Uncommon Alliances:
Real Partnerships
Real Experiences
Real Impacts

Conference Report

June 4, 2012

Hosted by
The Secretary's Office of the Global Partnership Initiative at the U.S. Department of State and
the Institute for Corporate Responsibility at the George Washington University School of Business

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OVERVIEW

The level of interest in multi-sectoral collaboration and governance networks has increased tremendously in recent years. Such arrangements are referred to by a variety of names, including: multi-stakeholder alliances, multi-sectoral governance, trans-sectoral governance, public private-partnerships, and communities of practice. All these terms share a similar idea about partnerships: working collaboratively in innovative ways to address pressing problems.

We are now entering a new era of partnerships where business is partnering with business, government is working in collaboration with business, and both are working with civil society. In today's new marketplace of partnerships, the alliances are bigger than ever, the stakes are high, and the successful partnerships inspire people to build more partnerships. But what about the challenges? Too often, alliances that don't work out quite as planned get swept under the rug. What can be learned from these partnerships?

On June 4, 2012 , The U.S. Department of State and The George Washington University School of Business invited partnership builders from across government, private sector, philanthropy, academia and civil society to explore the ins and outs of creating alliances, talk about techniques for overcoming hurdles, and focus on emerging trends in the partnership community at the *Uncommon Alliances* conference.

KEY THEMES

One issue on which all attendees agreed was that the organization and leadership of partnerships is a challenging undertaking, and not for the faint-of-heart. While the idea of bringing together multiple stakeholder groups – multilateral institutions, governments, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and civil society – so they can collaborate on solving important global problems sounds compelling "in theory" – bringing together such diverse groups with such diverse interests and cultures, in practice, takes a lot of work, patience, and persistence.

> "There is no one sector or company that can solve these problems. We need to bring people together."
> --Kris Balderston
> Special Representative for Global Partnerships
> U.S. Department of State

Over the course of the day, seven key themes and insights emerged in conversations, panel discussions, and lunch table talk:

1. Understand Partnership Motivations

Communication is key. Language is nuanced, so it is important to be aware and responsive to cultural disconnects. Each partner starts out in their default position, but in order to create a win-win situation they need to break down their preconceptions. Using clear and consistent language is essential throughout the partnership process and will help manage risk and threats. Partners need to communicate well amongst themselves, internally in their own organizations, and externally. The critical point in every partnership is to reach the point when you feel confident about that the communication is what you think it is, and that the other party has understood your message clearly.

2. Identify Internal Champions

Partnerships face internal constraints within their own organizations. Often, it is a heavier lift internally within one's own organization to maintain active support for the partnership (as most people trying to do anything fairly entrepreneurial face constraints). Champions from within an organization need to be really strong-minded.

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Sometimes it is hard for even senior management to muster support for innovative approaches, particularly for the private sector if there is no clear business case or product offering to come out of the project.

3. Work to Build Trust

Partners must be able to trust each other. Individual partners must be confident that the other partners will meet their obligations as promised. When partnerships are being formed, partners must share information in a way that they would not share so openly to the public, out of concern that it might be misunderstood. Partners need to believe that what they are hearing is accurate and honest. It is common for partners to have suspicions about the sincerity or the intentions of others – reflecting a traditional suspicion the public and non-profit sector has toward business and the "profit motive." Partners need to trust that the entire partnership is being managed in an unbiased way – allowing the diverse interests of partners to be considered fairly and thoughtfully.

4. Capitalize on Competitive Advantages

Special Representative for Global Partnerships, Kris Balderston highlighted the need for inclusiveness in partnerships in his opening remarks: "There is no one sector or company that can solve these problems. We need to bring people together." In order for partnerships to become truly inclusive, partners must cast aside preconceptions they have of other sectors and organizations in order to engage others constructively and effectively. In the past few years, many corporations have been leading their industry in how they view their role in society. Likewise, governments are increasingly playing a more important role in partnerships. What government's best role to play, however, remains to be seen: some feel that the public sector can play a role in procurement guidance, and provide incentives for organizations to follow industry wide standards and adopt third party certifications. Others see broader opportunities. Regardless, partnerships should capitalize on each partner's core competencies.

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> *--John Forrer*
> *Associate Director*
> *Institute for Corporate Responsibility*

5. Create Local Solutions to Global Challenges

Transformational and responsible change is only possible in a partnership as all stakeholders need to have a say in the development of a solution. A partnership that does not take into local context is doomed to fail, but forming partnership with local players is difficult because outsiders cannot validate the legitimacy of local organizations. It is also important to nurture personal relationships within the partnership. Partnerships provide an opportunity to take a fresh perspective and invent new types of solutions.

6. Be Transparent

Partnerships need to be open and transparent. The goals need to be unambiguous and expectations for partners need to be clear to all. At the same time, it is essential to recognize sensitivities partners may have in how they collaborate. For example, sometimes it is challenging to protect intellectual property while simultaneously asking suppliers to be completely transparent about their operations. Having hard data can convince outsiders to support a project at its outset or validate a program at its conclusion. Results need to be measured in two levels: the success of partnership and the impact of the intervention.

7. Break with Convention

Partnerships challenge governments to establish relationships with firms and non-profits that break with convention. John Forrer pointed out, "… the goal of governments to work with firms in a way that maintains a "level playing field" or avoids "picking winners-and-losers" can be difficult to achieve when working closely in a Partnership." Public officials must adhere to conflict-of-interest concerns and procurement regulations. At the same time there is value in governments working as a convener, catalyst, and collaborator in helping to establish new partnerships. Some traditional ideas about the appropriate role for government when engaging partners need to be updated so both accountability and innovation is supported.

8. Develop Partnership Skills

Partnership builders need to be great listeners, problem solvers and have flexible attitudes, and strong convictions. Partners need to be empathetic to the issues that may not be important to them, but are to their partners. Partnerships can be dynamic and in many cases, multi-sector partnerships

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--Steven Lerman
Provost, The George Washington University

evolve into something very different from the initial design as partners learn from their experiences. While it is important to delineate clear roles and responsibilities for each partner, one should allow the dynamic relationship to play itself out to achieve better results. Building lasting partnerships will have its up and downs. You have to go with it.

THE FUTURE OF PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships will continue to grow and play an increasingly important role in achieving government program goals and objectives. Jim Thompson, Deputy Director of the Global Partnership Initiative, summarized the day's discussion in pointing out that we are in the early-days of understanding how to design, manage and sustain partnerships that are purposeful and impactful. And yet there is a wealth of knowledge on effective partnerships based in experimentation, innovation, and hard-earned lessons.

Conference participants agreed that better information was needed on how to design and manage partnerships. Case studies, training, and venues for informal, practical discussions on "lessons learned" were all identified as important in supporting existing and the development of future partnerships.

There are obstacles to implementing a mutually beneficial and sustainable partnership, but the rewards are well worth the effort. Obstacles are constantly diminishing as organizations around the world grow more interested in partnering with others to approach problems. As Dr. Steven Lerman, George Washington University Provost, noted, "By getting groups together like these with different history and strengths, we can create partnerships that address serious problems within our society."