

## Partnering Solutions

How to build effective partnerships  
between the Business, Government,  
Community and Education Sectors

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Today we are faced with many sustainable development challenges across the world, which if not addressed and resolved in some way will threaten our very existence. Climate change, energy shortages, droughts, poverty, environmental pollution, epidemics such as HIV Aids and economic and social disadvantage are just some of those challenges.

Partnerships between the business, government, community and education sectors are critical to addressing these challenges and to achieving global sustainable development. Since first being acknowledged by global authorities at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and later at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, many governments and reports have reinforced the importance of cross sector partnerships.

Cross sector collaboration is a means of drawing on the collective skills and competencies of each of the sectors involved. It achieves a much more integrated approach to solving complex sustainable development challenges, as opposed to having each sector working separately, which could result in duplication, wasting of valuable resources or even competing with each other.

While there is now increasing recognition that cross sector partnerships provide a means to address these complex issues, many people from within each sector are struggling with just how to do it effectively. Many cross sector partnerships in operation today are not meeting the partners' expectations, resulting in much disappointment and disillusionment with the partnering process.

This paper addresses the key challenges faced when entering into a cross sector partnership, what it takes to develop an effective partnership that actually delivers real results, and what are some of the critical components that need attention in the partnering process.

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Before looking at how to develop effective cross sector partnerships we need to understand fully the role of each of the sectors and why this can often lead to different expectations and priorities.

Each sector fulfils a different role in our society today - the public sector is focused on establishing the necessary economic and social frameworks, and providing public services to address basic needs and rights, while the business sector could be described as innovative, fast and 'profit driven'. The community sector is seen as very much values driven and standing up for the public good, while the education sector has a major focus on research and knowledge expansion.

Cross sector partnerships that bring these disparate sectors together provide many challenges when the basis for their existence is very different and the key drivers that determine their way of operating are often at odds with each other.

By their very nature, cross sector partnerships require a significant investment of time and resources and will often involve many people from various organisations who may be located in different regions or remote areas of a state or country. This can present many challenges in building relationships and developing a shared understanding between key people.

However, we often see the same issues arising in various partnerships that act as barriers and impediments to effective partnering, such as:

- The lack of a clear purpose and differing expectations of what the partnership will deliver
- The predominance of 'silos' within each of the sectors which can restrict communication and delay decision making
- The lack of a clear process to bring the partners together and enable them to maximize the opportunities from the partnership
- People leaving and entering the partnership with new relationships having to be formed over and over again
- The lack of partnering skills and knowledge of how to be an effective partner
- People seeing partnerships as just a different way of allocating funds to projects or initiatives.

So we find much rhetoric and confusion around the language and process of partnering and cross sector partnerships. But amongst all the confusion and overuse of the word 'partnership' we do see a way forward. A way that can help people from each of the sectors come together, and develop effective cross sector partnerships that can deliver results that would be otherwise unachievable, and to solve the very complex, difficult challenges facing our communities.

# Cross Sector Partnerships

“A cross sector partnership can be described as a form of strategic alliance between organisations drawn from the business, government, education or community sectors, who commit to working collaboratively on a project, program or complex issue to pursue a common purpose.”<sup>1</sup>

In this form of partnership each partner will not only contribute from their own resources and core knowledge and skills, but also share the risks and benefits by achieving their own, each others and the overall partnership’s objectives.

Cross sector partnerships can range from those comprising one organisation from each sector, such as in many corporate social responsibility initiatives, to clusters of companies, government agencies, education institutions, not for profits and community groups that come together to address significant and complex issues.

There is really no limit to the various types of collaborations that can occur within and between the sectors, however, with more partners at the table, the degree of complexity and the need for efficient and effective partnering processes increases significantly.

For this reason cross sector partnerships should only be entered into when this approach is clearly seen as the best alternative to achieving results, as there are substantial transaction costs involved, with consequent risks and rewards.

While the challenges for cross sector partnering are many and varied, there can be significant benefits, such as:

- The ability to bring more resources and capacity to the project or program
- Enabling more creative and innovative solutions to be developed
- Allowing greater integration of broader economic, social and environmental objectives
- Developing the skills and capacity of individual partners, and
- Reaching across a broader area or region

Weighed against this can be some of the risks, such as the large amount of time and effort required, the possible loss of autonomy, the impact on an organisations reputation and the overall challenges of implementing with many groups and people involved. In any decision to move forward there needs to be a positive benefit or ‘value proposition’ for all partners as well as the overall partnership.

If we are going to embark on the partnering route, how can we be sure that we will be in a position to maximise the benefits while reducing the risks? What are the underlying principles of partnering that are fundamental to achieving a positive outcome? What is the glue that will hold the partnership together through the most challenging and difficult periods?

While there can be a number of principles developed for particular partnerships, there are three basic principles that keep recurring time and again, namely: equity, transparency and mutual benefit,<sup>2</sup> where each of these can be described as follows:

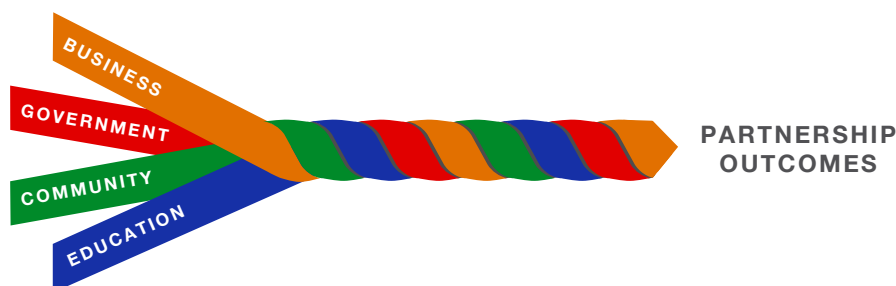
**Equity** - where this implies an equal right to be at the table, and a recognition that contributions to the partnership can be in different forms

**Transparency** - where all relationships are based on openness and honesty, and where people will be truly accountable

**Mutual Benefit** - where all partners can achieve specific benefits over and above the common benefits to all

When the partners develop and agree their basic principles for operating this will form the basis for how all people involved in the partnership will work together. It also provides the partnership with the opportunity to become a strong and durable collaboration, just like a piece of cord that is made up from a number of individual strands.

If we look closely we can see that each individual strand retains its own identity and individual characteristics, but when it is woven with the other strands its gains strength and durability whilst still retaining its flexibility.



<sup>1</sup> Partnership Brokers Accreditation Scheme (UK)  
<sup>2</sup> The Partnering Toolbook, Ros Tennyson (2007)

# Building a Cross Sector Partnership - Step by Step

While there are no doubt many approaches to building a partnership, our experience suggests that using a simple framework is a very useful tool, particularly to act as reference point and checklist as you work through the partnering process.

For this purpose we have developed a framework that comprises three distinct stages, which if worked through carefully can make the task easier and ensure success. If you try and shortcut these stages, you run

the risk of going one step forward and two steps back, or in the worst case self destructing completely. The three stages we use in our partnership process are shown below.

While we use these three stages as a progression and a way of ensuring that key activities are addressed at the right time, **the absolute critical imperative is the underlying relationships between people that are being built throughout this partnering process.**



Now let's look briefly at each stage of the partnering process:

## Stage 1 - Creating

The most crucial aspect of this '**Creating**' stage is that each of the potential partners work together to design a partnership framework that clarifies what the partnership is about and how the partners will work together. One of the key outcomes of this stage is that all the key organisations and people are engaged in the partnering process and there is common agreement to move forward.

Partnerships can be initiated in many ways, but whenever discussions turn to a possible partnership or alliance and people start moving in that direction - that is the time to sit down with the prospective partners and start asking some key questions, before you go too far. Questions such as:

- Who needs to be involved in these discussions and the proposed partnership?
- Are we ready to partner?
- What is the purpose of this partnership?
- What are our own and others expectations for being involved in the partnership?
- Who will provide financial support to take the partnership forward or is everyone able to fund themselves?
- How are the potential partners going to work together?
- How well do the partners know and understand each other? What is the level of trust between the partners?
- Are you going to need support from an external partnership broker?

While these questions are a good guide there may be other questions specific to the proposed partnership that need to be answered in these early stages, before the partnership progresses.

Once these questions have been explored and agreements are reached partners may wish to formalise the end of this stage by developing some form of partnership agreement. This agreement can range from being a simple document where some basic principles are set down on how the partners will work with each other, through to a more formal Memorandum of Understanding.

## Stage 2 - Developing

The key initial step of the '**Developing**' stage is to create an Action Plan for the partnership. This plan is much more detailed than the partnership agreement and sets out clearly the direction and tasks required to achieve the partnership objectives - this is in effect the operational or implementation plan. Key aspects of this plan would include:

- A clear purpose statement and key objectives for the partnership
- Key actions required to be undertaken
- Key milestones for achieving these objectives and actions
- Resources to be applied to the partnership by each of the partners
- How the process is to be managed and by whom

Depending on the type of partnership, the Action Plan may cover other areas appropriate to that particular partnership - the key point here is, that there needs to be a plan that is developed jointly and agreed by all partners if it is to have any chance of success. For the plan to be agreed it needs to have the full support of each of the organisations involved, not just the people at the table. Some key areas that may need to be addressed during this stage are as follows:

- Establishing procedures and protocols on how the parties are to work together
- Developing internal and external communication processes including how the partnership will be represented
- Seeking outside expertise when required
- Continuing to develop relationships between all of the partners
- Resolving conflicts as they arise

While this is only a quick snapshot of some of the areas to be considered in this stage of the partnership process, the overriding factor is that these activities need to work towards maintaining engagement and building commitment between all the partners involved in the partnership.

### Stage 3 - Sustaining

Once we have **created** a partnership and then **developed** it so that it is functioning effectively and it is starting to deliver some outputs, the next challenge is to **sustain** it so that it reaches its full potential and delivers the expected overall outcome. It is at this stage that partners need to take ownership of the partnership and ensure that it delivers. To do this partners have to be accountable and take responsibility for maintaining momentum and continuing to drive the process. Some of the key questions that need to be addressed at this stage include:

- Are we meeting our commitments? If not what are we going to do about it?
- Are we still getting value from being in this partnership? Is the partnership delivering the outcomes we sought at the beginning?
- Is our strategic direction still current? If it isn't, what are we going to do about it?
- How can we do things better? What do we need to do differently?
- Are the partners still committed? Is there a better way of delivering the same outcomes?

The ability of partners to assess objectively the need for a partnership to continue is one of the most challenging aspects of partnering, and that is what makes it so interesting and rewarding.

It is also important that in working through these stages there is a desire to seek not only **engagement** of the partners, but to build their **commitment**, and eventually achieve shared **ownership** of the partnership arrangement by all the partners. It is only then that the partners will fully incorporate the partnership activities into their core business and action will be achieved.



This simple formula is a guide that we use as we work through the partnering process. It is also important to understand what is meant by these terms and just how we know when we have achieved each level.

**Engagement** – at this level people are prepared to be at the table. They are receptive to being involved and will be keen to explore potential opportunities and scope various activities without committing actual resources. They will be interested enough to accept in the early stages that there may be some potential opportunity through this process and that the benefits will outweigh the costs and risks for being involved.

## Getting Results

**Commitment** – at this second level people will be prepared to commit actual resources to the partnership. There will be a clear demonstration, by way of some form of partnering agreement that will recognise a willingness to stay involved and a level of accountability for future actions.

**Ownership** – this is the ultimate level and one which we believe is crucial to the ongoing sustainability and performance of a partnership. At this level the partners take control of their partnership and it becomes their own and they take full responsibility for ensuring the partnership continues and maintains momentum. This is demonstrated by trust and accountability to each other and not being reliant on an external driver – the power comes from within the partnership and it truly is alive.

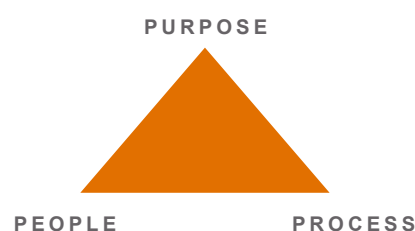
In seeking to develop through these different levels of engagement, commitment and ownership it is critical that sufficient time is spent at each stage of the process. This may require you to spend far more time in the early stages to ensure that the fundamentals are right before moving on too quickly. Ensuring that there are clear understandings between all the partners and clear agreements on how to move forward are essential. If concerns are raised they need to be addressed, not pushed aside as ‘undiscussables’, where they are likely to fester and come back to bite all the partners at a later stage of the process.

Overall a step-by-step approach will ensure that the partners progress together and everyone is brought along at the same time. In this way you will have a far better chance of success than blindly rushing in or trying to short cut the process.

Partners need to take ownership of the partnership and ensure that it delivers

After coming together and investing a great deal of time and resources into working through a partnering process, how can you ensure that you will get results? That the outcomes are in fact better than would have been achieved using any other approach.

In our experience we have found that there are three critical components that are fundamental to ensuring success and getting results from any partnership, namely



Within each of these three components are a number of key areas which need to be developed as the partnership progresses through the various stages, so let's look at each area in turn.

### PURPOSE

Developing and agreeing a clear purpose for a partnership ensures that all partners have shared expectations of what the partnership will deliver. A facilitated dialogue between the partners resulting in a documented purpose statement for the partnership should be one of the first steps in any partnering process.

In developing this purpose statement a number of questions need to be addressed, such as:

- How broad or limited should the scope of the partnership be?
- How will the partnership relate to each of the partner organisations involved?
- What will the partnership do that is different from what can be done individually by the partners?
- What will be the identity of the partnership?
- Is the partnership to deliver specific projects or is it intended to be a catalyst for collaboration, while the actual projects are undertaken by each partner organisation?

It is not uncommon when potential partners come together that they will have vastly different expectations as to what the partnership is intended to achieve. If expectations are not clarified at the early stages, and a clear purpose for the partnership is not agreed, this can lead to confusion and eventually frustration and conflict.

Gaining agreement and commitment to a purpose statement will focus each of the partners on their own 'value proposition' for being in the partnership, and help them decide their ongoing commitment to the overall partnership process.

It is also important that partners explore not only their own individual 'value proposition' but also what is the collective added value by coming together in a partnership. Often these benefits are not evident at the early stages of the partnership but evolve as the innovation and energy develops within the partnering process.

## **PEOPLE**

### *Relationships*

It is essential to remember that it is 'people that partner', so the effectiveness of a partnership will depend on the relationships that are established between people from each of the respective partners. These relationships must be built on mutual trust and respect for each other and enable each partner to have a shared understanding of how each other operates on a day to day basis.

Sometimes in the urgency to get a partnership up and operating, relationships can be ignored or seen as something that will develop naturally. We have found that whether or not partners have an understanding of each other from a previous situation, time and energy needs to be allocated to developing this shared understanding and developing relationships. In some cases it may be appropriate to have structured relationship building sessions as part of the initial stages of the process.

This aspect is even more critical for long running partnerships where people are continually leaving and joining. This reinforces the point that relationship building should not be seen as just one event but needs to be maintained throughout the process. People who join the partnership need to be properly inducted and briefed fully on the background and philosophy of the partnership. Most importantly you must ensure that the lines of communication between and within the partner organisations are not disrupted in any way.

### *Partnering Skills*

Linked to the ability to forge strong relationships is the overall level of partnering skills in each of the partner organisations. Do people have an understanding of the partnering process? Do they know the pitfalls and obstacles they are likely to encounter? How will they resolve the inevitable conflicts that will arise and still stay focused on achieving significant outcomes?

Operating in a partnership environment is different to that of a normal organisation where there are clear structures

in place and direct lines of authority. In partnerships this is not as clear as no one partner has authority over another. Working in this environment requires great skills in negotiation and facilitation rather than relying on directions from some higher authority.

### *Permission to partner*

Inherent in any partnering process is the ability of people to think collaboratively and be willing to explore opportunities for working together. In some cases, people will find this extremely challenging, sometimes due to their mindset or to the lack of support from the parent organisation.

In each of the sectors we experience what we call 'vertical drivers', those that encourage people to conform to a hierarchy and undertake activities solely for their organisation, and 'horizontal drivers', those that encourage people to work across agencies and organisations in a collaborative manner.

Unless we have strong horizontal drivers at all levels of the partner organisations, that give people 'permission to partner', then real results will not be achieved. By this we mean that people have the full support and freedom to operate within the partnership and not be restricted or overly controlled by their parent organisation. This allows people to have the freedom to fully participate in the partnering process and to truly create and innovate.

## **PROCESS**

### *Managing the Process*

One of the greatest challenges for partnering is how to manage the process so everyone feels involved and power imbalances do not occur. One partner should not feel disenfranchised or that they are being controlled by any of the other partners. It is important that there is a level playing field.

Critical questions for each of the partners are: - Who will initiate action? Who will make decisions? Who will take the lead on particular activities? Who will bring the partners together when needed? Who will follow up on actions and decisions? These questions are hardest to address in the creating stage when people are first coming together to explore the potential opportunities.

Getting a clear set of procedures and protocols in place is a critical step in the partnering process and one that usually takes place in the developing stage. Once these are established a further question is who should coordinate the partnership - should this be an internal partnership broker from one of the partners or an independent external partnership broker? Either way, most partnerships will require a dedicated resource to help broker various aspects of the partnering process.

### *Adequate Resources*

If adequate resources are not applied to a partnership process, all the goodwill in the world will achieve very little. While funding, people and time are obvious resources that are required to enable activities to be undertaken and the partnering process to proceed, the amount of these resources available is often underestimated and can often be variable through the life of the partnership.

Of the resources required, our experience shows that time allocation continues to be one of the most difficult areas to address in the partnering process. People invariably have very heavy workloads and commitments before they even consider being involved in a partnership arrangement and collaboration takes time. Shortcuts in this area can have a profound impact on the ability of the partnership to deliver results.

Consistency of resourcing is essential to maintaining momentum and is a clear sign of each partner's commitment and shared ownership of the partnership process. Any uncertainty can give rise to strong tensions between the partners with resulting frustration and possible conflict.

### *Open Communication*

Effective communication is essential in any organisational setting; however, with the added complexity of large numbers of people from each of the sectors involved in partnering, communication becomes even more critical. While participating partners may each have clear strategies and processes for communicating both internally and externally, these are very unlikely to be the same as other partners.

Some important communication considerations within a partnering context are:

- Is everyone being brought along in the partnering process?
- Is there clear communication both between and back within each partner's organisation or sector?
- Do people need to come together in person to share knowledge and build understanding between each other?
- When difficult situations arise, are different partners' views expressed in a respectful way so that trust is built between the partners?
- Are partner's comfortable placing issues on the table so they can be discussed openly and resolved?

This is not an exhaustive list, but developing a clear communication checklist is a useful tool in getting the most out of your partnership. The process to develop

such a list also provides an opportunity for people to develop an awareness and understanding of effective communication in a partnership environment.

Another critical aspect of communication is language. We generally develop language and terminology appropriate to our organisation - it becomes part of our culture. So when we partner with others who have their own culture and language we need to be aware of this and ensure that a common language is developed for the partnership that is readily understood by all.

### *Continual Learning*

Learning from our successes and failures is not new and is very much a tool that is used widely in organisations today. Capturing this learning on an ongoing basis and incorporating it into the everyday actions of those involved in the partnership is the challenge.

One impediment to continual learning within a partnership context is the ability of the partners to be fully open and honest with each other about what they see is working and what is not working in the partnering process. Working outside of normal organisational frameworks can restrict people in what they feel they can say, so issues can arise and get out of control leading to increased frustration and poor outcomes. Getting these issues out on the table as soon as they arise enables them to be dealt with and the partnership to progress.

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## Achieving Balance

In creating, developing and sustaining cross sector partnerships it is important to keep a clear perspective on what is really happening. This form of partnering can be extremely complex and often partners can lose sight of what they are trying to achieve and get lost in the process.

‘Achieving balance’ is a useful frame of reference for many aspects of the partnering process, be it between the risks and the benefits that can be gained, ensuring an equal voice at the table for all partners, to each partner deriving value in addition to the overall partnership outcomes.

Cross sector partnering is a challenging task but one that has the potential to solve many of the global challenges we face today, but it requires persistence and perspective. We wish you well with your partnering pursuits and remember - partnerships are a means to an end, not an end in themselves!

## About the Author



**Ian Dixon** BTech CEng, CPEng, FIEAust, FAICD

Ian Dixon is the Founder and Principal of DIXON Partnership Solutions and has more than 20 years experience in senior executive roles in both the public and private sectors.

Ian is an internationally accredited partnership broker through a scheme initiated and managed by the International Business Leaders Forum (UK) and Overseas Development Institute (UK).



Ian has also contributed to a number of boards, task forces and advisory bodies, where his unique knowledge and skills have been a key asset. He has also been a keen advocate and participant in a number of collaborative organisations.

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