

Parenting for local development. Clusters as
institutionalized partnerships

Zoe Nowak

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Introduction

Having experienced the PBAS trainings as a journey of transformation, both personally and professionally, Zoe shares the fundamental distinctions that helped her move from struggling and feeling helpless to being empowered and efficient. She also focuses on the analogies between partnering and parenting concluding that from a partnership brokers standpoint it is essentially about (1) being “a good enough parent” and (2) being the change agent while letting go of the need to control the outcome. Finally she gives an overview of why countries like Greece could find Clustering to be a realistic application of the partnering principles.

Parenting for local development. Clusters as institutionalized partnerships

This paper has been an excuse for endless hours of reflection and internal conversations. Since Level 1, I've explained to you – my imaginary audience – all that has led me here, my biggest fears, my dreams for the future and all the lessons I've learned - over and over I went, rephrasing and finding new connections each time. I've had sleepless nights writing this paper in my head, reflecting on partnerships, brokering, Crete and my life, too excited to fall asleep. I've caught myself staring out windows, chewing my nails, my frontal lobe on fire, daring to imagine the infinite possibilities that I now knew lay ahead...if only I dared! I'm not sure if I'll be able to captivate the essence of all these thoughts and ideas in 2000 words, in order to help you understand what a journey this has been for me. One thing I know is it sent me down the "rabbit hole of reflection" and maybe that's my biggest reward!

1. Professional career to date - my experience in partnering

I'm 30 years old and was born and raised in the island of Crete. I've studied Environmental Engineering and have a Masters in "Environmental Management and Quality Control". After working as a business consultant, I had my first experience in brokering at the age of 24, when I took over a local Agrotourism Network with 20 members. I loved, it although it was a big challenge, and when the network "collapsed" some months later I was heart broken, thinking of all the lost opportunities. What had I done wrong?

Next step was a governmental agency in Athens that promoted rural tourism, where I was responsible for the creation of an agrotourism network in the Prefecture of Rethymnon, in collaboration with local government and enterprises. A year later, and after the company sabotaged the project, I quit (heart broken again) not being able to grasp exactly what had gone wrong.

I then did a masters degree in "Regional and Economic Development" in order to solve the mystery... why don't business networks work? My thesis was on "SME Partnering for local competitive advantage" where I highlighted 3 issues in networking: "Social Capital and Trust", "Managing change", and "Creating Network brokers". At the end I presented the case studies of the networks I had worked on, what had gone wrong and proposed solutions for the future (my own reflective essay!).

My thirst for knowledge in the field of brokering eventually led me to PBAS! Two months after becoming the director of a Non-profit organization of the local government of Crete (the "Cretan Quality Agreement"), I did Level 1 and applied for Level 2.

My experience in partnering has been quite hard, because I didn't even know what brokering was, I was young and inexperienced. A girl with a foreign surname in a macho environment and facing for the first time the reality of our politically and economically corrupt country. I worked with common sense, gut instinct, enthusiasm, vision and tried to learn my lessons as I went along. I always did my best, even when it wasn't good enough, and although sad, I tried to get tougher and wiser. Although most of the times it seemed like banging my head on a wall, I loved that job so much that I kept on...until I found you! It has been a lonesome journey, but it's not anymore.

2. Personal values & reasons for wanting to be a professional partnership broker

I grew up in a "mixed" family, with a foreign father and not your typical Cretan mother. I was raised being self reliant, creative, thinking "out of the box" and although not fully accepted by others, always fought for what I believed in. I'm a proud person, have self-respect and treat others as equals. A part of me still doesn't believe in myself and wants to run away, but I dare to dream, try to love and accept myself, and work to evolve in a positive way. At the end of the day, I want to do good – feel that when I step on this earth, I'm not a burden. In partnership brokering and PBAS I feel I've found a context where I can be myself, enjoy my work and be proud of what I do!

The issue that actually gave me the strength to be a partnership broker in Crete was travelling in 2008 to Australia to find my father, after not seeing him for 13 years. Knocking on his door uninvited, not knowing if he would answer, in what state he would be in and if he would love me back. After 13 years of hiding my pain from myself, I decided to forgive my own father for not being a good parent, to be more mature than a 60-year-old in order to re-establish our relationship, and to bare my own pain because he couldn't deal with his own. This trip gave me my father back and changed me as a person.

Because I chose to be happy from then on, I also chose to deal with the reality rather than hide the inconvenient truth. I've stopped being afraid to deal with my fears and emotions and accept that I'm no superhero, just a real person with imperfections and limitations. From then on I reflected, accepted my mistakes and forgave myself for not being perfect – a step closer to being a responsible professional.

When I applied for my current job, I knew it would be a big challenge for someone like me, and dared only because I had grown stronger and I could distinguish what was really worth worrying about. If I had survived Australia, I could survive this.

Also, I had learned how to forgive, that gave me the maturity to collaborate with “difficult” people.

The truth is that I dread the idea of having children because I don’t want them to grow up in a corrupt place without opportunities. At the same time a part of me doesn’t believe I can be a good enough mother and protect them from the pain I’ve been through. So I laid the bet: If I can make Crete a better place through this job, that would mean that there’s hope for change. Then I could have children.

3. My experience and lessons learned from Level 1 and 2 - parenting for local development

The essence of my experience from PBAS, both Levels 1 and 2, could best be described as a collision with my personal and professional patterns and behaviour. It’s been the rabbit hole that I fell into, lost track of time and space, went through a world of concepts and practices that seemed alien to both me and my working patterns and came out a changed person and professional. I went to Wales thirsty for knowledge and anxious to learn everything on the spot in order to “save” my partnership. I felt “not good enough” and saw PBAS as a resource to fill in my gaps. But now I come out of Level 2 calm, grounded, with a clear mind and a pure heart, with the skills (not just the knowledge) that will help me see clearly, plan responsibly, think creatively, act, reflect and adapt according to given circumstances. I don’t know everything, but I know where to look for answers, ideas and courage. Now my goal is to do my best, not to succeed. And in this new context the PBAS principles aren’t just principles. They are a guide for keeping partnership brokers on an ongoing evolution, a helpful process that will continuously bring the best out of every one of us, a “guiding hand” indeed!

In short, the major “gifts” from becoming a part of PBAS, are the following:

- Finding PBAS after finishing my thesis in networking helped me reaffirm the conclusions that I had come to. If I had known about it earlier I wouldn’t have had the luxury of reflecting and getting to those conclusions on my own.
- Level 1 helped me accept that I’m not alone and that brokering doesn’t have to be a struggle - I was finally part of a big supportive and loving community! Learning things “the hard way” was a personal and professional pattern I managed to get over, mainly because of my mentor’s constant support throughout the mentoring period.
- Level 2 helped me restructure the way I work and deal with the challenges of brokering, from something as basic as project planning and prioritizing, to not losing my courage and dealing with difficult people and circumstances. But most of all it gave me enough time to feel comfortable with all the changes that PBAS practices meant for me (my beliefs and practices) and a constant support to help me actually achieve CHANGE! Throwing myself in the pool of PBAS, my mentor was my life vest, he guided me and helped me feel at ease, until I finally understood the obvious – that I could float on my own!
- The concept of “moving on” helped me change the way I deal with endings. With the end of every part of my life and work I experienced LOSS. Now I choose to face endings as changes in my current relationship with something or someone in time and space. I am open to them and accept them as a result of the given circumstances, not of my inefficiency. As a broker I feel that I’m no longer attached to the outcome, and in that way can be more committed to the process.
- Last but not least, incorporating the analogy of the “Good enough parent” into brokering gave me a bigger picture of my role as a broker. I suddenly realized that brokering a partnership is like parenting. You have to leave your egoism aside and approach the partnership with love, accept the fact that you’re not supposed to control the outcome, even if you think you know what’s right. Understand the partners, forgive them and continue helping them, learn your lessons as you go along, do your best and forgive yourself for not being perfect, let the partnership go when the time comes. Parenting and partnering is about transcending ourselves, getting over our personal fears and weaknesses and helping our “children” (the partnership and its partners) become what they are meant to be. Being the change agents without wanting to control the direction of the change.

4. Clusters as uninstitutionalized partnerships - an approach for the Greek reality

From my prior experience and through PBAS, I’ve come to believe that, for a place like Greece, Clusters seem to be a realistic application of the partnering concept. The main reasons are that Greece:

- is characterized by a predominance of SMEs, a lack of big enterprises and organizations, a centralization of wealth and decision making in the capital (Athens)
- has a highly corrupt political and economic environment. We are like a third world country but pretend to be Europeans,

so instead of aid, we get EU inspection! Also, for something to get a “licence to operate” the engagement of local authorities is needed

- no longer has “colonialist” relationships with other countries. In that sense, we don’t have an active NGO sector, and aren’t used to helping out other countries that are in need.

So partnerships are not acceptable as an approach to solve local problems because we pretend to be developed, we don’t have big companies or smart governors to lead such an initiative and in order to accept someone’s intervention locally they would need to HAVE AN EXCUSE! In that sense, Clusters could offer an institutionalized form of partnership, because they could:

- be formed to solve a specific problem
- include companies, educational institutions, local authorities and development agencies and other local groups
- be established in order to achieve broader goals that have to do with regional and national economic development for the greater public good, but at the same time support business development.

With the help of partnership brokers, clusters could provide a platform for tightening private/public alignment and ensure community wide involvement in building new links between communities, businesses and government. After achieving a broad agreement on a preferred future and moving to the implementation of an action plan, the “weight” could be shifted to the business sector that would work in the desired context bringing measurable outcomes for the local economy and community. At the same time, local authorities would feel they are the champions, building on their “leader profile”.

5. Goals and vision for the future

Personally, I would like to continue evolving as a partnership broker and become an active member of the PBAS community. Study, learn new skills, meet and learn from others, share ideas, create case studies and new tools.

Locally, I am very interested in brokering the idea of partnering and creating successful examples that could offer inspiration. One of my goals is to help already existing business networks understand the need for brokers, but most of all, to create a local training program for partnership brokers in collaboration with PBAS, for the people that work in local government and development agencies.

In the long run, I’m planning on moving to the countryside, run a small crafts business and work as an independent partnership broker. The crafts business will give me the luxury of being able to have a family and choose the projects I’ll really want to broker and at the same time will allow me to work on smaller scale partnerships in the inland of Crete, where it’s really needed.

But did I mention the best part? While I reinvented myself through PBAS, my mentor had his first child. A little angel appeared on my desktop and cried through the telephone lines to remind me what life is really about! I could be a “good enough parent” and not feel guilty about it. Although I knew that I wasn’t perfect, through my work as a broker I constantly learned how to transcend myself in order to do my best. Being a partnership broker was helping me become a better person. *And suddenly parenting didn’t seem that impossible after all...*