

A DISCUSSION PIECE

Making Complex Collaborations More Effective: The Growing Need for Interlocutors¹

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Tackling the World's Problems Collectively Brings New Helpers on the Horizon

Social partnerships, and similar collaborations, combine the energy of diverse actors. They are designed to be collective problem solvers. Of necessity, over many years, all sorts of professions, individuals and specialist organisations have emerged to help social partnerships form and realize their shared goals. One can think of process facilitators, intermediaries of different sorts - mediators, brokers, convenors – change agents, often associated with creating shared value in commodity chains, and activators that catalyse and mobilise people from all walks of life towards a common purpose.²

But as the size and consequences of intractable problems and their inter-relations within and across societies take hold – examples are climate change, unemployed educated youth, food insecurity and inadequate standards, gender equality and so on – the existing repertoire of expertise shows and needs expansion to include a new type of role player. Drawn from work on social accountability, the term that captures what they are and do is an *interlocutor*. This new 'kid on the block' bring **AGE** to collaborative efforts. That is, the tasks they optimize towards are to **A**ssemble actors and technologies, **G**uide interactions over time, and ensure that gains from collective efforts at multiple scales become **E**merged in institutions and societies' way of life.

Often involving 'hosting' by United Nations agencies, the collaboration terrain already contains large scale set ups to ensure, for example, adequate nutrition for the world's population; to anticipate and prevent the migration of diseases, such as malaria, as the world warms up; and to replenish the worlds' natural capital, the oceans fish stock. Alongside these arrangements, the landscape of assemblers and guides to multi-stakeholder collaboration is expanding to include entities with different names but a shared intention to better address the challenges of collective problem solving at multiple levels of social change. Industry facilitators (IFs) are a diverse grouping of entities helping corporations and economic sectors scale up their 'inclusive' effects. South Africa is experimenting with and learning from the work of Collective Impact Organisations (CIOs) to enhance sustainability through changes to the peri-urban ecology of Cape Town. Backbone Organisations (BOs) are being established in the USA as a new scaffolding in the civic infrastructure tailored to the formation of Collective Impact Partnerships (CIPs) at many scales and directions of social action, for example to systemically tackle youth unemployment. International Nongovernmental Organisations are active embryos for establishing social partnerships across borders that involve more than pairing with a particular business. The World Wildlife Fund's leadership of a consortium to rehabilitate and protect coral reefs in the Pacific is one example. In addition, the world of philanthropy is set to expand with 'meshwork' foundations, skilled at interconnecting multiple types of organisations that combine

¹ Extract from: "Innovation in Institutional Collaboration: The Role of Interlocutors", *Working Paper*, 584, International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam. <http://hdl.handle.net/1765/51129>

² See, for example, the Annual Review of Social Partnerships http://works.bepress.com/may_seitanidi/36
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many geographic locations, operating at numerous levels of change that are, for example, required to reduce CO2 emissions.

What do Interlocutors Bring to the Collaborative Party?

The ways that these emerging entities conceive and play their role often includes the methods and functions of existing supporters of partnering across institutions. But, what appears to make them distinctive is two-fold. First is being implicated, rather than being 'neutral' in the way collaboration is formed and proceeds – that is a process of interlocution. The interlocutor role is to co-produce and live a co-responsibility for how collective action works and bears fruit. In Peter Senge's sense, they have Presence in social change.³

Second is in the combination of attributes that they draw on and bring to bear. Seven seem to reoccur. (1) Coerced collaboration across multiple types of actors is seldom cost-effective. Social partnerships arise because people want them to, not because they are legislated to exist. Voluntarism matters. (2) Consequently, interlocutors bring a quality of leadership that exerts influence without formal authority, while treating conflict between parties as a given that needs to be made productive. Differences in interests are assumed to be in play. A harmony model of change is not relied on. (3) Another is an ability to gain the trust of stakeholders on the one hand while engendering trust between them on the other. (4) Awareness and analysis of the 'problem system' they are involved with and the need for scale to make change meaningful and not piecemeal. (5) Perhaps more critical is sensitivity to the distribution of power and authority that will make or break partnership efforts, allied to realistic strategies which constructively deal with this fact of life. (6) Another vital competence is the attribute of a polyglot, able to understand, translate and communicate across partners with their different jargons and vocabulary which may involve limited literacy and access to modern communication technologies. (7) Finally, how their governance is constructed and works must provide adequate 'sovereignty' in the way that decisions are taken and implemented. This attribute is typically co-determined by the conditions attached to the finance and other resources that partnering relies on. Which raises the question of whether or not public resourcing and the politics involved can satisfy the conditions needed for these attributes to come about and endure. Is private, philanthropic finance that lies behind many of the examples given, a necessity?

What next?

There are a lot of complex social partnerships around. But there is little understanding of how those involved with making them work actually do what they do. Perhaps the most useful next step is to take a serious look at the hubs and holders of these collaborative efforts to learn what attributes are critical for success under for different goals, constituents, time frames and operating conditions. From these insights, perhaps it is possible to increase the number and quality of interlocutors in the years to come as some social problems are solved which cause new ones to arise in a never ending story of uncertainty and unintended consequences of human innovation.

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³ Senge, P., Scharmer, C., Jaworski, J. and Flowers, B., 2007, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society*, Doubleday, New York.