

Empowerment Tools

Creating better services through co-production



Partnership with a Purpose Involving All the Players

By Jim Simpson

**In association with the South East Community
Empowerment
Research Project**

Partnerships with a Purpose – Involving All the Players Empowerment Tools - 3

This is one of the series 'Empowerment Tools' produced by Jim Simpson Consultancy from a major study involving 80 plus organisations and practitioners.

For consultancy, evaluation, research and training commission enquiries contact jim@jimsimpsonconsultancy.co.uk or visit www.jimsimpsonconsultancy.co.uk for a library of other useful articles and tools

This paper identifies the necessity to build 'vertical' partnership across the public domain; identifies who the key players are; and emphasises the critical role of partnership in improving society and communities.

Partnership has become the currency of change and improvement in the public sector as well as in the third sector. If you want to do something to improve health and well-being, community safety, regeneration, education of the local environment you will need to work in partnership.

The **case for partnership** is well rehearsed:

- complex social problems cannot be solved by one person, organisation or department
- partnership builds capability, knowledge and skills amongst its participants that might otherwise be confined to the few or hoarded by organisations and individuals
- partnership creates better outcomes creating benefits that are more than the sum of the parts of the participating players
- partnership promotes openness and transparency so it is more likely that resources will be devoted to better methods and better outcomes
- partnership is about different organisations and people working together to a common objective that they can better reach by working together than by working alone.

There are small scale partnerships where a few key organisations or people co-operate or co-ordinate their activities say to run an advice desk, a self-help group or build a play structure. Small localised partnership range through to medium-sized local networks and large scale partnerships running large swathes of public services.

If you want to set up a playgroup, get a piece of waste ground cleared or give feedback to a public service partnership, then working in partnership will be required at least in some measure. Some large scale partnerships, often formalised, can involve partners co-ordinating and 'co-evolving'¹ new solutions to social economic and environmental problems. In fact we know that deep seated and intractable problems such as rising obesity, global warming or housing shortage requires all of us to contribute to innovating solutions. Public, private and voluntary resources (that is money, people and social capital) need marshalling collectively is such complex problems are to be tackled. If you want to regenerate a run down area, build new housing, run a new community service or set up a new space or forum for people to influence service providers then, again, partnership working comes into play.

¹ Pratt, Gordon, Plamping 'Working Whole Systems', Kings Fund 1999

So this begs the question – **how do we ‘do partnership’ to make it work and raise the game of all the players?** There is of course no one solution or magic potion. However there are processes that need to be gone through in order to make partnership work and specific groups and communities that need to be included if partnership is to be meaningful, effective and sustainable. We know that for partnerships to work in order to build public goods and social capital we need to build trust, openness, accountability, reciprocity and relationships.

Partnerships can be *horizontally organised* or *vertically organised*. Typically horizontal partnerships have proliferated between people who have the same role or the same stake. Professional workers co-operate within departments or across departmental boundaries in order to reach common goals. In similar fashion community activists, local citizens, residents or service users will network and co-operate with each other where they need and want to. Managers of services or policy makers also horizontally network and co-operate with one another. It is our natural tendency to want to mix up with people in a similar situation to us and with similar experience or with similar interests and goals. ‘Horizontal partnership’ has enriched the knowledge and capability of the people involved and, in turn, enrich their services or projects.

However horizontal partnership is not enough. It has its limitations and runs the risk of people creating new silos within which they operate. In these silos misunderstanding of the outside world can become entrenched. How often have we heard local residents taking a dim view of council workers, or policy maker experts unprepared to hear the real experience of service users at first hand labelling them as the ‘usual suspects’. To tackle this, partnership work needs to be working vertically as well as horizontally. That is, policy makers talking to and learning from citizens and service users as well as local citizens understanding policy makers, managers or front-line workers. Meaningful partnership, knowledge, understanding and capability needs to take place across the levels of participation in public life.

Take the examples of policing and community safety or providing health services. Policing has the goal of improving community safety and reducing crime or anti-social behaviour. Health services exist in order to improve physical and mental health and well being and combat disease. These outcomes can only be reached when the ‘players’ – citizens, front-line staff, managers and policy makers - understand each other. Otherwise inadequate methods and solutions are developed that are bound to result in inadequate performance or to failure.

Understanding the different perspectives, insights and contributions of each partnership player needs to take place through partnership building activity that cuts through the filters of hierarchy or bureaucracy. The ‘bottom up’ wants and demands of citizens, service users and residents need to be satisfied through the ‘top-down’ duties, responsibilities and expertise of policy-makers, managers and front-line workers. This can only happen if the players are committed to ‘co-producing’ and ‘co-evolving’ solutions and public service models.

Those with power need to put some of the power on the table and empower others to take part in the public domain. The consequence of not doing this will be to repeat the mistakes of failing or weak public services that are disengaged from real people and their needs, wants, preferences and capabilities. For this read the public housing disasters of the late 20th century; failed public health services where health inequalities have widened rather than narrowed; planning blight that once produced unuseable city centres and bad housing; or education services where enormous

numbers of young people have been failed by an education system that has left them leaving school with nothing. These public sector failures have not come about due to the usual complaint of insufficient resources. In fact all of the examples above have had enormous sums devoted to them with, in most cases, real increases in resources over the longer term.

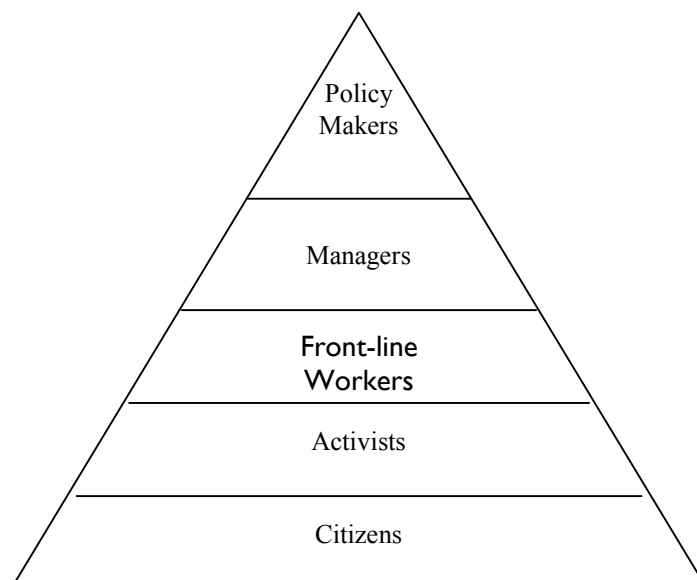
Failings have happened in part because the people making the decisions have made them far removed from the communities and 'services users' they are there to provide for. The more complex a problem is the more it necessitates a broad spectrum of contribution in order for it to be solved. Many players need to contribute to determining the public domain questions of what should be provided? how it should be provided? by whom? at what cost? in what places? and in what ways that work to the best possible outcomes? Public sector professionalism and policy making is required to serve the public interest through the medium of partnership and co-operation.

Partnership and co-operation is now on a statutory footing. For some time public sector service providers have been expected to deliver their service through co-operation and co-ordination with one another. Partnership working has the tendency to throw reality into sharp focus making the problems and opportunities that are faced by all of us in the public domain open, explicit and transparent. Local Government and health service legislation now requires service providers to work in partnership and demonstrate that they are so doing. Partnership has to work at the level of planning and specification as well as at the delivery level.

Participants in the Public Domain

The diagram below gives a pictorial depiction of the key players in partnership anywhere in the public domain. The roles and relationships apply wherever you look in the public sphere. Whether it is public transport being changed, schools being improved, services being re-shaped, planning applications being heard or care services being planned. In all these cases similar conditions apply. Policy makers, managers, front line workers (public, voluntary and, to an extent, private sector) and the citizens voice through community activists all have a part to play in determining the shape and character of public 'goods'. Similarly the same relationships apply in the voluntary and community sectors where community-run activities and voluntarism has its very character determined by the influence of each of these four groups of people.

The key players in public activity



The diagram also is, illustratively speaking, to scale. Policy makers are at the top of the power pyramid with the say over what goes in the public domain. In the middle are Front-line workers attempting to respond to the *bottom up demands* of citizens and activists in community organisations and voluntary groups. However their discretion and room for manoeuvre is checked through their managers and the organisational rules and policy shaped from *the top down*.

The citizenry has the least *direct power and influence* over the shape of the public domain. *Representative democracy* has the capacity to choose leaders (and some of the policy makers). However it can not disaggregate the component parts of our public life and public services mix (the neighbourhood, the school, the park, the clinic, the community centre etc.). So it can not enable people to be empowered to determine the shape and character of specific activities. Only through processes of **participative democracy** can effective partnership involving all the players take place.

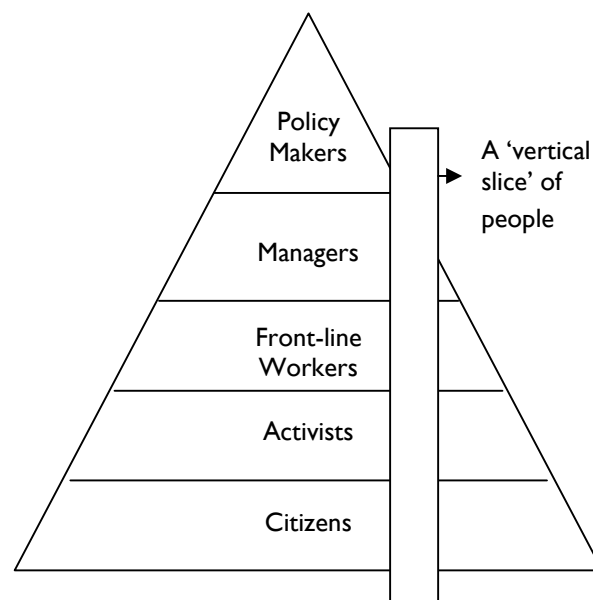
Vertical (slice) partnership working

Part of the solution to building better partnership and, therefore, better outcomes for people and communities is *vertical partnership working*. This is illustrated below.

Vertical partnerships work well because:

- people learn from each other – they have to in order to make partnership work effective
- participants learn about the opportunities and problems in trying to make improvements and changes from different perspectives
- deliberation and discussion is transparent and unfiltered
- innovation can take place quickly, cutting through what is less important through to what matters most and what is possible
- key people who can make a difference can immediately test out and tease out options and build strategy

Participants in the Public Domain – a vertical slice



So to conclude people in communities need to continue to press their public service providers to not only take their views seriously as consumers and users, but to involve them in designing better solutions, outcomes and achieving better results for every public pound. To create a better public sphere we need to:

- Bringing together 'vertical slice' groups and partnerships to co-evolve better services and responses to complex problems
- Innovate deliberative and participative democratic forums and processes (e.g. citizens juries, participative budgeting, service user polls) and recognise both the appropriate function and the limitations of representative democracy
- Invest in innovation - that is innovating better services, solutions to social problems and public services whilst disinvesting in mediocre or poor services with inadequate outcomes of failed strategic outcomes

Jim Simpson

© Jim Simpson Consultancy at www.jimsimpsonconsultancy.co.uk

Copyright Jim Simpson - © This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 2.0 Generic License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0>

The Empowerment Tools Series comprises 6 papers all available in the free [Resource Library](#) area at www.jimsimpsonconsultancy.co.uk and at the Local Government Innovation and Development [website](#)

'Empowerment Tools 1 – Healthy Partnership Checklist' is a checklist for reflection, learning and evaluation for anyone involved in supporting partnerships. It is easy to use collaboratively or individually and will help you evaluate the key building blocks to a healthy partnership.

'Empowerment Tools 2 - Practicing participation, methods and stages' revisits and relocates the international practice ideas about the stages of participation in public places and what this means by way of the public promise that service providers are making to local people.

'Empowerment Tools 3 - Partnership with Purpose - Involving All the Players' is another short think-piece that explains the different roles that are key to unlocking the power and potential for an empowered, people-driven public sector.

'Empowerment Tools 4 - Consumer or Citizen, theory and practice' debates the theory and idea of empowerment from different viewpoints. Empowering people, communities, citizens and services-users will be critical to the public sector and third sector organisations 'doing better' rather than merely 'doing more for less'. This paper locates both participative and 'market' theories of the public sector in a brief and comparative analysis.

'Empowerment Tools 5 – Public Sector Professional Work and Social Capital' is a shorter think-piece that emphasise the need for public organisations to nurture social capital rather than ignore it or act against it.

'Empowerment Tools 6 - Discovering 'Facilitative Public Management' is an ideas paper drawing together all of the empowerment tools research. It contrasts the best of a new and more innovative style of public management and decision making with the disadvantages of mechanistic public management that dominates our public services. Whatever your point of view or your role in any public service or community there is something in this for you!