



GETTING REAL: RESEARCH LESSONS FROM THE CASE STUDY PROJECT

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Introduction

Cross-sector partnership as a sustainable development paradigm is at something of a crossroads. The idea itself has reached a considerable level of acceptability and endorsement and there are increasing numbers of examples of good partnership-based sustainable development initiatives. But is this enough?

We need to get better at understanding and communicating what does (and what does not) work if cross-sector partnership is to achieve its potential and make a serious contribution to the sustainable development challenges the world faces.

This is not a case of replicating existing models rather it is a case of replicating successful partnering processes to ensure the smooth transition from a locally appropriate idea to a successful and sustainable project that ultimately achieves policy impact and scale.

If our hypothesis is correct, we face a critical question: How do we better analyse and share the process of successful partnering? It is this challenge that the case study project has been created to address.

The Case Study Project was a one-year programme developed by The Partnering Initiative in co-operation with the Alcan Prize for Sustainability and Supporting Entrepreneurs for Environment and Development (SEED).

This paper is a summary of the lessons that arose from researching the partnering process during this one-year project. These lessons have been extracted from writer's logs that were kept by those researching and writing case studies as part of the one-year project. The lessons that emerge from these logs can be clustered into four areas: the role of the researcher; the challenges around data collection and dissemination; power imbalances within partnerships and researching in different contexts.

However, before these lessons can be explored in more detail it is important to firstly provide some background to the project including the instructions given to case study researchers and the methodologies used.

Background

Different research approaches were used during the project ranging from case studies that document new partnerships, case studies that document existing partnerships and the use of both internal and external case study researchers.

The project began with a workshop in February 2005 titled *Partnership Case Studies: What? Who? Why?*. This was designed as an introduction to the one-year case study project. Eighteen partnership practitioners were invited to participate from a number of organisations including: Building Partnerships for Development-Water & Sanitation; Care International; International Business Leaders Forum; Global Public Policy Institute; SEED and the University of Cambridge Programme for Industry. There were also several independent consultants specialising in cross-

sector partnership work including two case study researchers from Argentina and South Africa who were involved in writing up case studies on some of the selected projects in Latin America and Africa.

The aims of the workshop were to:

1. Establish a learning network of partnership professionals who:
 - Start to share their experiences of writing and disseminating partnership 'learning' case studies and agree how to use the network for further learning
 - Build their own and each others data collection, writing and dissemination skills
 - Identify ways of exploring ideas for further work in this area
2. Explore key issues in the 'what?', 'how?' and 'why?' in the partnering case study debate
3. Create a number of new tools for more effective and targeted case study work that can be pilot tested and refined during the life of the project
4. Offer opportunities for finalising arrangements for specific case study work being undertaken during the coming year linked to this project.

A number of outputs came from the workshop and the intention of the project was to further develop and test these. Outputs included: good practice guidelines; key issues in partnership case study work; a table of potential audiences and objectives; a check list for collecting data; a definition of a 'learning' case study and a table summarising different dissemination options.

Based on these outputs two staff members at The Partnering Initiative created a resource guide for case study researchers participating in the project.¹ All case study researchers were provided with these guidelines to assist them in researching and writing the partnership they were allocated.

Research Lessons

As part of the project requirements all case study researchers were asked to keep a log. The purpose of the log was to capture the impressions and process of the case study researcher. In this log case study writers could record the objectives of the case study; methodologies chosen for collecting; interpreting and presenting the data; the challenges faced in this process; their impressions of the partnership(s); insights gained about the process of writing case studies; their recommendations about the future use and relevance of the case study produced; potential audiences and tools for dissemination. The log offered the case study writer a platform for discussing any issues that were not approved by the partners for publication and needed removing from the official case study document.

Many lessons in relation to researching and writing partnership case studies emerge from these logs. These lessons can be clustered into four areas including: the role of the researcher; challenges of data collection/dissemination; power imbalances and working in different contexts. The paper attempts to explore each of these areas in more detail and provide some research lessons.

1. The role of the researcher

The role of the researcher is crucial to the case study process and many considerations need to be made about this role by those commissioning the case study. Should the researcher be internal or external to the partnership? How much experience of working in partnership does the researcher need? How objective can the researcher be? Should it be an individual or would a research team be more appropriate? These are all important questions that need consideration when appointing a researcher to write up a case study documenting the partnering process.² Some of these questions were addressed in the logs and some of the lessons that emerged from these logs and other materials are outlined below.

Can the researcher be objective?

As much as possible the researchers role is to remain neutral and unbiased in the case study process. As Rein discusses the issue of objectivity and subjectivity in social sciences have been debated since the beginning of the 19th century.³ However, as much as possible the researcher needs to be objective in their approach, acknowledging that there may be some subjectivity as a result of the projections and assumptions they bring to the subject. The challenge with remaining neutral can be evidenced in one log where the researcher writes:

Sometimes it was difficult to manage the process to meet my research objectives. They wanted to have my opinion about what the right solution to this issue would be. In fact it was not possible to keep a totally neutral approach to what was happening.

A lesson that has emerged from this project is that it is important to be aware that the researcher can be subjective, bringing their own assumptions and projections to the process. However, the key is to clearly acknowledge this upfront in the documentation.

Is it necessary that the researcher have experience of working in partnership?

The question of how much experience of working in partnership the researcher needs is a consideration for those commissioning the case study. If a researcher is appointed with no knowledge of the partnership paradigm this could potentially slow down the process or at the other end of the spectrum even cause damage to the partnership if the researcher lacks awareness on the complex issues that are involved. One case study researcher argued:

An external researcher would need experience in the partnership paradigm to penetrate deeply enough into the partnership process. Moreover, one should be familiar with the essential context.

Another argument however could be that someone with little experience of working in partnerships could provide a fresh perspective and new way of thinking about and analysing these issues. It is

² See Stott, L *Partnership Case Studies in Context*, and Rein, M *Case Study Research Relationships* papers available to download from www.thepartneringinitiative.org/casestudyproject for more information on the role of the researcher in partnership case studies.

³ Rein, M (2005) *Case Study Research Relationships*, paper available to download from: www.thepartneringinitiative.org/casestudyproject

ultimately up to the individual or organisation commissioning the case study to decide on how much partnership experience the researcher should have.

Internal versus external researcher

The issue of whether an internal or external researcher should be appointed is an important consideration. The case study project provided an opportunity to test both approaches.

Two cases in the project used internal case researchers. These were individuals within the partnership who were then assigned a staff member from The Partnering Initiative for support. This approach was intended as a capacity building exercise to help build internal capacity amongst staff to write case studies. The aim is to build capacity through a mentoring type relationship. There is also potential for the skills and lessons from this capacity building exercise to be easily transferred to other relevant projects and areas of work. Other potential benefits of using an internal case study writer were positioned as: the ability to use the material as a promotional tool and the potential to use the material in reports to current or potential funders.

This research model had varying degrees of success. In one of the case studies the staff member assigned from The Partnering Initiative ended up doing most of the work as the internal case study writer had failed to write up the case study within the set timeframe. There could be many reasons for this including time restrictions, lack of capacity, not seeing it as a priority, etc.

Another lesson is that adequate incentives need to be built in to the brief as evidence in the log of one of the staff members from The Partnering Initiative when she writes:

I wonder whether there was enough of an incentive built into the project brief for internal case study writers to spend the amount of time required to do the work. There was also a lack of clarity about our respective roles (even though I tried to clarify this over email) and I got the sense that the internal researcher expected me to come in and do the work for them.

In all other cases researched as part of the project external researchers were used. This approach can also provide advantages and disadvantages. Advantages are that as the researcher is independent of the partnership they are more likely to be considered unbiased. Disadvantages are that it may take a long time for the researcher to get under the skin of the partnership and the time allocated may not allow for this.

2. Challenges with data collection/dissemination

The case studies researched as part of this project offer a number of lessons around data collection and dissemination. Collecting, organising and disseminating information can be a very complicated process and there are many issues for the researcher to take into consideration. The objectives and audiences of the case study will help to steer this process, but there are a number of other questions the researcher needs to ask. What sources of data will be used? What methodologies will be used to collect this data? How will the data be verified? How will the data collected be organised into a suitable structure? What format will be used for the dissemination of the case study so that it can be suitable for all the audiences identified? In addition to these questions there are a number of challenges that can arise including limited time spans; trying to

synthesise different people's opinions; missing inputs from some partners and getting sign off are just some of the challenges.⁴ The case study researchers in this project touched on some of these challenges in their logs and three of these issues are explored in more detail below.

Focusing on the partnering process rather than the impacts

One of the main aims of the case study project was to provide insights into the process of successful cross-sector partnering, rather than successful partnership impacts. One of the lessons from the researchers involved in the project is that it's difficult to separate out the process from the project impacts. This can be evidenced in one researcher's log when they write:

It is quite difficult when writing to separate the project outcomes from the partnering process. I found myself always reverting to writing about the impact of the partnership rather than how the relationship between the partners evolved and impacted the partnership.

In addition, the partners and stakeholders themselves may find it difficult to separate out these two issues, as it may seem intrinsic to focus on the impacts of the partnership. A different researcher captured this in their log:

Interviewees found the issue of the partnership having both outputs and outcomes a difficult one to understand. They were habitually only interested in outputs rather than the partnering process.

Despite the challenges with researching the partnering process the project has proved that it is important to persevere with this and get better at understanding and communicating what does (and what does not) work. This is crucial if cross-sector partnership is to achieve its potential and make a serious contribution to the sustainable development challenges the world faces.

Research Time Spans

There is no doubt that time can be restricted and this will impact how much researchers can really get under the skin of the partnership, and understanding the role of the partners and key stakeholders⁵. This is especially true for external case study writers who may know little about the partnership and need to learn more about the basics such as who all the partners are, the partnership's mission and activities and key stakeholders. This will restrict the time the researcher will have to collect more detailed data to capture the process of partnering. As one case study writer wrote in their log:

It was difficult to gather people to reflect in groups. Four or five days there was not enough to understand how subjective these opinions are and at what point they are shared, or not shared with others involved in the partnership.

It can also be true that the partners and stakeholders may not see the data collection process as a priority or they may just have too many other work constraints to give it the time it requires. The

⁴ For more information on data collection challenges see Hurrell, S (2005) *Data Collection Challenges*, available to download from: www.thepartneringinitiative.org/casestudyproject

⁵ The term stakeholders is used here to refer to all who are involved with or affected by the partnership activity including staff, beneficiaries and donors, as well as partners and other key professional or community players.

researcher will need to factor these challenges in to the process they adopt and may need to rely on secondary data such as reports, minutes and web site information.⁶

Learning from failure: The Role of Fictionalised Case Studies

Another lesson from the research was that partners and stakeholders can be very resistant to discussing failure or anything negative surrounding the partnership. As one researcher wrote:

I found there was a real resistance from those within the partnership to discuss anything negative about the partners or the partnership itself. This provided me with a challenge as much of the learning on the partnering process comes from failure and how this failure was addressed.

This can also be evidenced in a different case when one of the interviewees told the case study researcher:

Why should we concentrate on something which did not work as expected? ...I am not going to approve something that only shows the negative side of our work.

To overcome this the case study researcher may choose to offer interviewees the chance to have their story fictionalised, to obscure all identifiable details, characters and events while still maintaining the key learning points. In some cases the only way to share interesting learning points is to fictionalise a case study as there is no circumstance in which the partners would let the information go public. This has been a key learning from the project and one that deserves more attention.⁷

Is it a partnership?

Within the case study project we use the term partnership to mean the following:

“A cross-sector alliance in which individuals, groups or organisations agree to: work together to fulfil an obligation or undertake a specific task; share the risks as well as the benefits; and review the relationship regularly, revising their agreement as necessary.”⁸

The term partnership itself can be very loosely used and may mean different things to different people. As can be evidenced by this researcher when he discusses one of the projects profiled:

There is little or no evidence between the two groups in terms of identifying areas for common action, joint planning, managing and maintaining the partnership, reviewing the partnership and sustaining its outcomes...My overall impression is that there is very little evidence of a real partnership between the organisations and this is a case of the inappropriate use of the term.

⁶ For information on sources of data see Tool 5 in *The Case Study Toolbook: Partnership Case Studies as Tools for Change*

⁷ For more information on fictionalising case studies for learning purposes see paper by Hussain-Khaliq, S (2005), *Learning Case Studies: Definitions and Applications* available to download from www.thepartneringinitiative.org/casestudyproject

⁸ Definition as found in: Tennyson, R (2005) *The Brokering Guidebook: Navigating Partnerships for Sustainable Development*.

The researcher needs to be aware that many projects may consider themselves to be cross-sector partnerships, but may not necessarily resemble the definition described above. The case study researcher needs to use their own judgement on whether/how they bring this up with partners including whether this is documented in the final case study.

Getting Final Sign Off and Disseminating the Case Study

All case study writers must secure approval from all sources cited and the key stakeholders from the organisations/groups profiled before finalising the case study for publication. This can be done through email, or at a face-to-face meeting. Case study writers can choose to send either the entire text of the case study for approval to all parties concerned or only share the text with quotes that concern them. It is important to explain to the stakeholders and sources what this data will be used for and where. There needs to be final sign off by all the relevant partners and stakeholders.

Guidelines for good practice were discussed at the practitioner's workshop in February and they included points on when not to include material. This list includes: when it adds no value to furthering understanding of the partnership or partnering issues; when its confidential, unreliable or insignificant and when it risks undermining or damaging partner relationships.

When planning the dissemination of the case study careful consideration needs to be given to the audience.⁹ The community the partnership is working with/trying to impact is an extremely valuable audience for the case study and their inputs need to be approved and the format the case study eventually takes needs to take this crucial audience into consideration. As one researcher points out:

Communities are a valuable audience with specific learning needs. Case studies focused on the partnering process would be very useful if spread within communities... For this purpose appropriate dissemination tools need to be used including use of graphics with big drawings synthesising the main issues. Communities and their people could be the most important audiences to benefit from a case study.

3. Power imbalances in the partnership

Another key issue that arose in many of the logs was the issue of power imbalances within the partnerships they were researching.

There is an imbalance of resources and this means the community partners are largely dependent on the partner providing the funding.

One researcher suggests a good case study can help address the power imbalances that can exist between the partners. She writes in her log:

It would be useful for improving relationships and partnering processes with the communities if a mode of dissemination was targeted to them. This could include

⁹ For more information on potential audiences and objectives of partnership case studies see Tool 2 in *The Case Study Toolkit: Partnership Case Studies as Tools for Change*

photographs of key players and their opinions, outputs and outcomes and the cost and benefits for each partner. It should be very graphical with drawings and photographs.

Another difficulty is that hierarchies exist within the communities making it difficult to collect information on the partnership from these partners.

There are some hierarchies that make some of the villages not speak much in front of others. They don't want to give opinions, just explain how things are developing. There is a need to achieve a wider impact, sustainability and democratic participation and commitment from the community actors. Communication with the communities needs to be improved and they need to be given more room for their participation...power is not currently balanced.

Nevertheless, the case study researcher has a responsibility to be aware of the power imbalances that may exist and the need for ensuring that all voices within the partnership are heard.

4. Working in different contexts and how this impacts the research

The final research lesson that will be profiled in this paper is how working in different contexts can impact research. An understanding of a partnership's historical, political, socio-economic and cultural environment is very important to the researcher.¹⁰ For a partnership to be understood by those external to it, it needs to be contextualised. Partnerships are always the products of the specific context in which they have been created and in which they operate. According to one researcher context can be defined as:

The particular economic, political, cultural and social environments that are conditioning the partnership work. The operation of the partnership could not be isolated from this forces that help in understanding the particularities of each partnership and the contextual forces that framed them.

However, understanding a partnerships' operating context can present a challenge to the researcher, particularly an external researcher.

As one case study researcher comments:

It is important not to assume you understand the context based on what you have read, which is not always the view of the marginal voices. This can often make you misunderstand what you actually see and it's therefore important to be open to learning about other's interpretations.

¹⁰ For more information on understanding the context for partnership research see paper by Stott, L as part of the project at www.thepartneringinitiative.org/casestudyproject

Conclusions

This paper has discussed four lessons that came out of the one-year case study project based on findings from case study researcher's logs. These include: the role of the researcher; the challenges around data collection and dissemination of the case study; power imbalances and working in different contexts.

The research lessons profiled in this paper are the result of a one-year project on partnership case studies. It is intended to probe people's thinking on the role of the case study researcher/writer and to make them aware of the types of issues a researcher and those commissioning the case study need to consider when capturing a cross-sector partnership.