

LEADING EDGE PRACTICE

Brokering the Partnering Idea: A case study

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Cross-sector partnerships are most commonly created as a direct response to a specific development challenge. Typically, they are initiated and driven, at least in the early stages, by one organisation, with other agencies (partners) brought in to provide additional expertise, funds networks and other resources. Outputs from such 'problem-solving' partnerships are usually pre-determined, with success measured primarily in terms of how effectively they have dealt with the challenge. The more complex the partnership, the more likely it is that a level of partnership 'brokering' will be necessary – whether this is unconscious (one or more individuals undertaking brokering functions intuitively) or conscious (one or more individuals being allocated brokering tasks by the partners). As a partnership becomes more firmly established, the role of partnership broker may be re-constructed as something closer to a partnership manager.

But there is a quite different way of mobilising cross-sector partnerships – one that is more exploratory in approach and more open-ended in terms of outcomes. The focus is not on problem-solving, but rather on identifying and defining problems. In such partnerships,

the professional intervention of a broker is less about brokering **relationships** and more about brokering the partnering **idea**. The underlying intentions can be seen as threefold:

- To build partnering approaches and competencies that strengthen the capacity of each sector to fulfil its primary function more effectively and accountably;
- To promote a more 'enabling environment' in which cross-sector sustainable development solutions become the norm rather than exception; and,
- To position the partnership approach as a culture that challenges the 'business-as-usual' approach and seeks to formulate alternative and more effective ways of achieving economic, social and environmental sustainability.

A brief case study from Poland aims to illustrate the power and the potential of **brokering the idea** of cross-sector partnering for sustainable development.

Building a culture of partnering in Krakow, Poland

The programme was initiated by two not-for-profit organisations working to engage business in

sustainable development; the UK-based International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF) and the Krakow-based Progress and Business Foundation (PBF). The IBLF, through its representative Ros Tennyson, operated in the capacity of 'external broker', with an outside temporary relationship to the project, while PBF, through Rafal Serafin, worked as an 'internal broker', engaged in an on-going relationship with key players. These different brokering perspectives are captured in their commentaries on a one-day cross-sector event that had long-term repercussions for the city of Krakow.

Context

In 1993, Poland was going through a time of enormous change following the collapse of communist rule in 1989. The newly elected government introduced radical reforms aimed at promoting a market economy, the rule of law and democracy. It sought to initiate privatisation and encourage small business development while creating structures for local and regional government, the emergence of an independent media and the growth of civil society. While this was clearly a time of opportunity and excitement, for many it was also one of anxiety and confusion.

The challenge

Sustainable development efforts at this time were mostly tentative and fragmented. Seeing Krakow and the surrounding region as a microcosm of the challenges facing Poland, the two partner organisations identified the key challenges as:

- Dealing with government, business and civil society confusion as to their roles and responsibilities;
- The lack of experience of key sector leaders to operate confidently in their new roles;
- Ascertaining how local level benefits could be generated from national reforms; and
- An apparent disinclination for cross-sector collaboration.

The response

A commitment to ensuring that national reforms would benefit Krakow was evidenced in early meetings with different local sector leaders. It was clear, however, that they were not working together and were largely unaware of each other's initiatives and activities. In response, a dynamic one-day event was organised which would, for the first time, propose the idea of cross-sector collaboration to build a holistic and integrated approach for the sustainable development of the city.

For a range of reasons people were intrigued enough to attend. This may have been due to excitement at the prospect of a

new approach to meet their concerns, the idea that an international organisation was taking an active interest in their city, the opportunity to air their views to those they did not usually meet, or to a mixture of these. What was intriguing was that, in a climate of scepticism about the 'quick fixes' presented since the collapse of communism, the partnering idea seemed to have genuine appeal, probably because it was practical and about building 'home-grown' solutions. In any case, one hundred people came.

Event Design¹

GETTING STARTED

Participants arrived anxious, curious and cautiously optimistic.

At the first session we divided the group into their different sectors (business, civil society, academia and public sector) to enable them to build strong pictures of their sector's strengths and weaknesses. This was followed by a frank discussion about their views of the other sectors and an exploration of the potential benefits of working collaboratively with them.

RT: *This was a high-risk strategy. The PBF staff team were very nervous about the proposed design. They feared that latent hostilities between the sectors would be exacerbated and, of course, I understood that their personal and organisational reputations were on the line. I was torn between respecting their anxiety about how they would manage if things didn't go according to plan and feeling intuitively that this was an opportunity to cut through to something quite new that should not be missed.*

In the end I persuaded them to take the risk by promising to rescue the situation if necessary – though this decision also gave me a sleepless night!

BUILDING SECTOR IDENTITY

The plenary that followed involved detailed feedback from each group in turn. Here each sector was able to position itself by describing its values, priorities and contribution to society as well as acknowledging areas where it had less knowledge or competence. As the picture unfolded (especially when each sector fed back its attitudes on the others), there were moments of drama, antagonism and humour. But, above all, there was a palpable attentiveness among all present and a growing sense of engagement and insight.

RS: *Through the sector-based working groups we provided a framework for participants which they recognised as being safe. In this atmosphere, they were able to quickly establish a sense of common values and attitudes. The approach helped consolidate a self-recognition of operating 'robustly', even when their sector was in the process of being redefined.*

The comfort factor was crucial. The situation would have been different had we gone into plenary at the start as people would have clammed up.

BUILDING SECTOR IDENTITY continued

The morning session ended by playing back what had been revealed. The conclusion (obvious to all as they had watched it emerge) was that one sector's strengths complemented another sector's limitations. This led quite naturally to an understanding that collaborative development solutions, built on the unique contributions of each sector, were far more likely to be both appropriate and sustainable.

When asked what principles would need to be in place to make it possible for those present to contemplate cross-sectoral working, the group agreed that these were equity, transparency and mutual benefit.

RS: Notions of equity, solidarity, transparency, mutual benefit and co-operation had been widely presented in Poland as important principles for guiding reforms. Yet, for many, these ideas seemed too abstract or irrelevant to the day-to-day reality of institutional working. The key to the success of the morning session was that such abstract ideas were made practical.

Principles were applied to the actual experiences and views of the workshop participants.

Listening to the different interpretations of such terms from distinct sectoral perspectives was enlightening for everyone.

INITIATING CROSS-SECTOR EXPLORATION

At lunch participants were encouraged to sit next to people from another sector. The noise of animated conversation was almost deafening!

In the afternoon there was a brief presentation from an external guest speaker who described his experiences of creating tri-sector partnerships for city regeneration, social inclusion and sustainable economic growth.

Everyone listened. They seemed to be ready for a session on how cross-sector collaboration actually worked. Their questions to the speaker were both focussed and practical. A lively exchange took place.

RT: It is my experience that such case study presentations only really work when those listening are already asking themselves practical questions and those presenting realise that their audience will be far more engaged by: 'these were the challenges we faced and these were our attempts at finding solutions' rather than 'this is what we did, aren't we clever'.

As far as I could see, no one in the room felt inclined to copy the case study per se, but everyone felt inspired enough by the innovation and courage revealed by the story to feel that it was quite realistic to have a go at creating their own version.

ACTION PLANNING

The final session was designed to build a tangible action plan.

To our surprise it seemed that several of the lunch time conversations had already led to initial project ideas:

- a packaging company working with university students and a green NGO for a city-wide campaign to reduce waste;
- an environmental education initiative for school children between teachers and local park programme staff;
- a 'Technopark' project between business, the University and the city authorities, building on Krakow's potential as an IT centre and attracting inward investment;

RS: We had not anticipated that there would be so many project ideas forthcoming.

However, we quickly adapted what we had planned and began to list the ideas and the commitments made to ensure we would be able to follow them up. It also became apparent that some form of structure would be needed to transform this deluge of exciting proposals into tangible projects.

Other partners and further resources would also need to be secured...

The ideas would need to be aligned with the development plans and ambitions of the City Authorities...

ACTION PLANNING continued

- a careers advisory service set up by local businesses and the University...and so on.

Within 30 minutes, 15 collaborative projects had been suggested, each involving two or more sectors and directly contributing to the 'Sustainable Krakow' theme.

With these issues in mind, we steered the participants to a discussion about how to create a collaborative framework into which all these ideas would fit.

SECURING FOLLOW-UP

As the facilitators began to move to the 'thank you' slot, the Mayor (who had been an active participant throughout) said that as this had been such a successful day, he would very much like to encourage the group to meet again in a cross-sector format to maintain the momentum that had been engendered.

There was eager agreement and the idea for the Krakow Development Forum (KDF) was born.

RS: As an 'internal' broker, I was in the frontline throughout the day. One of the key lessons for me was that however well you prepare, you must always be ready to adapt to changing circumstances.

During the course of the day, several new leaders emerged and it was vital to give way and provide them an opportunity to lead.

We imagined prior to the event that, if things went well, it was probable that some sort of support structure would be required as follow-up. In fact, it was the Mayor who proposed that structure, we simply created the conditions for this to happen.

RT: I learned many lessons from this day. It was truly remarkable how much was achieved! We had done our homework, prepared well and the day itself was brilliantly facilitated by the PBF team.

As an external broker, my role was largely in the background. At the event I saw myself as having three main functions: firstly, to provide support to PBF behind the scenes; secondly, being ready to step in at a moment's notice if necessary and, finally, to use the added value of being 'external' to the situation to ask provocative questions, reflect back to the internal broker on group dynamics or refer to examples from elsewhere.

What happened next?

Within a few months, KDF was formally established as a non-profit association for the building of cross-sector partnerships that would, "...bring social, economic, environmental and cultural benefit to the Krakow community and its regional, national and international context." Set up to

identify and respond to opportunities and problems with the resources and competencies of its members, the KDF was designed to enable and promote collaborative work rather than engage in project implementation itself.

Financing was obtained through a modest fee that affirmed

individual commitment to the KDF idea. The initiating group comprised 26 individuals from different sectors with institutional support from the City Government, the IBLF and six companies. A management committee of five cross-sector nominees was accountable to a wide-ranging membership including the Mayor and other

civic and business leaders alongside teachers, activists, students and artists.

By 1996, the KDF had a membership of 88 individuals from all key sectors in Krakow and 21 supporting members. Most of the projects identified in the first workshop were subsequently implemented and many more were generated. Among the most significant were:

- **Revitalising Kazimierz** (the former Jewish district where thousands were deported and died in Nazi concentration camps leaving the neighbourhood derelict and desolate). A Community Development Association was established and a revitalisation plan formulated with input from the cities of Berlin and Edinburgh.
- **Revitalising Nowa Huta** (the industrial district of Krakow, dominated by the former Lenin Steel Works). A community-based revitalisation plan was developed with the Steel Works' management as it dealt with the challenges of restructuring and a Forum for Nowa Huta provided a lobby for this little known part of Krakow.
- **Opportunities for Youth** – a Careers Advisory Centre for graduates was established in partnership with local businesses. This prompted Krakow's universities to seek further private sector links, including the re-designing of course curricula for the job market.

- **Jagellonian University III Campus** – Poland's oldest and most prestigious university, drawing upon a combination of state funding and foreign investment, sought to build a new campus linked with a technology park which became a flagship for Krakow.
- **Schools for Sustainable Development** – Links between schools, national parks and other protected areas around Krakow were generated between Ojcow National Park and the Peak District National Park in the UK. School exchange visits led to the development of a nationwide environmental education programme which continues today.

The KDF was designed as a temporary partnership with the objective of strengthening the roles and responsibilities of the three sectors in contributing to the sustainable development of Krakow. In 1998 it was decided that, because the projects initiated through the KDF had taken on a dynamic of their own and working in partnership had become second nature to its members, this brokering role was no longer needed and the KDF was disbanded.

Outcomes

Thirteen years have passed since the events described above. Poland is now a member of the European Union and Krakow has become a favourite tourist destination. The city has adopted a development plan which includes many of the priorities and ideas identified by the KDF

and there is a strong culture of cross-sector working in the city. Several founding KDF members have gone on to become government ministers whilst others have become national leaders in the NGO and business sectors. The KDF has also served as a role model for a new type of delivery mechanism that has been adopted by other cities in Poland and beyond. If we accept that the aim of the KDF project was to **broker the idea of sustainable development partnerships**, it was entirely successful. The fact that it no longer exists is immaterial.

The KDF story shows how a single well-designed, well-timed and well-managed workshop can transform working relationships and lead to quite unexpected levels of innovation and enthusiasm in just one day. Brokering the idea of partnering can be the first step on an exciting journey. But it is not a 'soft' technology – it involves rigour, responsiveness, risk and responsibility from those involved in the brokering process. Above all, it requires the professional discipline to 'let go' once the idea has been successfully brokered and resist the temptation of going on forever.

NOTES

- ¹ *This workshop design is described more fully in The Brokering Guidebook: Navigating effective sustainable development partnerships, The Partnering Initiative, 2005. Available from: www.ThePartneringInitiative.org*