

# PARTNERING SKILLS

## The need for an integrative approach

These are challenging times, surrounded by considerable uncertainties. Issues are complex, interests are high and often conflicting, no convenient paradigms or ideologies exist anymore to guide the actions of people. Solutions to societal problems have to be developed and implemented in collaboration with other actors. There is need for a partnering society. Effectively operating in the “partnering space” presents four challenges for integrative skill development: relevance, reliability, timeliness and sharing.

**[1] Relevance:** the first skill challenge of partnering is to identify and enter into relevant networks of collaborating partners that either constitute the problem or contribute to the solution.

**[2] Reliability:** the second skill challenge of partnering is to produce high quality and relevant knowledge on the basis of peer review and benchmarking. It requires high skill levels to identify, select and reproduce reliable knowledge developed and/or monitored in partnerships with others.

**[3] Timeliness:** the third skill challenge entails producing relevant and reliable (controllable) knowledge for specific audiences. It requires high skill levels to produce (often together with others) timely knowledge with sufficient independence.

**[4] Sharing:** the fourth challenge entails the production of shared knowledge, that takes into account the outcome of societal processes, and assesses their desirability in order to come up with effective solutions.

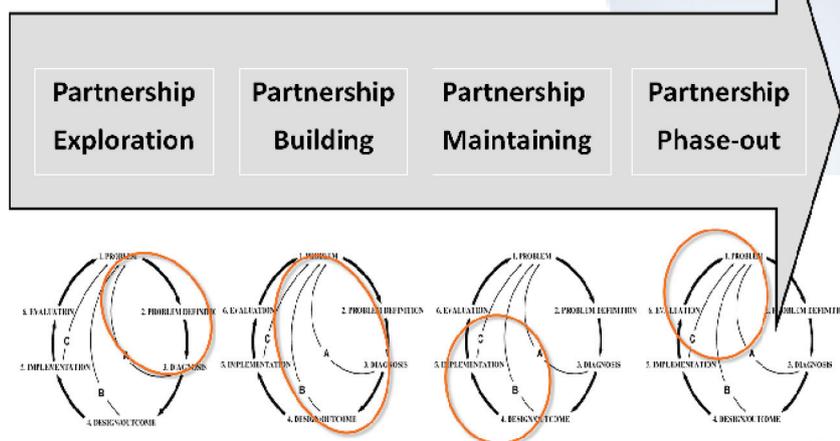
The transition from a ‘group’ of relatively unrelated stakeholders (often with conflicting interests) towards a ‘team’ of interrelated stakeholders (with shared goals and well elaborated working practices) constitutes the biggest challenge for cross-sector partnerships. Partnering processes can be portrayed as a professional learning journey, in which individuals are offered the opportunity to develop their own skills and to build their own capacities, as a process of self-discovery and development, through the social process of partnering. These ‘learning journeys’ are never smooth; they are filled with dilemma’s and trade-offs. A list of skills that are necessary for managing these dilemma’s and trade-offs in good partnerships can be found in the extensive paper. However, most importantly, managing a large variety of skills at the same time is needed, to effectively use partnerships. And a research/investigative attitude is important to develop and optimize these different skills and the synergy between them. This research and inquisitive attitude is the pinning link between all the other skills.

### The partnering Research and formation Process

Many partnering tool books or monitoring frameworks do not start with the (shared) problem definition and diagnosis that triggered the partnership, but immediately jump to the intended outcome and design. Evaluation and monitoring research tends to focus on the process rather than on the outcome of partnership projects. The research question, then, becomes how to optimize the partnership rather than whether it provides an adequate approach to the problem, which is of course a much more difficult and often politically sensitive question.

Partnership processes are not easy to plan, are often iterative (problem definition changes over time, project designs will be adjusted) which requires constant **feedback loops** in the process. A useful technique that can be used to systematically develop a successful cross sector partnership is the reflective or Kolb’s learning cycle: which goes from a problem definition, diagnosis, to a solution formulation, implementation to evaluation (Figure one). The reflective cycle uses research skills as the underlying linking pin that facilitates a better understanding of the other skills needed in partnerships. It is only by going through the reflective cycle in the right order or sequence, from problem, via problem definition, diagnosis to the design of a possible solution, that makes it possible to begin to design and implement appropriate solutions to the issues raised.

Figure 1 The Reflective Cycle and four basic partnering stages.



Linking the reflective cycle of research to the respective stages/phases of a partnering process, yields four basic phases: exploration, building, maintaining, phase-out

Phase	Partnering/monitoring evaluation model	Reflective cycle skills	The partnership tool-book
1. Partnership exploration	Appraisal Zero measurement	Problem definition → diagnosis	Scoping, identifying
2. Partnership building	Input Quantification	Diagnosis → design/output	Building, planning, managing, resourcing
3. Partnership maintaining	Throughput Internal feedback	Design/output → implementation	Implementing, measuring
4. Partnership phase-out	Output/outcome External feedback/control group	Implementation → Evaluation	Reviewing, revising, institutionalizing, sustaining/terminating

[1] In the exploration or appraisal phase of partnerships, the focus should lie on problem definition and identification. Whether potential partners can already be identified in this phase, critically depends on the ability to come to a proper diagnosis of the problem. The partner selection in this phase can strongly influence the problem definition, which in turn strongly influences the ultimate effectiveness of the partnership.

[2] In the partnership building phase, the 'input' of the partnership is defined: who participates and brings what kind of expectations, goals and resources. This phase requires that the diagnosis of the problem (and the hypothesized value-add of a particular partnership) can be linked to an intended outcome of the partnering process. The outcome of a partnership differs from the 'output' in that it considers the way in which the partnership can contribute to solving the actual problem.

[3] In the Partnership maintaining or throughput phase, the actual management of the partnership requires skills for moving the outcome design to more operational (output oriented) terms, which includes a large number of implementation and management questions. Deliverables are defined and a governance structures are further fine-tuned. Feedback and learning loops have to be already in place to accompany the iterative process of the partnership.

[4] in the Phase-out or output/outcome phase, the partnership is reviewed on its effectiveness towards obtaining the short term and longer term goals. A means towards this is the institutionalizing of the partnership, first within the participating organizations, as well as a separate organization. In this phase formal evaluation is used to decide whether the project should be continued or terminated. The counterfactual problem of partnerships is particularly relevant in this phase: what has been the value added of the partnership and would the partners have been able to achieve the output on their own?

A partnership gets terminated after it has solved the issue/problem for which it was initiated, or because it proved inefficient. The most probable path is however that the problem is redefined and the partnership enters into a second phase which starts a new proces of learning and skill development.