



PRACTITIONER NOTE SERIES:

Plotting Partnerships: Ensuring Accountability and Fostering Innovation

Author Ken Caplan

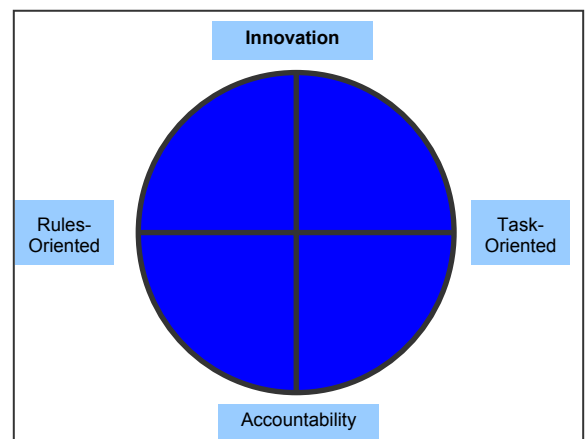
Written February 2003

This paper explores the way practitioners approach multi-sector partnerships in order to deliver services, based specifically on design features in water and sanitation projects. By plotting partnerships on two axes that balance 'Innovation and Accountability' against 'Policy and Task Orientations', this report aims to reveal where opportunities for both delivery and influence are being missed.

Over the past few years, Building Partnerships for Development¹ (BPD) has worked closely with various multi-sector partnerships that bring together the public, private, civil society and donor sectors around the delivery of water and sanitation services in poor communities.² The BPD has angled its inquiry from three directions – 1) how individual sectors engage with such partnerships; 2) how specific components of water projects are impacted by or impact on partnerships at the local level (i.e. regulatory frameworks, expectations around cost recovery, etc.); and 3) how partnership projects evolve (i.e. how they are initiated, sustained, and then end).³

Perhaps the key finding, unsurprising to any partnership practitioner, is the difficulty in bringing the sectors together around a clear strategy. As stated throughout BPD and other literature, partnerships are often fraught with assumptions and miscommunications that lead to mismanaged expectations. BPD's role has been to put forward some practical considerations to make partnership development at least somewhat more straightforward and their practices more effective.

With the understanding that getting the focus right is half the battle, this piece frames partnerships along two spectrums of innovation and accountability, rules and task orientations. Whilst these characteristics are certainly not mutually exclusive, at any given moment, partnerships generally lean towards one emphasis or the other. The framework discussed below is aimed at practitioners to help them step back and see their work in a wider context in order to clarify the ethos and hence direction of their partnership project. As a monitoring and evaluation tool, this helps to determine ways that utilise both innovation and accountability to maximise the impact of a partnership approach. The framework put forward is less about what the project does and more about how the partnership functions.



Partnerships as Innovation

In the water and sanitation sector, multi-sector partnerships to meet service needs of poor communities are by definition innovative. Creating new institutional structures and linkages, they are breaking the

mould of the way projects have been approached in the past. Process innovations include new ways of involving the consumer (community labour contributions, community water committees, or bringing in consumer organisations to advise regulatory agencies, for example). Process innovations may also include greater co-ordination between partners to deliver particular project components (for example, hygiene education or targeted subsidies).

The *partnerships* with which the BPD has been working exhibit a variety of such innovations.⁴ In one case, an NGO staff member was seconded into the company. In another case, community groups created water committees that developed profits that were in part put back into the community and in part paid salaries to committee members. In one project, donors played an integral role (rather than as only a funding agency) as did the regulatory agency. These reflect non-traditional ways of exploring how services could best be delivered while incorporating the aims and objectives of each partner organisation or group.

Partnerships oriented around innovation exhibit particular characteristics. They are, by definition, not exclusive. As they are based on sharing ideas, the more groups involved the better. The key factors for innovation-oriented partnerships are listening, brainstorming, and establishing open forums to capitalise on a willingness to share ideas. Given this openness, a key driver for such partnerships is engagement. This engagement suggests both an equitable proactive approach to problem-solving where voices are heard that generates a targeted, focused response to specific issues.

The key challenge for such partnerships is taking the innovations forward. Innovation is interesting and exciting. Being about ideas, it draws in individuals fairly easily even if the debates between different ideas can then be difficult. Innovation-oriented partnerships, however, often do not know when to stop innovating and when to institutionalise the relationships more concretely in order to deliver more systematically and comprehensively. (Although outside pressure usually forces this move towards institutionalising the partnership.) Regulations may not allow for institutionalising innovative approaches unless efforts are made to link the partnership activities with the wider rules of

the game (policy formulation, the macro contract, etc.).⁵ Issues around capacity, institutional buy-in and vision all impact on how innovative approaches can be maximised.

Partnerships for Accountability

Innovation and accountability in partnerships are by no means mutually exclusive. Partnerships that promote innovative institutional relationships still require that partners are accountable to each other. Partnerships that emphasise accountability will still strive to be innovative in the way they approach a problem. What is often seen, however, is that partnership practitioners are generally geared towards one end of the innovation-accountability spectrum or the other with regard to how the *partnership* itself functions. Rather than brainstorming, openness, etc., the notion of accountability elicits thoughts of transparency and disclosure, contracts and compliance, penalties and deadlines, governance and confrontation.

In multi-sector partnerships in water and sanitation projects, accountability is framed both towards the contract or agreement as well as towards the customers or clients. Understanding the context in which the partnership operates is critical in terms of understanding what local level partnerships can and cannot do and where primary accountabilities lie.⁶

Many of the partnerships with which the BPD has been working exist in a macro context of a contract between the public and private sectors. Local-level partnerships in these cases needed to determine how the achievements of the partnership counted towards the overarching contractual obligations of the company. In one case, the partnership arrangement between various companies and an NGO took the form of a consortium. Issues around shareholding for the NGO and the consortium's contract negotiations with the public sector "client", provoked serious discussions around issues of accountability to whom and for what. In some cases, the lack of a grievance mechanism inside the partnership evoked sufficient ill-feeling that virtually destroyed the relationship.

Participation in accountability-oriented partnerships is necessarily exclusive; decision making in such partnerships is first and foremost between the signatories. As

opposed to innovation-oriented partnerships described above, negotiations are the foundation for bringing groups together in accountability-oriented partnerships. Key factors for such partnerships are the contract, grievance mechanisms in case something goes wrong, and results. For projects in the water and sanitation sector, an accountability-orientation manifests itself in, for example, an emphasis on the paperwork, regular monitoring and evaluation exercises, clear delineation of responsibilities in contracts, letters of agreement, etc.

The key challenge for partnership practitioners is to strike an appropriate balance between formal structures that guide working practices, and leadership (in its broadest sense) that promotes creative thinking on how to maximise the inputs from different organisations.

The Task-Oriented Partnership

Partnerships are most generally thought of as delivering something – water connections, a health centre, a new road, or a training course. Task-oriented partnerships are derived from a clearly defined project and driven by the urgency to produce results.

Adding Responsibilities in Cartagena: An attempt to influence policy

Through discussions with community representatives and a pilot demand assessment, the billing regime was identified as one of the most significant factors preventing access to services in the neighbourhoods of *El Pozón*. Most of the residents of *El Pozón* are daily cash earners and thus find it difficult to save enough to pay their water service bill each month.

The regulator refused to modify national regulations, which stipulate that bills cannot be issued to customers at intervals less than once a month. Therefore, the partnership brought local community organizations more clearly into the frame, establishing mobile payment collection units to collect money from residents on a bi-weekly basis. This innovative approach (with new accountabilities of local groups) complies with the national regulations while still giving the residents of *El Pozón* the flexibility to pay more frequently. *(Adapted from Colin and Lockwood.)*

Such partnerships are geared towards efficient division of labour – dividing tasks for example, around who puts in the pipes, who “educates” the community, who researches the needs of the community, who gives the land tenure, etc. Each partner usually has a specific role to play (and is thus accountable for that component).

The key challenge of task-oriented partnerships hinges on the sustainability of the projects they deliver. Once galvanised, partnerships can deliver water points to a poor community fairly quickly and efficiently. Such a straightforward approach however, may miss out on opportunities to create a dialogue between different partners. It may deliver without viewing the longer-term impact and sustainability of the project or sufficiently engaging with the policy arena to bring lessons learned into the wider debates. Whilst delivery is laudable, in some ways, given available funding (admittedly a big assumption), the delivery of water points is the easiest aspect of the job. The more difficult task is to engage with and inform policymakers in order to scale up delivery, ensure sustainability of systems installed, and manage vested interests that soon develop once water points are put in place.

The Rules-Oriented Partnership

At the other end of the spectrum from the above, the rules-oriented partnership brings different groups together to determine more appropriate policies, regulations, laws, and standards or more broadly, the “rules of the game”. In the case of water and sanitation, such partnerships could be between, say, consumer associations, the regulator, municipalities, and the operator. Such a grouping would not actually engage in the delivery of services (though the individual actors might). Instead they form a platform from which to debate and discuss how best to achieve broader policy goals, change the rules of the game, or influence how specific actors engage with the process.

The key driver for rules-oriented partnerships is generally sustainability – how can we change the system to ensure that our interventions are more sustainable. For individual partners in such platforms, their participation can be from a negative point of view (“how do I ensure that what comes out of these sessions doesn’t adversely affect me”) or from a positive, if not equally self-

	Innovation	Accountability	Task-Oriented	Rules-Oriented
Primary Drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsiveness to changing context • Targeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grievance Mechanisms • Results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urgency • Division of Labour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability • Creating Advantage
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional Buy-In • Scaling Up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility • Responsiveness to changing context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability • Dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberations & Speed • Vested Interests • Communications
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondments • Pilot Programmes • Multi-objective approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract Design • Verification Mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology • Community Labour • Subsidies for connection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards/Regulations • Stakeholder Dialogue • Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group

serving, point of view (“how can I use this forum to create advantages for me, my organisation, my constituency...”)

As with the innovation-oriented partnership, certain factors are necessary to allow rules-oriented partnerships to thrive. Primarily there must be political will (with a small “p”, i.e. not only related to government) and openness of the system that allows for exploration around options.

Getting to the Centre: The La Paz-El Alto Project
 The National Regulations for Water and Sanitation Service in Urban Areas, developed in 1992 by the Ministry of Housing and Basic Services, defined in-house water and sewerage services as the only acceptable long-term water and sanitation solution for urban areas. The partnership was allowed to pilot alternative service standards through a condominial approach. Condominial systems deviate from the normal system in several ways, including reduced pipe diameters, shallow trenching and drainage incline.

In order for the pilot to be replicated, it was necessary to convince the Ministry of Housing and Basic Services to modify the legal status of condominial sewerage. This is why, from the start, an objective of the partnership had been to facilitate the modification of the standards by the Ministry. Meeting this objective might be aided by the fact that the regulator was involved in the partnership, although only as an observer.

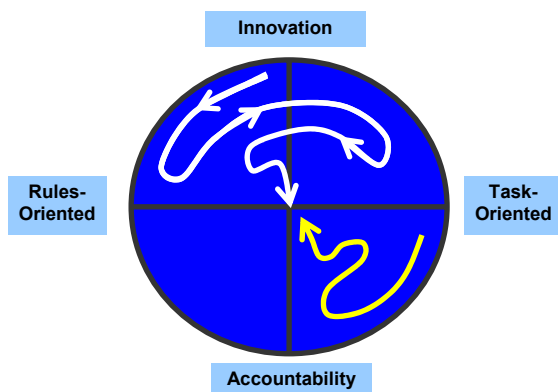
Given their looser overarching objectives, the key challenge of such partnerships is the time it takes to bring together sufficient legitimate diversity to meaningfully explore options. Determining practical ways to pilot or implement the recommendations requires yet more time (and possibly a different grouping of partners altogether). Politics are more rife in these types of partnerships since changing the rules by definition encroaches on vested interests. Knowing that these types of partnerships deliver fewer tangibles, managing expectations of partners and stakeholders must be delicately handled.

Combining the Axes

Partnerships will generally contain elements of all four orientations – drivers around accountability and innovation, task and rules. Each partner may even see the partnership differently with one partner suggesting that the partnership is about innovation and another suggesting that it is about getting organisations to do what they say they will. However, usually one can plot the primary dynamics of the partnership in one of the four quadrants in the matrix. The top half of the matrix reflects an emphasis on synergies whereas the bottom half reflects the pressures to produce. The right side places an emphasis on outputs (tangibles like water connections) and the left side on outcomes (intangibles like increased dialogue).

The ideal partnership would be framed as close to the centre as possible – maximising innovation and creativity whilst ensuring accountability, focusing on delivery whilst capturing lessons to influence the rules. A good example within the BPD research is the focus project in La Paz-El Alto (See Box) where “...modifying the rules [had] been set as an explicit objective in order to facilitate future replication at the national level.” (Tremolet and Browning, 2002) Whilst challenges are inevitable in any such partnership project, and La Paz-El Alto is no exception, it does exemplify good practice in

incorporating the context and feeding learning back into the system.



Based on the graphic, practitioners would be able to trace their progress across the spectrums. Whilst sounding much like an academic exercise, this feedback is critical for bridging gaps in expectation, and seeing where opportunities have been missed but may reappear on the horizon. Such introspection would allow for greater consideration of the context (i.e. who is missing from the discussions, what is the impact of standards and regulations on the partnership, etc.), a greater understanding of the incentives and constraints of different partners, and finally some guidance on how the partnership itself will need to transform to achieve its goals.

Select Bibliography

Caplan, K. et al. *Flexibility by Design: Lessons from Multi-Sector Partnerships in Water and Sanitation Projects*, BPD, June 2001

Caplan, K. & D. Jones. *Partnership Indicators: Measuring the effectiveness of multi-sector approaches to service provision*. BPD Practitioner Note Series, July 2002.

Colin, J. and H. Lockwood. *Making Innovation Work through Partnerships in Water and Sanitation Projects*, BPD Research and Survey Series, February 2002.

Jones, D. *Conceiving and Managing Partnerships: A Guiding Framework*. BPD Practitioner Note Series, July 2001.

Nelson, J. and S. Zadek. *Partnership Alchemy: New Social Partnerships in Europe*. The Copenhagen Centre. 2000

Plummer, J. *Focusing Partnerships: A Sourcebook for Municipal Capacity Building in Public-Private Partnerships*. Earthscan. 2002.

Sabapathy, J. et al. *Innovation through Partnership*. AccountAbility. 2002.

Tremolet, S. and S. Browning. *The Interface between Regulatory Frameworks and Tri-Sector Partnerships*, BPD Research and Survey Series, April 2002.

Water and Sanitation Program, *New Designs for Water and Sanitation Transactions: Making Private Sector Participation Work for the Poor*. 2002.

End Notes

¹ Formerly known as Business Partners for Development.

² See Caplan et al 2001 for project details and early lessons.

³ See www.bpd-waterandsanitation.org for further findings.

⁴ See Colin and Lockwood for further details on *project* innovations.

⁵ See Tremolet and Browning for further analysis.

⁶ See Caplan et al 2001; Tremolet and Browning; and Water and Sanitation Program for further analysis.

Series Editor: David Jones

Series Production Manager: Tracey Keatman

BPD Water and Sanitation

Prince Consort House, 27-29 Albert Embankment

London SE1 7UB, United Kingdom

info@bpd-waterandsanitation.org

<http://www.bpd-waterandsanitation.org>