

What is a Partnership?

Where Partnerships Begin

... is with an opportunity, problem, crisis or possibility, that you and your own stakeholder group can't solve by yourselves. Then you need to 'connect' with other stakeholders having separate interests, and it usually means discovering how each have things that are useless to themselves of great value to others, finding the natural SD of partnerships in the 'synergy of opposites' with which nature builds durable complex systems.

All sustainable design is a partnership with your world, an expanded connection among equals. In general it starts with a search for stakeholders with 'standing' to collaborate with by linking what would be 'useless' to make it 'needed', responding to needs no one stakeholder can provide by themselves. They can come in as many forms as there are business plans, but basically are of two types. There are multi-agency 'decision making' and 'consulting' partnerships. Either the network of relationships is designed to facilitate group decision making or to consult and inform a single stakeholder's decision making. Examples of each are public/private environmental program design and implementation around a forest or water or land resource, or the designer led developer team's method of engaging all the stakeholders that their design will impact.

The keys to successful partnerships in either case seems to be to have:

- **A Clear Idea**
 - The organizing purpose needs to be so simple everyone will clearly understand, providing a common 'viewing point' even more than a common view, that is inclusive enough to survive all the changes in the circumstances or group membership.
- **A Safe Place to Talk**
 - The act of 'partnering' among equals with different needs and interests is a complex thing, and needs open communication that can be both openly truthful and unthreatening. Building that trust is a process, made more difficult by stakeholders having different languages as well as different interests. I think the key to that is listening for what others are trying to say rather than reacting to what our natural snap judgements lead us to think we heard. The two are extremely different kinds of 'hearing'.
- **Boundary Spanning Individuals**
 - Like hubs in a network, every stakeholder group will have some members with their feet in other stakeholder groups, and a skill with speaking their various different languages. A healthy partnership basically passes both the: a) shared visions and the b) responsibility for making the conversation intelligible, back and forth between the boundary spanning individuals.
- **Accumulative Learning Process**
 - Without a record of the accumulative learning and the path it took, losing individual participants erases their contributions. To begin the 'recorder' might just start with a periodic one paragraph 'executive summary' that participants are asked to add to with a single sentence.
- **A measure of success**
 - Neither is more important, a) having clear goals with a studied metric for achieving them and b) closely observing the environment and how it and the partnership's interventions change each other. A variety of 'whole system' and 'total impact' measures are now becoming available, some described in Total Balance.
 - Periodic exploratory program evaluation is a critical complement, such as asking the served community what the goals of the intervention seemed to be, based on their own experience of it. That and other 'open question' learning exposes inside and outside views that need to be connected.
 - One of the best guides is to have a basket of key statistics that are easy to collect regularly over time and then study them to begin to understand the P/N relationship as an organic entity. You'd also find out about the intrusion of other influences into the environment as well as turning points in growth or decay of project measures indicating complex system emergence or decline. Along with a regular practice of questioning the problem, like the 4D project design cycle, using these techniques of maintaining an improving understanding of the partnership's whole environment is itself a measure of success.

Some Examples:

Collaborative Partnerships

Twelve partnerships presented at the National Academy of Sciences ['Partnerships' meeting](#) in June 08

[Agua Para Todos](#) (Bolivia)

[Common Code for the Coffee Community](#) (Africa/Asia/ L. America)

- A great success story

Connection - SD Partnerships

[East Coast Fever Vaccine Development](#) (East/Central Africa)

- A great 'failure' that changed how the whole African scientific community works 'by accident'

[Farm to Fork Initiative](#) (U.S.)

[Global Water Challenge](#) (Africa/Central America/Asia)

[Green Chemistry Institute](#) (U.S.)

[Green Power Market Development Group](#) (U.S./Europe)

[Multilateral Initiative on Malaria](#) (Tanzania)

- A tragic success, inadvertently destabilizing communities by multiplying populations.

[Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership](#) (Worldwide)

- A tragic success in adapting technology to leverage continuing worldwide growth of economic exploitation impacts.

[Sustainable Forest Products Global Alliance](#) (Africa/Asia/ L. America)

[Sustainable Silicon Valley](#) (California)

Problems Needing a Partnership to Solve

two examples...

[The global uniform energy use measurement](#) - (Worldwide)

[The automatic compounding of wealth](#) - (Worldwide)

What are the hazards ?

The need for partnerships is partly the short sighted development choices of the past, principally mistaking a good niche opportunity as an unlimited resource and running into conflict with the environment and other stakeholders as a direct consequence. People have actually not learned much about that, though the evidence is all around, for lack of a common useful model for discussing the problem. So, there's the risk of repeating the same error, not knowing how it was made before. That misunderstanding is usually the to blame the error on having the bad intentions when the real cause was perfectly good intentions that people preserved even as their consequences turned from multiplying good to multiplying harm. The world changes and you have to watch to keep up, but we don't have a common useful model for that either.

It is critical that plans to take any opportunity consider what their footprints will be and how the environmental response will alter it's presently forseen course. In nature all directions ARE reversed and you should ask how and when.

Examples

- [Bio-Ethanol](#) - a large well funded international environmentalist, governemen and business partnership invested in a good niche opportunity for alternative energy, but the organizers did not look what it would run into. It was mistakenly devoted to the limitless task of both replacing petroleum and supplying ever growing economic energy needs. It turns out that swapping food producing land for fuel production has very high immediate human impacts. We have been depleting arable land while greatly increasing food demand with uncontrolled growth of both population and wealth. Now supply at the hard pressed limits of the land is much more prone to disruption. For high productivity people to maintain growing food consumption they only need to pay a bit more, accepting higher prices. The low productivity people are unable to and get cut off.
- [The Earth](#) - also a great niche opportunity for developing a civilization, but same problem!