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Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability

Partnerships for sustainability governance: a synthesis of key themes

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Partnerships for sustainability governance loosely refer to cooperation for the purpose of designing and implementing sustainability policies. To achieve better cooperation between private, public and civil society actors, partnership design needs more critical evaluation of their costs and benefits. We provide a synthesis of a special issue exploring sustainability governance through partnerships (this issue). Two overarching conclusions are that (a) instead of entirely transforming governance arrangements, partnerships incrementally nudge governance towards greater inclusion of diverse stakeholders, and (b) while more inclusive governance enhances the capacity to resolve contested and complex problems at scale, it can also obscure accountability and generate conflict with other institutional objectives.

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Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability 2015, **12**:86–90

This review comes from a themed issue on **Sustainability governance and transformation**

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For a complete overview see the Issue and the Editorial

Received: 03-11-2014; Revised: 23-12-2014; Accepted: 08-01-2015

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2015.01.001

Introduction

This review offers a synthesis of a special issue devoted to the role of partnerships in governance for sustainability (this, see [1]). In the context of governing for sustainability, the term 'partnerships' has been employed to tackle problems ranging from the implementation of international agreements on biodiversity and conservation [2] — through to partnerships for sustainable urban infrastructure within cities [3]. Partnerships can take diverse forms including, for example, transnational policy networks [4••], cooperation on science and knowledge [5••,6••], place-based collaboration and collective action [7••,8••], and more traditional forms of public–private sector contractual agreements [9••]. The benefits of partnerships as a vehicle for sustainability governance are often argued to include their capacity to combine financial and organisational resources and diverse types of expertise, provide spaces for the co-production of knowledge and overcome entrenched institutional fragmentation.

The idea of partnerships has become a normative goal in environmental policy. With its rhetorical focus on cooperation and participation, partnerships seem to embody the inclusive, joint problem-solving approaches promoted in sustainability discourses. That is, partnerships are considered a desirable 'end' as well as a 'means' of environmental governance. The 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development generated some three-hundred partnerships [10]. However, the rise of partnerships stems from broader changes in political ideology of liberal democracies since the 1980s [11]. State-sponsored cooperation with market and civil society actors, and sometimes local communities, has created new networked forms of governance with their own particular suites of practices and their own 'symbolic politics' [10,11]. Debates over the desirability and effectiveness of partnerships, and whether they meet normative ideals are not new. However, these debates remain inconclusive and give contradictory assessments about partnership performance [3].

In this review we respond to several perennial questions and dominant themes in the literature. We specifically cover the conceptualisation of partnerships as a suite of instruments in sustainability governance, and, their efficacy in a range of problem contexts. Critical questions for guiding better partnership design can be explored along four themes:

- Do the limitations and risks associated with partnerships outweigh their benefits?
- Should partnerships encourage collaboration, coordination or cooperation, and what does it matter for the intended outcome?
- How do partnerships nest and operate within broader institutional environments that are increasingly complex and dynamic?
- How do various partnership models promote science and policy integration as required to tackle complex and contested sustainability problems?

The special issue articles underpinning this synthesis are themselves reviews covering partnerships from diverse perspectives: conservation [12••], agriculture and development [13••], urban development [4••,14••], natural resources [6••,7••,8••,15••], and health [16••]. They also

range in domains, for example: coming from behavioural and political science [17••,18••], ecology [12••], and geography [7••,14••]. Drawing on key insights from these contributions we address the above themes in turn.

Theme 1: The limitations of partnerships

One of the most consistent messages from across the literature is that partnerships have limitations and costs that need equal consideration alongside benefits. Partnerships are risky, costly and time-consuming [7••,8••,12••,18••], and can also become too dependent on key individuals [7••]. Partnerships in both developed and developing countries can give the outward impression of inclusion and participation in problem-solving and decision-making. However, they implicitly preselect partners with high capacity such that those most vulnerable may be inadvertently excluded [16••,19], potentially side-lining local people [13••,14••].

In some instances the language of partnerships has been used by governments to legitimise a *shifting* rather than *sharing* of responsibility to the private sector or civil society, with the public interest — including environmental protection or inclusive development — lost or significantly reduced in that shift [9••,13••]. For these reasons, partnerships should not replace the importance of state centred regulation or oversight. For example, where governments have encouraged new partnerships for the construction of low-carbon and climate resilient infrastructure, evidence is pointing to the critical importance of oversight by the state and a 'greening' of the regulatory framework in which these partnerships will operate into the future [9••,14••].

Partnerships, rather than spaces for innovation, can be captive to the rules and norms of the institutional actors that built them. For instance, the reliance on market-led approaches to agricultural supply chain development in the global south, highlights the risks of managerial logics defining outcomes for local producers [13••]. Critics argue that in formalised partnerships, problems can arise if they are not properly designed and executed. Issues of corruption, transparency, accountability and a lack of flexibility in contracts are also commonly cited [16••]. Partnerships are critical for sustainably governance [18••], but potential limitations highlight the importance of having a better understanding of when and how they can be used. Partnerships are no panacea. Care is needed in the design of partnerships such that they are used only where appropriate; and that expectations about their potential are realistic.

Theme 2: Coordination, collaboration and cooperation

While public–private sector contractual agreements represent more traditional forms of partnerships, the language of coordination, collaboration and cooperation is more commonly used to discuss the broader set of stakeholder interactions that underpin many sustainability challenges (e.g. [7••,8••,12••,18••]). While there are subtle differences in how such terms are used in the literature, there are also some consistencies. Partnerships in general relate to the informal and formal interactions between stakeholders as they seek to not only share knowledge (e.g. [20–22]), but also build the trust that is required to ensure the interactions are effective (e.g. [12••,18••,23]). For all such partnerships, there is a continuum between coordination and collaboration [7••,8••]. Coordination implies that the associated interactions relate to some formalised, or at least pre-agreed, ways of working [24]. In other words, actions or decision-making are coordinated using pre-determined operational rules or behavioural norms, potentially being prescribed either by organisational rules or government policy. In collaborative processes, in order to coordinate actions or decision making, the operational rules or behavioural norms need to be jointly contested and created endogenously as part of the partnership. Collaboration involves contestation in complex problems with diverging stakeholder interests [18••,25]. While cooperation can be used very generally to describe mutually beneficial interactions [14••], more formally it refers to interactions where stakeholders remain fairly independent, while working towards goals that happen to be complementary [7••].

The use of the terms coordination, collaboration and cooperation has implications beyond semantics. These define (or differentiate between) the types of interactions that constitute the character of any partnership. Different types of interactions have strengths and weakness in solving different forms of sustainability challenges. Coordination is more straightforward and may be sufficient to achieve a limited set of objectives [8••]. Collaboration involves greater transaction costs [7••], but can be more successful in harmonisation of multiple objectives [8••].

Theme 3: The importance of complexity

Scholarship on social–ecological systems [26] has underpinned a drive to understand cooperation, coordination, and collaboration in the face of complexity [7••,17••,18••]. New research has built on this social–ecological perspective by further developing theoretical frameworks [18••], and approaches for empirically testing those frameworks [17••]. For individuals, laboratory (and also field [27]) experiments show that communication [28], and the ability to sanction the behaviour of individuals that does not meet group expectations [29] are critical for fostering cooperation. At the institutional level, new frameworks probe the empirical circumstances where collaborative partnerships promote cooperation, learning, and bargaining (Figure 1). Specific foci of these frameworks include: how do partnerships co-exist and interact with other overlapping collaborative and other types of institutions