

Partnership

Subjects: Sociology

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The widespread use of terms such as ‘collaboration’, ‘partnership’, ‘cooperation’, and more recently expressions such as ‘co-creation’ and ‘co-production’, has led to debates about the expectations of such relationships and calls for more rigorous clarification and classification of these related concepts, which are sometimes used interchangeably. This entry shares some of the attempts that have been made to define and categorize ‘partnership’. It concludes by suggesting that the broad spectrum of personal and organizational interactions and connections within, between, and across different sectors, domains, disciplines, and contexts makes the quest to delineate and categorize these diverse types of collaborative endeavours a seemingly impossible task.

Keywords: Partnership ; Collaboration ; Relationships ; Sustainable Development ; Multi-stakeholder Partnerships

1. Introduction

Although the term ‘partnership’ has a long history, and the use of partnership language in the field of international development dates back at least half a century ^[1], it has become something of a buzzword in recent years. The advance of globalization and the increasingly intertwined nature of complex problems faced by society have given rise to a more widely-accepted conceptualization of partnership as an association that brings together different sectors of society to pool diverse resources, capitalize on synergies, and share risks and benefits in order to accomplish something that any single organization could not do alone ^[2].

2. Conceptualization and categorization

Since the first UN General Assembly resolution “Towards Global Partnerships” in 2000 ^[3], the idea of partnership in an international development context has evolved with the most recent of the biennial UN resolutions ^[4] defining partnership as: “voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both public and non-public, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and, as mutually agreed, to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits” (A/RES/73/254, para. 4).

In parallel, within the field of sustainable development, partnerships were endorsed as a key approach for achieving environmental and developmental change at the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. While initially centered mainly on collaboration between public and private organizations, sustainable development partnerships are now accepted as embracing “a broad alliance of people, governments, civil society and the private sector, all working together to secure the future we want for present and future generations” ^[5].

This evolution is reflected in the use of terms such as ‘multi-actor’, ‘multi-party’ or ‘multi-stakeholder partnerships’ that are situated at the heart of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda ^{[6][7]}. In a related vein, the most recent General Assembly resolution “stresses that partnerships will be critical to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, as an effective instrument for mobilizing additional human and financial resources, expertise, technology and knowledge, while reiterating that partnerships are a complement to, but are not intended as a substitute for, the commitment made by Governments with a view to achieving the Goals” ^[4] (A/RES/73/254, para. 5).

The partnership landscape, however, extends far beyond the fields of international and sustainable development. The broader partnership terrain encompasses a vast array of collaborative relationships across numerous academic disciplines and professions that have many different forms, names, partners, and goals, and operate at global, regional, national, and local levels. In a literature review conducted by Creech and Paas ^[8], for example, the following diverse types of partnerships were identified:

Business Partnerships; Strategic Alliances; Public-private partnerships; Tri-sector or Cross sector partnerships; WSSD ^[9] Multi-stakeholder Partnerships; Mandated partnerships; Enacted Partnerships; Community partnerships; Negotiated partnerships; Local partnerships; Locally led partnerships; Participatory international partnerships; Non-participatory

international partnerships; Nascent partnerships; R&D (research and development) partnerships; Production partnerships; Transactional partnerships; Integrative partnerships (p. 5).

It is not surprising then that both the looseness of the term and the variety of different relationships that are being promoted under the banner of 'partnership' have raised questions about how these relationships might best be understood and categorized ^{[10][2][11][12][13]}.

While there appears to be general consensus on the impossibility of arriving at a concrete universal definition of partnership, useful efforts have been made to distinguish partnerships from looser collaborative forms such as networks and coalitions ^{[14][15][16][17][18]}. Another helpful distinction has been made between statutory or mandated partnerships required by legislation for a specific purpose and more voluntary partnerships among organizations working together for a common strategic purpose ^[19]. Although the terms are widely used interchangeably ^[20], Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) in which public sector agencies contract businesses to provide services or build infrastructure have also been differentiated from more flexible, often non-contractual Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSPs) ^[16]. In addition, it has been noted that cross-sector partnerships such as those involving companies and NGOs cover a wide spectrum from sponsorship and cause-related marketing activities to much more strategic collaboration on sustainability, policy development, and implementation ^{[14][15][21][22]}.

Further attention has been drawn to the fact that while 'partnership' is most often depicted as a structural form or construct, it can also be construed as 'partnering'- a process or way of working cooperatively ^[10]. The European Union's (EU) 'partnership principle', for example, outlines a process of engagement and 'multilevel governance' between different social actors and levels of government that ensures the effective delivery of European Structural and Investment Funds ^[23]. 'Partnership' has also been positioned as a form of 'collaborative' governance in which different actors work together to address societal problems ^{[24][25][26]} and as a paradigm for international development cooperation between North and South ^[27].

Because of the enormous range of forms and shapes that partnerships take, the quest to develop a comprehensive typology of partnerships is a challenging one ^{[8][14]}. Some examples of the diverse typologies that have been put forward include the three types of collaboration identified in the pioneering work of Murphy and Bendell ^[14] on business–NGO partnerships:

- Process-oriented: developing strategies, policies and relationships.
- Project-oriented: focusing on discrete activities linked to core business practices.
- Product-oriented: delivering improvements to products, services and sales.

Selsky and Parker ^[13], meanwhile, propose a typology for cross-sector partnerships that address social issues which outlines four categories of partnerships that are characterized by the actors and sectors involved:

- Non-profit organizations and businesses.
- Governments and businesses.
- Governments and non-profit organizations.
- Actors from all three sectors.

Moving away from a focus on participating organizations, Kelly and Roche ^[28] classify partnerships involving the Australian Council for International Development according to focus areas that include:

- Development partnerships working for more effective development at the local level.
- Partnerships to support civil society development.
- Partnerships which leverage a more effective response to complex change situations.
- Partnerships which add quality to the work of all partners.
- Partnerships and alliances for social change.

In contrast, Tennyson ^[29] presents a partnership typology based on "the choice of partnership structure that is put in place to best support the achievement of particular goals and approaches." (p.3). This categorization includes partnerships that range from policy and consultative arrangements, and multi-stakeholder relationships at different geographical levels, to

partnerships that are temporary and dispersed, and those that focus on learning. A further typology is offered by Austin and Seitanidi [30] who propose a continuum that distinguishes between philanthropic, transactional, integrative and transformational partnerships on the basis of their capacity to create collaborative value

3. Conclusions

While the efforts outlined above provide interesting avenues for exploring partnerships, in addition to their various forms and goals in different contexts, the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of collaborative arrangements makes it impossible to contain them within static categories. Furthermore, these classification exercises focus primarily on organizational and structural relationships and most pay limited attention to the individual, relational and process dimensions that these initiatives involve. As personal relationships and dynamics are central to the organizational connections that form the basis of partnerships, acknowledgement of this aspect has the potential to promote a more inclusive approach to partnerships that, through shifts in individual and organizational behaviors, will enhance their possibilities for achieving systemic change [31][32].

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