King's Fund

# Partnership: fit for purpose?

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WHOLE systems THINKING
working paper series



King's Fund
**Publishing**
11–13 Cavendish Square
LONDON



WHOLE SYSTEMS THINKING
working paper series

**WHOLE SYSTEMS THINKING** is a series of working papers. They offer insights derived from putting ideas into practice as part of an action research programme – ideas about partnership and whole systems which are now central to the Government's ambitions for sustainable change, regeneration and the development of action zones in employment, education and health.

The papers reflect our experience of developing and applying a new approach to primary health care in cities. Similar issues of partnership and public participation arise elsewhere in the public sector and in the commercial world. We find much in common with people from many different organisations who recognise that, notwithstanding the new political climate, things are not really going to change if we just do 'more of the same'. They, and we, are looking for new ways of working.

**WHOLE SYSTEMS THINKING** is not a sequential series. It does not matter where you start from and none of the papers offers a complete picture. What we hope you find are thought-provoking ideas, particularly if you are curious about the kind of problems that return to haunt organisations over and over again. Some prove remarkably difficult to influence despite the best efforts of policy-makers and highly motivated people 'on the ground' – homelessness, for instance, and under-achievement in schools, long-term unemployment, 'sink' housing estates, family poverty. Issues like these need effective inter-agency work and consultation with the people who use the services, but even this can seem like a chore rather than part of the solution.

We have long experience of primary health care development in cities and a growing dissatisfaction with change initiatives which both fail to learn the lessons of earlier investment and to deliver desired outcomes. Four years ago we were in the position of developing a new action research programme whose focus was to be the intractable problems we refer to above. These may be recognised as 'wicked' problems. They are ill defined and constantly changing. They are perceived differently by different stakeholders and in trying to tackle them the tendency is to break them into actionable parts, which often turn into projects. We reasoned that if they could be recognised instead as issues for an interconnected system to tackle together, then they may become more tractable.

We chose to shift the focus of our work away from attention to parts and onto 'the whole' and thus to the connections between parts – how things fit together. This led us to explore ideas related to systems dynamics and the 'new science' of complexity. This has resulted in our designing a distinctive set of interventions which link ideas and practice and which we have called *whole system working*. This is a new development approach which does not offer certainty or guarantee success but it has rekindled our enthusiasm and that of many of the people with whom we are working.

We hope the ideas in these working papers enthuse you too. Because of our roots, many of the examples come from the health sector but we believe the concepts and the practical methods of working whole systems are widely applicable.

*Pat Gordon, Diane Plamping, Julian Pratt*
*King's Fund*
*November 1998*

**Whole Systems Thinking**

The Urban Health Partnership is an action research programme on inter-agency working and public participation. The work is in London, Liverpool and Newcastle and North Tyneside, with health agencies and their local partners in housing, local government, commerce, police, transport, voluntary sector and local people.

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# Partnership: fit for purpose?

This paper offers a way of thinking about:

- the purpose of partnership
- partnership behaviours which fit different purposes
- partnership behaviours which can lead to sustainable change and are not dependent on injections of external resources.

It is the latter type which holds the promise of partnership that government policy aspires to. The approach we have been developing with local partners – which we call Working Whole Systems – fits this type of partnership and has a lot to offer, we believe, both as practical working methods and as theory that guides action.

## Partnership as the new 'cure-all'?

We are emerging from a period when competition was promoted as *the* effective means of achieving social outcomes. Now partnership is the preferred way of doing business and is being promoted in an ever-growing number of policy initiatives.[1,2,3,4] Community Safety Plans, Action Zones in Employment, Education and Health, Health Improvement Plans are all part of the policy agenda on economic regeneration and social inclusion, and all rely on 'the duty of partnership' and public participation.

Many people welcome the Government's aspirations yet recognise the danger that partnership becomes seen as the new 'cure-all'. Working together makes sense, especially when resources are constrained, but it is not an easy option. All too often, the frustration we experience in practice far outweighs the promise of partnership (Box 1).

Partnership is, of course, not new. 'Over the years the trumpet has sounded for joint working and multi-sectoral working; for collaboration and alliances; and most recently for partnerships – between private and public sectors, professionals and lay people ...'[5] There are important lessons to be learned from the past (Box 2).[6]

The present emphasis on partnership brings to mind uncomfortable parallels with earlier insights that teamwork could improve performance. Once it had become 'a good thing', there was little discussion about the circumstances in which the efforts necessary to create effective teamwork would produce significant benefits. The primary care team, for example, became seen as the ubiquitous solution to everything.[7,8] Those of us who work in teams don't do so all the time we are working. The question is: when is it appropriate to work as a team member and when not – in other words, what is fit for purpose?

In our recent work we have found it helpful to ask similar questions about partnership and the conditions necessary for partnership development:

- what meanings does the word 'partnership' carry?
- what are the purposes of partnership?
- which sort of partnership behaviour is fit for which purpose?
- how do we sustain partnerships?

**Box 1** Experience of partnership

battlefield..... energy..... talking shop..... cost..... power..... tedious..... surprises..... exhaustion..... time..... irrelevant..... friendship..... ignorance..... values..... paper.... conflict..... learning..... politics..... excluding..... relationships..... agendas.....

*Source:* from a public sector managers' workshop, London: King's Fund, July 1998.

This paper is based on a presentation to the European Health Management Association Conference, Dublin, June 1998.

**Box 2** Lessons from the 1960s urban programmes

- Partnership between organisations is hard to achieve ... cultural, departmental and organisational differences are not easily overcome
- Inter-agency tensions will not go away just because there is money to oil the wheels
- Creating a truly shared purpose is paramount
- Success will depend on local autonomy and initiative, but tensions will arise between the centre and localities unless there is a genuinely mutual process of setting priorities and targets
- Local power struggles over steering groups and management boards can become a painful distraction, which may last for years
- It is relatively easy to mount a collaborative bid and become a trailblazer ... sustaining enthusiasm and commitment over time is altogether different

In this paper we suggest a typology of four different sorts of partnership, each with different characteristics and fit for different circumstances. We begin by looking at some of the words used to describe relationships between people and organisations taking part in joint endeavour. We then explore the purposes of partnership and different partnership behaviours that are 'fit for purpose'.

'Partnerships are relationships, and relationships are inevitably about power and control'.[5] Not all partnership behaviour is well intentioned. People co-operate to exclude as well as to include. Partnerships can lead to cosiness which resists change. Agreement based on avoiding conflict can be seen as collusion.

An extreme example is the Sicilian *omertà*, the silence of honour designed to maintain the insider power of the Mafia. Silences surround other closed societies and operate to reinforce compliance with the rules and defend insider interests.

We believe that the typology of purpose suggested here will also be helpful in exploring issues of power, control and accountability, but we do not do so here.

## The meanings of partnership

We have found it helpful to reflect on some of the often ambiguous words that describe a range of ways in which people and organisations interact in getting things done (Box 3).

## Types of partnership

In trying to understand the mismatch between our aspirations for partnership and our experiences in practice, we have created a typology which focuses on the purpose of partnership (Figure 1). The horizontal axis represents the different types of goals being sought. To the right, people and organisations are pursuing individual goals. To the left, the goals are collective.

The vertical axis represents how predictable objectives and solutions are, and the extent to which the behaviour needed to achieve them can be known in advance. In the lower half, objectives are recognisable and the way to achieve them is understood. The future is predictable, if you understand the present and the way things have worked in the past. In the upper half, on the other hand, only broad aims can be recognised and achieving them depends on working with and triggering changes in other partners. The future can be anticipated in broad terms (and rarely comes as a complete surprise) but cannot be predicted in detail.

The quadrants of Figure 1 are not a hierarchy but an attempt to describe different circumstances and purposes. The names we have given to the quadrants are tactics that are frequently appropriate in these different conditions, i.e. fit for purpose. The imagery of 'fit for purpose' and 'fitness landscapes' comes from evolutionary biology[9,10] but we believe it can be usefully applied to organisations as well as to organisms, provided we interpret 'fitness' to mean 'successful behaviour' rather than 'survival'.

Different tactics suit different environments. We consider two extremes. One extreme consists of a single peak. We follow Kauffman[9] in describing this as the Mt Fujiyama landscape where one, dominant, smooth-sided peak is visible from afar. This is the lower half of Figure 1, the South landscape where the objective is clear and the solution (the peak) is 'knowable'.

## Box 3 Words

**Partner** – 'one who has a share or part with others'. The meaning implies the existence of a 'whole' of which the partner must be aware. In commercial and legal usage the nature of the whole is clear. A partner is 'one who is associated with others in some business, the profits and losses of which he proportionately shares'. Partners are not necessarily equal – they share proportionately. It is a business form that is able to accommodate independent professionals who need to take responsibility for their individual actions (e.g. solicitors, doctors, accountants). Each partner also takes responsibility for the functioning of the whole business.

Partner also has the meaning of 'one who shares with an other', such as a husband, wife or companion in dance. In this usage it is possible to imagine that the partners' purpose is to create some 'whole', such as the dance, which is greater than the sum of its parts.

**Competition** – the 'action of endeavouring to gain what another endeavours to gain at the same time; rivalry'. Competitors may be aware of a 'whole', for which they are competing, or they may simply be aware of what is within their reach. Competitors seek to improve their individual performance. There is no sense of responsibility for the 'whole'.

**Co-operation** – is derived from co- ('jointly, reciprocally, mutually') + opera ('work, exertion, service'). In its strong sense, co-operation is used to mean 'working with others to the same end', in which case there is an underlying sense of the 'whole'. But it is also used in a weaker sense of 'working together or joint operation'. We have found it useful to use this weak sense of the word 'co-operation' in the typology below.

**Co-ordination** – means 'to bring (various parts etc.) into a proper or required relation to ensure harmony or effective operation'.

**Collaboration** – a collaborator is one who 'works with' others, and is often used in a literary or artistic sense of co-producing something together. It is also used in the sense of working traitorously with an enemy and because of the ambivalence felt towards this term, we decided against using it.

**Co-evolution** – a process by which an environment and a species evolve together. Contemporary evolutionary theory stresses not the survival of the 'fittest' but of the 'fit'. We use the metaphor of an ecology or living system to think of organisations, departments, teams, individuals as independent, purposeful organisms linked in a network of interdependence.

The notion of co-evolution began with predator/prey relationships but can also be applied to the way all members of an ecosystem evolve together and therefore the way in which the fate of an individual depends on the fate of the ecosystem. 'Partnership is an essential characteristic of sustainable communities ... since the creation of the first nucleated cells over two million years ago, life on Earth has proceeded through ever more intricate arrangements of co-operation and co-evolution. Partnership ... is one of the hallmarks of life. In human communities, partnership means democracy and personal empowerment, because each member of the community plays an important role. Combining the principle of partnership with the dynamic of change and development, we may also use the term co-evolution metaphorically in human communities. As a partnership proceeds, each partner better understands the needs of the other. In a true, committed partnership both partners learn and change – they co-evolve.'[11]

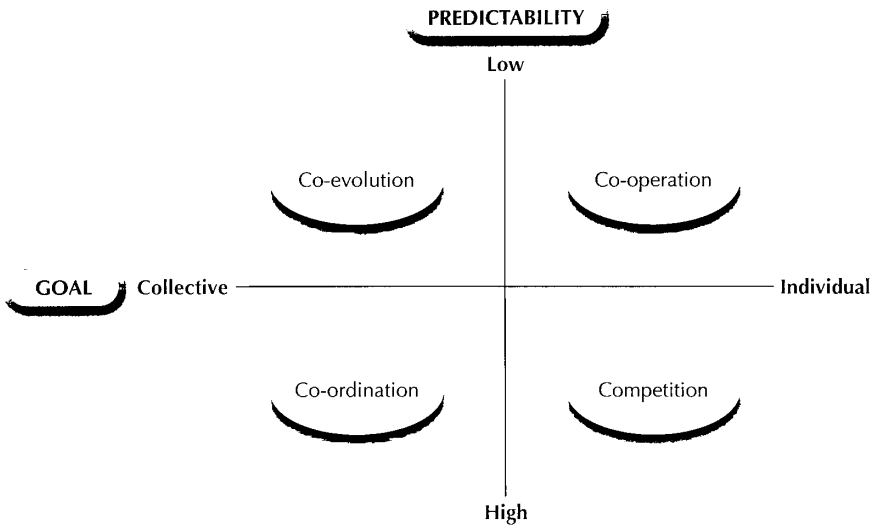



**Figure 1** Types of partnership

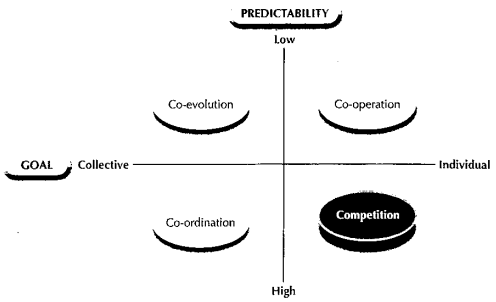
The North landscape is more rugged – like the Scottish Highlands, there are many peaks and the environment is likely to be more varied and changeable. It is possible to reach a local peak only to discover there is much further to go to reach the top. The search here is likely to be much less simple and straightforward. What seems appropriate now may be quite inappropriate in a few months' time. The emphasis is on exploring possibilities rather than moving predictably towards a known goal.

The distinctions between the quadrants are not watertight. Real partnerships may include elements from several quadrants at any one time, and are likely to move between them over time. Nevertheless, we believe the distinctions can be useful in recognising the behaviours that are likely to be appropriate in different circumstances.

### *Competition*

Competition may seem an odd place to begin a typology of partnership but it is not a solitary behaviour. It implies the presence of others in the environment and it is a tactic for change. In the bottom right quadrant the goal is individual (either personal or organisational) and the ways to achieve it are 'knowable'. Provided you have correctly identified that you are in this sort of landscape – an obvious mountain to climb – the appropriate behaviour is to do what you know needs to be done to promote your own self-interest. This commonly leads to competition between players – especially where resources are limited – and that is the label we have given to behaviour in this quadrant.

Competition, or the threat of competition, is widely recognised to be a powerful stimulus for improvement. Athletes may improve their performance. Organisations may be stimulated to draw on their creativity by being required to compete with others. The driving force is individual creativity and competition can improve the efficiency of individual parts of a system, which is often exactly what is required. Competition should be the simplest form of 'partnership behaviour' to bring about and the easiest to sustain, as it requires



## **Box 6** The Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma

Suppose that you and your accomplice to a serious crime are arrested and questioned separately. Suppose, too, that the police have very little evidence against you. Provided that you and your accomplice 'co-operate', by each of you denying that you were involved, the police will probably only be able to convict you of a minor offence. The police know this and offer you freedom from prosecution if you testify against your accomplice – if you 'defect'. Your dilemma is that they have probably offered the same deal to your accomplice – and if you each testify against the other, you will both receive the maximum sentence.

Whatever your accomplice does, you will do best if you defect. Since this is also your accomplice's best strategy, the outcome will be that you both defect. You have been set up to compete with each other, to pursue your self-interest over the interest of your opponent, and have both done worse than if you had co-operated.

If you could have communicated with your accomplice and had trusted each other, you could have done much better by co-operating. Without trust and communication, it does not pay to co-operate.

Describing the game by its pay-off structure liberates us from the details of prisoners and interrogation. Playing the Prisoner's Dilemma is simply a matter of choosing whether to co-operate or defect in the face of that pay-off structure. What happens if you play the game again and again (iteration) with the same opponent? Interestingly, there are conditions in which you can influence the behaviour of your accomplice to achieve mutual co-operation.

Robert Axelrod conducted a series of computer tournaments between different strategies, or rules, for the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma. He found that, although there was no one rule that was the most effective against all others, players adopting one particular rule did best in most circumstances. This rule, 'tit for tat', advocates co-operation on the first move. On subsequent moves, it advocates doing whatever the opponent did in the previous move. When two players using 'tit for tat' play together, they begin by co-operating and continue to do so into the future – each co-operative choice encourages the opponent to continue to co-operate. When a player using 'tit for tat' plays with one using 'always defect', he learns from being exploited on the first move (when his opponent defects) and retaliates by defecting in subsequent moves. A player needs to alter their behaviour to take account of the way their opponent has played in past rounds of the game, and a rule like 'tit for tat' enables them to do so.

The computer tournament suggests that successful rules encourage the player to follow four simple principles:

- *Don't be envious.* People are so used to games with only one winner that they often judge their performance against their opponent and try to do better than them. Your opponent then retaliates, and although you may do better than your opponent, you both do much worse than two others who are quietly co-operating.
- *Don't be the first to defect.* The best single predictor of success is to start with the assumption that co-operation is possible.
- *Reciprocate both co-operation and defection.* Reciprocating co-operation reinforces positive behaviour in your opponent. Reciprocating defection, that is to say punishing an opponent who doesn't co-operate, is equally important. The purpose is not retribution but triggering a change in behaviour in the other, so the punishment needs to stop as soon as the other player shows signs of co-operating.
- *Don't be too clever.* If your opponent is to co-operate on the next move (the behaviour you are trying to trigger), they have to feel confident that you will co-operate too. This is most likely when your behaviour is clear and consistent.

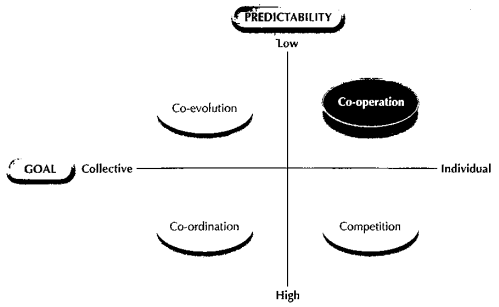
no agreement (or indeed direct communication) between competitors and there are no uncertainties about what to do.

Competition is appropriate behaviour when there is clear consensus on the nature of success, and few factors to constrain individual people or organisations from reaching their own goals. This requires relative independence from other players and from their futures. Competition has its limits when short-term success for the individual damages the environment necessary for that individual's survival in the longer term.

***Example:*** *When catering contracts are put out to tender, each provider has to compete to find ways of reducing costs and/or improving quality (or at least promising to do so).*

### *Co-operation*

When the goal is self-interest, there are certain circumstances where co-operation is a better strategy than competition. In the top right quadrant of Figure 1 goals are still individual but the landscape is more rugged and unpredictable than in the bottom right. To achieve the desired goal in these circumstances some non-obvious behaviours may have to be tried, and abandoned if unsuccessful. In this landscape, players act to influence the behaviour of others because instead of the win/lose of competition, there is the possibility of win/win. We have labelled this quadrant co-operation – enlightened self-interest in an uncertain environment.




There is a considerable body of literature about the conditions in which co-operation may arise. Probably the most influential contribution has been the book *The Evolution of Co-operation*,[12] which describes the game of the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma (Box 6).

The extraordinary and counter-intuitive implication is that co-operation may arise entirely out of self-interest and without any shared goals or even conversations between the co-operators. This analogy suggests strategies you might choose to try if you find yourself operating in the top right corner – pursuing self-interest in an uncertain environment. Perhaps even more importantly it suggests how you might behave if you were in a position to influence the 'rules of the game' and you wanted to encourage co-operation rather than competition (Box 7).

## **Box 7** How to promote co-operation

- *Trust and communication:* even a single-move game of the Prisoner's Dilemma can result in co-operation if genuine trust and communication between the players can be established. It helps to teach people to care about each other.
- *A sense of the future:* people have to recognise that their futures are linked.
- *Iteration:* people have to be encouraged to try and try again. One-off activity is not enough as co-operation only emerges as the best strategy over time.
- *Pay-off structure:* design a pay-off structure that both penalises individuals who act competitively and rewards co-operators. Living within one's budget while cost-shifting would no longer be acceptable.
- *Recognition:* people need reliable information about who has been co-operating and who has been defecting.
- *Like-mindedness:* if co-operators are able to interact with other co-operators, co-operation can evolve locally and then spread.
- *Teaching:* it helps if people understand the strategies that give rise to co-operation.

Each member of a co-operating partnership can achieve their own goals more effectively by co-operating over time with other members. They build on the fact that they see their future as linked. They act to influence the behaviour of other members because they see that actions that are in the short term successful may turn out to be less successful because they trigger unpredicted changes in others, while actions that might be expected to be unsuccessful turn out to be highly successful because they trigger changes that are beneficial.

Co-operation may emerge even when no one intended it as a strategy. It may be one of the most underused forms of partnership between *organisations*. It is useful because it doesn't need the time and effort required to reach agreement about a collective goal. On the other hand, it is probably the mechanism by which a lot of business gets done between *individuals* – 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'.

The good news about co-operation is that you can get a long way without collective goals. In organisational life the most serious barrier to the evolution of co-operation is the lack of continuity of relationships – from the past and into the future. If people move frequently from job to job, there is no opportunity to have the iterative interactions with other players that are required to trigger co-operation. And if people and organisations do not expect to have to keep working together (or even if they can see a date for the end of the relationship) the incentives to co-operate fall off rapidly as the shadow of the future fades. To promote co-operation therefore the person (or department or government office) making the rules must create stability in relationships, avoid reorganisations, and build expectations of length of stay in jobs.

Co-operation is also unlikely where other factors undermine trust. These factors may vary from the personal to the general political and cultural ones. It is particularly difficult to establish co-operation if one player believes that the choices made by another player are subject to the arbitrary control of someone else – a chief executive, for instance, or government minister – who does not take part directly in the game.

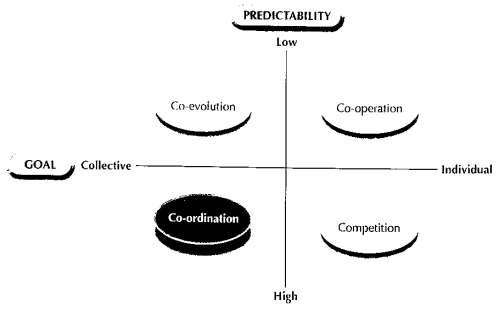
***Example:*** *Neighbourhood Watch Schemes where all that is required is an interest in the safety of one's own house and co-operation with one's neighbours to achieve it (rather than a wider interest in developing the neighbourhood).*

### *Co-ordination*

The bottom left quadrant describes another environment where the solution is knowable – the Mt Fujiyama type – but it differs from competition in that the goal is shared and not individual. We have used the term co-ordination to describe the partnership behaviours that are appropriate in this situation.

Sometimes it is easy to agree a collective goal and the behaviour required to reach it – when a collective goal is a means of achieving individual goals, for example, with two organisations reducing their expenses by sharing infrastructure costs. More often, however, co-ordination requires a joint organisational structure, such as a board or joint planning team, in which everyone has a voice and to which they are prepared to subordinate some of their individual behaviours. This joint structure is responsible for reaching agreement about goals and how to achieve them, setting performance targets and then monitoring them.

Co-ordination as a tactic is more akin to the everyday usage of the word 'partnership'. The requirement is first to agree the collective goal and then the way in which it is to be achieved. This will be based on past experience of what works. Co-ordinating partnerships come together with the intention of delivering pre-set objectives.



There is confidence that the objectives are the right ones, knowable from past patterns. The driving force may be a desire to reduce duplication, to add value by pooling resources or to fit the parts together better. This is the jigsaw model where, as long as everyone shares the same picture, they can in time see how all their separate pieces fit together.

Project management is a tried and tested form of behaviour in this quadrant. Everyone has to do their own part of the work but in a sequence or manner which allows the whole project to be completed. There are clear and joint objectives and these are known as the project begins. There are timetables and targets and individual roles are specified usually in both qualitative and quantitative terms. This is the environment in which the master plan can work, particularly when outputs can be clearly specified. In house building, for example, contracting processes are well rehearsed. Regulations are clear. Value-for-money frameworks are set. At a technical level it is relatively easy because people know how to behave as contractors and suppliers. This contrasts with health and education where contracting is new and the product much less tangible and less directly attributable to inputs, i.e. bricks and mortar.

Co-ordinating partnerships often form around money. In joint finance ventures, between local authorities and health authorities, for instance, partnership adds value by pooling resources. This may help to reduce gaps in services but this form of partnership is often limited to issues that do not challenge the individual goals of the organisations concerned. They are successful in important areas which are nonetheless marginal to the core business of the partner organisations (e.g. interpreting services for health professionals and minority ethnic communities, transport schemes for housebound people). This form of partnership rarely 'infects' the way organisations work. They function more like worthy organisational hobbies than pilots for changing mainstream practice and often do not survive beyond a 'project' period.

Co-ordinating partnerships are also formed to lever in new investment – new to the locality at least. Challenge Funds, the Private Finance Initiative, the London Initiative Zone for primary care development and Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) initiatives are examples. In SRB initiatives when the goal is both house construction *and* social change, much of the frustration with partnership comes from failure to build truly shared goals with local communities. The temptation is to see the sheer practicability of construction as the 'real work' in contrast with the business of social change which operates in different ways and to different timescales. If the collective goal turns out to have been bidding for money, then what you end up with is pressure to spend money. Houses get built, physical environments improve but communities fail to regenerate in the hoped-for manner and the impact of the investment is disappointing.[13,14]

Social change requires the potential for different relationships and the possibility of 'doing things differently around here'. This potential is often visible in the intense communication that takes place as partners try to 'create the platform' from which to bid. It is clear to everyone that they need each other – but only until they get the money, then it is business as usual. After the bid is successful they do not need to keep in touch much because the processes are so familiar to them – they each know how to do their bit.

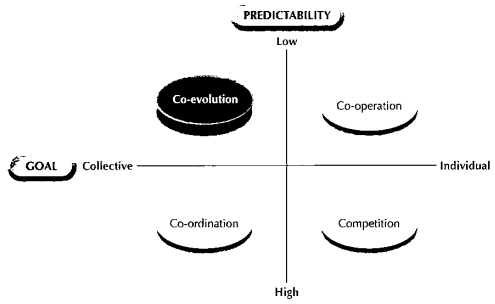
Among the problems for co-ordinating partnerships may be:

- failure to agree a truly shared goal
- misunderstanding the nature of the shared goal – is it bidding for money and spending it, or something else?
- failure to put the shared goal above the personal goal
- inflexibility
- misunderstanding patterns of cause and effect, so tackling agreed goals turns out to be tackling only symptoms not fundamentals.

***Example:*** *A surgical team may be seen as a co-ordinating partnership, coming together with a collective goal, around complicated procedures requiring expert co-ordination based on past patterns of what works.*

### *Co-evolving partnership*

Sometimes partnership is needed to generate new possibilities and new ways of working, rather than co-ordinate known good practice. We place this form of partnership in the top left quadrant. This is where long-standing, policy-resistant problems are to be found. The goal is a collective one but the 'landscape' is once more rugged and deformable. There is not the certainty based on known patterns of what works that we find in the bottom left quadrant. The environment is uncertain and the 'peak' itself, and the tactics needed to reach it, can only be discovered by all the players exploring together and contributing from their different perspectives.




Partnership in this sense is a vehicle for engaging with seemingly intractable problems which have not been amenable to change. If they prove to be intractable, then by definition old ways of working don't work. Project management and co-ordination of good practice are not credible solutions – 'If we always do what we always did, we'll always get what we always got.' This is where the Government's aspirations for partnership are so important. In policy document after policy document the analysis is consistent and welcome – we need to find new ways of working. 'More-of-the-same' and 'try-harder' are not enough. '*The strategic agenda is to work across boundaries ... underpinned by a duty of partnership ... past efforts to tackle these problems have shown that concentrating on single elements of the way services work together ... without looking at the system as a whole does not work ...*'[4]

We are beginning to use the term co-evolving partnership to describe behaviour in which the partners are committed to co-designing something together for a shared purpose. This is not about consensus or working to the lowest common denominator but lifting the game to a new level of operation (Box 8). It is not about past patterns that are known to work or about co-ordinating known good practice. It is about working together into the future, which is not yet knowable. The timeframe is long and the collective goal much less clearly defined than the objectives of co-ordination.

We have been exploring practical ways of working with co-evolving partnership which we call *working whole systems*.[15,16,17] Complex social issues, such as urban regeneration, depend on the actions of many individuals and organisations. They form interconnected parts that make up a whole – a system that is capable of adapting and evolving. The behaviour of the system depends on the way the parts are connected, as well as the way the parts themselves behave. Success is dependent on the mutually appropriate development of the constituent parts – winning isn't winning if the environment is damaged.[18]

**Box 8** Necessary conditions for co-evolving partnerships

- ***Building relationships:*** people need time to explore purpose. Sufficient people need to understand why they are building a partnership
- ***Changing mental maps:*** so that people see themselves as part of a 'whole' and reject the shifting of blame from one part of the system to another
- ***Diversity:*** sufficient mix of people from different organisations and different levels within organisations to enable new possibilities to emerge
- ***Expectation:*** that change can be fuelled by energy and passion, not just money, and that common purpose is the source of coherence
- ***Iteration:*** people need to be able to try and try again. One-off activity is not enough.
- ***Responsibility:*** the leadership task is to create conditions so that people can take responsibility for the behaviour of 'the whole' as well as their own individual behaviour.
- ***Future:*** incentives which enlarge the shadow of the future and enable people to see their futures as linked

One way of thinking about this 'whole system' is to use metaphors.[19] One such metaphor likens an organisation or collection of organisations to a well-oiled machine in which teams, departments, organisations are linked like cogs. When the machine is not working as we would like, we expect it will need to be redesigned or reorganised. It will need better control systems, better information systems and joint planning mechanisms. These seem appropriate measures for organisations operating below the horizontal line of Figure 1, where solutions and past patterns are knowable.

For organisations operating above the line we use a different metaphor – that of a living system. Organisations such as hospitals and local authorities can be compared to living organisms linked by interdependence and constant adaptation. For such an adaptive system to work differently, people have to create a great variety of interconnected relationships which generate new possibilities for action. New solutions seldom happen by design, but rather arise from the complex interactions that occur when enough people with different perspectives on a common cause get together. The solutions come from inside and are not dependent on external knowledge, skills or money. This does not mean that best-practice lessons cannot be learned but the motivation and the driving force for change are internal, organic and always locally specific.[20,21]

We suggest that it is only within the context of this form of co-evolving partnership that local systems find their own solutions to their long-standing problems. These are unlikely to be new inventions. They may be new to some agencies but are almost certainly known somewhere within the local system. It is the process of uncovering, rather than importing or inventing solutions, which generates the possibility of change which is not only locally appropriate but sustainable.[17] The innovation lies in creating the conditions that enable local people to re-engage with old problems. In an effective partnership of this sort all the partners change over time. We believe it is this possibility that holds much of the promise we recognise in partnership.

***Example:*** *Central government has recently announced a New Deal for Communities[22] aimed at local government, housing associations and many others. There are to be pilot sites and a ten-year timeframe. Two factors are of interest. The first is about shared purpose. The Chancellor has made clear that what interests him is employment and revitalised local economies. If agencies can contribute to this purpose then there is money for housing, but simply building houses is not the collective goal. The second is the ten-year timescale which means this is not about creating special project teams, which simply would not persist for so long, so it has to be about how-do-we-do-things-differently-around-here, or partnerships for possibilities.*

## Conclusion

There is a range of behaviours that organisations may usefully employ when working in partnership. The typology suggested above offers a way of thinking about the purpose of partnership and the different behaviours which are appropriate under different conditions. In the bottom right corner, there is no shared goal and no shadow of the future – so go for it! In the top right, there is no shared goal but organisations may choose to co-operate when it is mutually beneficial to do so. In the bottom left, when they identify a goal they all want to achieve, their main task may be to co-ordinate their activities. In the top left, when they have a shared aim but the future is unpredictable, they need to find ways of working which allow them to explore possibilities together. The aim here is to co-produce something different and the partners have to want to change in order to do it. (It is no accident that co-evolving is the least specific word in the typology.) We provide two examples, below, of a range of behaviours which illustrate the partnership typology.

The nature of the collective goal is one of the critical links between the quadrants. We don't need it for competition. We don't need it for co-operation to succeed. We don't always get it right in co-ordination: we think we've got it then it turns out to be something else often to do with money – which we suggest is the source of much of the frustration with the notion of partnership. For co-evolving partnership to thrive sufficient people

need time to explore purpose and to understand why they are building relationships.

We suggest that the long-standing, seemingly intractable issues that government policy is addressing are to be found in the top-left quadrant of this typology. They are likely to be influenced by the actions of many individuals, groups and organisations. There is likely to be agreement about broad aims but not about precise objectives and the levels of complexity are likely to be such that it would not be possible to map out a precise path to achieving them.

We have been developing *working whole systems*[16] as an approach to these complex and uncertain conditions. We think it has a lot to offer, both as practical working methods and as theory that guides action.

**Example**

### *Junior hospital staff*

- *Hospitals compete for junior clinical staff in order to fulfil their service contracts. When staff are scarce, competition is likely to make each hospital ask itself what it can do to make it the kind of place junior staff want to work in.*

- *Hospitals co-operate to run junior doctor rotas in order to fulfil their service contracts.*

- *When hospitals share a common goal of training junior staff with colleges of education, local authorities and health authorities, they form a partnership (education consortium). Each knows the part they have to play to achieve the goal. They still operate independently – they may even be competitors on other issues – but for the shared goal of training junior staff, they operate as a co-ordinating partnership.*

- *If the shared goal were to become not just the training of present day clinical staff but the future human resources of the NHS, then the nature of the partnership would have to change. Many different perspectives would have to be drawn in. The timeframe would be longer; the future uncertain; and the first task would be to create conditions where long-term productive relationships can thrive.*

**Example**

### *Booksellers*

- *Bookshops compete for customers. Until recently they did not compete on the basis of price but on things like opening hours, location, visiting authors signing their books, specialist books, audio-tapes and so on. As the big chains started to cut prices, small booksellers have had to find other ways of adding value for their customers. Some have branched out into selling coffee, stationery, children's play corners, internet access.*

- *Sometimes booksellers both compete and co-operate. Second-hand booksellers seem to be particularly good at co-operative behaviour. In several market towns in Britain when you visit any bookshop they will give you a map showing all the bookshops in the town. We don't know how this began but the booksellers seem to have decided they have more to gain than lose and the assumption is that if one co-operates the others will too. Often these bookshops carry much the same stock but there is a degree of specialisation and to the casual visitor each shop may have a distinctive flavour – one has more children's books, another more art books (and the latter will also direct you to the artist's supplies shop). Suppose the town's tourist office wanted to encourage this co-operative behaviour, they might decide to produce a leaflet and thus change the pay-off structure for booksellers. Those who co-operate by distributing the map and referring customers are rewarded by being included in the list. The sanction against those who 'defect' is removal from the list. The tourist office would be acting here as the 'rulemaker' intent on promoting co-operative behaviour among the town's shopkeepers and starting with those who are already inclined to do so. This win-win behaviour may lead to further co-operation which is not visible to the customer, such as sharing warehousing arrangements for storing books.*

- *Bookselling is the major economic activity in the town of Hay-on-Wye in Herefordshire. Booksellers, and many other interested parties, share a common purpose which is not selling books but attracting potential buyers to the town. In recent years they have successfully acted*

**Example** *(cont.)*

*together to co-ordinate the Hay-on-Wye Book Festival. Marquees are erected, B&B offers are encouraged, international advertising commissioned, special promotions featured, famous authors invited, prizes awarded and lots of visitors welcomed to the town.*

- *An example of a co-evolving partnership is the internet-based bookshop, Amazon, and its customers. Amazon has the explicit intention of creating a community of readers – when you buy a book you become a member of Amazon. If you are interested in books about desert travel, Amazon can tell you what other members with similar tastes are currently reading. As a bookseller Amazon has to compete with other bookshops on price, range, convenience, reliability, speed of delivery and so on. Technology has made it easy for Amazon and its customers to interact at any time of the day or night. Through home-based computers they have succeeded in making themselves more accessible to many people than neighbourhood bookshops. They have changed the environment in which local shops compete. Of course, many people still want to browse, to meet others, to be tempted by an unknown title rather than place a pre-decided order. But booksellers may be influenced to think differently about how they lay out their shops and how they behave with customers. Meanwhile, Amazon has made use of the interactive capacity of its technology to encourage its customers to write their own book reviews which are then made available to other readers. Now you can tap into a global network to find out what people think about the book you are contemplating reading or to add your review to this creative community. Will this virtual community develop and begin to organise themselves in other ways? Will Amazon evolve into a different sort of organisation that influences trends in publishing in new ways ? No one is certain what will happen next.*

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# Urban Health Partnership
## Summary

Originally set up in 1994 as the London Health Partnership, the Urban Health Partnership is a five-year development programme to generate a distinctive programme of work on community-based health services. It was set up as an alliance of charitable foundations, government and private sector chaired by Liam Strong, then chief executive of Sears plc, and managed by the King's Fund, one of the contributing foundations.

The Partnership was formed at a time when the Government was investing heavily in projects aimed at 'getting the basics right' in primary care through the London Initiative Zone. The programme grew out of the King's Fund experience of supporting demonstration projects in primary health care in the city.

### *The brief*

The brief was 'to do things differently and to add value to the many good projects which foundations can choose to support at any time and to the Government's current investment in improving the basics of primary care.' This was to be a 'learning fund' to find new ways of using relatively small amounts of development money to try to impact on mainstream investments. It was recognised that there would be no 'quick fix'. We were charged with developing an innovative programme. We interpreted innovation not as a search for novelty but, in industrial terms, as the stage which follows invention and prototype and focuses on bringing a design into production.

### *The purpose*

- To find new ways of using development monies to bring about lasting change
- To add value to efforts to improve primary health care in cities, particularly services for older people.

### *The focus*

The focus of the programme is improving services for older people because they:

- tend to have multiple needs and experience of chronic ill health
- tend to make use of a wide range of services
- often live alone and are relatively poor, like many city-dwellers
- have a lifetime's experience, are often resourceful and want to contribute to the communities in which they live.

The focus comes from our early consultation with health and social care agencies. This revealed no shortage of ideas but a passionate concern that competitive bidding for short-term project funding was deflecting people from what they thought was more important work – the intractable issues – such as mental health services, care for children in poor families, care at 3am and care for vulnerable older people.

The geographical focus is London, but from the outset it was clear that the issues facing London's health services were mirrored in other cities. A parallel programme was started in Newcastle and North Tyneside and in Liverpool. An urban primary care network was formed and meets regularly at the King's Fund to exchange ideas and information.

### *Resouces*

Funding is from the King's Fund, Baring Foundation, Special Trustees of St Thomas' Hospital and the NHS Executive. Contributions in kind were made by London First, McKinsey & Co and Sears plc. At local level financial and other resources were contributed by both statutory and independent agencies.

### *Phase one*

Once the focus had been decided, our next step was to consult elderly Londoners to hear their *personal experiences* and try to turn these into opportunities for improving services. We set up London-wide meetings and we ran local workshops in four districts to learn about the *barriers to change*.

*Personal experiences*

The concerns older people raised in these initial meetings have been repeated over and over again as the programme has developed. There is such consistency that these concerns must be seen as lessons of importance not because of their novelty but because of their familiarity. They include: safety and security, access to services, affordable and accessible transport, independence in the home, admission and discharge from hospital, information about services.

These are concrete problems and it is not difficult to see how they inter-connect. People who plan and deliver services and those who use them recognise that responses must be multi-agency, that users must be involved, that professionals must collaborate – these are not contentious issues. What we found was not a lack of intention but a scarcity of effective practical methods for making them happen.

*Barriers to change*

We worked in four districts at neighbourhood, general practice population, operational management and policy levels. Each workshop brought together between 15 and 30 people already working to provide services for elderly people in their patch. The system of care around elderly people involves many agencies and individuals extending way beyond the statutory services. It was this complexity we wanted to understand.

For example, in one district we mapped the progress of a hypothetical elderly person with a minor stroke being taken to the Accident and Emergency Department at 10pm. It gradually became clear that people in one part of 'the system of care' around admission to hospital knew little about the reality elsewhere, and that what appeared to be a solution in one place merely shifted the burden, often in ways which were unintended and counterproductive.

In another place there was widespread agreement about the importance of mobility and transport, whether by mini-cab or ambulance or an arm-to-lean-on, and yet transport services were seen to be quite unconnected to other local services.

We learned that if the right people are brought together they can gain a much clearer understanding of the 'big picture'. And that the people who use services bring crucial insights into the way the system actually works, rather than the way it thinks it works. We concluded that anything which helps the health and social care system to understand itself as a whole is likely to lead to better judgements about using resources to bring about lasting change.

*Phase two*

We began to develop the approach we have called *working whole systems*. The ideas which underpin it are useful where there is a willingness to see issues like hospital discharge or homelessness as beyond the ability of any one organisation or individual 'to fix'. Such issues are complex. They cross boundaries and require communication and partnerships. One of the key insights from systems thinking is that while each element of a service may be organised and managed in a way which appears effective, the system as a whole may perform badly and its capacity to learn new ways of working may be limited. Despite the hard work and good intentions of many people in many agencies, the whole often fails to function as well as the parts. In health and social care the people who suffer as a result are those who most need inter-connected services. We began seeking ways of making *the whole system* the focus of our interventions.

We began by seeking partners from anywhere within a local system – health authority, trust, local authority, general practice, voluntary organisation. What we were looking for was local partners who:

- do not believe there are quick fixes
- do not believe that solutions lie in 'one more push' using the same old ways of working
- are serious about partnerships, by which we mean more than simply coming together around money.
- are serious about involving people who use services.

We knew that the system of care around older people stretched way beyond the statutory services and was therefore likely to mean working with large numbers of people. We learned about and experimented with a number of methods of doing this, including Future Search, Open Space

Technology, Real Time Strategic Change, Appreciative Inquiry and Time Dollars.

We are working in a number of sites in three cities – London, Liverpool, Newcastle and North Tyneside. The work begins with a burning local issue – for example, how to improve hospital discharge; how to prevent lonely deaths; how to avoid last year's winter bed crisis. First, we engage the stakeholders who bring together people with many different perspectives on the particular issue of concern. We then design 'whole system' interventions which always involve working with many types of stakeholder; always engage local people in active participation; sometimes include working with large numbers of people simultaneously over two or three days. The purpose is to uncover local solutions to local problems. The 'newness' or difference comes from working to:

- *identify the system-wide issue* – not more analysis of problems but seeking common cause. For example, being able to move from hospital discharge as a problem for the acute trust to the system-wide issue of how can we make going home from hospital a positive experience.

- *identify the appropriate system for that issue* – not 'just the usual suspects' but the minicab service, police, ambulance, housing associations, community groups, churches, all taking part alongside more traditional players in the statutory and voluntary sectors.

- *find new ways for this system to recognise itself* – getting the 'right people' together which means many different perspectives and cross-sections of people from within as well as between organisations.

- *discover solutions within the system* – this is a critical difference: the belief that ordinary wisdom is enough and that with sufficient diversity and mix of people, new possibilities emerge.

The purpose of working in these new ways is not to replace existing ways of working, but to add value when existing methods have limited impact. These new methods have clear objectives focused on making new connections, involving users as experts and generating possibilities for new action.

### *Evaluation*

The programme is being evaluated by a team of locally based researchers led by Professor J. Popay of the Public Health Research & Resource Centre, University of Salford. The evaluation shows that we are succeeding in:

- designing and testing practical ways of working which lead to collaboration between statutory organisations and their communities
- creating enthusiasm to re-engage with long-standing problems. This happens at all levels – chief executives, hospital consultants, councillors, police, nurses – and helps make change more sustainable
- engaging significant numbers of older people. They have crucial insights into the way the system actually works, rather than the way it thinks it works
- spreading the techniques beyond the initial focus on older people to, for example, housing and urban regeneration.

Some of the difficulties lie in sustaining the interest of key groups over time; promoting equal voice for all participants, and understanding how to support local action in different sites. We continue to work on these and to develop our ideas further.

Barbara Douglas, Kathryn Evans, Martin Fischer, John Harries, Ian Kitt, Sue Lloyd-Evelyn, Dave Martin, Jane Neubauer, Sharon Ombler-Spain, Julian Pratt, Madeleine Rooke-Ley and Chris Shearin have contributed to the work of the programme, which is directed by Pat Gordon and Diane Plamping

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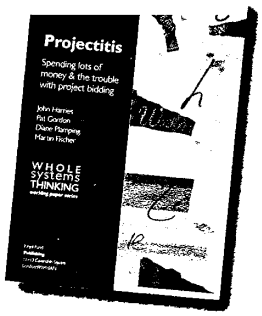


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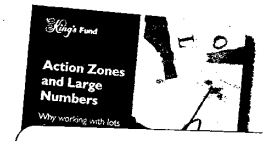


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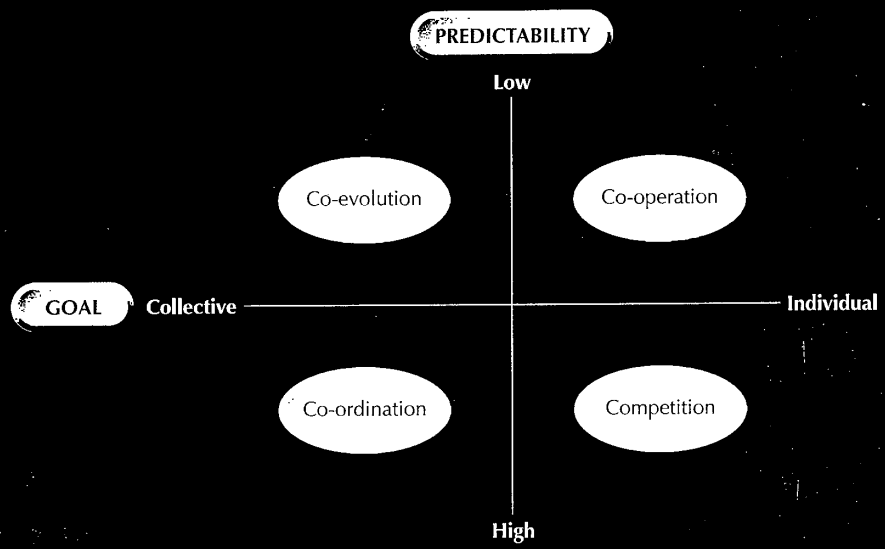


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