



Are you packed? Travels into new partnership realms.

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1. Wanderlust - the background

For the past ten years I have worked in the assistive technology and disability sector as an intermediary between stakeholders from a variety of polarities – public and private sector, micro and macro sized, national and global scales, as well as the education and health sectors. My roles have spanned both paid and voluntary positions and I have acted as both an internal and external, formal and informal broker.

Recently, my focus shifted to include private sector partnerships within the luxury and fashion industries, where extensive learning and reflective practice have been essential in maintaining a principled approach, while culturally adapting to a new working environment. In this sector, navigating and negotiating within an emotions-led, rather than needs-led, for-profit industry has been a key consideration (Willie, 2022). I hope that my broad perspective, shaped by just as many cringeworthy mistakes as there have been courageous successes, can help other brokers to navigate the labyrinth of increasingly diverse stakeholders that need convening to effectively advance the 2030 Agenda.

Transitioning between organizations and sectors presents challenges, often requiring adjustments in working practices to align with varying expectations. At times, adapting to a new setting has meant recalibrating pace, communication style and complexity to overcome being either too fast or too slow, too direct or too polite, too academic or too simplistic. Finding a middle ground that fits in comfortably with the pace, voice, and values of a new group is essential for effective collaboration and integration into what can be diverse professional environments.

1.1 Preparing the path - context

On the surface, connections between the fashion world and the development sector might seem tenuous at best, polar opposites at worst. However, the luxury goods and fashion market are a substantive part of international financial flows, particularly in the garment and pharmaceutical cosmetics manufacturing industry, where from a 2030 Agenda perspective, there is increasing scrutiny and evidence of its negative environmental and social impact (A. L. Vestergaard 2021, Abbate 2024).

The luxury goods and fashion sector is experiencing significant growth, with the global industry valued at \$354.8 billion and projected to expand further as Asian markets develop (Lähde, 2023). Brands are increasingly positioning themselves within the sustainability conversation, driven by both regulatory pressure and consumer awareness, and as a result, the international search for value building partnerships is fast growing (DiVito 2021). In their

reach for sustainable credentials (Steinhart 2013) some global brands have been accused of greenwashing with short-term, low-commitment partnerships and sustainability marketing campaigns, whilst others have made extraordinary financial and governance commitments to obtain full B-Corp accredited status, such as the fashion houses Chloé and Stella McCartney.

Luxury brands often serve as forms of soft power, representing their country of origin and reinforcing a sophisticated national identity, particularly in Europe. In this context, global manufacturing brands and influential individuals engage in strategic partnerships to promote branded products and participate in high-profile public events. Effective partnership management between the stakeholders ensures smooth collaboration, by ensuring contractual alignment and frequent logistical support for both ongoing and new initiatives.

In 2022 a new word was coined to describe the ‘unprecedented convergences between ecological, political and economic strife that we are currently experiencing’ termed, ‘The Polycrisis’ (Lähde 2023), (UNDP March 2023). Given the global interconnectedness of the environmental crisis, its politics touch all aspects of society today and this is particularly relevant in low- and middle-income countries, where the garment manufacturing sector is a substantive employer.

In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) here are some of the relevant topic areas that are being discussed increasingly by and about the sector:

- I. The fashion industry needs to half its emissions by 2023 to avoid exceeding the 1.5 degree pathway agreed to in the 2015 Paris Accord (FCCC 2016) (McKinsey 2020) as it is responsible for producing the equal amount of greenhouse gases per year as the combined economies of France, Germany and the United Kingdom.
- II. Livestock farming is cited as one of the significant contributors to global warming, land degradation, air and water pollution, and loss of biodiversity as more than fifty million animals are farmed and slaughtered each year to make handbags and shoes, with leather tanning using heavy metals such as chromium, resulting in toxic waste (Thomas 2019).
- III. The environmental link can also be seen where the waste or by-products discarded by agro-industries are being used in cosmetics, food and pharmaceutical sectors (Rocca 2022).

So, far from being just about individuals buying attractive material goods, this industry is a nexus of environmental, economic, food, health and energy security, which requires substantive attention. Clothes may be private goods eventually but the scale of current manufacturing and its current impact on global public goods, mean that the public sector and civil society need to engage and find ways to collaborate effectively with the private sector.

Drawing on experience in facilitating innovative partnerships between public and private sector stakeholders, establishing and sustaining partnerships in this sector required thoughtful brokering, to navigate the diverse motivations and working cultures involved.

While this may seem like an unconventional setting for a partnership broker, far from our traditional development home, hopefully my learnings from this experience present some insights and guiding ideas, particularly around language and communication. Indeed, an analysis of 444 fashion sustainability focused fashion partnerships (Dzhengiz 2023) illustrated that cross-sector collaborations with environmental and social goals, had a greater long term impact than traditional CSR (corporate social responsibility) projects. This would indicate the demand for a PBA partnering approach in the sector, to support the alignment of corporate initiatives with sustainability objectives. I hope this piece serves as a useful tool for others as they pack their PBA toolkits and perhaps venture into this emerging field.



2. Fitting in

Adapting to this new sector like any other, meant observing behaviours and patterns of work. Listening to a broad range of stakeholders talk about their past experiences provided me with valuable insights into its culture, conveyed through the language they used to describe their working environments, especially within the fashion side of the industry. It is an emotion fuelled sphere, which is reflected in some dramatic behaviours.

Numerous stories from various individuals highlighted their experiences with challenging workplace environments, which appeared to be a frequently recurring theme rather than isolated incidents. These concerns were often associated with the use of strong language, fluctuating leadership styles, high workload expectations and inconsistencies in salary payments. This was seemingly more prevalent in smaller organisations with no corporate structure, behavioural policies or formal human resources departments. Within this context, there seemed to be an acceptance of this working culture as the norm, with a perception that not conforming to it or questioning its legitimacy signalled weakness.

Additionally, some accounts revealed a deep distrust of colleagues, with terms used such as being “at war” or “in the trenches” contributing to heightened workplace anxiety.

This contrast was particularly striking when compared to my development colleagues with firsthand experience living or working in areas of armed conflict, who would be unlikely to use such language in this context. At the same time, the industry was often described as “relationship-based” or “trust-based,” which, again, are emotion-driven descriptions. However, stakeholders in practice also characterized the environment as inherently transactional and leverage-based. Therefore, to foster more impactful collaboration in addressing the SDGs (A. e. Vestergaard 2021), arguably both sectors will need to adapt and

develop a mutual appreciation of their differing working cultures and motivations, to find common value through professional communication frameworks.



3. Learning the language – bad, less and technical

Nelson Mandela once said, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” The foundation of my ability to adapt to this new space was not only about adjusting to the behavioural culture but also learning new semantics and technical terms. Just as military and civilian doctors in the UK use different lexicons, making collaboration technically challenging, I had to adjust to learning new terms and the informal language used to describe activities - terms not readily found in peer-reviewed journals, Wikipedia, or even the Urban Dictionary.

Having experienced unwarranted disdain early in my career, when I failed to use the accepted field acronym (i.e. the cool name) for an organisation’s name, I have learnt to be comfortable as the newcomer and ask to have words and concepts explained to me. This approach can help demonstrate to stakeholders that their varying working cultures and languages are being acknowledged and fully understood. Raising these types of questions in a group setting can be beneficial for others who may be unfamiliar with the terminology and would also benefit from further clarification.

Cross-sector communication barriers arising from mismatched terminologies and organisational mechanics (Murray 2010), can add complexity to the challenges of the broader partnership dialogue around aligning goals and objectives (Louche 2021). Showing the humble vulnerability to ask questions in this sector has been more challenging than in any other I have encountered, due the sector’s demanding and competitive nature. Therefore, where brokers can translate or make space for discussion around technical and sector-specific language, it can facilitate a shared vocabulary that smooths the path to collaboration.

Another side to the language of this working culture is its informality and brevity. In contrast to the nature of UN system communications, especially where email audits are commonplace, there is less use of formally structured language or focus on the clarity of communication than I am accustomed to, leading to ambiguity and at times additional workload. One strength of the development sector is the capacity or expectation to have effective online video calls that build relationships at speed, running through our agenda points calmly and efficiently. I took this tool for granted until it was no longer available, forcing me to navigate an overload of email threads between partners instead of enjoying the open, productive and efficient video meetings I had become accustomed to, quickly

followed up by succinct meeting notes shared among the participants. To bridge this cultural gap, partnership brokers can benefit stakeholders at the start of a cross-sector collaboration, by acting as mediators who ensure key terms are defined and contextualised, which in turn builds trust, mutual understanding and reduces risk.



4. Insurance - facing change and reflection

In one partnership group, the departure of a long-term member necessitated finding solutions to operational challenges that were causing concern among stakeholders. Upon reflection it seemed that this long-term partnership needed reconsidering from the 'Reviewing and Revising' stage of the Partnering Cycle (Tennyson, *The Partnering Toolbook - An essential guide to cross-sector partnering*, 2011). However, given specific discussions around resources, communication, governance, and problem solving it was clear we needed to dial back and revisit the 'Managing and Maintaining' phase. I found this an interesting exercise as much of my recent experience had come from the 'Building and Scoping' phase of partnership innovation, so it was good to revisit this area from within a long-term collaboration.

In this situation, serving as an internal broker required confidence and comfort in facilitating open discussions among partners on resources, skills, and governance structures. This approach proved beneficial, leading to restorative and regenerative outcomes for the group. It encouraged improved working practices and collaborative solutions, while reaffirming to stakeholders that the partnership remained valued. However, this experience also highlighted the complexities of working as an internal broker when partnership management is just one aspect of a broader role. This is not uncommon, and the excellent paper, 'If the shoe fits – managing dual roles and accountabilities as a partnership broker' by Mary Frankham (Frankham, 2018) provided 'ah-ha' insights on navigating and distinguishing between different roles and responsibilities. The guidance was particularly helpful in avoiding some of my past mistakes, particularly trying to 'fix it' by undertaking too many tasks myself.

This experience illustrated that some of the communication challenges faced by the working group in a fast-paced environment could be addressed through discussions on operational tools, which is an area typically outside the remit of a broker. However, using internal project management experience helped facilitate this process. Establishing a consensus to hold weekly meetings enabled the team to address broad aspects of the 'Managing and Maintaining' phase, in a more systematic way. By enhancing digital skills and implementing problem-solving strategies, greater efficiency was achieved, leading to the development of a

new communication structure within the partnership. This approach also garnered interest from senior staff, who were keen to participate.

In another corporate partnership group, funding partners and team leaders were encouraged to take up similar digital technologies and a schedule of regular online meetings, to support project planning and delivery. The practice proved highly effective and helped to develop strong cohesion among remote teams. As a result, external staff who joined a project at the last minute on the ground, voiced feeling excluded because there was such apparent cohesion built among the remote colleagues.

My learning from this experience was that remote working and international partnerships are increasingly reliant on digital technology platforms. Despite being outside the remit of a broker's role, I believe we should be comfortable engaging in conversations around the structure and technicalities of the working partnership. This includes bringing in external training for staff or running co-supportive workshops between partners, where they feel comfortable sharing what they do or don't know about a technology platform. Colleagues can then guide each other, creating a practical team-building exercise for mutual benefit. It is rewarding to see colleagues support each other, grow in confidence and go on to work cohesively across other partnerships using these skills. Digital platforms are an accepted part of communication in the international development sector but not necessarily for those where time is considered a cost and communication tends to be in-person and informal.

A reflection from this: Discussing how we work together was of course easier when we all agreed upon the 'why' and 'what' we were trying to achieve as the outcome. However, in the context of current global complexities when even these objectives are not clear, it is more important than ever that the 'how' is clear and less ambiguous. The issue of communication culture, which encompasses communication style, semantics and modalities, has been a growing challenge in most of the roles I have held over the past ten years, particularly when outside a technology-based industry.

One significant issue has been the gap between 'digital natives' and those colleagues more accustomed to analogue or paper-based communication and administration. I have also repeatedly experienced that these differences are tied to more traditional, hierarchical structures. This becomes increasingly challenging when you work in a fast-paced working culture with differently skilled and experienced colleagues. My perception has been that technology supports efficient working but can also encourage more collaborative and non-hierarchical working cultures. This new form of communication, administration and operation of projects is not always welcomed, particularly when this threatens the power held by senior staff who previously controlled the older communication methods.



5. Travel tips - a practical suggestion

After working and reflecting on my past experience in combination with this new industry, where I have gained experience with a wide range of partners, from large, medium, and small organizations to independent individuals, I would like to share some simple concepts that have been helpful to me. These ideas have now become part of my general reflections on partner behaviours and the tools that assist me in navigating complex partnership situations. I developed these to help me adapt to cultures of extremes and to manage a period of change within the broader sector. They have all been used successfully in practice.

As part of the 'Managing and Maintaining' phase of a partnership cycle, whether moving forward in a new relationship or revisiting this stage to establish new ways of working, I have found that a crucial part of the communications plan is having a substantive conversation around communications technology. This conversation should address its use for daily operations, governance structures (especially in light of GDPR and financial legislation), and problem-solving. From the examples I've shared here, open discussions about how we work digitally, the language we use and what skills are available or need support, can strengthen the practicality of our working partnerships. When these matters are discussed openly with senior staff, they can also play an important role in strengthening working relationships, reducing the risk of overburdening individuals with the relevant digital skills, and mitigating internal conflicts when skill sets don't align.

I believe this approach could be beneficial in all partnership situations, particularly in cross-sectoral partnerships with diverse resources and skills, where language, motivations and general administrative and communication styles may differ. There is also evidence (Feilhauer 2021-02) to support the argument for integrated digital governance mechanisms in cross-sector partnerships, illustrating that transparent and standardised governance structures help reduce the chance of miscommunication and therefore overall project risk.

At the partnering agreement stage, or where being reviewed, I would like to suggest as practiced here, that as part of the 'partnering roles and responsibilities' and 'co-ordination and administration' phase, that there is a second layer of discussion and agreement about digital communications, with some guiding questions suggested below. This is a tool, bringing together various practices that have proven to be beneficial across my career. Additionally, in response to the lessons I have learnt through working across a diversity of geographic and working cultures, I have added a section from a human resources perspective. I hope this will prove to be a helpful navigation tool for brokers journeying into the realms of sustainability in public-private partnerships, particularly in the luxury goods and fashion sector, as well as in other diverse multi-stakeholder projects.

5.1 A new tool for the kitbag

Administrative/communications/logistical responsibilities.

1. When shall we meet and how often?
 - a. If we meet remotely, what digital platform will we use?
 - b. Who will create the agendas for these meeting and when will they be circulated?
 - c. Who will send out the meeting invitations?
 - d. How will we share documents and on what platform?
 - i. Are all our staff confident using the digital tools we agree upon using?
 - ii. Do we need to support staff with an open digital skills workshop or external trainer?
 - e. Are any of our partnership team deaf or need communications accommodations such as subtitles/captioning for functional difficulty? If so, which online tools will be applied?
 - f. Would any of our partnership team benefit from subtitles/captioning to support language barriers?
 - g. Will notes/minutes be produced from our meetings?
 - i. Who will take notes/minutes of meetings and when will they be shared after the meeting?
 - ii. What mechanism will there be to ensure the equitable and fair recording of the matters discussed?
 - iii. Will meetings be regularly recorded?
 - h. Do we need to run a language workshop to ensure that we understand each other's specialist language?
 - i. Are there helpful sources of information on our sectors which are recommended for background reading?

(Financial compliance is the most important risk area of any partnership and not mentioned here, although strongly related to the administrative duties. The clearer meeting content is understood at the time, the better.)

Human resources

2. What are our agreed behaviours between partners?
 - a. What staff behavioural policies do our organisations have in place and do they align?
 - b. What are the accountability arrangements?
 - c. What mechanism do we agree upon should personal conflicts occur?
 - d. What proportion of our project staff are volunteers or interns and how will we manage their exit from the partnership?
 - e. How can we strengthen our staff collaboration across the partnership to include those staff not in frequent operational contact?



6. Reaching home - conclusions

Luxury goods and fashion sector partners are increasingly engaging in the sustainability conversation, and the narratives of communications are aligning more frequently with those of the development sector, particularly in green-focused policies and marketing campaigns. As a result, greater synergy is required from both sides to work collaboratively. While some of these points may seem commonplace in the development sector, they are not necessarily familiar to everyone else.

Despite the differing motivations of the private and public sectors, there are opportunities for shared objectives and mutual learning, as collaborative efforts evolve to address the complex and seemingly paradoxical partnerships required in this era of polycrisis. A balanced approach that considers market-driven realities while upholding principles of integrity, equity and accountability is essential to achieving the outcomes necessary for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. However, effective collaboration between non-profit and for-profit partners requires a concerted effort to understand and navigate differences in values, perspectives and working practices. Partnership brokers can play a significant role in bridging this divide and mediating the complexity of this space using a principled approach.

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