effective cross-sector working* in their own discussions by taking a problem-solving approach to difficulties and barriers identified.

With the agreement of participants, discussions in all workshops were recorded and summary notes were then distributed prior to the next session, where the notes were amended and agreed. In this way, only data which had been 'cleared' by participants was used in further work (Harris and Harris, 2002); points of consensus and commonality were drawn out (Leach et al, 2002); and dissimilar viewpoints were openly aired. Finally, and reflecting the importance of 'action' in our approach, we as researchers supported participants in each area in working together to develop mutually-acceptable responses to the challenges which they themselves had earlier identified. The responses were recorded in each area in jointly-owned cross-sector 'Partnership Improvement Action Plans'.

In the following sections, we draw on analysis of workshop reports, participants' feedback comments and the thirteen jointly agreed Action Plans to consider the pressures and practical challenges of CSPs identified by project participants in both sectors, as well as the ideas they put forward jointly to tackle those challenges and thereby improve their capacity to collaborate. Quotes from study participants are included for illustrative purposes *in italics*.

Pressures to work cross-sectorally and perceived benefits

In all thirteen study areas there was said to be an expectation, and often a requirement, from the UK national government for local governmental authorities (LAs) to work in partnership with a range of external bodies, including TSOs. The majority of LA participants mentioned specific policy initiatives as drivers for cross-sector partnership working: "*each week there is a new initiative from [national] government that mentions partnerships*". This perception of the external policy environment shaping the local partnership agenda was shared by TSO participants who felt that, in the current policy context, not taking part would

make their organizations vulnerable; they highlighted the *“importance of being seen to participate”* and *“knowing what’s going on”*.

Within the broad framework of national governmental interest in partnership working, the local decision to collaborate across sectors was often part of a more general desire, shared by both sectors, to exercise ‘community leadership’. LA participants were clear that their obligations to diverse communities were ones that they could not meet without the cooperation of local TSOs. They described the potential of partnership working *“to enable us to fulfil our responsibility to reach and get closer to local communities”*, with TSOs acting as a conduit for local people to voice their opinions and to participate in planning and service delivery. From a TSO perspective, these arrangements were also welcome as they provided *“opportunities to facilitate the involvement of traditionally excluded members of local communities”*, in particular black and minority ethnic groups, faith groups and people with disabilities. Thus, there was seen to be a common interest in *“reaching the parts that local [municipal] authorities cannot reach alone”*.

In addition to these external drivers for CSPs, project participants in both sectors were also motivated to work cross-sectorally by internal organizational factors. It was thought that each sector could bring specific skills and expertise from which the other could learn: *“working together we can identify common goals, and pursue outcomes which actually mean something locally”*. This ‘mutual advantage’ perspective on cross-sector partnership working - where synergy is achieved between the policy objectives of a governmental agency and the mission of a TSO - was widely shared. The local benefits of CSPs were felt by participants from both sectors to be improved opportunities and better outcomes for people using services and for local communities and neighbourhoods: *“when we find the common ground, the whole really is greater than the sum of the parts.”*

Challenges of cross-sector partnership working and proposed responses

Despite the general agreement that cross-sector working could be advantageous to organizations in both sectors and that organizations in each sector could complement the characteristics of the other to secure public benefits, participants identified numerous challenges that they had experienced in implementing CSPs.

Participants from both sectors emphasised that effective CSPs require specialist and dedicated resources, not just money but also time and skills: *“to work effectively in partnerships you need a whole range of skills: communication, negotiation, conflict-resolution and policy analysis”*. The importance of allocating time for building mutual understanding was also stressed: *“there is a general lack of understanding about the respective roles of the LA and the voluntary [third] sector; this is often made worse by there being no common understanding or*

language; stereotypes, negative assumptions and prejudice about ‘the other’; and a lack of trust between respective parties.” This lack of knowledge and understanding, which in turn was a major obstacle to building trust, was widely cited by organizations in both sectors. It was related to various further negative factors in both sectors, including: territorialism; protectionism and a lack of organizational (as opposed to individual) commitment to partnership working.

Many project participants thought that the challenges posed by lack of time, skills and negative mutual perceptions amounted to a lack of ‘capacity’ for effective partnership working in both sectors. The problem for both sectors of this capacity deficit was often exacerbated by the sheer number of partnerships they were engaged in; in larger LAs senior LA and TSO staff could be involved in as many as 60 formal partnerships. As a result, it was often the case that *“the burden of making partnerships function well falls on to a small number of key individuals, who often pick up jobs because no-one else will do them.”* This in turn meant that partnerships were often seen as depending too much on individual personalities, raising concerns about organizational and community accountability, and partnership sustainability.

Cross-sectoral discussions between participants about partnership-working ‘capacity’ often led on to them jointly prioritising skills development and other related resources in their Action Plans (see Table 1 for an example). One area group committed itself to developing a model of mutual understanding and support, by organizing cross-sector job swaps and mentoring. In another area, participants initiated a skills audit of existing partnership participants as a precursor to developing a programme of training. In a third area, it was agreed to include the full costs of participating in partnerships in all new funding agreements between the LA and the third sector.

Alongside concerns about cross-sectoral collaborative capacity, a frequently cited challenge was the fact that mechanisms for the involvement of TSOs in CSPs were seen as unsatisfactory by both sectors – albeit for different reasons. Amongst many LA project participants, there was an expectation that the third sector could and should be ‘represented’ by a small number of individuals and should be able to speak with a single voice in CSP discussions: *“there are often inconsistent lines of communication and reporting between voluntary sector representatives and the wider voluntary sector and a lack of clarity about their accountability.”* In contrast, TSO participants had *“difficulty with the notion of ‘representing’ a sector that is extremely diverse and, in some areas, increasingly competitive”*. They also complained that local authorities were torn between: *“encouraging us to speak out on behalf of local people and [on the other hand] not being willing or able to listen to what we have to say or how we say it.”*

More positively, participants felt that the issue of TSO representation in partnerships could be *“improved by both parties having clearer expectations of*

how the involvement of, and consultation with, the voluntary [third] sector might best be achieved". As with the issue of partnership 'capacity', participants felt that this process of clarifying consultation expectations might be supported by investment in skills development; especially skills development for key people within the third sector around advocacy, policy awareness and strategic planning. In complementary fashion, it was suggested by project participants that 'third sector acclimatization' training should be provided for local governmental personnel involved in collaborations with TSOs; to help them understand the diverse nature of the third sector and the distinctive features and challenges faced by TSOs.

The issue of third sector representation in partnerships was linked to some broader challenges surrounding the 'governance' of individual partnerships. Some participants found that meetings of cross-sectoral partnerships were often, in themselves, a source of confusion and frustration. Individual roles were ambiguous, accountabilities were unclear and there was a feeling that consultation and subsequent communication of decisions was sometimes inadequate. Participants suggested that problems of representation and governance were often attributable to the fact that CSPs were established at short notice in order to meet timescales and targets imposed by national government policies, with little time to consider terms of reference, membership, timescales, processes or outcomes. Resultant problems around accountability, transparency and trust within CSPs were compounded, it was said, by lack of clarity about the purpose of many partnerships and the associated problem of participants holding differing expectations: *"it's often unclear how partnerships fit with the council's [LA] priorities and few specify the rights and responsibilities of participants, so lines of accountability are unclear"*. Those who actually participated in partnership meetings were not necessarily the most appropriate from their respective organizations: *"too often, membership comprises people who are located at the wrong level in their organizations to make the necessary decisions."*

The 'governance' of CSPs, then, was felt to be a major priority for future action to improve cross-sectoral collaboration and a number of initiatives were identified in Action Plans to introduce 'pre-partnership agreements' which would establish rules of partnership engagement and governance at an early stage. Suggestions jointly agreed in local areas and incorporated into Action Plans included: taking time at the outset to establish a clear rationale for the establishment of a partnership and an indicative timescale for its duration; clear membership criteria and agreed understanding of the roles of both LA and TSO participants; identification of the time and resources available to support TSO participation; and agreement on reporting mechanisms.

Implications for Practitioners and Policy-Makers

The PIP action research project confirmed the indications from earlier research (cited above) that both local governmental authorities and third sector organizations experience multiple and overlapping pressures to work together 'in partnership' but that they also experience substantial problems in implementing such collaborations in practice. Through a collaborative approach to tackling those problems of collaboration, the Partnership Improvement Project provided not only detailed information about the nature of the problems experienced, but also practical proposals for tackling the challenges.

It seems that there are the expected problems of 'insufficient resources' but it also seems that the resources which are most lacking are ones of time, skills and expertise rather than money as such. Moreover, negative stereotypes of the 'other' sector and lack of understanding of its distinctive culture and ways of working contribute to lack of trust between organizations brought together in partnerships. The need to manage multiple partnerships puts additional pressures on those engaged in collaborative cross-sectoral efforts.

There is also a cluster of problems which are broadly around the 'governance' of cross-sector partnerships. These include the conundrum of how to provide 'representation' of a heterogeneous third sector; the quest for appropriate models of decision making; and dealing with uncertainty around objectives, purposes and perceived imbalances in power. Our findings suggest that, not only do cross-sector partnerships require attention to governance in their own right but also that those partnership governance arrangements need to be both tailored and dynamic (Takahashi and Smutny, 2002). In fact, it seems that time invested at the early stage of a partnership - a preparatory period in which parties can pay specific attention to locally appropriate governance arrangements and to the process of trust-building – could help to avert disputes and mutual distrust at a later stage.

The PIP experience further suggests that the process of working together across sectors towards an agreed goal (in this case, the very goal of improving cross-sectoral partnership working) can enable participants to explore possibilities beyond the constraints of a national government-driven partnership agenda, and identify the 'collaborative advantage' (Huxham, 1996) of working together. Responses to some of the challenges of working across sector boundaries can be found, it seems, when there is a collaborative cross-sectoral search for responses to the challenges: *"This has given us the space to discuss difficult and often intransigent issues and has provided a really useful intellectual sounding board. We now have real potential to make significant and lasting change."*

As for policy-makers, the PIP experience suggests that they need to be aware that, however 'obvious' the notion of cross-sectoral partnerships for the common good might appear to be, obstacles to the practical *implementation* of cross-

sector partnership working are substantial. At a local level there can be, in effect, a collaborative capacity deficit. Further, many of the generic obstacles to cross-sector collaboration are shaped and amplified at the local level by local circumstances, including prior experience (often negative) of organizational and personal relationships across sectoral boundaries. Dedicated resources are needed to enable new local cross-sectoral 'partnerships' to find their own customised solutions to the challenges of collaboration; ones which are sensitive to, and grounded in, local history, politics and relationships.

Closing the 'implementation gap' between national policy directives and practice on the ground in local areas will also require acknowledgement from public policy makers that, for both TSOs and governmental agencies, cross-sector partnership working is resource-intensive. If it is to be effective there needs to be dedicated investment of time not only for skills development but also for trust-building (Lewicki et al, 1998; Stephenson and Schnitzer, 2006).

Future Research on Cross-Sector Partnerships

The project reported here has provided a number of pointers for future research on 'partnerships' and collaborative working across the government/third sector divide.

First, as regards methodology, the project experience suggests that practical and theoretical benefits can accrue from an action research approach to tackling the challenges of cross-sectoral working (Mann et al, 2004); an approach in which practitioners from the two sectors can be supported in a collaborative search for practical responses to their jointly experienced problems. In the PIP case, the action research approach enabled cross-sector discussions to move beyond traditional disputes about resources and decision-making and enabled a genuinely collaborative approach to exploring issues, including knowledge-sharing and the development of cross-sectoral trust (Kramer and Cook, 2004). The approach proved successful in bringing together people working across sectoral divides and in giving them a shared problem to solve - namely, how to create the conditions for effective joint working.

Having jointly laid the foundations of mutual understanding, participants were then able to identify *practical* action which could build on that development (as shown in Table 1). Most importantly, the very process of working cross-sectorally on a joint problem, supported by facilitating researchers, served to start building the trust which has been identified as an essential prerequisite of successful cross-sectoral relationships (Brown and Troutt, 2004).

Second, the PIP example suggests that future research could benefit from conceptualising cross-sector partnerships not so much as the sum of individual actors in different sectors, and not so much as curious 'hybrid' organizational

forms (Evers and Laville, 2004; Minkoff, 2002), but as *sui generis*; as phenomena which need to be understood as organizational forms in their own right, demanding their own specialist theoretical developments. From this perspective, it appears that future research should pay attention to matters such as the structure, governance, accountability mechanisms and culture of cross-sector partnerships, as well as to the question of how to build collaborative capacity in all partner organizations.

In taking forward research on partnerships, organizational and nonprofit scholars might benefit from linking their efforts with those of scholars of community development and community empowerment who are also engaged in a quest to understand the nature of the complex interactions at the local level between governmental agencies and third sector organizations (see, for example, Barnes et al, 2007; Rycraft and Dettlaff, 2009) . Drawing on the theoretical and empirical findings generated by community practice scholars could also help to throw light on questions about the implications for practice of inequalities in power within cross-sector partnerships. Such questions were raised in earlier theoretical literature but were not found in our own study to be a barrier to cross-sectoral collaboration. We found, in fact, that both TSOs and local governmental authorities were under external pressure to collaborate and needed each other's active cooperation. Whether it is common for external pressures for partnership to trump tensions arising from inequalities of power, merits further empirical investigation.

Finally

In this paper we have focused on the challenges of implementing cross-sectoral collaborations and partnerships. Some of our findings echo earlier research; for example the mutual lack of understanding about the features of organizations in the 'other' sector; the obstacles to developing trust across sectoral boundaries; and the difficulties of establishing governance structures for partnerships. But we have also been able to add to existing knowledge by teasing out the complexities of the inter-linkages between the challenges; for example, the way in which dependence on just a few committed individuals can threaten the sustainability of partnerships; or the way in which the pressure to establish cross sectoral collaborations very rapidly can leave no space for the development of mutual trust and the building of collaborative capacity.

Most importantly perhaps, we have been able to point to a way in which collaborative capacity across sectors can be built up; through a process in which representatives of the two sectors themselves work collaboratively in the search for mutually acceptable practical responses to the challenges of implementing cross-sectoral partnerships.

Table 1: An Example of a Local Partnership Improvement Action Plan

Local objective	Local partnership improvement action
To improve mutual understanding and knowledge transfer (eg. about models of delivery, engagement and advocacy) across the two sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization of job swaps, outreach visits and arrangements for peer mentoring between senior LA and TSO staff • Production and distribution across the local authority of 'An Introduction to the Third Sector'
To address LA concerns about the accountability of TSO 'representatives' in local, strategic partnerships and TSO concerns about the resources required to participate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of existing role and resource/skill needs of TSO infrastructure in cross-sector partnerships prior to introduction of a model for Elected Participants • Inclusion of partnership participation costs in service level agreements
To develop a common and transparent reference point for the governance of cross-sector partnerships concerned with planning and strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of a new 'pre-partnership' agreement to cover the purpose, remit, organization, decision-making arrangements and resourcing of partnerships
To improve the transparency and appropriateness of LA commissioning and procurement with the third sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint LA/third sector review of services and funding needs for Children and Young People • Joint LA/third sector work on outcomes and performance indicators for smaller TSOs
To improve opportunities for the involvement of local people in local planning (eg. community involvement in new neighbourhood arrangements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of new Community Engagement small grants fund, jointly administered by LA/third sector

Note

(1) The authors of this article were part of a team of researchers. Other members of the research team for the project reported on here were Sam Brier and Jane Harris whose contributions to the ideas in this paper we acknowledge with thanks.

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