

The Essence of Transforming Partnerships: their vital role in system change and innovation and their essential elements

The world is dealing with complex issues for which no easy solution is available, such as climate change and resource scarcity. Multiple actors have to work together in unusual collaboration, aimed at system innovation. A transforming partnership is a successful vehicle for organising this necessary process of cooperation and change.

System change is required

The world is changing. We are dealing with complex issues for which no easy solution is available. Whether it is climate change, terrorism, scarcity of resources, deficits in the health systems, circular economy, new models for the financial sector, unequal distribution of wealth and migration, these are all problems of a complex, boundary- and sector crossing nature. We are talking about wicked problems¹. Wicked problems, in the sense that they require system change, innovation and integral and out-of-the-box thinking. The necessary solutions need to be more than adaptations of the current way we work. We need to change, in respect to the way we cooperate, the way we deal with economics and welfare, the way we use resources and the way we respect each other.

The nature of these wicked problems is such, that there is a natural interdependency between the different elements of the problem. Logically, multiple actors dealing with those different segments and perspectives are involved, who have different interests and cultures. However, they need to work together to find solutions in unusual cooperation. One solution for all doesn't work anymore, contextual and tailor-made solutions are required. This time therefore requires multistakeholder partnerships, focused on innovation and systems change, in which government, NGO's, knowledge institutes and business are involved. This kind of partnership is called a transforming partnership.

What is a transforming partnership?

Both in the world of business, the social domain and the world of development cooperation, the term transforming or transformational partnerships is used².

For example, The United Nations³ say: 'Transformational partnerships are a new form of collaboration between groups of companies and the UN, which catalyse wide-scale positive changes in behaviour creating impact at a systemic level across sectors and geographies.'

The Partnership Brokers Association recently developed a definition of a Transforming Partnership: a partnership that is intentionally created to challenge and change mainstream systems and mind-sets.

I define a transforming partnership as a multi-stakeholder partnership that is suited for and intended towards system innovation, finding ground-breaking solutions for complex problems and dilemma's and aimed at societal change.

The nature of a transforming partnership, aimed at system change, entails that when the process is started, the outcome is not yet clear. Partners may have a vision and purpose at the beginning, but no clear path on how to get there and thus need to have an open mind towards the actual outcome. This means that the process needs to be flexible and open, to be able for the partnership to adapt to new information and knowledge being developed in the course of the process and due to new partners entering the game.

As said, most of the time the partners of a transforming partnership themselves have no clear picture of the necessary processes and steps to move forward. Frequently, the partners are new to this complex process of change and cooperation for the future. Another handicap is that the partners often experience a drawback from the more traditional forces in their sector and within their own organisations.

¹ Wicked Problems were first described by Rittel and Churchman (Wicked Problems. Management Science, 14(4), B-141 and B-142, 1967).

² The word transforming is synonym to the word transformational.

³ United Nations System Private Sector Focal Points Meeting in 2011, exploring what the UN and businesses needed to do differently in order to achieve "transformational partnerships" which will result in scaled and sustainable impact.

A transforming partnership is often about bringing innovation to sectors that are willing to, but maybe not yet completely able to, be innovative and change. Therefore flexibility and open-mindedness to change within the partnership and within each of the partner-organisations is required of each of the partners.

Transforming versus conventional partnership

There are three elements that differentiate a transforming partnership from a conventional partnership: goal, process and attitude. A conventional partnership is often more focused on linear change and innovation in a limited area. In a conventional partnership, the goals of the partnership are often clear from the beginning, and the focus, energy and ideas from the partners are the vital factors determining the speed, progress and result of the partnership. And a conventional partnership gives a more or less save space to partners to guard their own interests. While a transforming partnership is 1) aimed at system change and innovation and 2) in continuous motion and learning curve, without a prefixed outcome 3) requiring partners to develop and change, within the partnership and within their own organisations.

Which specific elements are important in a transforming partnership?

There are many theories and authors that describe relevant elements of a transforming partnership. One could describe a transforming partnership as a huge problem solving commitment between different actors with interests in the same domain. Already in 1996, the 'Both/And' Mind-set for solving problems indicated some important aspects that are also essential to transforming partnerships⁴: collaboration, win-win, everyone has a piece of the truth, shared framework of understanding necessary for mutual creative thinking and interdependence of things.

Horst Rittel, one of the first to formalize a theory of wicked problems⁵, defined ten characteristics of wicked problems. Since transforming partnerships very often deal with wicked problems, these characteristics are also important for a transforming partnership.

And also the Transition Theory, such as studied by research institute Drift, offers valuable lessons for transforming partnerships.

The 10 essential elements of a transforming partnership

Combining my practical experience and studies of a variety of theories, I have identified the following 10 essential elements of a transforming partnership (in no specific order):

1. Transforming Mindset: partners have a mindset ready for changing the status quo and ready to embrace innovation. The partners are willing to play a role as change maker. Partners are also willing to invest in innovation.

2. Process-orientation: the partnership focuses on process in equal amount as on results (the 'path' is important). The partnership values the process and is willing to allocate time and money to the process.

3. Positive societal impact⁶: the partnership is based on a long-term vision that has a positive, sustainable, powerful and lasting effect on people, planet and societal welfare as a whole. The partnership measures its success by the positive contribution to society as a whole. It is not about 'do no harm' but about 'do good'.

4. Diversity: partners involved are not only those directly involved, but also those on who the partnership has (indirect) impact. The partnership reaches out to unusual actors, big and small, and is a true multi-stakeholder partnership. The governance of the partnership should be kept simple, however.

5. Responsibility: the participating partners are willing to take responsibility and action beyond the responsibilities of their own sector and organisation. They are willing and able to take long-term and - if necessary - unpopular decisions.

6. Reflective learning: partners have a reflective approach on their own behaviour and the partnership. Learning is incorporated within the partnership. Partners are willing to be open and vulnerable and grow and learn from each other. Brilliant failures are as important as results.

7. Agility: the partnership is able to quickly adapt to changing circumstances, through flexibility in structure and focus. This is not only a skill of the partnership, but also an essential constitutional element of the partnership. Agility is built into the partnership, in its governance and processes.

⁴ Facilitators Guide for Participatory Decision-Making, page 147, The Community at Work, 1996.

⁵ Wicked Problems: Problems Worth Solving, Jon Kolko, in *Stanford Social Innovation review*, 2012.

⁶ Social impact is often defined as: 'the attribution of an organisation's activities to broader and longer-term outcomes'. In: *Practical Guide to Measuring and Managing Impact*, 2013.

8. Risk & Conflict: the partnership consists of a variety of partners that have different purposes and conflicting interests. This encompasses risks and may lead to conflict. Partners realise this is part of the effort and are willing to overcome struggles. Due to the element of system change, a transforming partnership often operates in a political arena. Partners also realise that there is no innovation without taking risks and stepping into the unknown. No pain, no gain.

9. Transparency: the partnership is willing to share efforts and results, also the brilliant failures and the not-so-brilliant failures. Communicating about the partnership, story-telling and seeking broader engagement are natural elements to the partnership. Even in a situation of political sensitivity, the partnership will try to be as forthcoming as possible.

10. Circular Chaotism: instead of a schematic step-by-step approach moving into different phases of the partnering cycle, the partnership moves in circles around the different phases⁷. Like an onion, always peeling of the next level.

The partnership also deals with a (non-intentional) circular learning and result curve of moving forward, and then moving backwards again, followed by the next move forward, etc.



These 10 elements ensure that the transforming partnership has the necessary focus, flexibility and mind-set for innovation and system change.

The Futureproof Organisation

There are similarities between the 10 elements of a transforming partnership and the 10 elements of a futureproof organisation⁸. A future-proof organization is an organization that is designed in a way that it is able to meet the demands of the future, seizing opportunities that will arise and facing the challenge ahead.

The 10 elements of a futureproof organization are smartness, impact, transparency, network, meaning, smart working, diversity, circularity, glocal and leadership. One may argue that a transforming partnership can be seen as a 'temporary organization for changing the future'. Therefore, there is an overlap in the elements belonging to a transforming partnership and those belonging to a future-proof organization.

The role of the broker in a transforming partnership

It is clear that the broker of the transforming partnership needs to be able to stimulate and work with all the 10 elements of the transforming partnership. This requires an experienced, senior broker, with a broad set of intellectual and interpersonal skills⁹. The most important attitudes of the broker of a transforming partnership are steering -with compassion- and being innovative. The broker also requires an independent, flexible and curious mind-set. The necessary attitudes of a broker of a transforming partnership fit naturally within the profile of an innovator-shaper personality.

Conclusion

Global challenges such as climate change and circular economy are complex issues that require multiple actors to work together to find system changing solutions. A transforming partnership can be a successful vehicle for organising this necessary process of cooperation and change. The vital elements of a transforming partnership are a transforming mind-set, achieving positive societal impact, working with a diversity of partners, taking responsibility, embracing reflective learning, dealing with risk & conflict, a strong process-orientation, coping with circular chaotism, agility as philosophy and embedding transparency. A transforming partnership can operate as a temporary organization for effectively changing the future. And will thus - in this time of change - be an increasingly necessary form of partnership.

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⁷ <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/Partnerships/Private%20Sector/Guide%20to%20Partnership%20Development.pdf>

⁸ '10 elementen van een Futureproof Organisatie', J.D. Baidenmann, 2017.

⁹ Please refer to the article 'The attitudes of the Broker of a Transforming Partnership', J.D. Baidenmann, 2017, for more information on the role of the broker of a transforming partnership.