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Beyond Partnerism: Toward a More Expansive Research Agenda on Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration for Responsible Business

Jem Bendell, Eva Collins and Juliet Roper

Abstract

The paper sets the context for the special issue on 'Collaborative engagement for sustainability in the Asia-Pacific region'. The relevance and risks of cross-sectoral strategic alliances for sustainable development vary greatly across the region. Potential alliances face unique hurdles given different public challenges, political systems, types of development, forms of civil society and cultural traditions. The four papers in the special issue highlight some key issues that have not been well explored in the current literature, such as the role of collaboration in state-centric societies, the applicability of a tri-sectoral model (of state, business and civil society) in places where ownership and accountability are more complex, and the business rationale for partnering when there is limited consumer, media or civil society demand for voluntary action. In this special edition the papers bring further light to some of these debates.

Keywords

partnerism; multi-stakeholder collaboration; responsible business; cross-sectoral strategic alliances; Asia-Pacific

The formation of strategic alliances between companies for mutual commercial benefit is a widely used approach by contemporary business (Mowery et al., 1996). The development of such alliances with non-commercial organizations, such as government agencies and voluntary associations, to deliver social and environmental outcomes, is a more recent phenomenon (Bendell, 2000; Sinh, 2002). In the past decade such cross-sectoral strategic alliances have become more widespread as mechanisms for achieving corporate sustainability and responsibility (Seitanidi, 2010). By bringing together their respective competencies and resources for the greater good, people in governments, business, civil society and multilateral agencies have sought innovative ways to respond to many contemporary sustainable development challenges: climate change; human security; the prevention and treatment of major diseases; ethics, governance and responsible investment; entrepreneurship and employment; pension and superannuation fund management; and sustainable financing for development (Waddell, 2005).

In the English-speaking world these 'multi-stakeholder' or 'cross-sectoral' alliances and partnerships are receiving growing political support, illustrated by the Secretary of State's Office of Global Partnerships being established by the United States Government in 2009. Similarly, the British government that took power in 2010 announced the role of civil society and business collaborating on public issues as a key part of its agenda. Globally, the appetite for such stakeholder engagement appears strong; over 90% of corporate executives responding to a World Economic Forum survey felt that in future 'partnerships between business, government, and civil society would play either a major role or some role in addressing key development challenges' (World Economic Forum, 2005).

Given this expansion in unusual collaboration, since the first books on the topic in the mid-1990s (Murphy and Bendell, 1997), a swathe of academic literature has emerged in a number of

disciplines, including management studies, political science and international development studies (Selsky and Parker, 2005). Some attempts to synthesize this literature have identified three broad categories or levels of analysis: whether the research considers mostly organizational implications, issue implications or governance implications. First is a functional organizational perspective, sometimes called the 'resource dependence' (Selsky and Parker, 2005) or 'actor' (Glasbergen et al., 2007) perspective, that examines the processes, benefits and challenges facing the participants in collaborative initiatives. Much of the research within management studies has focused on these instrumental benefits to participants, although many recognize that a key dimension to professional interest in partnering is their potential societal benefit (Seitanidi, 2010). A second grouping focuses more on the efficacy of multi-stakeholder alliances in achieving progress on specific public issues, such as environmental protection or advancing nutrition. Here there is more contribution from international development studies, voluntary sector studies and political science (Warner and Sullivan, 2004). The third focus area for research has been on the broader questions of governance and the role and operation of new institutional forms created by multi-stakeholder alliances (see, e.g., Glasbergen et al., 2007; Bendell, 2000). This third area of research has not yet been addressed well within management studies, perhaps given the paucity of attention to political philosophy within mainstream management literature (Coen et al., 2010). These three levels of analysis are the equivalent of viewing the challenge from an office, a tower and a hill. At the office level, operational matters are key. From the tower, one looks at how alliances are delivering on a particular collective challenge. From the hill, one can see various alliances in context and reflect on the lie of the land and what is on the horizon if these new arrangements become more widespread. Much less frequently, some manage an integration of perspectives through edited collections that bring together all three levels of analysis, making connections between political philosophical issues such as principles of democratic governance, immediate concerns with practical impacts on intended beneficiaries, and the mechanisms for effective management at the operational level (see, for example, Bendell, 2000).

Although taking different approaches, this body of research is now said to be establishing a partnership paradigm (Glasbergen, 2007). As such, the practice of multi-stakeholder, inter-organizational partnership is moving from a methodology to an ideology – towards 'partnerism'. We define partnerism as an 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. The earliest work on these topics placed multi-stakeholder alliances in the context of public policy agendas, such as sustainable development, and then processes for democratizing the firm (Murphy and Bendell, 1999). However, political philosophy has been difficult to integrate into mainstream management literature and the subsequent literature on collaboration has not often explored these dimensions, or 'the view from the hill'. It is only in recent years that management studies is finding space for discussions of more political theories of the firm, with increasing input from political science (Coen et al., 2010).

There are many challenges in the collaboration space to be aware of, and which question a partnerism paradigm. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN agencies are concerned that participation in consultations and alliances with business could threaten their integrity and

independence. Some business managers fear that too much time and money spent on stakeholder dialogue and alliances with not-for-profit organizations might divert them from their ultimate aim of producing goods and services as profit making enterprises in order to benefit their owners and workers. Governments often raise important questions about the legitimacy, governance and accountability of cross-sector alliances, particularly those that exclude or undermine public sector interests. As strategic alliances have become more widely used mechanisms for policy development and implementation, these questions about their effectiveness and accountability become more important. The existence of partnerism calls for a new approach from the research community, to ensure that its questions and conclusions lead to good education and advice. The hallmarks of a re-invigorated agenda on partnership could include it being interdisciplinary, particularly drawing insights from political science and international development studies into management research; integrative, particularly relating the organizational, issue and governance levels of focus into single inquiries; action oriented, so that research responds to the real time issues that are arising due to multi-stakeholder engagement, critical; so that research does not repeat popular assumptions about partnership, but interrogates them, analyses the development of discourses in this field; and asks new and difficult questions, and multi-cultural, exploring these themes in new places and contexts with open eyes, rather than relating new research to existing orthodoxies. Currently, the partnership paradigm is rather dominated by Caucasians. For instance, as with your authors, 14 of the 16 contributors to the most comprehensive recent compilation on this topic were Caucasian, and most of the cases presented within it were Western (Glasbergen et al., 2007).

In this special issue we make some small steps towards a more expansive agenda for research on multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnership. To begin with, we called for research from the world's most culturally, politically and economically diverse region – the Asia-Pacific. Not a continent but a broad region, made popular in recent decades due to increasing economic and political ties, it is the area of the world in or near the Western Pacific Ocean. It includes much of East Asia, Southeast Asia, Australasia and Oceania. Some include the countries of South Asia as well, although not on the Pacific Ocean, and we have used this broader definition. ¹ This region is highly important due to its large population, rich resources, diverse cultures, rapid pace of change with economic development and growing role in the world as a whole (IMF, 2006). It is important, therefore, to bring experiences from this region to the international academia, and relate discussions about it within that academia back to researchers and practitioners across the region.

It was with this in mind that the Asia Pacific Academy of Business in Society (APABIS) was founded. Modelled after its European counterpart, the European Academy of Business in Society (EABIS), APABIS provides a platform for business, NGOs, government departments, academia and other organizations to work innovatively and collaboratively toward the understanding and establishment of mutually sustainable relationships between business and the communities of the Asia-Pacific region. In 2009, APABIS organized a conference on the topic of this special issue, with Griffith Business School's Asia-Pacific Centre for Sustainable Enterprise (APCSE), which resulted in this publication.

In recent years there has been an upswing in published research from the Asia-Pacific region in academic management journals on corporate responsibility, business ethics and environmental management (Bendell et al., 2009; Collins et al., in press; Welford, 2005; Sriramesh et al., 2007). Yet it was our reading that there was limited insight being shared from and on the region on matters of

collaboration and partnership. As conference organizers, we sensed that the relevance and risks of cross-sectoral strategic alliances for sustainable development would

vary greatly across the region, and face unique challenges, given different public challenges, political systems, types of development, forms of civil society and cultural traditions. The discussions at the conference highlighted some key issues that have not been well explored in the current literature, such as the role of collaboration in state-centric societies, the applicability of a tri-sectoral model (of state, business and civil society) in places where ownership and accountability are more complex and the business rationale for partnering when there is limited consumer, media or civil society demand for voluntary action. In this special edition the papers bring further light to some of these debates.

One of the arguments for business leaders to engage with their stakeholders is that it enables them to develop products or services more suited to particular markets, and to receive positive reputational benefits for the superior social or environmental qualities of products or services and the company providing them. In 'Consumer driven corporate environmentalism: fact or fiction?' Sukhbir Sandhu, Lucie Ozanne, Clive Smallman and Ross Cullen explore this assumption in depth in India and New Zealand. Their analysis suggests that, despite the growth and interest in green consumerism, it has not yet matured to the stage where it is viewed by managers as driving corporate environmentalism. One implication of this finding is that, in some parts of the world, voluntary corporate responsibility and stakeholder engagement may be less about responding to societal pressures, and more about the growing awareness of management leading to some taking the lead on the social and environmental performance of their enterprise. As such, managers can be understood less as responding to a corporate accountability movement (Bendell, 2004; Broad and Cavanagh, 1999), and more as partaking in a corporate responsibility movement, where they seek to transform their own business and enterprise more broadly, due to their values and identity (Bendell, 2009). One implication is that such business people may seek to increase the level of consumer awareness in order to provide incentives for further transforming their business. In this sense stakeholder engagement could be seen as a mechanism for transforming society's demands of business, rather than placating them (Levy, 1997; Roper, 2005).

One of the assumptions of much literature and practice in multi-stakeholder collaboration is the existence of three sectors – business, government and civil society – which each have particular interests and competencies that make cross-sectoral engagement of relevance to each. One of the major changes in the world economy in recent years has been the growing size and reach of state owned enterprises and sovereign wealth funds from Asia (van Agtmael, 2007), which cannot be assumed to be either private or public, as they have a mix of interests. Their relation to civil society is not simply direct, but also through the state, and influenced by the government views on civil society legitimacy. In 'Exploring the potential benefits of Asian participation in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative: the case of China', Liliane Mouan looks at a case of how Chinese state-owned enterprises relate to one important global multi-stakeholder initiative, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). It finds that the EITI might be of limited value for China and its Asian peers, because it faces general problems about legitimacy in non-Western circles as do most Western-led multi-stakeholder partnerships, and also because the principles that it promotes are not aligned with China's culture, philosophy and business interests. The paper concludes with suggestions on how a stronger 'business case' for China's participation can be made. This highlights

how a more expansive agenda for research can investigate how to relate the product of the last decades of cross-sectoral engagement in the West to other increasingly important actors in the global economy.

Much of the literature on multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnerships looks at large corporations (Yaziji and Doh, 2010). This may be a result of the choice of researchers, or because large corporations have previously experienced more pressure to partner, and had more human and financial resources to do so. However, a more expansive research agenda must bring into focus the experiences of collaboration by small and medium size enterprises (SMEs). In 'Innovation, sustainability and regional development: the Nelson/Marlborough seafood cluster, New Zealand', Kathryn Pavlovich and Michèle Akoorie look at how multi-sector partnerships amongst SMEs have assisted in increasing the sustainability of the New Zealand fishery industry. An important aspect of this paper is that they focus on how the collaborations have helped innovation in the industry's core practices in ways that impact on sustainability. Using qualitative methods, they report significant success. A focus on innovation will be increasingly important for future research if collaboration is to be explored less in terms of reputational defence, and more in terms of proactive engagement to find solutions to common problems.

We consider the fourth paper in our special issue to be important for its exploration of how collaboration can be moved to the heart of corporate strategy, and assessed in this regard. Such integration is important if stakeholder engagement is to play a useful role in transforming the future of enterprise. In 'Managing strategic alliances through a community-enabled Balanced Scorecard: the case of Merck Ltd., Thailand', Erik Hansen, Martin Sextl and Ralf Reichwald note that often corporate community involvement (CCI) remains separate from corporate strategy, and that innovations in basic business tools, such as the Balanced Scorecard, are needed to mainstream forms of stakeholder engagement. Through careful analysis of an in-depth case study, the authors conclude that top managers must relate the goals of strategic alliances with the strategy of the firm. They make the case for integration of conventional (economic) goals and CCI initiatives by focusing on the most important goals and indicators of CCI and how they are linked to other goals and indicators.

Together these papers help challenge some assumptions about the identity of stakeholders and sectors and the relative influence of consumers in shaping engagement, encouraging us to explore the implications. They show that some businesses are proactively engaging in order to innovate, and demonstrate an ability to lead in the absence of consumer demand. Much of stakeholder theory has assumed a somewhat reactionary and defensive standpoint from the company, yet a new proactive agenda is hinted at by these papers; an agenda where business people seek to lead a transformation of business, as part of a 'corporate responsibility movement' as alluded to above. This new agenda will give rise to new questions about how to engage stakeholders effectively in addressing collective problems and/or discovering new business models, and the ethics associated with such leadership on matters of public interest. To provide useful and balanced insights, as researchers we shall need to hike up and down between the metaphorical office, tower and hill, to develop and ultimately operationalize a more expansive agenda on multi-stakeholder engagement that moves us beyond the orthodoxies of partnership.

Notes

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Sometimes the term Asia-Pacific also includes Russia (on the North Pacific) and those countries in North and South America that are on the coast of the Eastern Pacific Ocean. We did not use this broader definition for our special issue.

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