The necessity of transformation

Emerging Partnership Lessons from Diverse Contexts

PARTNERSHIP
BROKERS ASSOCIATION
LEARNING • TRAINING • TRANSFORMING

PEP
Promoting Effective Partnering

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Acknowledgements

1. Partnership Brokers Association: www.partnershipbrokers.org

1. Starting from the End

"I'm not talking to you..."

"That's ok, I'm not listening.."

"If as a partnership broker I can just let myself be an outlet for someone's frustrations. And just listen. This can be a powerful way to unravel issues or discover concerns, interests or new ideas. Even just the act of listening can be a kind of resolution in and of itself – when people who are not usually listened to feel that, finally, their voice has been heard"

Where do we want this work to lead?

What will it take to make a truly inclusive and sustainable world? When we look at the enormity of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) it is very daunting – can we as a species really find ways of working together to turn things around and, if so, what will it take? Whilst we understand that this research project is a tiny drop in a big ocean, we hope it will provide a vehicle for the voice of local experience and play its part in making the case for the vital importance of individual leadership and courageous action at national and local levels.

The Promoting Effective Partnering (PEP) Facility is a project of the Dutch Government undertaken during its time as co-chair of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC). PEP has been initiated by a partnership of five organisations: The Collective Leadership Institute; Partnership Brokers Association; Partnership Resource Centre; Partnerships in Practice and The Partnering Initiative. PEP exists to support the work of development professionals and practitioners so that they collaborate ever more effectively to achieve the SDGs. This partnership is, we all hope, making its own contribution to SDG 17.[2]

As one of the five partners, we have pushed from the beginning for the PEP Facility to be as human, responsive and accessible as possible – where those who engage with it feel they can be heard and their challenges can be aired, shared and addressed

in a supportive atmosphere and a safe space. We really want PEP to be both practical and realistic about what it takes to partner and how very tough, in certain contexts, partnering can be.

We have welcomed the opportunity to access individual perspectives from many parts of the globe and from all sectors (community groups, business, government, NGOs, international agencies and academia) and hope this project will both help to shape the 'tone' of the PEP Facility and provide a starting point for voices that often get lost – including those from the very groups and contexts that the SDGs aim to impact most because those needs are so pressing.

This project

The aim of this project was to explore the realities of working in partnerships for sustainable development at country and local levels by:

- **Gathering knowledge** that is substantive and real (even if anecdotal in character) by accessing a rich network of practitioners operating as partnership brokers who have the capacity (embedded in their training) to reflect on their day-to-day experiences and to capture insights from a widely diverse range of contexts.
- **Synthesising and validating findings** with support from a diverse range of practitioners able to share their own experiences and help us to interrogate findings.
- **Implementing transmission mechanisms** through both PEP and our own networks in order to provide appropriate partnering / partnership brokering support to those on the front end of delivering the SDGs.

We believe that this project will build further possibilities for those in our network to offer partnership-strengthening support in different regions and countries. It will also help to develop the PEP Facility by revealing valuable layers, complexities, challenges and innovations in the partnering paradigm to support its work and to provide genuine insights and practical advice with a human and locally appropriate 'edge'. In this way, PEP will be able to make the support it offers applicable and responsive to the real needs of those working at the sharp end of partnering.

PEP's Co-Design Lab

A two-day workshop in The Hague[3] came at a critical moment in the project and enabled us to benefit from further insights and ideas – particularly to do with how we can position this work with a range of outputs and products. The feedback we

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2. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.

3. Held from January 25-26, 2016, at which some 40 participants from organisations all over the world came together to interrogate the work of the PEP partners and to explore and help to develop the PEP SDG support facility.

got on our work to date on this project was very encouraging and enabled us to think more broadly about how this work may be adapted for different purposes.

Outputs from this project

This project started small but has the potential for considerable expansion in a number of ways. Immediate outputs and inputs (in addition to this report) include:

- Preparation of a **slide pack** of some key findings available on the PEP Facility and the PBA website that practitioners worldwide can use to make the case for more attention being given to diversity and context by decision-makers and / or for more resources to be made available for the partnering process

- **PEP Talks** – a series of audio conversations between two practitioners working on similar projects / SDGs in very different contexts (the first on local agricultural supply chains with practitioners from Poland and Zambia will be available on the site from April 2016 – with others in the pipeline, hopefully the PEP Facility will cover all 17 SDGs in due course)

- In-put into the **Navigator for Challenging Contexts** being developed by our PEP partner[4]

- In-put into the work of another PEP partner[5] on **Partnering Fundamentals**.

Possible further uses of the material and / or the approach[6] include:

- Using the online PEP Facility to create a **Story Book** of both 'rich' and 'bad' stories – a place where practitioners share their experience written in a compelling story format exploring what makes elements of partnering 'contagious' (whether positively or negatively)

- Re-working the findings as a way of framing / understanding **Risk Management** at local level

- Explore what are the real **Incentives for Learning** and why people don't really allocate quality time to it even though they talk about it a lot

- Push for the PEP Facility to be a **'place for candour'** and build on this work by providing an confidential 'chat room' of critical friends for practitioners who are beleaguered – 'a safe place to go'.

Above all we hope this project will do two important things:

- Emphasise the importance of **diversity and complexity** in partnering as a challenge to those who seek 'one size fits all' solutions and

- Promote the importance of **individuals and individuality** in partnering as an antidote to the tendencies of positioning partnering as a somewhat anonymous and consensus-driven phenomenon.

Our PBA network

Over the last 15 years PBA has promoted the concept of partnership 'brokering' as a specific and essential set of skills and approaches that can be adapted to be fit-for-purpose at local, regional and national levels in very different contexts. We have a network of nearly 2,000 alumni from our four-day partnership brokers training course, of whom 300+ are formerly accredited professional partnership brokers (many working as 'internal' partnership brokers within an organisation, but some operating as independent 'external' practitioners with a specialism in partnership brokering).

Our alumni group is comprised of individuals in key positions from all sectors located in more than 100 countries. They have first-hand experience of partnering to address development challenges in various and diverse environments. They have two great advantages as 'informants' – the first being that they are at the forefront of managing partnership processes and the second that they have been taught / encouraged to develop a 'reflective' approach to their partnering /partnership brokering practice. In other words, they are operating where 'the rubber hits the road' and they consciously and systematically try to make sense of what they see and experience (see Section 8: Practitioner Dilemmas).

Our starting point

On the one hand, we know that we don't know what we don't know and on the other hand we are evolving quite a strong position about partnering and its complexities. With regard to the latter, we feel it important to be up-front with regard to our current thinking about partnering as a paradigm since it has undoubtedly influenced our approach to this project (see Section 2: Methods and Madness) and our deductions about what the findings reveal (see Section 9: The Challenge of Transformation).

Our experiences over many years have led to a number of observations and deductions about what it takes to partner well (that we are, of course, further testing in this project). Our current thinking[7] is:

- That the most interesting / innovative partnerships are complex (so we should worry if they are too easy)
- That the 'interior condition' of those working in partnerships has a significant impact on the partnership (who we are as practitioners is more important and has more impact than what we do)
- Experiences and opinions of individuals are hugely important (and usually dismissed as 'biased' when they are at odds with norms or convention)
- That context has a major influence on what is possible (there is a risk that global frameworks are quite inappropriate at local level)
- That many (far too many) partnerships are at the 'compliance' end of a continuum (see Section 9 for more on this) and therefore fall far short of their potential for challenging and changing outdated systems and 'business as usual' decisions and behaviours.

Above all, we hope that this project justifies our strong belief that making sense of experience is the most authentic basis of new knowledge and the best foundation for effective partnering.

SDG Partnerships and the importance of context

Multi-actor partnerships are positioned as central to meeting the SDGs. However, those working to put these relationships into practice are finding it extremely challenging to establish, manage and / or scale up their work to maximise reach and impact. The 'why?' and the 'what?' of partnering are reasonably well established and articulated (although, of course, this is subject to change as experience grows and deepens) but we believe (alongside our PEP partners) that the immediate challenge is the 'how?' While a wide range of tools, guidebooks, case studies and papers have been developed to support those working to establish and maintain partnerships, this project is centred upon the premise that greater effort is required to build systematically on context-specific and emergent practice which happens at local levels and usually involves the 'messiness' of day-to-day trial and error.

Alternatives to partnering

In view of the number of contextual challenges many partnerships face, the question about the existence of any 'next-best-alternative' to partnering seems important. Interestingly the majority of our respondents (60%) suggested that in their contexts there was no real alternative to partnering. For the 40% that indicated that an alternative to partnership existed, the most common alternatives cited were 'transactional relationships' (such as contracts of work, sponsorship or

more traditional bilateral funding arrangements). Other than these, it would be a case of 'going it alone' or continuing with 'business as usual'. The latter option would probably mean: competition between organisations; silo operations and an inevitable duplication of effort.

A few respondents were somewhat more optimistic and innovative in their speculation about other non-partnering options. These included: informal arrangements; better licensing regimes and engaging bilaterally with just one other agency.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly (because so many partnering challenges were raised – see Sections 4-6), all respondents felt that the gains that could potentially be achieved through partnering would be greater than those achieved by sticking with the status quo.

"We could have attempted to go it alone - this is what we were doing previously – but the potential outcomes achieved through partnering looked a lot better."[8]

The value of 'small' and learning from local experience

We so frequently hear about 'building the big picture' and, of course, bold ideas and achieving scale and impact is critically important. But so are the details – sometimes it is possible that we get so absorbed in 'doing big' that we lose sight of 'doing right'. We have drawn our findings, largely but not exclusively, from the local – the 'small' – in the hope that these may have some real value for understanding what it takes to partner and where in our search for scale we may be going wrong.

So this is where we were coming from when we undertook this project – let's see if where we ended up confirmed or challenged these starting points. Let's also see whether they align with your own experiences and views – or whether they don't.

2. Methods and Madness

This project was never positioned as formal research, per se, but rather as an opportunity to capture stories from those in front-line (partnership brokering) roles which, we hoped, would bring some nuanced insights and ideas to the whole issue of multi-stakeholder collaboration as a key component in achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Armed with a big ambition, but underpinned by the slenderest of resources, we decided just to 'go for it', see what emerged and then try our best to make sense of what we found. There were times when we felt we had been quite mad to take this on but we went ahead because we were intensely curious about what our partnership brokering colleagues would be able to expose about the realities of partnering – and how their actual experiences may differ from partnering theories.

We have applied considerable 'method' but not, we hope, at the cost of a little 'madness'[9] since we deeply believe that much about partnering is about 'hunches', exploring the unknown and intuition as it is about logical deduction.

Our research methodology

There were three main research components in this project:

- **Online survey** of those who have completed our partnership brokers training course[10]

- **Semi-structured interviews** of survey respondents selected from a range of contexts
- **Analysis of logbooks** compiled over a 3.5-month period by candidates for formal PBA accreditation as partnership brokers.[11]

The survey enabled us to reach a significant number and a wide range of locations (see map on page 8). The interviews offered us the opportunity to probe further and push those we spoke with to really consider if / in what ways their contexts had made partnering more or less difficult.

The logbooks gave us a somewhat different dimension since they were originally written for an entirely different purpose. As reflective journals, they describe strategies, challenges, issues and questions raised in day-to-day partnering / partnership brokering experiences. Never intended for public viewing, they tend to capture 'uncensored' views that we believe can have particular value for donors, decision-makers and planners who may be quite remote from the realities of the partnering paradigm.

We summarise our survey and interview questions and some response statistics overleaf.

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9. "If this be madness, yet there's method in it" – *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare.
10. A four-day intensive skills training for more details see: www. partnershipbrokers.org/w/training.

11. See: www.partnershipbrokers.org/w/training.

The survey was sent to 1,300 PBA alumni[12] and was available online for a two-week period. There were 140 responses[13] from a pleasingly wide range of contexts. Whilst this represents only an 11% return, numerically not as robust as we had hoped for, we were pleased with the quality and depth of response as well as the diversity of sectors and locations represented. The tables overleaf give details of the countries, regions and sectors our survey respondents came from:[14]

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12. 1100 who had completed the introductory partnership brokers training and 200 who had completed accreditation.

13. 100 fully completed, 40 partially completed due to a technical glitch.

14. Independent: Those operating as independent 'external' partnership brokers are more likely to see the partnership from the perspective of all sectors. Other: Cross-sector coalitions, networks, consortia and alliances.

Countries where respondents were operating from at the time of the survey

Argentina
Australia
Bangladesh
Belgium
Bhutan
Bolivia
Brazil
Cambodia
Canada
Chile
China
Costa Rica
Democratic Republic of Congo
Egypt
Ethiopia
Fiji
Ghana
Greece
Guinea
Hungary
India

Indonesia
Jordan
Kenya
Kribati
Laos

Lebanon
Mali
Mauritius
Mexico
Mozambique

Myanmar
Nepal
Netherlands
New Zealand
Niger

Pakistan
Papua New Guinea
Peru
Philippines
Poland

Romania
Russia
Rwanda
Senegal
Solomon Islands
South Africa
Spain
Sri Lanka
Switzerland
Syria
Thailand
Timor Leste
Turkey
Uganda
UK
USA
Vanuatu
Vietnam
Zambia
Zimbabwe

Number of respondents by region						
Continent	Africa	Americas	Asia	Europe	Australia / Pacific	Multiple
Numbers	23	22	18	15	26	32

Sectors from which the respondents came					
Sector	Public sector	Private sector	NGO	Independent	Other
Numbers	27	19	48	30	16

THE GLOBAL GOALS
For Sustainable Development

1 NO POVERTY	2 ZERO HUNGER	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	4 QUALITY EDUCATION	5 GENDER EQUALITY	6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION
27.5%	20%	37.5%	40%	26.7%	15.8%

7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES	11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION
7.5%	35%	13.3%	5.8%	5.8%	4.2%

13 CLIMATE ACTION	14 LIFE BELOW WATER	15 LIFE ON LAND	16 PEACE AND JUSTICE	17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS	other
3.3%	2.5%	5.00%	7.5%	18.3%	32.8%

A total of 40 survey respondents chose 'other' when asked to select whether their partnership(s) had an SDG focus. Of these, 10 of the respondents did, in fact, fall under one or other of the SDGs (specifically, health, education, employment and hunger eradication). Of the remaining 30, their partnerships were focussed on one or other of the following issues:

• **Working with vulnerable groups** including indigenous people, the elderly, LGBT, mentally ill and children / youth;

• **Civil society strengthening** and community development (specifically capacity building, improving quality of life and building community resilience);

• **Disaster preparedness** / response / recovery and humanitarian issues (specifically, working with refugees and displaced people).

Number of SDGs individual respondents were involved with	
1 SDG	37
2 SDGs	23
3 SDGs	17
4 SDGs	15
5 or more SDGs	24

Our interview approach was as outlined below:

Interview questions	Purpose
Context: • Why did the partnership start in that particular country / region? • In your perception, was it easy or difficult to partner in that particular country / region and why? • We are especially interested in how partnerships are influenced / impacted by their specific context / conditions. Can you give a picture of the important features of your context? • Did the partnership manage to adapt to the challenges of the context?	To gather information on important features of context in terms of: Economic situation; Political background; Societal factors; Historical factors; Partnering culture / capability; and other factors. To tease out how easy or difficult it was to partner in that context.
Stories of Achievements and Challenges • What is has been / is being achieved? (Expected / Unexpected) • What were / are the key challenges?	To explore whether / how the partners managed to address / adapt to the challenges of the context.

Observations & Deductions	To extract spontaneous lessons about partnering from front-line practitioners and whether these could provide genuine guidance to others in earlier stages of partnering.
• What have you learnt about partnering? • Do you believe there are some 'fundamentals' that underpin effective / successful partnerships? If so, what are they? What 3 pieces of advice would you give to others starting out on (SDG) partnerships?	
Material on / question about PEP • We would love to know what the proposed PEP facility could do for you and your partnership(s). Please tell us…	To try and tease out what PEP could provide that would be really useful / practical / appropriate in their specific partnering contexts.

We selected those we interviewed on the basis of accessing the widest range of contexts. The 24 who were interviewed came from a range of sectors and locations:[15]

Those operating as internal partnership brokers by sector		
Academic: 3		
Corporate: 2		
Public sector: 5		
International Agency: 2		
NGO: 5		
Those operating as external partnership brokers: 7		
Locations		
Afghanistan: 1	Ethiopia: 1	Papua New Guinea: 1
Australia: 2	Greece: 1	Philippines: 1
Azerbaijan: 1	India: 2	Sri Lanka: 1
Bangladesh: 1	Indonesia: 1	South Africa: 1
Bhutan: 1	Mali: 1	Syria: 1
Canada: 4	Mauritius: 1	The Gambia: 1
China: 1	Myanmar: 1	USA: 1
DRC: 1	Nepal: 1	Zimbabwe: 1
Egypt: 1	Pakistan: 1	

Finally, in mining the rich data available from the logbooks, we took a rather different approach. In order to avoid prejudicing our findings with our own assumptions, we asked the member of our team who was relatively new to our work to simply read all 60 logbooks and to note the issues that she thought were most interesting / relevant with regard to questions of context – both in terms of what the writers **recorded about** the context and how they **responded to** contextual challenges in their partnership brokering role.

The logbooks are, of course, highly individual in their style and focus and those who compile them take very different approaches both to their writing and to their partnership brokering work. With an emphasis on managing the partnering process by trying to work in a systematic and thoughtful way, the logbooks encourage partnership brokers to address an underlying question: *What do the partners and / or the partnership need from me?*

Let's see what you make of what we found out.

3. Partnership Triggers

Headlines

Most respondents highlight context specific, issue-based, triggers as the catalyst for partnering

A key reason for engaging in partnership is a desire to access or improve basic services

But civil society organisations work in partnership as a response to requirements from donor

The key trigger for the private sector is the social licence to operate (not 'profit' per se)

The partnerships with which our respondents were involved seem to be spread fairly evenly across the board as to whether they were initiated by the private sector, public sector or civil society organisations. Where sufficient information was forthcoming, a number of different triggers to partnering emerged. Since these seem to be significantly different according to the sector of the initiating organisation, we have summarised these findings by sector.

In the public sector

Partnerships initiated by this sector tended to be centred on the effective delivery of services, or addressing a particular issue, e.g. access to health services, delivery of humanitarian / development assistance or the active promotion of inclusive development. As a public sector respondent from Australia put it:

"The driver of the partnership is based on the promise of the strengths of collaboration to address and deliver solutions to complex… issues. The past speaks for itself – unrealised plans, duplication of similar projects, limited / non-fluid communication between stakeholders (even with different departments in the same government), no continuity in programmes due to a number of factors including legal / political battles between sectors and difficulties in adapting legislation."[16]

The inability of the public sector to address challenges alone due to lack of resources or capacity, and the need to ensure wider scope, were also cited by informants from other sectors as reasons for partnering with government agencies.

"It is the churches that deliver development – it is (the) only entity that works from national right down to village level. The government does not have resources or capacity to do that. There are very few government services on the ground and there are no roads from the capital to the rest of the country."[17]

"I work in multiple partnerships and in most cases the trigger is effective delivery of development assistance."[18]

"We have need to partner to build synergy in service delivery across the social development spectrum."[19]

In many instances, pressure to work in partnership has been a direct response to policy changes that position partnering as a mechanism for sharing and leveraging resources.

"Funding models for health care have had to change as a result of limited resources. National level policy changes have led new joint funding models."[20]

In the private sector

Partnerships initiated by the private sector were generally linked to the desire for a social licence to operate through some form of community engagement and visible positive impact at community / local level. This included efforts to improve community quality of life (more than 50% of those working in the private sector cited this as the key driver) through products and services as well as to gain access to reliable suppliers, markets and networks. Interestingly, the responses were quite industry-specific in their focus. For example, the extractive sector respondents see community partnerships as vital for core business:

"It is difficult for mining companies to operate in the locality without social acceptability as brewing social issues might explode to uncontrollable levels."[21]

"The trigger for the partnership is an oil pipeline project for an international oil exploration company whereby a pipeline right of way has to be acquired for the project."[22]

"We set up a foundation to address the capacity of the non-profit sector to support quality of life in an industry-dependent city during the boom cycle."[23]

In one case where the community pushed for a private sector partnership due to the lack of support from the public sector, the private sector was seen as coming to the rescue of a failing project:

"I worked with local governments to develop a strategy for promoting local products in the tourism sector. Two years later, locals wanted to work with me to implement

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16. Internal partnership broker working with local government in Mauritius.
17. External partnership broker working with government in Australia and PNG.
18. External partnership broker working in government in Australia and South East Asia.
19. Internal partnership broker working in government in Canada.
20. Internal partnership broker working in government in Australia.
21. External partnership broker working with a mining company in Philippines.
22. Internal partnership broker working in a mining company in Nigeria.
23. Internal partnership broker working in an energy company in Canada.

the plan by working with business and with a business model since the local authorities that had employed me to do this work never implemented the strategy."[24]

In the civil society sector

Partnerships initiated by the INGOs or NGOs were, to a very significant extent, driven because partnering was a pre-condition for receiving funding from donors. Tendering and grant requirements for government and / or donor funding clearly plays a major role in driving collaboration among organisations in the civil society sector. In some instances, this is quite strongly resented in part because it is not viewed as the preferred way forward and in part because no resources are allocated to ensure it works well.

"Requiring organisations to partner in order to receive funding is like an arranged marriage and, while they agree to partner, none of the discussions have taken place to enable them to successfully partner."[25]

"I work in multiple partnerships that are mostly initiated by NGO or company out of social ambition, or just because government funding is available for collaboration."[26]

"This partnership started as a condition from the donor. We had no choice but to work as a consortium and to implement our project collaboratively. The partnership between consortium members and local NGO was also driven by the donor's conditions. But, after 3 years of working together in this way, the local partners decided to set up their own local collaborative framework independent of the donors and outside agencies. The driver for this decision was their experience of the way their community issues had been tackled through the consortium's cross-sector approach."[27]

Work on specific issues was also highlighted as a key driver – these included health, education and children's rights. As with the public sector, another strong trigger was the desire to improve access, effectiveness, scale and impact of service delivery.

"We wanted to explore if there were better ways of working in the Pacific. As the largest INGO with connections in many sectors, this initiative attempts to bring all those together for greater impact in the area of early childhood care and education."[28]

Cross-sector trends

Across all the sectors, our respondents noted issue-based triggers as the foundation of their partnerships. The most common issues cited as the foundation of a partnership and of equal interest to the various partners regardless of sector were: health; education and work with marginalised or vulnerable groups (such as women, people living with disability or displaced populations following conflict or disasters). How these issues manifest themselves and how the partnership is developed to respond was strongly influenced by context. For example, the issue of marginalised groups included: increasing the number of women on corporate boards in Egypt; advocating for inclusive disability policies in Australia / the Pacific Rim and working to promote LGBT rights in Canada.

Disaster response was also an important, cross-sector, partnership trigger – where the fear of or response to a crisis precipitated a push for collaborative action. In Bangladesh, for example, the need for disaster preparedness was cited as the overriding impetus for working in partnership. Whilst partnerships to build resilience to, prepare for and deal with, disaster is a common theme, it is also important to note again that there are highly significant contextual peculiarities of different actual or potential crisis situations and how partnering approaches can best meet those specific conditions.

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24. External partnership broker working in Greece.
25. Internal partnership broker from the academic sector in Australia.
26. External partnership broker working in the NGO sector in the Netherlands.
27. Internal partnership broker working in the NGO sector in PNG.
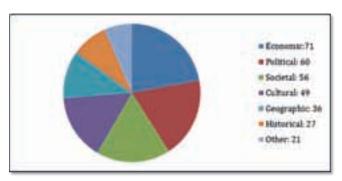28. Internal partnership broker working for a large INGO in a number of countries in the Pacific.

4. Impact of the External Context

Headlines

A complex mix of contextual and internal issues impact partnering, it is hard to separate them

The interplay between partnership and context is dynamic and subject to abrupt change

In the survey, respondents were asked to list the contextual factors[29] that had most influence on their partnership activities. See below for a breakdown of the number of times different contextual factors were cited:

Economic factors

Respondents highlighted the impact of specific economic factors in the context where the partnership is operating. These included: poverty, financial crisis, economic dependence of a community on a particular company / industry, corruption, and 'boom and bust' cycles. Upon closer analysis, this information shows some interesting variances. The financial crisis, for example, which was raised several times as having impacted partnering negatively, was also mentioned positively in relation to forcing partners to consider new ways of addressing funding.

"The financial crisis urges for diversification of funding and the creative search for other means to realise social ambitions."[30]

Another respondent noted that, in an environment where the economic crisis is seen as having affected everything, that blaming economic factors may be a smokescreen for the deeper issue mistrust of politicians and perceptions of corruption:

"The reality is that it's not so much the economic crisis per se, but people use the crisis as an excuse to shout more – it's a half lie. There is still a problem with collaboration in the Mediterranean. The key problem is trust – relating to the last decades – politicians made so much money with corruption. Now they're used to highlighting the problem but don't want to talk about solutions."[31]

70% of respondents indicated that economic factors impacted their work in partnerships. The most common issues cited were limited funding, funding cuts and redeployment of state funding during the lifetime of the partnership. References to the individual economic context of partners included: the impact of a downturn in the economy; NGO dependency on grants and external funding; the competitive environment for NGO funding; top down change in organisational funding priorities and a focus by funders focus on projects and programmes.

Political factors

Respondents cited factors such as: policy reforms or new legislation; elections and frequent changes of government and, therefore, policy; drastic political left / right swings; too much political control and interference, and general political instability as the major political issues. These were seen by most as having a strong effect on partnerships, both internally, when the public sector was also a partner, and externally, as a result of a changing or unstable political climate.

Within countries, changes in government and political agendas were noted as being detrimental to partnership momentum and commitment. Electoral cycles were also viewed as playing a large role in determining public sector objectives and timeframes, in many cases reinforcing short sightedness from government partners.

"Three to four-year cycles of government mean that you are constantly working with new governments and staff. This is compounded by the fact that we work in 120 countries, each with their own political systems and cycles."[32]

Respondents also highlighted the impact of political instability as having a significant bearing on their partnerships. The same respondent also noted:

"The region is subject to drastic political change: swinging from capitalist to socialist. Socialist governments see a US company as the enemy: it takes talking, going to the right people and initiative to make government understand that while a US corporation wants to make money, it also invests in contributing to education globally."[33]

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29. It should be noted that most of our respondents reported in terms of national contexts – there is a whole different piece of research to be undertaken that looks at the many different contexts that can exist within national boundaries.
30. External partnership broker working in the Netherlands.

31. External partnership broker working in Greece.
32. Internal partnership broker from the private sector managing multiple partnerships in Latin America.
33. ibid.

Societal factors

Respondents highlighted a number of societal issues as having an impact on partnering activities including: change in demographics due to ageing populations; migration; disease and epidemics; working with fragmented communities with little capacity to respond to shocks; socio-economic isolation of vulnerable groups such as children, women, sexual minorities and the mentally ill as well as racism - within and between countries, and within organisations.

> *"The national census says one in five households are led by women, but the contribution of women to the economy is never acknowledged, or reflected at decision-making levels. When there is a period of political turmoil, social issues like gender are relegated to the background in favour of what are seen as more pressing matters (for example, security, political and economic stability). Some clearly have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo."[34]*

Societal issues are clearly impacted by other factors:

> *"With an ageing population and diminishing financial resources there is a greater demand on social services by marginalized people and a greater need for agencies to provide services more efficiently. Culturally, marginalised persons and families are stigmatised due to mental health, poverty, gender, and age. Co-locating these services in one location could increase this negative perception."[35]*

> *"The community is poor, agricultural production is marginal, many have resorted to traditional 'flush and dig' mining. The entry of someone with a mining permit was a real threat to local people, especially in relation to their livelihoods. Local folk threatened to picket the area barring the entry of the legitimate permit holder... ultimately it was a social not a legal problem."[36]*

> *"The community I was working in was complex, suffering from both economic and social shocks that made it difficult to maintain quality services or to anticipate future needs. The NGO sector in the country was in chaos: some NGOs had secure funding whilst others had none. Many were isolated and there was staff burnout at both board and operational levels. The sector in these circumstances became very competitive and there was little planning or coordination between organisations."[37]*

Cultural factors

Cultural issues cited by respondents included: attitudes towards gender; ethnic culture and language differences between partners; cultural practices – especially traditional / cultural customs around leadership and authority. The prevailing cultural norms had an important impact on partnerships attempting to address cultural issues – one example cited was the attitude towards women in countries such as Egypt, India and Zimbabwe making partnerships addressing gender inequality issues quite high risk.

Many cultural issues were seen as intersected by political issues:

> *"When there is a period of political turmoil, social issues like gender are relegated to the background in favour of more pressing matter (e.g. security, political and economic stability). Some have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo."[38]*

> *"Even when legislation is in place, the society and its members from whatever background or role live in a community where it is common not to respect girls' rights."[39]*

The challenge of working on global programmes in local settings was also mentioned several times. In India, for example, a respondent working on a programme addressing healthy lives and wellbeing spoke of the challenges involved in translating global programme language so that it was relevant and understood locally. In Syria, the issue of working with external partners who were not Arabic speakers, in a situation of turmoil and constantly changing priorities, was seen as a serious additional complication.

Geographical factors

The main geographical issues mentioned by respondents included: the rural / urban divide; lack of security in conflict and post-conflict zones; managing partnerships remotely; implementing programmes across broad geographical areas; difficulties associated with working with marginalised communities in hard-to-access locations.

> *"Where do the partners meet? They can't meet in Syria. Turkey has now become an extension of the conflict. Getting people out of Turkey for meetings in Europe is not easy due to visa regulations."[40]*

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34. Internal partnership broker from the academic sector working in Egypt.
35. Internal partnership broker working in the public sector in Canada.
36. External partnership broker working with a mining company in the Philippines.
37. Internal partnership broker from the academic sector in Canada.

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38. Internal partnership broker from the academic sector in Egypt.
39. Internal partnership broker working with UNICEF in The Islamic Republic of The Gambia.
40. Internal partnership broker working for an INGO in Syria.

Historical factors

Historical factors affecting partnerships were primarily linked to over-adherence to the established ways of doing things ('*we've always done it like this...*'). In some instances, mention was made of the opposite with cases where 'positive regulations' were shunned because they were promoted during a discredited historical period – for example, in Egypt where previous advances for women were discredited due to their association with the Hosni Mubarak era.

In many cases, those promoting partnerships used past examples and practices as providing a case for collaboration, even where past experience of collaboration was limited (whether due to a lack of a democratic tradition or to earlier 'partnerships' having been relatively superficial).

Conflict and crisis

Respondents cited factors such as natural disasters, epidemics, earthquakes, conflict and post-conflict situations as having an enormous impact on their partnering work. Such scenarios impacted the partnership in terms of safety, security, urgent new priorities, funding being re-allocated and the loss of, or rapid turnover of, key staff. In Syria, for example, the challenge of working with traumatised populations and the fears of surveillance were extremely detrimental to collaboration.

Sudden or unexpected changes point to the dynamic / volatile nature of contextual factors that can dramatically alter partner relationships as the quotes below indicate:

"An unexpected crisis (for instance, Ebola) can change priorities suddenly."[41]

"Shifting peace and conflict dynamics are critically important."[42]

"The security situation has changed. The relationship with the government has got less predictable. The government is highly controlling of our activities."[43]

Conflict situations also raise questions about the suitability of partnering as a delivery mechanism when faced with urgent humanitarian concerns. The need to reflect on systemic / structural issues is highlighted well by an INGO respondent working in Syria:

"There are large geo-political causes that a single multi stakeholder partnership would struggle to resolve, for example, how could a partnership actually resolve the conflict in Syria? At best we attach ourselves to problems

that emerge from the root problem - education, energy and security as a result of the war."[44]

However, another respondent also noted that this kind of challenging context can, in some circumstances, also be conducive to partnering:

"In an insecure environment, partnership is so fundamental because you have strength in numbers when dealing with issues of security together."[45]

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41. External partnership broker working in several countries in West Africa.
42. External partnership broker working with the NGO sector in Sri Lanka.
43. External partnership broker working with UNHCR in Egypt.

44. Internal partnership broker working for an INGO in Syria.
45. ibid.

5. Challenges from Within

Headlines

Different organisational cultures and contexts have a crucial impact on partnering

Power imbalance can be a key feature of partnerships that fail to thrive

Individual personalities can impact partnering as much as contextual factors

Many respondents saw the internal challenges (coming from within the partnership) as being as important as external context issues – some saw them as more important. There were a lot of overlaps in defining these challenges across geographies.

Organisational cultures and changes

A key challenge cited by many, was the fact that public, private and non-profit institutions work very differently and this has a major impact on their partnerships. One of the issues mentioned was the tension between hierarchical ways of working and the more participatory style that partnership promotes.

"A young dynamic organisation working with an old-fashioned organisation – one organisation was used to work in a very free environment and the other highly restrictive."[46]

"There are structural and institutional ways of working that inhibit innovation in partnerships – some 'partnerships' are merely transactional and not true partnerships."[47]

Different levels of organisational maturity relating to length of time in operation as well as histories of previous partnering experiences and / or established ways of working with other sectors were also cited.

"At the moment the work of NGOs has been diminished as the government is taking an active part in the areas where NGOs used to work (health, education, economic growth). This is an improvement in some ways, but the government don´t have the skills or knowledge to work with different society groups."[48]

"The understanding of the purpose and value to be gained from partnering is poor; partner diversity, organisational capacity for collaboration and its historical experience with both loose and structured alliances also create challenges."[49]

A lack of partnering capability or culture of collaboration was noted by a number of respondents whilst others highlighted very different appetites for risk and the difference between partners in their pace of working. The slow pace of public sector organisations was cited frequently as a frustration since it meant the partnership was unable to make decisions within what was regarded by other partners as a reasonable timeframe. And one respondent asked:

"What happens if the stakeholders as a group can't move as fast as the context requires?"[50]

Staff turnover and organisational cultures were seen as highly influential on the partnership's ability to work effectively:

"The high turnover of individuals representing one or more partners created huge delays in moving forward and frustration among the long-standing partners."[51]

"Organisations are like people, they have their developmental phases: infancy, adolescence and maturity. Organisations that are less mature don't know who they are or where they are going, and this can have a negative impact on the partnership."[52]

"Differences in levels of commitment are inevitable: all partners will not be equally committed to the partnership, and it is likely to be the person with the strongest vested interest that will push the partnership."[53]

Cross-sector tensions and dependencies

Many respondents noted that their partnerships were affected by tensions between sectors. Examples included: NGOs and the public sector feeling uncomfortable with the commercial organisations needing a return on investment from being involved in a partnership, and public sector bodies feeling the need not to be over-associated with any one partner, especially the corporate sector.

46. Internal partnership brokering working for an INGO in Germany.
47. Internal partnership broker from the academic sector working on multiple partnerships in Indonesia.
48. Internal partnership broker working with the private sector in Bolivia.

49. External partnership broker working in the UK.
50. External partnership broker working with UNHCR in various countries..
51. Internal partnership broker working in the NGO sector in Romania.
52. Internal partnership broker from the public sector working in India.
53. Internal partnership broker from the academic sector in Egypt.

"Each organisation involved in the consortium wanted their partners to align to its own logic and culture. They didn't build a shared culture and they only shared benefits, never risks."[54]

The NGO sector was also singled out for mention several times in relation to its intra-sector competitiveness for funding and visibility. In some contexts, an over-reliance by non-profit organisations on government funding limited their interest in fostering corporate or other, more diverse, partnerships.

Power imbalances

In response to questions about particular issues that unexpectedly hindered or helped the development of partnerships, several respondents noted that partners also experience role confusion, power imbalance, misaligned objectives, hidden agendas and fears of losing control and / or autonomy. Power imbalances were the most frequently cited:

"Obvious lack of balance between partners was a major issue as the partners that funded the process tended to dictate the pace of the collaboration which created room for distrust and suspicion."[55]

"In my experience equity continues to be a major challenge; all too often local partners (or others not contributing financially) can be overly intimidated by the government or private sectors."[56]

Individual personalities

A key finding was that individual personalities often played the central role in helping or hindering partnerships. Many respondents spoke about the importance of individual commitment to a partnership and the existence of personal agendas that can impact partnering.

"Individuals' attitudes, values, fears and egos are important. Individuals might fear losing face, not delivering for their organisation. Some might feel ill-equipped to report back confidently on the partnership and its direction."[57]

According to respondents, strong personalities can have both a positive as well as negative impact on partnerships. Depending on the situation, the presence of a champion for the partnership, for example, can help maintain steady progress and assist when partners are losing interest or motivation. On the other hand, the nature of collaborative work means that strong individual personalities can also hinder partnering,

particularly if some feel that their voice is not being heard or their needs are not being met.

"Difficult but important individuals need to be handled with care to ensure they don't undermine the partnership."[58]

54. Internal partnership broker working in the NGO sector in the DRC.
55. External partnership broker working with the private sector in Nigeria.
56. External partnership broker working in Canada.
57. Internal partnership broker working in the public sector in Australia.
58. Internal partnership broker working in the private sector in Bangladesh.

6. Lessons about Meeting Challenges

Headlines

Access to external support, new tools, resources and ideas is helpful

Engaging with government and working at systems level is difficult but critical

Improved partnership communication and building personal connections should be a priority

A partnership broker has a crucial role to play in addressing contextual challenges

In this section we have combined responses to questions about whether and how contextual and internal challenges were addressed.

External support

Many respondents talked about bringing in external support for partners or accessing new trends and tools in order to expose partners to new ideas and create space for innovative thinking.

> *"There is a real value to bringing in external people to assist brainstorming for new ideas and to support new learning and thinking."[59]*

> *"By exposing local partners to more global experience (bringing experts to them, taking them to events or a new environment where they can see what else is out there) so they can see trends, good practice and discuss with peers the problems that they are trying to resolve."[60]*

> *"External people can be usefully 'disruptive' by getting partners to think radically about behaviour-as-usual and consider key issues like efficiency, use of technology, infrastructure, working with the private sector and resource-mobilisation very differently."[61]*

Open conversations and clarity of roles

The importance of addressing challenges by straightforward / frank communication was cited frequently – preferably with partners meeting face-to-face or at least speaking rather than sending emails. One respondent emphasised the need for:

> *"Regular meetings and open and frequent communication to uncover hidden agendas and latent bias. We are all individuals with our own personalities aside from the vision, mission values of the partner*

organisations we represent. It is important to understand the layers within organisations and individual bias and assumptions."[62]

Investing time in giving and receiving feedback was also highlighted:

> *"I have learnt that things need to be talked through and feedback given and asked for – be flexible, analyse and bring partners back to the table if things aren't working."[63]*

Alongside the plea for open communication, it was also seen that this should not imply that arrangements would be loose and endlessly open to discussion. Rather that it was equally important that all partners had clear defined roles and responsibilities in relation to the partnership:

> *"Make the roles and responsibilities very clear: the line between management and governance roles must be very clear in order to prevent replicating work, and stepping on toes (and thus tensions between partners). Each player must be encouraged to stay within their role space and to respect the role space of their colleagues."[64]*

Working better with government

A considerable number of respondents felt that it was necessary to improve relationships with government in order to overcome some of the more pressing contextual challenges. In spite of many issues raised about working with the public sector, this connection was viewed as critical to addressing structural impediments to partnering. Some felt that this was a vital and necessary component of systems-level thinking.

The example of a partnership for micro insurance and credit was instructive here:

> *"In our partnership formation we have aligned to the political system of Ethiopia, which is quite top down, but a necessary ploy to create systemic change needed for adaptation of a branchless banking system."[65]*

In order to deal with the challenge of political cycles, one respondent working in Latin America and the Caribbean suggested that it was helpful to focus on:

> *"Short term cycles of impact, and medium term cycles of sustainability."[66]*

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59. Internal partnership broker working in the public sector in Canada.
60. Internal partnership broker from the private sector managing multiple partnerships in Latin America.
61. External partnership broker working in Canada.

62. External partnership broker working in public health in Australia.
63. Internal partnership broker working for an NGO in the USA.
64. Internal partnership broker working in the health sector in India.
65. Internal partnership broker working in the NGO sector in Ethiopia.
66. Internal partnership broker from the private sector managing multiple partnerships in Latin America.

Some reported that financial challenges in the public sector are leading to a more genuinely collaborative relationship:

> *"We are moving away from the transactional: where generally the government 'partner' used to provide the funding and then become the watchdog to an acknowledgment of the skills, materials and capacity that all sectors, including the public sector, can offer."[67]*

Focusing on community stakeholders and target groups

Keeping a vision in mind and focusing on the needs of the groups that the partnership is targeting was another response to addressing contextual challenges.

> *"Think about shared interest: think about who you are trying to serve, ego aside, there is a huge opportunity to achieve a greater outcome for those who need it most through collaborative efforts. It's not about your organisation; it's about a collective outcome for the people you serve."[68]*

In a post conflict situation, this connection was regarded as essential:

> *"One of the characteristic of post conflict situations is people keep their heads low, and focus on what they have got to do. This often undermines the good development gains that could be achieved. It is fundamental for field teams in particular to try and make sure they are actually opening up to partners in the field, and for managers to encourage and resource their teams to do so."[69]*

In many cases this kind of 'opening up' was seen as requiring improved community relationships. Some respondents confirmed the importance of hiring staff that understood the local language and customs, and conducting thorough background research on partners and the context of the partnership. Others mentioned the importance of engaging with communities by ensuring respect for local traditions and cultures:

> *"One of the strongest killers of sustainability of any partnership is lack of support from traditional leaders and local institutions: when your organisation moves on, local institutions have to be strong enough to take over."[70]*

The same respondent reinforced the principle of partnerships giving space for local 'placed-based' activities that are locally driven and owned.

> *"Go with an open mind: some cultural practices that have been around for centuries may be beneficial; there are many things you can learn from the community. However, even though you are going with an open mind, you need to know you stuff sufficiently well to be able to convince them that some of their practices are harmful."[71]*

It was notable (and perhaps surprising) that no one mentioned the issue of partnership beneficiaries becoming partners.

Being flexible, patient and persistent

Not articulated very frequently in relation to partnering lessons, the need to be flexible yet also determined – particularly perhaps in the role of partnership broker[72] – was mentioned and seems a good place to end this section:

> *"Partnership is a dynamic thing. It responds to challenges and changes as it moves along. The beginning is difficult: starts with the company crusading. Then the community sees it's serious. The company becomes popular, then the partnership becomes popular. Then there's a summit plateau – or the 'bureaucratic' stage. Lots of players coming in – everyone wants to get a share of the pie. This stage is very political. It needs incredibly careful handling."[73]*

> *"Everyone needs time and patience to let the trust build and let the partnership move at its own pace. It's a mistake to race to solutions - take time to explore the issues and opportunities that are there."[74]*

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67. Internal partnership broker working with the public sector in Canada.
68. Internal partnership broker working with the public sector in Australia.
69. External partnership broker working with NGO sector in Sri Lanka.
70. Internal partnership broker working for an NGO in Zimbabwe.

71. ibid.
72. We are well aware of the bias in this finding!
73. External partnership broker working with a mining company in the Philippines.
74. Internal partnership broker working with an energy company in Canada.

7. Core Partnering Principles

Headlines

All but one respondent believed that there are core part-
nership principles

Trust and transparency are the most cited principles and
often overlap

Principles vary quite considerably between different con-
texts / themes / sectors

The intention behind the principle may be far more import-
ant than principle itself

79 out of 80 respondents said that they believed there was indeed a set of core partnership principles[75] – though in response to the question *What are they?* a wide range of answers was given which rather begs the question of how 'core' they are (if we take this to mean universal):

"Transparency and honesty to ensure everyone is one at same place and there are no hidden agendas; accountability to each other as partners to ensure joint action occurs; collaboration that values each partners contribution; open discussion around all issues even being willing to withdraw from partnership; not assuming partners really know each other even if they have a formal partnership established; a sense of humour for those hard times and bumps in the partnership."[76]

"Trust, respecting confidentiality, funding in place for the brokering role, leadership and vision within the partnering group and a genuine demand from stakeholders for the partnership or a partnering approach."[77]

"Relevant and shared topic or issue around which to form a partnership and wide selection of non-traditional partners – these are both fundamental."[78]

From the survey respondents some common themes emerged. With those we interviewed, however, their answer to the question about core principles became more layered and rather more context-specific.[79]

With both groups, the two most frequently cited principles were 'trust' and 'transparency' (35% and 32% respectively of survey respondents who answered yes to this question). Trust was important in establishing "*clarity of purpose in all we undertake together*" and assisting the development of "*shared aims, honesty and mutual learning*".

"Respect between partners and for what each partner brings to the table. It is important that partners value what each other brings. Trust is so important to the partnership. Being open and honest with each other builds trust."[80]

Open, honest and regular communication between partners and the need for time and patience were also cited as being central to the building of trust.

"A communication culture that supports openness, disagreement (if it is aimed at improving partnership working and its outcomes), sharing, capturing stories and creating climate for the partnership story to be created and lived."[81]

The importance of relationship-building was also cited as a key principle by a number of respondents, one of whom noted that:

"Personal relationships underpin everything; these need to be established first before productive, sustainable professional partnerships with deliverables can be achieved."[82]

One respondent[83] stressed the importance of review as a key principle for promoting trust with a call for prompt feedback and programme / project updates, a channel for grievance resolution and opportunities to share learning experiences.

Other principles cited by more than one survey respondent included: accountability; identification of a common vision; shared goals and interests; the importance of building strong relationships to support the partnership's work and genuine respect for diversity of culture, language, values, contributions and skills. In relation to the latter, one respondent noted that an important principle was the "*inclusion of not the usual suspects*"[84] to assist in changing entrenched power dynamics and enabling the input of fresh views.

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75. It should be noted that the PBA partnership brokers training (which all respondents have completed) promotes the importance of the principles of equity, transparency and mutual benefit in partnerships and thus there may be an inherent bias in these responses. Of the 80 that answered this question, the number who listed these principles was as follows: Transparency (28) Equity (10) and Mutual Benefit (9).
76. Internal broker from the academic sector working on multiple partnerships in Indonesia.
77. Internal broker working in the NGO sector in Syria.
78. Internal partnership broker from the NGO sector working in Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands, PNG.
79. The comparison of the impact of context in three different locations (see page 24) illustrates this well.

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80. Internal partnership broker working in the NGO sector in the USA.
81. External partnership broker working in the UK.
82. Internal partnership broker working in an employment network in Australia.
83. Internal partnership broker from the private sector in Ghana.
84. Internal partnership broker working in the public sector in Australia.

In many cases, the comments provided by participants to inform their choices of principles (i.e. their intention) were more interesting than the principles themselves. This was particularly the case in the interviews where respondents qualified their choices in a more deliberate manner. The need for commitment and a focus on impact, as well as systems-thinking and holistic perspectives were mentioned here. One respondent suggested that partnerships should "*provide a neutral space for change*"[85], others were more inclined to explore the 'disruptive' element of partnering. Context seemed to be key, as did the level of courage of those in the leadership or brokering roles to hold a space for dissent.

This spectrum is explored more fully in Section 9.

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85. Internal partnership broker working in the academic sector in Canada.

8. Practitioner Dilemmas

"Perhaps it is fair to describe the… staff[86] as both 'warriors' and 'worriers' at one and the same time. This is to be expected, since warrior-ing and worrying are characteristics of many of those operating as partnership / collaboration brokers – whether as individuals or as a team."[87]

This research project has been based on the experiences of those operating in partnership brokering roles across the globe. They have been our eyes and ears into the partnering worlds and specific contexts they inhabit on a day-to-day basis. However, their contributions do not just cover their external world but also their internal dilemmas as they operate with, and on behalf of, partners.

Whilst this is not a project about the role of partnership brokers (indeed that has been well explored elsewhere[88]) it would be incomplete if we did not also record something of their insights into what it takes to partner effectively. This work involves taking on board the realities of context and the challenges (sometimes specific to the situation, sometimes more generic to the paradigm) partners themselves bring with them.[89]

Starting with context.

What our findings reveal is less about the critical importance of a partnership broker per se and more about the critical importance of individuals and individuality in partnerships. This is manifested in what we believe are new forms of 'facilitative leadership' that promote partner participation and engagement through skills such as active listening, encouragement, shaping and review, among others.[90] Our research confirms that individuals (using different blends of these skills in a range of roles) are critical to the successful navigation of contextual issues – in other words, to the way the partners and the partnership learn how to steer through contextual challenges and, sometimes, even how they can actively challenge and change the 'rules of the game'.

The most frequently mentioned context-related issues in the partnership brokers' logbooks were of two types as summarised below.

Context / situational issues included:

- Historic conflict leading to confrontation
- Cultural differences
- Different forms and expectations of leadership (and assumptions of existing leaders)
- Sector differences and suspiciousness (as between government, non-profit and business)
- Disinterest / hostility towards partnerships at senior management levels (in all sectors)

Challenges of brokering partnerships in complex contexts included:

- The time it takes to get fully informed about contextual issues
- Building good working relationships in an atmosphere of distrust
- High expectations from partners that you will solve all the problems
- Partner dependency on the partnership broker
- Being ready to '*let go and step back*' when the time is right

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86. A partnership brokering team.

87. Extract from a case study Dealing with Paradox: Stories and Lessons from the first three years of Consortium-building available from www.partnershipbrokers.org.

88. *What do Partnership Brokers Do? An Enquiry into Practice* available from www.partnershipbrokers.org.

89. The material cited in this section is largely taken from the 60

logbooks we reviewed (unless otherwise stated). Since these are personal documents we have respected confidentiality and have not referenced the specific source of any quotes.

90. See Cufaude, J. The Art of Facilitative Leadership: Maximising Others' Contributions, Systems Thinker, Vol 15, No. 10. Dec 2004-Jan 2005.

Not surprisingly, given the nature of the group from which our data was compiled, many respondents noted the importance of having skilled partnership brokers in place to assist in addressing contextual challenges. As one respondent put it:

"It takes an astute and sophisticated partnership broker to navigate and unearth individuals' drive and fears and to create the safe space for individuals to explore and create pathways to new futures."

Another wrote about helping to build a 'resilient' partnership:

"The partnership broker must be conversant with the local language otherwise they will be left out in the cold (perhaps they could have a local partnership broker and work as a team). They must understand the culture and values of the parties they are brokering (in order) to instill respect with regard to the sensitivities and sensibilities of the different parties. They must understand the laws and other statutes governing the issues raised in the partnership. They should understand local politics, alliances and networks. They should be alert to any sudden or unexpected twists and turns from inside or outside the partnership and be ready to re-orientate the partnering process."

Some comment on what they have to 'undo' in relation to conventional / entrenched views on what partnering is and is not:

"I see myself as a translator of cultures; between donors, and the real world. I help those involved not to feel intimidated by partner language (for example, the idea of a "proper partnership"). I help partners to define in practical terms: what they want out of the partnership; what their partnership is; what works well; what will help them to achieve their highest goals. We worked together to co-create a purpose statement for this partnership. In this process it went quickly from what the funder wanted from them (a kind of extractive approach) to their own sense of what was possible (a kind of emergent approach). We brainstormed until they ended up with a statement of their vision for the future of the country and their role in shaping that future. It was a really powerful confirmation to them as partners how they could function as a partnership without being wholly donor driven."

There is also a need to keep clear boundaries around the partnership brokering / process management role. The role (like partnering itself) is a means to an end and never an end in itself:

"Enabling and encouraging the partners to build respect for each other and not over emphasising the importance of your role as a partnership broker. Keep reminding everyone (yourself included) that the partnership is a means to achieve something; it is not an end in itself. If you lose sight of that for a minute you are bound to fail."

At best, those in the process management role are keen observers who can bring clarity to the complexities and complicatedness of partnering as a mechanism. They can also help us compare and contrast what things are similar across contexts and what are more context specific. Some of the rich diversity that this encompasses is captured below in a comparison of the work of three partnership brokers working on a range of SDG themes in very different contextual settings.

The partnerships and their context[91]

Sara Nyanti	Basanta Shrestha	Tony Lee Luen Len
UNICEF operating in The Islamic Republic of The Gambia	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) operating from Nepal	Port Louis City Alliance operating in Mauritius
The SDGs the partnerships are focused on		
1,2,3,4,5,6, 8, 10 (directly), but also others	1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, 15	11 (directly) but also others including 6, 7, 9
Some of the key challenges faced		
The country is resource-constrained 'because it is not a donor darling' • Domestic resources are reduced by a significant drop in tourism due to the threat of Ebola • Low rainfall has resulted in major loss of crops / yields • Limited civil society operating • Weak capacities of government in certain sectors • Brain drain – 'competent nationals all leave'	Building a shared vision and understanding between diverse stakeholders • Differentiated capacities of the member states • Lack of scientific data and development information • Stringent data sharing policies and practices • Changing geo-political context • Partnering with the private sector	'Many people are interested but there are always issues that hold them back like hierarchy, bureaucracy, busy-ness' • A proper legislative framework does not exist for the proposed governance model • Politics at all levels • Resentment towards project initiators • Competing strategies and proposals • Ministry of Finance is unresponsive • Cycles of elections – 'This is the 3rd city mayor in 18 months'
The partnering principles / approaches adopted		
Recognise informal partnerships are just as important as formal ones • Manage power imbalance especially in difficult contexts • Have respect for what everybody brings to the table • Work to align everyone's expectations	Be completely politically neutral • Be inclusive • Make knowledge available to everyone • Focus on up-scaling • Foster regional / cross-country cooperation • Enable more capable countries / players / contexts to help others	A clear common goal / vision • Someone good in the partnership brokering role • A well-developed / co-created agreement • Look for and work with '*conscious individuals*'

By closing this section with a number of extracts from the logbooks – which developed as part of the PBA Accreditation process to encourage reflective practice and penetrating analysis – we indicate something of the dedication and persistence it takes to navigate the layers of complexity and complicated-ness of partnering as a mechanism.

"In order to get into deep listening, we need to be quite secure personally. In the process of listening, we open ourselves to being influenced. Some of our beliefs may be threatened, and we may become vulnerable. In a sense, it's a paradox: in order to have influence you must allow yourself to be influenced."

"It is a real balancing act between trying to keep things moving and keeping people engaged. While I have been writing and reflecting I now see that as the facilitator of this partnership I have been avoiding addressing some of the real underlying issues with partners. For example, the elephant in the room that no one wants to speak about is racism. Maybe deep down I have not been ready to address it either. However, I do know that if I do not create the space for that discussion, I will also be behaving in a racist way."

"Trust in the partnering process is built when we say what we will do and we do what we say. Being explicit is always better than being implicit. Fulfilling our commitments is important and not communicating our inability to keep to a commitment leads to trust evaporating rapidly."

"In choosing between different alternatives, my thinking is that we need to secure a firm new foundation for the group and that cannot happen without dealing with the critical issues that killed the network's momentum. I have a tendency to gloss over difficulties, but in this case it would be a mistake. We need to put the issues on the table and deal with them at the next meeting."

"I have to be aware of and understand hierarchies and decision-making powers in a partner organisation's structure, as well as in my own organisation. This is critical in order to move from conversations between motivated individuals towards broader and deeper organizational buy-in, ideally supported by senior leadership. Only high-level buy-in will in the end guarantee adequate resource allocation, which is critical to maintaining a partnership over time."

"It's a long game. You have to be prepared for ambiguity. All sides need to work from a philosophy of reciprocity and trust – and this takes some building. As a partnership broker you need to be really adaptable, both in terms of reassessing / reiterating goals as things change, and in helping partners to strive for and measure achievements."

"Clearly we need to generate energy among partners to be more open in the way they partner with others. The interest may be there but general interest alone will not do the trick. Above all, I see my role as helping to challenge and change traditional mindsets"

Is it the case that effective partnering requires us to 'challenge and change traditional mindsets'? Through the insights of those working in a wide range of partnerships and contexts, our exploration over the last four months is driving us towards that deduction. The final section of this report examines this in more detail.

9. The Challenge of Transformation

"What is needed now?."

"It is… our task as creative participants in the universe, to re-dream our world. The fact of possessing imagination means that everything can be re-dreamed. Human beings are blessed with the necessity of transformation."[92]

Our findings are not entirely new or unexpected, rather what we see emerging is a richly textured global partnering landscape where the varied and complex inter-connections between sectors, themes and circumstances play nuanced roles in determining the focus and impact of partnering approaches. In this sense, our work reinforces the importance of paying particular attention to context in partnering work at all times. As a respondent with experience of working in multiple partnerships in different parts of the world noted, *"The context is actually everything!"*

Cross-cutting nature of contextual issues

Although we asked about particular contextual categories (economic, political, social, cultural, etc.) in our research questions, our work to date shows a complex interrelationship between these different factors. Indeed, in many cases, it is hard to pull out a single factor as having a determining influence on partnership. A key finding is that the interplay and overlap of diverse contextual factors creates a nuanced blend in different situations at different times that impacts partnerships and their work. Furthermore, as the picture in different locations can be quite different, it is vital to look at things holistically; thus, while it may be helpful conceptually to isolate a particular contextual factor, the partnering experience of our respondents suggests that this misses the point and that it is the complexity of circumstance that gives the richest partnership insights.

Dynamic and changing nature of context

The contexts in which our respondents are working are not static: they are constantly evolving and changing. Sometimes they are subject to sudden and unexpected shocks such as conflict, crisis situations or emergencies. At other times changes can be anticipated or prepared for, e.g. electoral or policy changes. The same is likely to be true of the different organisations and individuals involved in partnerships. Appreciating the dynamic nature of context in different settings and across different levels is also essential to understanding its impact on partnership.

Addressing the challenges

As well as drawing on a range of different tools, resources and tips for addressing contextual challenges,[93] the need for constant partnering health checks, reviews and feedback loops in place was emphasised as being essential. It was also interesting to note that many respondents have used global links overcome national / regional challenges while local links were drawn upon to challenge global assumptions / directives. These two forms of connection are worth exploring much more deeply. Indeed, these relationships and the manner in which they are played out may be at the heart of the SDG challenge and would benefit from further exploration and enquiry.

Ultimately, we believe that our respondents make a good case (both directly and by example of their own work in managing the partnering process) for more effort to be given to a deeper investment in partnering as a process.[94] This is a view that our PEP partners share and has informed the way the PEP Facility is evolving.

Transformation in context

During the review session on this piece of research at the Co-design Lab,[95] we ventured to propose that, in our experience, the vast majority (a provocative 80-85% was suggested) of operations currently described as 'partnerships' were basically 'compliant'. Because they are driven by the search for funding and / or initiated by donors with an explicit or implicit expectation of setting the terms they collude with the status quo and 'accepted' ways of 'doing development'. As a result, we asked the question: *How can these kinds of partnerships bring about transformation?*

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92. Ben Okri, A Way of Being Free, 1997, Phoenix House, London (cited in The Brokering Guidebook, 2005).

93. These are not reported in this paper but available to the PEP Facility as a resource.

94. An additional output from this project is a set of slides made available on the PEP Facility website for practitioners to use to add depth / evidence to partnering proposals or to make the case to both donors and partners that such investment (on partnering processes) is really important to effective partnering.

95. January 2016, Den Haag.

At the same time, many involved in partnership activities have a strong personal conviction that partnering is critical to sustainability and survival. They may therefore be more driven by deep dissatisfaction with the status quo and frustration that most partnerships are not more. 'disruptive'. How can these practitioners bring about transformational change without being anarchic?

We have placed these two divergent possibilities at either end of the continuum below along which we see a range of intermediate partnership drivers that tend towards collusion or disruption. While this clearly an issue that requires further investigation, we think that a 'middle way' (shown here at the centre of the continuum) can be identified where striving for transformation may be possible through creating ways of working that consciously and conscientiously build on 'creative dissent'.

Ten tips for helping partners create more transformational partnerships

1. **Develop a culture of reflection** as well as efficiency in every partnership (the best reflective practices lead to far greater efficiency)

2. **Communicate continuously**, appropriately (for each partner) and imaginatively (to envision how things could be different)

3. **Use real examples from elsewhere** – in the form of stories, dialogues, visits, case studies that share process issues and journeys – to inspire confidence and promote the courage to partner bravely

4. **Ask well-framed questions** as the key to unlocking potential (it is often better to ask a much-needed question than have a pre-prepared answer)

5. **Plan and make everything outcome / output and**

Collusion   compliance   compromise   Is learning how to challenge and work through creative dissent the key to transformational change?   dissatisfaction   disturbance   Disruption

What might it take for SDG partnerships to be context-sensitive, confidently 'owned' by the partners and simultaneously flexible, responsive focused and practical enough to be able to transform our world?

This question is not an easy one to answer and but we believe that the findings from this research project do give some clear directions towards answering it. We have captured these in ten tips:

impact focussed by creating and adapting (and, above all, explaining) genuinely fit-for-purpose tools

6. **Build partners' partnering capacity and skills** (including the skills required to challenge and change 'business as usual' mind sets and empty protocols)

7. **Encourage and support partners** to be available, direct, open and brave

8. **Explore different or divergent views** (and don't 'smooth over') so that they can become triggers for innovation

9. **Help partners hold the space** for ideas and solutions to emerge (don't force the pace or narrow the options too soon)

10. **Be clear that partnering may not be the most suitable mechanism** for what is needed and be able and willing to signpost constructive alternatives.

People matter

While context is key, the importance of the people involved – whether as partnership initiators, donors, partnership brokers, partner representatives, stakeholders or other – is equally (perhaps even more) crucial to the healthy and impactful development of partnerships. A strong message from our research is that "people make partnerships" and it is the constant, on-going (and sometimes relentless) interplay between people and their contexts that can make or break collaborative efforts and, at their best, create the conditions for genuine transformation.

"If something feels wrong, it probably is wrong - don't override your gut feelings."

"I need to dare to open up a tough conversation - and be able to inspire others to do so too."

"The meeting context changed within five minutes as conflict took hold. It was important that I demonstrated genuine interest in each individual's position with 'warm' questions to help us all to understand why they were feeling so strongly. By framing my responses as sensitively as I could and trying to be courageous, we were finally able to reach agreement by really taking into account everyone's underlying interests."

"I have learned a lot about leadership and brokering during this… process. I have been required to push far ahead of the partners in exploring and creating opportunities that they cannot yet see as individuals or as organisations. This has involved quite a lot of personal risk in that I needed to be visibly seeking, questioning and making mistakes. It feels as if, more than anything else, I have needed courage."

The trouble with transformation is that it is invariably 'messy'. It requires us (i.e. human beings around the globe in whatever roles and circumstances we find ourselves) to step into the future (however unprepared we are) rather than cling to the past with all its certainties (however inadequate we found them to be).

Being transformational by re-dreaming our world and collaborating against so many odds is extraordinarily challenging, but it is worth remembering that if 'business as usual' worked, the world wouldn't be in the state it is. We would not require the enormous effort it will take from everyone (working in local villages or international agencies and everything in between) to achieve the SDGs. Perhaps we have to be transformational in our intent to promote change. If we are not, we may never sustain the courage it will take us to get there.