



Third Sector Research Centre

Working Paper 126

**Third sector partnerships and capability building:
What the evidence tells us**

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Abstract

This report draws on findings from the evidence and learning reviews of the Building Capabilities research conducted by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) at the University of Birmingham in partnership with the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. The report focuses solely on building capabilities in partnerships involving third sector organisations.

Cross-sector partnerships are often set up to tackle social issues deemed too complex for any single organisation to solve. These partnerships take a variety of forms, and there is some evidence to show that they can improve outcomes for end users. Cross-sector partnership working faces numerous challenges, such as stereotypes, assumptions, and rhetoric. Partnerships are time-consuming and resource-intensive, and need access to various resources and support if they are to succeed, including: time, people with suitable experience, trust, and support in evidencing value for end users. Partnership literature, such as 'toolkits', offers some useful guidance, but can be too simplistic. Cross-sector partnerships are highly situated and contextual, so resources and support need to be tailor-made.

There is little specific mention in the literature of the need for, or ways of, building the capabilities of partnerships. However, there is some discussion of building capacity: of individuals, organisations, and partnerships as a whole. Without sufficient capacity across each of these three strands, partnerships cannot function, let alone build capabilities. However, it has been suggested that 'capacity' is neither a neutral nor an inclusive term as it is imposed by funders and so doesn't recognise forms of capacity built at community level such as informal economies or strong but invisible networks. As a result, capacity-building initiatives or activities can serve to increase the power imbalances in society by, for example, privileging professionalised organisations while overlooking the key role of smaller groups. Also, in these austere times, it is likely that partnerships in need of support to build capacity and capabilities will crumble and fail, while partnerships that already have capacity and capabilities will gain resources. And so inequality is perpetuated.

Keywords

Cross-sector partnership; Voluntary sector; Building Capabilities; Big Lottery Fund; Capacity building

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Summary

The key question for this study, 'What works in building front-line voluntary organisations' and partnerships' capabilities to deliver outcomes to end users more effectively and sustainably?' cannot be clearly answered from the partnership literature alone. The response from the third sector partnerships literature could be summarised as, 'The answer will be different in every context as it depends on a range of complex and changing factors such as organisational priorities, interpersonal relationships, and available resources.' However, what the partnership literature does is to unpack and outline those factors, and provide some broad overarching guidance about how they might begin to be addressed in each individual context. Much of this could apply to any type of partnership, but due to the high levels of complexity within cross-sector partnerships and the environments in which they operate, these partnerships often need more support than other types of partnership.

Most of the individual hypotheses which underpin the Building Capabilities study questions are not addressed, or rarely addressed, within the partnership literature. For instance, we found no examples of relevance to questions of choice in a market or choice leading to better outcomes. We found more evidence relating to the role of infrastructure bodies in providing capability building support, and concerning factors critical to sustainably embedding skills and confidence in partnerships. This indicates that partnerships may have a role to play in third sector infrastructure, and that there is scope for embedding skills and confidence in such partnerships – i.e. building their capabilities.

There is little specific mention in the literature of the need for, or ways of, building the capabilities of partnerships as such. However, there is some discussion of building capacity: of **individuals**, **organisations**, and **partnerships as a whole**. Without sufficient capacity across each of these three strands, partnerships cannot function, let alone build capabilities. Capacity-building requires a minimum level of financial, human, and skill resources (Netto et al, 2012: 254). There is some recent evidence that working to build the capacity of partnerships is effective in developing leadership, organisations, and projects, in engaging communities, and in improving financial sustainability through diversifying funding sources and developing donor relationships (Minzner et al, 2013: 11). However, the evidence that exists is highly specific to the individual situations and contexts of the partnerships concerned.

In terms of **individuals**, partnerships are likely to need to provide intensive and ongoing support for any representatives of public groups or end users such as patients, service users, carers, or residents, who are involved in the partnership, to help them perform their roles effectively (Foden and Pearson, 2010: 7). Support could include: training in relevant practical skills; payment of fees and expenses; provision of laptop/tablet/smartphone and internet/telecomms service; buddying or mentoring support from a professional colleague.

Building the capacity of **organisations** may also, in effect, mean building the capacity of individual staff and volunteers, rather than creating strategic organisational change (CEEDR/TSRC, 2009: 27). Capacity building in front-line organisations (FLOs) is 'a prerequisite for full VCS participation and parity of

partnership' (Russell, 2005: ii). While any size of organisation may need support, smaller FLOs are likely to need more support than larger organisations to participate fully in cross-sector partnerships (Osborne et al, 2012: 39, Rees, 2014: 54).

In terms of **partnerships as a whole**, one suggestion for building capacity is to take a more innovative and inclusive approach to partnership by involving people who might not traditionally have been involved. This is described as a move away from the current imperative to 'do more with less' and instead find ways to 'do more with more' (Hambleton and Howard, 2012: 3). This has proved effective in cities in England and the Netherlands, but requires political will and inspirational leadership (ibid: 4). Research from the UK and beyond also shows that, if capability exists and is built on, it is possible to develop innovative ways of linking Government, the third sector, and communities (Brinkerhoff, 1999: 59, Mohanty, 2011: 51, CLES/nef, 2013: 9).

However, it has been suggested that 'capacity' is neither a neutral nor an inclusive term as it is imposed by Government or other funders and so doesn't recognise forms of capacity built at community level such as informal economies or strong but invisible networks. As a result, capacity-building initiatives or activities can serve to increase the power imbalances in society by, for example, privileging professionalised organisations and groups while overlooking the key role of BME organisations (Netto et al, 2012: 246).

1. Introduction

The Big Lottery Fund's Building Capabilities for Impact and Legacy initiative (Building Capabilities) has been in development since the start of the decade. It signals a significant step-change in the way in which 'support' for frontline voluntary organisations (FLOs) is organised. It involves moving away from a generic, supply side approach to funding capacity in general towards a demand side approach with a specific focus on skills, knowledge and confidence – described here as 'capabilities'.

In order to inform the future development of its Building Capabilities approach, The Fund commissioned a scoping study from a team led by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) at the University of Birmingham, in partnership with the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University.

The aim of the study was to review existing evidence to address three questions:

1. What works in building FLOs' and partnerships' capabilities to deliver outcomes (verifiably) to end-users more effectively and sustainably?
2. What are the requirements for, and potential of, a marketised approach for capability-building, including an understanding of the shape of the emerging market, and potential gaps in provision including those for smaller, rural and other specialist groups?
3. What lessons can be distilled for the Big Lottery Fund, other funders, policy makers and market participants, from these new understandings?

Underneath these three questions, the study involved considering nine hypotheses. Details of these can be found in the main study report (see back page for details).

The research involved three key elements:

Evidence review	Market review	Learning review
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A rapid evidence assessment of published and grey literature, including over 200 documents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Secondary analysis of the 2010 National Survey of Charities and Social Enterprises and primary analysis of an online survey of 188 support providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A series of participatory workshops consisting of funders, providers and researchers.

This report focuses solely on the **evidence concerning Building Capabilities in partnerships involving third sector organisations, particularly cross-sector partnerships**. Details of the main study report can be found at the end of this document.

2. Background

2.1 The emergence and nature of cross-sector partnerships

Partnership working in the UK, and particularly cross-sector partnerships, gained a higher profile under the Conservative Government in the early and mid-1990s, and expanded rapidly under New Labour's 'modernisation agenda' from the late 1990s (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2002: 252). Partnerships were created at central Government level, local Government level, and at operational level involving service users through mechanisms such as Area Child Protection Committees and the New Deal for Communities programme. By the beginning of the 21st century, partnerships between the public and third sectors were being described as 'a commonplace part of institutional life' (Huxham and Vangen, 2000: 772), and commentators were acknowledging that the third sector had a role to play in delivering public services (Kendall, 2005:36).

The aim was often to tackle intractable so-called 'wicked issues', such as health inequalities and urban deprivation, which were deemed too complex for any single organisation to solve (Geddes, 2006: 7; Douglas, 2009: 16; Vangen and Huxham, 2012: 734). To begin with, partnerships brought individual organisations together, but New Labour initiatives soon began to create partnerships involving other partnerships. For example, Quality Protects, a partnership intended to improve the effectiveness of children's social services which ran from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, involved other partnerships including Youth Offending Teams, Health Action Zones, Community Safety Partnerships and Sure Start partnerships. This added extra layers of complexity and congestion to an already complex picture. Also, the Government's approach to partnerships with FLOs was inconsistent, and their view of partnership was one-sided, effectively assuming that everyone had the same agenda which was also the same as the Government's agenda (Wyatt, 2002: 177).

Cross-sector partnerships take a variety of forms. Broadly, these include:

- *Public-private sector partnerships*, such as the Private Finance Initiative (Shaoul et al, 2007: 480)
- *Private-third sector partnerships*, such as those set up by Pilotlight, a charity whose mission is to match 'skilled business leaders' with FLOs throughout the UK to provide mentoring and coaching (<http://www.pilotlight.org.uk/pilotlight>)
- *Public-third sector partnerships*, often area-based, such as Sure Start/children's centres for early years (Tickell, 2013: 25), and New Deal for Communities for regeneration (Beatty et al, 2010: 246)
- *Private-public-third sector partnerships*, such as Local Strategic Partnerships (DETR, 2001: 12).

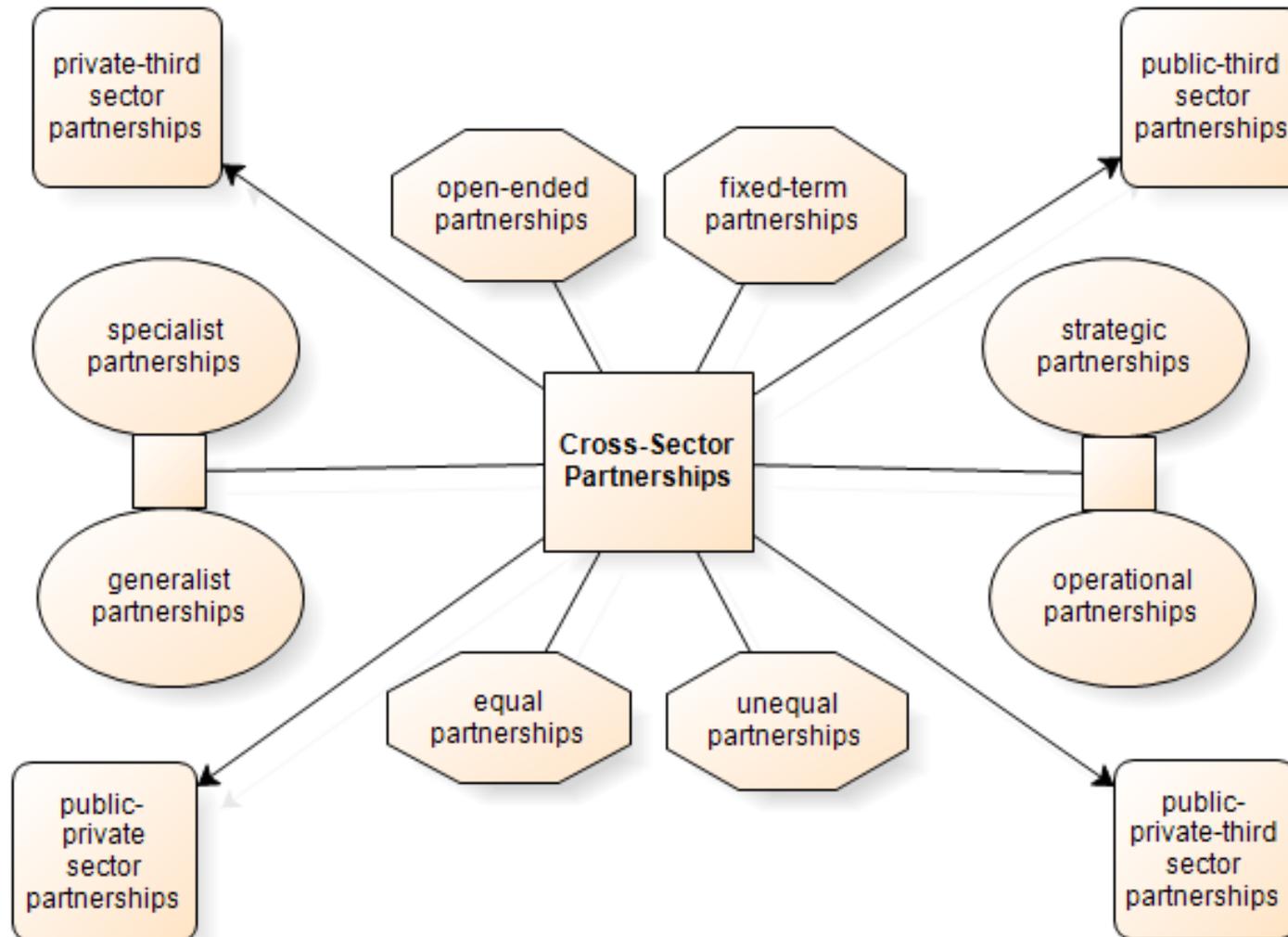
It is also possible to differentiate between:

- *Specialist* partnerships, intended to address a particular issue, such as Youth Offending Teams, and *generalist* partnerships, intended to address a range of issues, such as Local Strategic Partnerships
- *Strategic* partnerships, intended to prioritise and co-ordinate, such as Local Strategic Partnerships, and *operational* partnerships, intended to deliver services, such as children's centres
- *Open-ended* partnerships which can operate for as long as they choose, and *fixed-term* partnerships, which are often focused on a specific task
- *Equal* partnerships, where all partners have the same access to power and resources, and *unequal* partnerships, where this is not the case, perhaps because one partner acts as lead and/or holds the purse-strings.

While all of these partnerships will include people from different fields and sectors, the highest levels of complexity are likely to be found in generalist partnerships which include people from all sectors and a wide range of fields.

There are also intra-sectoral partnerships, i.e. partnerships between organisations in the same sector. In the third sector in the UK, this is a fairly recent phenomenon, so there is little about it as yet in the literature. One example known to the researchers is Sheffield FUSE, a partnership of third sector infrastructure organisations in Yorkshire which was formed in 2011 in response to TLI funding. However, most third sector organisations that are involved in partnerships are in cross-sector partnerships.

Figure 1: Cross sector partnerships in diagrammatic form



2.2 Benefits of cross-sector partnerships

The academic literature, and much of the grey literature too, is more inclined to critique partnership working and review the challenges faced by cross-sector partnerships than to identify potential or actual benefits. In particular, there is little evidence to show that working in partnership will improve outcomes for end users (Russell, 2005: ii, Dickinson, 2010:1, Perkins et al, 2010: 101). However, this is partly because gathering such evidence would be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Also, there are a few exceptions. For example, research from Northern Ireland suggests that cross-sector partnerships enabled partners to learn, developing knowledge from information and understanding from knowledge, such that they could act on that learning to, for example, do their jobs better, make things happen, help organisations meet goals, and develop more co-ordinated responses to problems (Boydell et al, 2008: 216). A key finding from this research was that changes in the working practices of individual or organisational partners as a result of this learning go far beyond the remit of the partnership, and so may not be seen as a partnership outcome (Huxham, 2003: 421, Boydell et al, 2008: 217). It has been argued that knowledge is the most valuable commodity that partnerships have (Douglas, 2009: 81). English research demonstrated that the New Deal for Communities partnerships led to significant improvement on 26 of 31 indicators over a six-year period from 2002 to 2008 (Beatty et al, 2010: 238). Other research from England showed that cross-sector partnerships in social care and health were better able to reach target participants and could involve more participants with different needs (CLES/nef, 2013: 49).

3. Challenges of cross-sector partnership working

3.1 Stereotypes, assumptions, and rhetoric

Stereotypes, assumptions, and rhetoric can undermine the work of cross-sector partnerships, and this is covered extensively in the literature. Each sector is subject to stereotyping. For example, the private sector is often seen as commercial, efficient, predatory or focused; the public sector as procedural, bureaucratic, democratic, and accountable; the third sector as responsive, creative, best at working at grass-roots level, but also amateur, informal or less competent. In general, cross-sector partnerships are based on assumptions of common goals (Vangen and Huxham, 2012: 2) and that partnerships can reduce duplication of work and achieve better value for money (Cairns et al, 2006: 11). However, sectoral stereotypes can undermine these assumptions.

One particular assumption often made about the third sector is that it can be represented by one or two members who will themselves represent a wide range of communities. There is considerable resistance within the sector to these ideas (Russell, 2005: iv; Cairns et al, 2006: 16; Osborne et al, 2012: 46). This problem is not unique to the UK, being replicated in other countries such as Mali (Serra, 2000: 12). Macmillan (2003: 30) offers a useful distinction between being a representative *of* the sector, a representative *for* the sector, and a representative *from* the sector. Third sector organisations find themselves in a particularly difficult double bind when they are required to be both representative of a variety of constituencies and to compete within the market (Cairns et al, 2006: 16).

There are other, more specific assumptions at work in cross-sector partnerships. For example, public-private sector partnerships are based on the assumption that the private sector is more efficient than the public sector and better at generating wealth, so private provision of public services will be more efficient than public provision, and will lead to increased wealth (Shaoul et al, 2007: 480). Public-third sector partnerships are based on the assumption that the third sector is best placed to manage social problems, and resources from the state will enable this to happen (Teasdale, 2012: 107). However, the trouble with such assumptions is that they may not apply in all – or even any – cases.

Another assumption made is that marketisation is inevitable, perhaps in part due to the increase in privatisation of public services (Shaoul et al, 2007: 491), but the literature suggests that 'market-like behaviour and market-style organisational forms' are not in fact necessary (Carmel and Harlock, 2008: 156).

Another factor that can undermine cross-sector partnerships is the difference between the rhetoric and reality of partnership working (Douglas, 2009: 9). The official discourse of partnership speaks of openness, democracy, and innovation, yet the internal structure of most partnerships is hierarchical and favours some local agencies and interests over others (Whitehead, 2007: 19, Dickinson, 2010: 2). This can leave some people, particularly end users involved in partnership working, feeling frustrated or alienated (Foden and Pearson, 2010: 32).

3.2 Other challenges

Several other challenges of cross-sectoral partnership working have also been identified:

- Changes in legislation, policy, and discourse initiated by Government (Beatty et al, 2010: 246; Martin and Guarneros-Meza, 2013: 586).
- The extra complexity found in two-tier local authority areas. These areas may have more partnerships, because they are seen to be needed at both county and district level, and lines of accountability between those levels are not always clear (Cairns et al, 2006: 15).
- Rural location. It takes longer to travel to and between meetings in rural areas (Cairns et al, 2006: 15) and can be hard to maintain the good communication which is key to effective partnership working (Jones et al, 2010: 6).
- Competition within a market (Cairns et al, 2006: 24; Carmel and Harlock, 2008: 166-7) which is increasing due to the climate of austerity (Osborne et al, 2012: 6). Private sector companies set up a 'Chinese wall', an information barrier implemented between different departments to prevent conflicts of interest. However, cross-sector partnerships do not have different departments, and third sector organisation partnership members may not even have different members of staff.

- Rules and bureaucracy based on the assumption that single organisations, not partnerships, are actors. For example, the procurement terms of one local authority precluded potential bidders from discussing their bid with any other party, which effectively made it impossible for any partnership to work up a bid (Lawrie and Mellor, 2013: 37). In many areas, local authority tendering processes also make it difficult or impossible for the third sector to help design local services (Osborne et al 2012: 49).
- Blurring of sectoral boundaries. This can make it hard to identify lines of responsibility and accountability (Shaoul et al, 2007: 491), both within and beyond the partnership. It can also make it difficult to understand how decisions are reached (Cairns et al, 2006: 17). This becomes particularly problematic if the governance of the partnership is unclear.
- Partnerships can conceal important differences between sectors (Carmel and Harlock, 2008: 159). For example, in operational public-third sector partnerships, FLOs can become so involved with delivering public services that their other roles, e.g. independent advocacy, lobbying, and campaigning, become hidden. Or, in strategic public-third sector partnerships, the partnership's priorities can be so closely aligned with those of the public sector that the public sector's role in supporting and engaging the third sector become hidden (Russell, 2005: ii).
- If individual organisations, or their representatives, have negative experiences of cross-sector partnerships, this can deter them from engaging in other partnership working (Cairns et al, 2006: 23; Gazley, 2010: 52).
- Lack of understanding of other partners' and sectors' priorities and pressures (Cairns et al, 2006: 20). Gaining such understanding takes time and effort, but if this is not done, the risk is that the partnership will be tokenistic and ineffective.
- Time. For example, directors of third sector infrastructure organisations are often asked to take part in dozens of partnerships (Cairns et al, 2006: 15). Most partnerships hold regular meetings which require attendance, and often ask partners to complete tasks in between meetings, leading to 'partnership overload' (Douglas, 2009: 16). The risk is that involvement in partnerships may take time away from essential core work. Gazley found that 14% of the executive directors of FLOs expressed the view that involvement in cross-sector partnerships represented more loss than gain (Gazley, 2010: 63). This is particularly risky for smaller FLOs (Rees, 2014: 54). Also, short timescales make it difficult for a partnership to communicate effectively (Cairns et al, 2010: 16).
- Inequality. The equality principle inherent in the concept of partnership may not operate in practice, particularly where there is significant disparity between sectoral resources and aims (Cairns et al, 2006: 24; Carmel and Harlock, 2008: 162). For example, lack of resources often effectively excludes BME organisations from partnerships (Taylor et al, 2006: 6), and this is likely to worsen as a result of the current austerity measures (Netto et al, 2012: 247).

Other organisations, sectors, and partnerships, may not have sufficient resources to take part in partnership working (Huxham, 2003: 40; Gazley and Brudney, 2007: 392). In particular, it can be difficult to secure the involvement of individuals with the necessary decision-making powers (Cairns et al, 2006: 17) and the commitment of some organisational partners (Cairns et al, 2010: 17) which can seriously hamper the work of a partnership. Also, we know that capitalism increases inequality in global society (Piketty, 2014:571), so it seems likely that a capitalistic market-based approach will similarly increase inequality for the deliverers, or the end users, of public services.

- Disagreement. It can be difficult for a partnership to identify, or agree on, common goals (Vangen and Huxham, 2012:2). For a partnership to flourish, it will need a clear, joined-up vision that acknowledges different perspectives (Petch, 2011: 24, drawing on the work of Weatherly et al, 2010).
- Governance. It can be hard to establish suitable governance arrangements for new partnerships, especially if the partnership is formed in response to a driver with a tight timescale such as a funding opportunity (Cairns et al, 2006: 17).
- Lack of clarity about whether partnerships are made up of organisations/groups or of individuals. Nominally, a partnership is made up of organisations and groups – but each of these is represented by an individual. This means that partnerships have and include compound identities with, for example, knowledge being held and gained at, and exchanged between, individual, group, organisational, and partnership levels (Juriado and Gustafsson, 2007: 52).

4. Support for cross-sector partnerships

4.1 Cross-sector partnerships' support needs

The literature identifies several areas of support needs for cross-sector partnerships:

- Time to work effectively in partnership. A partnership is a structure; partnership working is a process (Macmillan, 2003: 36; Douglas, 2009: 2; Petch, 2011: 12). Making a quick decision to enter into partnership can lead to mission drift or reveal differences of values or ethos (Baker and Cairns, 2011: 2). Once a partnership is set up, it needs time to operate effectively. First, it needs time to prepare for the work it has been set up to do, particularly to develop good governance arrangements (Cairns et al, 2006: 24). These should include written terms of reference, setting out the partnership's aims and how it will operate. The partnership also needs time to establish common values and goals (Lawrie and Mellor, 2013: 44). These are useful to refer to at times of pressure or discord. The partnership also needs time for partners to gain knowledge and understanding of each others' individual and organisational roles, goals, pressures, and priorities (Cairns et al, 2006: 26; Cairns et al, 2010: 5; Osborne et al, 2012: 46) which will enable partners to work together much more effectively than they could without such knowledge and understanding. Finally, the partnership needs to make, and regularly review, a formal action plan (Cairns et al, 2010: 2). This should have clear milestones, with timescales, and lines of responsibility for named individuals. These steps will help to minimise the early problems which are almost inevitable in any partnership (Douglas, 2009: 126). Policy pressure for 'quick wins' can undermine the operational effectiveness of partnerships and their ability to plan strategically for the longer term (Perkins et al, 2010: 108).
- Resources to enable effective partnership working. Partnerships are resource-intensive to set up and, particularly given the pace of change, there is no guarantee that they will be cost-effective in the longer term (Petch, 2011: 24, drawing on the work of Weatherly et al, 2010). Also, as resource constraints continue to bite, many organisations are being forced to reduce all commitments beyond their fundamental core work, which can mean that partnership working becomes a luxury and so falls by the wayside (Douglas, 2009: 17). This is leading to conflicting findings such as that interest in peer learning is growing, but the capacity to engage with any kind of learning is dwindling due to lack of time and resources (Baker and Cairns, 2011: 1). As a minimum, like any partnership, cross-sector partnerships need basic organisational and administrative resources (Cairns et al, 2006: 26). This means people to arrange and chair meetings, take minutes, correspond with partnership members, and so on. If the partnership is to work effectively and efficiently, a higher level of resourcing will be needed, in the shape of intensive support, care, and attention (Cairns et al, 2010: 3). Even more resources are needed to bring about lasting improvements to cross-sector partnership working, i.e. sustained investment and time (ibid). In some cases, some of these resources will be available from within a partnership, but this cannot be taken for granted, particularly in the current climate of austerity.

- Tailor-made support, rather than off-the-peg. This will be most effective, because every partnership is different, and the context for every partnership is different (Baker and Cairns, 2011: 2).
- Ongoing support which is readily accessible in times of need (Huxham, 2003: 416), because 'transition is the new natural state' (Douglas, 2009: 33) but resulting changes such as restructuring of organisations, implementation of new legislation, or turnover of personnel, hampers the work of partnerships (Perkins et al, 2010: 107, Osborne et al, 2012: 6).
- Trust building. Particularly where relationships between sectors are weak and/or mistrustful, a cross-sector partnership will need help to establish strong and trusting relationships between sectors (Cairns et al, 2010: 3). Support for this could come from an expert independent facilitator such as a senior civil servant or suitably experienced consultant.
- Support in evidencing value for end users. Minzner et al's research (2013) was not able to measure any resulting improvements for end users because the research was too short-term. They suggested that this could be done through a longer-term mixed-method evaluation within a randomised controlled framework, although this would be time-consuming and resource-intensive (ibid:18). Also, attribution is always going to be problematic with many factors contributing to improvements in a complex situation (Russell, 2005: ii). Any partnership wishing to measure its effectiveness will need to identify baseline measures at an early stage (Douglas, 2009: 189).
- While not essential, 'soft steering' from central or local Government or other funders, such as ministerial or officer encouragement or the provision of additional finance, can also be helpful (Martin and Guarneros-Maze, 2013: 597).

4.2 Toolkits for partnership working

Partnership working toolkits proliferated around the turn of the century, such that in 2003 the NHS Health Development Agency published a review of 25 toolkits, audits, and guides to partnership working (Markwell, 2003). Many of these toolkits are no longer readily available. The current research has found and analysed 10 UK partnership working toolkits:

1. Partnership Working Toolkit. Government Office for the South East (2003)
2. Partnership governance framework and toolkit. Birmingham City Council (December 2006)
3. Corporate governance framework and toolkit for working in partnerships. Norwich City Council (May 2009)
4. Best Value toolkit: Effective partnership working. Audit Scotland (July 2010)

5. Collaborative Working. A CommUNITY Barnet Toolkit (March 2011)
6. Partnership Toolkit. Community Places for Women's Support Network, Belfast (2012)
7. Effective Partnership Toolkit. Partners IN Salford (undated)
8. Effective partnership working: features likely to secure success. Learning and Skills Improvement Service (undated)
9. Partnership toolkit: guidelines for effective partnership working. Mid Devon District Council (undated)
10. Working With Partners. Fields In Trust (undated)

These toolkits were produced by a variety of national, regional and local government departments and by national and local third sector organisations. They range in length from one to 97 pages. Their intended audience is rarely made clear, but the number that were produced suggests that toolkits have been seen as a significant form of support for partnerships. The finding from the literature that tailor-made support is more effective than off-the-peg support may help to explain their loss of popularity in recent years.

However, analysis of these 10 toolkits has highlighted a variety of factors that can help to ensure the effectiveness of a partnership. Which factors are relevant for which partnership will depend on that partnership's purpose and context. We would suggest that, broadly, the factors that are cited in the largest number of toolkits will be relevant for the highest number of partnerships, and vice versa. Those factors listed by four or more of the 10 toolkits analysed are listed below, with numbers in brackets showing how many of these 10 toolkits cite each factor:

- Ensure that partners understand and agree their roles and responsibilities (8)
- Document the names of partners, and the structure and processes of the partnership, including how decisions will be made (8)
- Collectively identify evidence-based priorities and actions, focused on the needs of the area, to deliver intended outcomes (7)
- Have a communication strategy with clear lines of communication (6)
- Support learning, help partners to gain knowledge and skills (6)
- Have clear and documented governance arrangements, including financial responsibilities and budgetary authority (6)
- Engage end users in the partnership, and involve end users in decision-making at all levels (5)

- Use performance information proactively to manage and improve performance, and to demonstrate the partnership's impact (5)
- Clarify the approach to challenge, scrutiny, complaints, and disputes (5)
- Agree and share a vision and aims for working together at strategic and operational level (4)
- Base collaborative working on equality so that no partner feels excluded and each has a voice without any major disparities of power; partners' roles may differ but their contributions are valued (4)
- Make sure all the necessary people are involved in and committed to the partnership, with full representation of stakeholders and no gaps in membership (4)
- Clarify the resources required to deliver these priorities and actions (4)
- Assess and manage risks (4)
- Have effective mechanisms for disseminating information and reporting to stakeholders (4)
- Share information between partners, particularly about organisational and community needs (4)
- Document the achievable purpose(s) of the collaboration (4)
- Document the values and principles of the partnership, and how these will be put into practice (4)
- Have clear accountability, with an agreed and publicised accountability/scrutiny structure (4)

Much of this chimes with the findings from the literature reviewed above. But it is essential that all concerned understand, and accept, the complexity of their cross-sector partnership (Vangen & Huxham, 2012: 757). A lot of the partnership support literature, such as the toolkits analysed for the current research, gives the impression that if only the guidelines set out therein are carefully followed, the operation of any partnership will be trouble-free. However, this is too simplistic, as the context and membership of every partnership is different, and varies over time (Cairns et al, 2006: 23). In addition, there are always contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes in partnerships. For example, a partnership may be attempting to symbolize unity while explicitly valuing diversity. Also, both congruence and diversity in organisational goals have been found to influence success in partnerships (Vangen and Huxham, 2012: 731). These kinds of contradictions, tensions and paradoxes cannot be resolved, and should not be ignored, but need to be acknowledged and managed such that differences become virtues (Vangen, 2012: 4). There are, as yet, no tools for mapping, monitoring, or mitigating these contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes.

5. Conclusion

Little of the literature on cross-sector partnerships addresses the Building Capabilities' hypotheses. There are some suggestions of factors which are critical to sustainably embedding skills and confidence in partnerships, but minimal evidence that this leads to benefits for end users. It can be argued that cross-sector partnerships are more in need of capability-building support than organisations, because they are more complex and so more vulnerable. However, in the current climate of austerity, combined with the lack of evidence of partnerships' effectiveness, it could equally be argued that we should begin to make 'a bolder assessment of not merely the alleged benefits of partnership working but also their limits' (Perkins et al, 2010: 113). Some commentators have suggested that it is foolhardy to enter a partnership without being absolutely clear about the potential for real advantage (Huxham, 2003: 421).

The literature tells us something about the support needs of cross-sector partnerships and about how these can be addressed, although this is highly situated and contextual. The literature tells us very little about where cross-sector partnerships can get support from, who is providing support for cross-sector partnerships, how support is being provided or how effective it is at addressing partnerships' needs.

It has been argued that intra-sectoral partnerships should be strengthened, as well as cross-sector partnerships (Mohanty, 2011: 52), and this may become an increasing need if more of these partnerships are formed. Yet the evidence shows that partnerships are time-consuming and resource-intensive, and that establishing their impact is similarly time-consuming and resource-intensive. It is unlikely that any partnership will be able to source the support it needs through the market unless it has an adequate budget to do so – which, in the current climate, is rare and getting rarer. It is more likely that a partnership in need of support will crumble and fall, while partnerships that already have capacity and capabilities will gain resources. And so inequality is perpetuated.

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About the Third Sector Research Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) at the University of Birmingham exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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