

Building cross-sector partnerships

The Partnering Toolbook

Author: Ingrid Hagen< crossingpoint@wanadoo.nl>

Can partnerships between public, business and civil society organisations be more effective than single-sector initiatives in addressing the challenges of sustainable development? For any organisation that decides to venture into cross-sector partnerships,



The Partnering Toolbook is a good place to start.

It is rare to find a set of practical tools that is flexible and yet can add value to any collaborative endeavour. But that is what *The Partnering Toolbook* provides. Cross-sector partnerships can lead to innovative, coherent and integrated approaches to tackle the challenges of sustainable development, and can often succeed where single-sector initiatives have failed.

Many organisations have not yet institutionalised cross-sector partnerships, supported by investments in people and budgets. According to author Ros Tennyson, 'If the world had to wait for non-profits, or any other sector, to be 'ready to partner', the partnership movement would never get off the ground'. For organisations that are ready to take the plunge, the Toolbook offers a good starting point with some reservations.

The partnering process

The Toolbook first presents the rationale for partnering, and describes a 12-phase approach to building successful partnerships. This 'one size fits all' approach is so flexible, however, that it jeopardises its usefulness. For example, 'resourcing' the partnership follows the 'building' and 'planning' phases. Yet for a private sector organisation keen to make a business case, and a cash-strapped NGO, resources are likely to be the first priority. Thus the phases in the process, and their sequence, will depend on the needs of the partners involved.

The three key partnering principles 'equity, transparency and mutual benefit' may be obvious, but perhaps mutual benefit needs to be reconsidered. At times, it may seem unlikely that partners from very different sectors will find common ground, yet it is often the most diverse partners that benefit most. Transparency among the partners is essential, about their agendas and the anticipated benefits, regardless of whether they are the same. Perhaps a more appropriate third principle would be mutual respect.

The process of exploring the potential benefits of cross-sector partnerships can be stimulating for some, but daunting for others. The Toolbook therefore recommends that the partners compile a resource map outlining what each can bring to the partnership. Often the mapping process can suggest new approaches, identify unexpected opportunities, and broaden the view of what is possible.

Partnering skills

The process of building and maintaining a partnership is complex, and will work only if it is supported by individuals with the right skills. It requires a champion, a broker and a donor, as well as a manager with a strategic vision who can persuade and negotiate. The key is self-awareness at the individual, organisational and sector levels, as well as the ability to overcome ingrained perspectives and patterns of decision making. Unfortunately, the Toolbook does not discuss one failing that is common to NGOs and private sector organisations alike ? their unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of partnerships and invest in them.

Any partnering approach, no matter where applied, must be complemented by a clear understanding of the partners and the organisations involved. Partnerships will only take off when the organisations behind them are ready to let go of entrenched views of their roles and responsibilities, and are willing to explore the potential of real cross-sector collaboration.

[Ingrid Hagen](#)

is a consultant based in the Netherlands who promotes and learns from public?private partnerships.

Further reading

R. Tennyson (2004)
[The Partnering Toolkit](#). Partnering Initiative.

R. Tennyson (2006)
[The Case Study Toolkit: Partnership Case Studies as Tools for Change](#). Partnering Initiative.

M. Rein et al. (2005)
[Working Together: A Critical Analysis of Cross-Sector Partnerships in Southern Africa](#).

M. Warner (2003)
[The New Broker: Brokering Partnerships for Development](#). ODI.

M. Warner and R. Sullivan, Eds. (2004)
[Putting Partnerships to Work](#). Greenleaf.

J.M. Witte et al. (2005)
[Business UNusual: Facilitating UN Reform through Partnerships](#). UN/Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi).