

Bendell, Jem ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0765-4413> (2017) In the company of revolutionaries: reviving radical innovation 20 years after the contemporary era of cross-sector partnering began. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, 2017 (66). pp. 9-21.

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## **In the Company of Revolutionaries:**

### **Reviving radical innovation 20 years after the contemporary era of cross-sector partnering began.**

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This appears in Issue 66 of the *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* (June 2017). This version is pre copy editing. The official version of this paper can be found at:  
<https://www.greenleaf-publishing.com/journals/journal-of-corporate-citizenship>

#### **Introduction**

The year 2017 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the publication of the first book that announced to scholars the rise of strategic partnerships between businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGO) to address both corporate impacts and contributions to sustainable development. *In the Company of Partners* (Murphy and Bendell, 1997), was also my first book, and written with Dr David Murphy, now the editor of the *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* (JCC). It was because we considered such 'cross-sector partnerships' to provide exciting, though complicated and ethically complex, new routes for advancing sustainable development, that we were inspired to even consider writing a book. Over the following 20 years there has been a profusion of partnering practice and scholarship, on a wide range of social and environmental issues (Seitanidi and Crane, 2014). In that time, David and I evolved our own work to focus on other issues and practices, but maintained an interest in this field of strategic collaboration. Therefore, 20 years on seems an opportune time to share reflections, as I offer in this *Turning Point* and as David does in his *Editorial* to this issue.

Analyses of what has happened over a period of 20 years might typically look at the number, geography, aims, types, performance and criticisms of cross-sector partnerships. There are a number of studies which offer such overviews (Bitzer and Glasbergen 2015; Pedersen and Pedersen 2013; Seitanidi and Crane, 2014). However, what can be missed by such reviews is insight into the values, attitudes and emotions of the practitioners and scholars involved in a subject at any one time. The field of cross-sector partnering has been animated by people concerned with problems like poverty and environmental degradation. In that sense, the field is a 'social movement' (Bendell, 2004; 2009) and our interpretation of it can benefit from a movement perspective. One leader of the 1960s peace movement in the United States, Gregory Calvert, suggested that academic study often misses the emotion and spirit of political action: "Once a great people's movement has become a thing of the past, it is easy to forget or dismiss the spirit which gave it life and provided the inspiration that moved its participants to acts of faith and courage. Like a corpse seen as a 'dead thing,' a political movement can be dissected by historians, sociologists, or political theorists without ever discovering what made it live and breathe, what gave it hope and daring" (Calvert 1991, p. 58).

Calvert's analysis resonates with a field of inquiry that focuses on enabling "reflective practice" by professionals, particularly in public-service professions (Schoen, 1987; Johns, 2002). The campus in the English Lake District where I am based has a century-long tradition of enabling reflective practice, whereby people seek to make new sense of their

lives and gain insights on their practice. Inspired by that, one way I can contribute to analysis on the field of cross-sector partnering is by providing personal reflections on how this field has changed over time. I will start by explaining what it felt like when I began to work on cross sector partnerships 20 years ago, and explore what that approach could mean today. In doing so, I will suggest that the field of practice and scholarship has become conservative, aligned to maintenance of existing power relations which are themselves implicated in the social or environmental problems that cross-sector partners and scholars seek to address. Consequently, I will point to what a more transformative, potentially revolutionary, approach to partnering could involve in future.

## **Sensing Back**

In early 1995, I'd finished my undergraduate dissertation on the WWF 1995 Group, which was a partnership of around 50 companies committed to sourcing all their wood from sources compliant with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) system. In my dissertation I criticised the initiative, but decided to send it to WWF-UK and enclose my CV. They hired me, and I worked on creating a standardised supply chain audit and reporting system for the companies. After that I worked with WWF International to conceive the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). I was enthused by these new approaches, and so quickly wrote the book *In the Company of Partners* with David Murphy, who I had met at WWF conference.

Looking back, I remember that when I first started working on cross-sector partnerships, I did so, and many of the participants did so, because of a combination of personal perspectives that encouraged innovation. First, there was the ethical motivation, as the scale of un-sustainability and its relationship to everyday business had become clear. Second, there was frustration at the lack of progress through governmental and intergovernmental effort, and from traditional forms of campaigning. Third, there was a hope that significant changes could be achieved through new approaches. This was linked to a fourth perspective, which was a sufficient sense of self-efficacy, whereby we believed we could create change ourselves. Fifth, there was a curiosity about trying new approaches and to learn as we went along. Sixth, there was sufficient self-confidence to break some norms about what was expected of an NGO staff member or business person. I say 'some' norms, as many of the norms remained, as I will explain in a moment. Seventh, for some of us with a critical training, aware therefore of fundamental problems with capitalism, there was a perceived pragmatism, of postponing a more radical agenda to seek swift change within the existing system, with the hope we might create contexts for more systemic change. All of these perspectives were reflected or explained in our book (Murphy and Bendell, 1997).

Although I left WWF at the time to begin doctoral studies, I continued to advise and co-create partnerships over the coming years, and used these insights to write two further books on partnering (Bendell 2000; Bendell 2011). Now 20 years on, partnering is an established field of practice and research (Seitanidi and Crane, 2014). As so many NGOs and companies collaborate on projects today, it is difficult to realise how 'wacky' this idea seemed to many 20 years ago. Such development in the spread of an idea and practice is often welcomed as a sign of progress, and that the pioneers were clever or correct. Yet if innovation is what made it interesting before, it does not necessarily make it interesting now. The seven characteristics of partnership innovators that I described above could be summarised as a revolutionary spirit, yet there was not a clear revolutionary strategy or discourse and, over time, that spirit has, in my view, waned as this field of practice and research has been established.

## Seeds of Conservatism

Although innovative at first, the field of cross-sector partnering always had the ingredients for becoming a conservative field of practice and research – given the focus on large organisations and often involving efforts to create new governance bodies. As practitioners in civil society, in the mid-1990s we focused on big business, given their influence through their supply chains and consumer reach, and their apparent vulnerability to brand-bashing campaigns. As business people, or advisers to business, we focused on large NGOs with famous brands, which could help persuade our colleagues, suppliers, customers and others that we were serious about a policy commitment and initiative. Therefore, most of the partnering involved larger organisations which, to use a term from innovation studies, were the “incumbent” organisations. Now I realise that some people working in NGOs, myself included, developed a rather partial view of business, shaped by our engaging public communications professionals from large firms. For instance, corporate communications officers are more likely to speak of collaboration and mutual understanding, rather than disruptive innovation to grab market share from competitors.

The new initiatives we created as novel experiments with a hope of prefiguring a more participative form of international governance also then evolved to become large incumbent organisations. For instance, the two I was involved with, the FSC and MSC, became major multi-million dollar organisations influencing significant market segments. That was the plan, after all. The result of this meeting of large organisations, with their substantial bureaucracies, is that the cross-sector partnering agenda that emerged was a largely conservative one. By which I mean the partnerships were not about fundamentally challenging and transforming the underlying dynamics that might cause the social and environmental problems being addressed. For instance, in my PhD on “ethical trade” I analysed how Western initiatives on ethical trade defined the problem as “over there” in poor practices in supply countries, rather than “over here”, in the buying practices and dominant supply chain position of large western multinationals (Bendell, 2005). When I shared such ideas in papers, speeches, and emails, I was regarded by some NGO staff as an arrogant hurtful radical and not welcomed again to their always-positive community of practice.

Some might argue that work on the “Base of the Pyramid” represents an innovative non-incumbent approach, yet that would fundamentally misread its focus on large multinationals learning from local enterprises to then displace them by serving low-income markets (Bitzer et al, 2015). Some might argue that partnerships focused on micro-finance represent an innovative micro-enterprise focus. I disagree for two reasons. First, they are partnerships involving major incumbents, such as large NGOs and banks, with the intended beneficiaries, not the partners, being micro entrepreneurs. Second, micro finance is an entirely traditional view of money and of development assistance, which evidence shows has failed to deliver any significant economy-wide development outcomes (Bateman, 2010).

By the late Noughties, limitations of market mechanisms for driving change towards achieving the public goals of sustainable development became more apparent. More studies critical of partnerships began to appear, mostly from a political science perspective and focusing on legitimacy issues (Utting and Zammit, 2009). Most of this research was within the field of international development studies, and did not appear to affect the focus within management studies. In recent years, some management studies recommend more work on questions of legitimacy, and how partnerships relate to wider societal governance

(Seitanidi and Crane, 2014). If theorisation on the role of cross-sector collaboration in economic governance does not draw upon critical social theory and political economy, then it might avoid questioning dominant power relations in societies. Such research does not necessarily need to draw from other disciplines, as the critique of 'managerialism' within management and organisation studies provides a helpful context to consider limiting assumptions.

Given a lack of research focused on informing NGOs about who, whether and how to partner with companies, I thought it would help to provide recommendations based on these wider critiques, and so wrote the practitioner-focused book *Evolving Partnerships* (Bendell, 2011). In that book, I mentioned that supporting innovation can be one type of 'third generation partnership' aimed at systemic change, but I still focused on large organisations as the key protagonists. My emphasis on systems-change partnerships in that book was related to the emerging narratives of business leaders about promoting systemic change for sustainability, which I had both analysed and theorised as a potential *Corporate Responsibility Movement* to fundamentally reform capitalism (Bendell, 2009).

What I did not examine in either of those books, nor found in the mainstream management literature or in conversations with partnership practitioners, was the question of whether partners were the most useful actors, or partnerships the most useful arrangements, upon which to base more systems-oriented change efforts. I was not alone in that oversight. In a keyword search of academic articles on cross-sector partnering and innovation, done for this article in 2017, I did not find any analyses of how informal community networks are working with entrepreneurial start-ups to achieve transformative outcomes. To me, this reflects how the agenda of cross-sector partnering is dominated and defined by the practices of large incumbent organisations, pursuing market based mechanisms for change.

Looking back now, I realise I had a lot invested, emotionally and professionally, in the idea that cross sector partnerships could deliver meaningful change, where meaningful meant significant in the context of the scale and urgency of the challenges faced. Was I at risk of becoming 'incumbent'? As specialist academics, are we all at risk of that?

## **Academic Conservatism**

Any area of practice with innovative beginnings can grow and become incumbent, eventually more focused on its own self sustainment as anything meaningful. This process has been chronicled as happening with the 'incorporation' of social movements (Kivisto and Sciortino, 2015) and with 'occupational closure' in the development of professions (Witz, 1990). Similar processes may occur within research communities. That is why, with Eva Collins and Juliet Roper, we warned of an emerging orthodoxy of 'partnerism'. We used the term to describe an emergent "orthodox view, that if managed well, partnerships always result in net positives for participants, communities and wider society. This view sees that drawbacks to collaboration are operational challenges, rather than unavoidable, and that they are outweighed by the merits of collaboration. This orthodoxy may have developed because of a mixture of practitioners' hope for change and their interest in securing funding while ignoring limitations and failures, and many business researchers' mono-disciplinary and instrumental focus" (Bendell, et al, 2010, p353).

Since then I have looked at academia more closely for how it promotes its own forms of intellectual incumbency (Avis, 2016; Enders and de Weert, 2009). We progress through

publishing our research in narrowly defined disciplines. For the top jobs we need to publish in the “top” journals. Even lower-ranked Universities can ape the top ones in their assessment of candidates for academic staff, especially if they are chasing a higher ranking. This process encourages academics to stick to the theories, methodologies and issues that they are already familiar with. If one has a lot of teaching to do, then the opportunities to explore outside one's comfort zone are further limited. Due to this ‘disciplining’ process, typically academics focus on knowing as much as they ought, not as much as they could. Yet if we don’t explore the world broadly, we might unwittingly accept the mainstream assumptions on matters that are not our specialism and thereby perpetuate them in our writing and teaching. For instance, there are major revelations from the natural sciences in the past few decades that completely challenge the mechanistic model of the natural world that pervades our contemporary culture. If we don’t know what quantum physics is suggesting about the underlying connection between everything, or from the latest in evolutionary biology about the influence of individual consciousness and the surrounding environment on genetics, we risk reinforcing a questionable and limiting worldview (Wheatley, 2006). Contrary to the emphasis on specialisation today, I have come to understand that if we aren’t a ‘jack’ of all trades we are a master of none.

The emphasis on specialisation to progress in an academic career does not help us follow our passion over new intellectual horizons. Over the years, as I learned, and as the world changed around me, some of my specialism no longer seemed a relevant way of acting on my commitment to social change. For instance, when I realised business was so powerful and management studies might be a direct way to have influence, I could not focus on international development studies anymore. Yet academic institutions can punish us for moving around disciplines. For instance, it is not so easy to get a job in management studies if you have published mostly in development studies. Seeking to build on prior knowledge is important, as is seeking continuity across the different activities we do. Yet disciplines have become the cages not foundations of this process.

Academic disciplines are inventions, useful illusions for organising knowledge. They become unhelpful when people begin to treat them as real, and they begin to discipline us and restrict us. To regard being advanced in one discipline as to be more useful, more knowledgeable, than someone with a broader reading and experience, is an untenable delusion. It is a delusion maintained by academics and universities for their own status and income, rather than any particular usefulness to society. Because disciplinary tramlines are superimposed on a shifting landscape of experiences and knowledge, they carry our academics away from real-world relevance. Change can happen when we refuse to accept these tramlines, and traverse a wilder landscape of ideas. I'm inspired by polymaths like the Gregory Bateson (1972) who followed their intellectual passions around a wider range of ideas, and discovered new forms of coherence.

I discuss this critique of academia with you here as part of a warning about the establishment of a field focused on cross-sector partnerships, no matter how interdisciplinary it may be. If we have a body of work on these topics, we can become stuck in our focus on them, whether or not studying and teaching it offers the same significance as when we first became involved.

### **Insights Beyond Partnerships**

Integrating doubts or new insights into one's professional work can take time. In my case, 2008 was a personal turning point, but it took 3 years to integrate this into my professional activities. One instigator of this personal 'crisis' was the Western financial crisis, which

meant that I could no longer ignore the deeper questions about the design of capitalism – no longer seriously hold the view that it is something to address at some point in the future. Rather, attempts to shift economic systems at their root was something to more actively consider, pursue and analyse. I began to look more closely at the nature of our monetary systems, learning how banks create our money supply when they issue loans, and the various problems that system causes in economy and society (Bendell and Greco, 2013).

Another experience in 2008 challenged the view that large incumbent firms could drive much change after all. At the end of 2007 WWF-UK released a report I conceived and co-authored, called *Deeper Luxury*, on the social and environmental performance of the large firms that own the world's most famous luxury brands (Bendell and Kleanthous, 2007). The report was constructive, but did not avoid criticism. Most of the brands reacted defensively, and despite a lot of expressions of concern, embarked on extremely cautious and piecemeal programmes of engagement with consultants and NGOs. Like many who worked in partnerships, I had always argued for the ongoing role of NGOs as watchdogs, but once again I was witnessing first-hand the difficulty of a large NGO in playing that role, and how business reaction can be very cautious and ineffective. Yet this time there was a twist. During 2008 I was approached by lots of entrepreneurs, who had read the report and expressed enthusiasm about this overarching narrative and vision, as it connected with their own vision for luxury and what they were trying to achieve with their own small firms. One entrepreneur, Kresse Wesling, said the report inspired her to start her company up-cycling waste fire-hose into high end accessories. Her company Elvis and Kresse is growing fast and has won many awards as a luxury brand, not just an environmentally preferable one. This led me to focus on the processes of 'disruptive innovation' and develop a theory of 'elegant disruption' on how aspirations are key for many innovations to scale and challenge incumbent firms (Bendell and Thomas, 2013).

Putting these two very different things together, I began to wonder how an entrepreneurial approach might drive change in, or provide alternatives to, our monetary systems. These were two very new areas for me, and so I needed time to learn about them. Fortunately, at the time I did not have a full-time academic role and my consulting work was intermittent, so I 'outsourced myself' to India in late 2009 and created a pop-up social activist hub in Auroville with monetary activist and community currency innovator Matthew Slater. There I learned more about monetary systems, currency innovations, and the mechanisms of disruptive innovation. It took two years before I felt comfortable with emerging professionally on this agenda, when I gave a TEDx speech on The Money Myth at an event organised by the European Broadcasting Union. I then helped produce a United Nations event on the topic, and published a paper with them on the role of complementary currencies in development (Bendell et al, 2015). I had finally traversed a professional tramline. Since Bitcoin became famous in 2013, and the UK campaign Positive Money has gained momentum, more people now understand that money and currency is a relevant topic for debate and design, and so my work on this is considered less bizarre than it was prior to 2013.

### **Radical Partnering?**

To bridge my new focus with previous work, in the introduction to my latest book *Healing Capitalism*, I explore the case for why business leaders who are concerned about sustainable development could support fundamental monetary reform, and experiment with alternative currency systems (Bendell and Doyle, 2014). What might this mean for cross sector partnering? To explore that, I would like to return to the spirit of partnering in

the mid-1990s, when it was a strange an idea as working on complementary currencies is today. In so doing, we should recognise that most current partnering is conservative, and that even if promoting innovation, is still focused on incumbent large organisations, rather than start-ups and community networks. We should also recognise that there could be some incumbency in the research community on partnering that a spirit of mid-90s partnering would imply we break free from.

One dimension of that incumbency is an assumption about what is a matter of “sustainability” and “sustainable development” which also reflects those topics that most partnership academics feel comfortable in exploring. To be specific, a focus on monetary systems is not something many would explore. Therefore, one aspect of the spirit of early partnering that needs rethinking is the 7<sup>th</sup> perspective I described in opening this paper – the view we can usefully postpone more critical economic agendas. That was done due to a belief in pragmatism, yet today that same pragmatism need not involve postponing a radical agenda, but instead accepting that radical change may need to be sought in ways that are neither perfect nor predictable. The ambition of both practitioner and scholars can be widened. In a recent review of the espoused or implicit public goals of partnerships and those that study them, all appear to exist within paradigm of adding better outcomes to existing systems, rather than transforming existing power relations (Seitanidi and Crane, 2014).

One dimension of incumbency is a very limited focus or understanding of innovation, especially that which would disrupt incumbent businesses or NGOs. From the business management perspective, there is now more scholarship on the role of cross-sector partnering in innovation processes (Mirvisa et al, 2016). However, a review of that field does not reveal a focus on disruptive innovations (Bitzer et al, 2015). Moreover, the limited amount of research directed at informed NGO management of corporate relations has not considered disruptive innovation (Al-Tabbaa et al, 2014). Therefore, to conclude this reflection on the last 20 years for this 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, I want to argue for practitioners to experiment with a new wave of revolutionary cross-sector alliances.

With a mid-90s spirit of partnering, these partnership ideas will be creative and experimental attempts to create major social change, and reject the dominant norms of what is expected of business, social activists and academia. As an action researcher, I see a role for academics in instigating such creative discussions and helping practitioners to experiment, rather than being neutral observers (Reason and Bradbury, 2000). Therefore, I will share one idea that I have been working on that illustrates a new approach.

The context is the current mainstream monetary system, where the role of banks in providing our money as interest-bearing debt militates against social and environmental progress (Bendell and Greco, 2013). This situation also leads to a lack of money and credit in many communities. One means of addressing this problem is to create local currencies that do not need to be bought with national currency. The successes of complementary currencies are now beginning to receive analytical attention (Ruddick et al, 2015). Some of these currencies are based on common platforms. Founded over ten years ago, today Community Exchange Systems (CES) is the largest community currency network, involving over 50,000 participants in several hundred community groups distributed across 5 continents. There are many others, such as [www.communityforge.net](http://www.communityforge.net) and most of them have developed their systems without funding (Slater and Jenkin, 2016).

These local currency initiatives are still very small projects and their ability to scale is restricted by using physical notes or websites, so they lack means of quick payment at



point-of-sale. In addition, their attractiveness is restricted by an inability to spend an alternative currency outside a specific geographical region or community of interest. This presents opportunities for scaling impact by connecting the local currency communities with the start-up entrepreneurs in payments technology and crypto-currency innovation. Many of the local currency initiatives are informal and not incorporated as NGOs. Many of the start-up companies in the financial technology and crypto-currency field are staffed by a handful of young entrepreneurs and are not typically engaged with academics. It is rare that local community currency activists and financial technology startups have reason to meet and discuss – their worlds are often far apart.

The project Matthew Slater and I are developing would bring them together in new alliances. It is to scale up and connect existing local currencies with what we call a platform for the 'credit commons' (Slater and Jenkin, 2016). This will enable the software of thousands of existing local currency projects worldwide to become interoperable with a new accounting layer and cutting edge blockchain technology. With this project, individuals, enterprises and NGOs that use local currencies could give and receive credit with those participating in similar systems elsewhere, thus enabling greater exchange. The new infrastructure will provide environmental sustainability or social economy business communities with new opportunities to produce and exchange, and therefore also increase the attractiveness and uptake of the local currencies. Growing local currencies in this way would provide some insulation from future financial shocks and offer one route to transcend the current unsustainable monetary system. The potential partners in the financial technology space are the entrepreneurs in alternative payments infrastructures, such as Ripple Labs and Stellar. There are already examples of such firms exploring their social impact, such as Stellar in South Africa (Simonite, 2015).

Does this sound a strange? The Marine Stewardship Council sounded strange to many people when I helped to propose it in 1996. Innovators don't spend time convincing everyone in order to be accepted as 'normal', but work with key allies to manifest their visions.

## **Conclusion**

20 years after I started my career in social and environmental change by working on cross-sector change, I advocate that those of us interested in this practice move beyond a focus on incumbent organisations, to catalyse and analyse partnerships between those that are not large, not established, and who can pursue a truly radical agenda to transform capitalism and governance. Although I still think existing partnerships can and should evolve to be more systemic and we can research their efforts usefully (Bendell, 2011), the spirit of the mid-90s would suggest a very different approach today. A revolution in the domain of partnering, where different types of actors collaborate on projects that could radically transform today's form of capitalism, would constitute a true partnership revolution, for both practice and research.

Twenty years ago, those of us working on sustainable development began to ask if we could be 'in the company of partners'. Today we can look again at our partners and ask if we could be 'in the company of revolutionaries.'

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