Partnerships: Pandora's box or panacea for rural development?

Alister Scott

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Alister Scott
Professor of Environmental and Spatial Planning and Governance
Birmingham School of the Built Environment, Birmingham City University

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Abstract

This paper charts the evolution and essential characteristics of partnerships set within the contemporary discourse of changing rural governance highlighted in the previous chapter (Goodwin, 1998). A detailed critique of the partnership concept in theory and practice is presented, drawing on the extensive research within the social sciences literature. The paper concludes with some assessment of the future prospects for effective rural partnerships in light of contemporary critiques.

Key words:

Partnership, rural governance, rural development, social inclusion, community

Acknowledgements

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Alister Scott

Birmingham School of the Built Environment, Birmingham City University, Millennium Point, Curzon Street, Birmingham B4 7XG
E-mail: alister.scott@bcu.ac.uk

Partnerships: towards a new form of rural governance?

The rhetoric and practice of 'partnership' has now become a common and contested phenomenon in rural development policy and practice, transcending global, regional and local scales of operation (Edwards *et al.*, 2001; Hague, 2004; Van Huijstee *et al.*, 2007; Derkzen and Bock, 2009). Partnerships are powerful representations of a prevailing political ideology characterised by the diminishing role of the state within which the well-documented shift from 'government' to 'governance' has taken place (Marsden and Murdoch, 1998; Derkzen *et al.*, 2008; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004). Arguably, partnerships have become established as the preferred vehicle for developing and achieving more inclusive and deliberative public policy goals (Bachtler and Michie, 1997; Davidson and Lockwood, 2008; Macintosh, 1992; Roberts and Lloyd, 1999; Roberts, 2003; M. Scott, 2003). However, little critical research has been undertaken into their overall effectiveness and suitability for this purpose (Derkzen and Bock, 2009; Hague, 2004; Valentinov, 2008).

Nevertheless, this significant re-orientation of public policy processes usurps the traditional distinctions between 'market', 'state' and 'civil society' in favour of new dependencies, networks and actors. Consequentially, partnerships are positioned as part of wider societal processes of 'democratic renewal' which are not simply designed to just improve service delivery, but are also about renewing democratic understanding, encouraging political awareness and enhancing opportunities for political participation (Goodwin, 2003, p. 7).

Typically, rural development partnerships include representatives of public, private, voluntary and community interests who are assumed to share a degree of commitment to specific policy objectives, at a strategic or delivery level (Derkzen and Boch, 2009; Shortall and Shucksmith, 2001), although this is by no means universal, and the way in which partnerships evolve and restrict their membership can impact on internal and external perceptions (Scott, 1998). Certainly, partnerships have evolved from simplistic considerations of co-ordination and coalition to encompass more complex and participatory notions of social capital, inclusiveness and shared responsibility (Brinkerhoff, 2003). This increasing sophistication is also evident in the diverse scope and composition of partnerships (Hague, 2004).

A number of positive propositions recur in the expanding literature and practice that champion the partnership ideal. For example, partnerships have been lauded as

universal goods; providing additionality (their whole is greater than their parts: Roberts, 2003); flexible tools in managing change (Rosenau, 2000), reducing uncertainty (Stoker, 1998), improving co-ordination (Davidson and Lockwood, 2008; Cavazzani and Moseley, 2001), reducing inequality (Osbourne *et al.*, 2006; Shucksmith, 2000), managing conflict (Prins, 2005), promoting sustainability (Ray, 2000; Moseley, 2003), improving understanding and mutual learning (Greer, 2001; Bull *et al.*, 2008: Bovaird, 2004), broadening participation (Reinicke 1999; Reinicke and Deng 2000), promoting social inclusion (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004), creating new arenas of power and power-relations (Derkzen *et al.*, 2008) and facilitating joint working (Esparcia, 2000; Ray 2000).

Unpacking definitions from this voluminous literature is no easy task. Van Huijstee *et al.* (2007) draw a useful distinction between partnership literatures following institutional or actor perspectives. Within the institutional perspective, the focus of work is on partnerships as new forms of collective governance, with the emphasis on the roles that partnerships can and should play in multi-level and multi-scalar governance (Goodwin, 2003; Hague, 2004). The actor perspective focuses much more on partnerships as strategic devices with research "into" partnerships rather than "at" partnerships (Van Huijstee et al. 2007 p. 81), where issues of social capital, knowledge and trust become core ingredients in an increasingly rich and ethnographic set of research methodologies (Martin, 1995; Rondinelli and London, 2003; Derkzen and Boch, 2009).

One useful all-encompassing definition is provided by Ansari and Phillipps (2004 p.35) who view partnerships as "... a process in which the stakeholders invest themselves in terms of ideas, experiences, and skills to collectively bear on the problem through mechanisms for joint decision making and action". This definition includes three important elements emanating from the various contributions above. First, partnerships are purposive. Second, they pool together resources (financial, practical, material or symbolic) from a number of different partners; and finally, the partnership is necessary in order for a desired outcome to be achieved. Brinkerhoff (2002) posits two further elements of partnerships based on their mutuality and maintenance of agency identity. Edwards *et al.* (2001, pp. 294-295) in their landmark study stress that

> "partnership' is neither a neutral term, nor one with a fixed definition; rather the meaning of `partnership' is discursively constructed and contested through political rhetoric, policy documentation, programme regulations, and grassroots practice".

Taussick and Mitchell (1996, p. xv), however, argue that "to be partner … implies not only making a contribution to knowledge and ideas but also learning from rather knowledge and experience of others".

Indeed, partnerships have been actively promoted as exemplars within New Labour's themes of openness, flexibility and vibrancy with particular emphases on public-private partnerships (Osbourne *et al.*, 2004, 2006). Gordon Brown, then UK Chancellor of the Exchequer (*The Guardian,* 2003, p. 8) encapsulates this political dynamic within the Public Private Finance initiative, within which support for partnerships has flourished.

> "It must be right that government seeks to secure, over the long term, the most cost-effective infrastructure for our public services. The Private Finance Initiative enables us to do this by binding in the private sector into open and accountable

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relationships with the public sector ... Those who say PFI is privatization have got it wrong because, while the private sector is rightly helping in public service delivery, the public interest is paramount".

Within the Scottish context it is highly significant that the 1995 Rural White Paper *People, Prosperity and Partnership* (Scottish Office, 1995) explicitly linked the concept of partnership with both empowerment and economic gain to achieve the sustainable development of rural Scotland. Comparably, the European Commission (1996, p. 3) at the Cork Conference championed partnerships as integral and multi-scalar tools for rural development policy:

> "Given the diversity of the Union's rural areas, rural development policy must follow the principle of subsidiarity. It must be as decentralised as possible and based on a partnership and co-operation between all levels concerned (local, regional, national and European). The emphasis must be on participation and a 'bottom-up' approach which harnesses the creativity and solidarity of rural communities. Rural development must be local and community driven within a coherent European framework".

Yet, in spite of its pervasiveness and almost utopian ideals, the concept of partnership has attracted significant academic criticism (see for example Davidson and Lockwood, 2008; Derkzen and Boch, 2009; Edwards *et al.*, 2001; Goodwin, 2003; Hague, 2004; Jones and Little, 2000) in part reflecting its overuse and abuse (OECD, 2001 Roberts, 2003); ambiguity and 'fuzziness' (Parkinson, 1996; Jones and Little, 2000); lack of accountability (Whittaker *et al.*, 2004; Bovaird, 2004; Edwards *et al.*, 2001); complex heterogeneity (Bovaird, 2004); lack of empowerment (Warburton, 1998) maintenance of inequitable power relations (Prins, 2005; Edwards *et al.*, 2001; Mackinnon, 2002); short termism (Edwards *et al*, 2000: Derkzen and Boch, 2009) and lack of sustainability (Blowers, 2002).

Unpacking this discourse of partnership working, we now turn our attention to the rationale for, and evolution of, partnerships with particular emphases on rural development.

The evolution and form of rural partnerships

Rural partnerships exhibit a wide range of characteristics in terms of their age, duration, focus, activity, funding, scale of operation and representation. These variations reflect not only the structural and institutional contexts in which partnerships are formed and operate, but also the different drivers, barriers and actors relations and motivations that influence the form and effectiveness of partnership working (Hague, 2004; Osborne *et al.*, 2002: Scott, 1998; Derkzen and Boch, 2009).

It is generally accepted that the late 1980s and 1990s heralded the period of most significant growth in partnerships globally (Edwards *et al.*, 2000; Esparcia, 2000; Hague, 2004). Within developing countries, the rapid growth of partnerships has to be seen within the political, economic and social imperatives to mitigate rural poverty and empower local people in community development programmes (Kapoor, 2005). Here, governments were increasingly reducing their role from delivery to supporting and enabling roles commensurate with emerging ideas of community governance (Marshall,

2005). However, to some commentators these partnerships were nothing more than smokescreens to divert state responsibility, reduce risk or minimise public sector debt, rather than confronting the need to improve inclusiveness or public policy (Farrington and Lewis, 1993; Hague, 2004).

Within a UK perspective, Jones and Little (2000) argue that partnerships were rooted within government-led, large-scale urban regeneration projects where the roles of the private sector and government-sponsored quangos were increasingly championed at the expense of local authorities (Atkinson, 1999). Thereafter, these urban models were transposed onto rural areas without sufficient regard to differences in context (Jones and Little 2000). Jacobs (2000) sees the political dimension of state-local authority tensions as fundamental to understanding the rise of partnerships within which both urban and rural regeneration initiatives were operationalised. Ultimately, this led to the derogation of local authority functions and controls in favour of new partnerships sponsored by central government as a means of centralised control or governmentality (Jones and Little, 2000: Thompson, 2005). This was further endorsed through subsequent legislation and policy initiatives in the UK and Europe which imposed a duty on public sector agencies to work in partnership at both a strategic and a service delivery level in order to secure emerging funding streams (Dwyer *et al.*, 2007).

Many of the early rural partnerships focussed on local community action characterised by small-scale, tangible physical developments with clearly identified priorities and a small number of partners (Francis and Henderson, 1993). Here, the nature of the process and outcomes of projects and funding opportunities were readily identifiable and understandable by all participants. Contemporary partnership arrangements, however, are characterised by much wider spatial and temporal complexities, leading to more sophisticated and convoluted partnership networks and projects concomitant with ever-expanding institutional requirements and bureaucratic funding regimes. These new partnership principles were employed both vertically, to link the different spatial levels of administration (European, national, regional and local); and horizontally, to link different sectoral groups and interests (local/regional levels). Ultimately, these new structures, relationships and multi-scalar operations obfuscated the process and outcomes, thereby potentially alienating and excluding local actors and participants (Derkzen and Boch, 2009, 2008; Dwyer *et al.*, 2007: Edwards *et al.*, 2001).

Partnerships now pervade all areas of public policy and are key features in the rural development arena. This raises key issues about the way partnerships are formed, operationalised and represent the interests they allegedly serve, and the extent to which they synergise and complement existing actors in the policy spheres in which they operate. Significantly, Derkzen and Boch (2009) note a research deficit in these wider questions of partnership performance and operationalisation.

Environmental partnerships

Partnerships in the environmental realm have clearly flourished within this new governance agenda. This trend is responding to several stimuli, which include dissatisfaction with current regulatory regimes, a response to globalization, short-termism, and the growing roles of the business and nongovernmental organization sectors in the environmental policy arena (Poncelet, 2001; Scott, 1999). Many commentators now claim that legislation alone can no longer sufficiently protect the public's interest with respect to the environment and that more collaborative, consensual

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approaches within deliberative processes of engagement produce more sustainable outcomes (O'Neill, 2001; Logan and Werkerle, 2008). However, the significant growth of actors with a particular stake in the environment has led Poncelet (2001, p. 13) to conclude "that the capacity to veto environmental action now outweighs the ability to produce solutions in many cases".

Environmental partnerships feature prominently at the global scale, particularly with respect to emergent discourses surrounding sustainable development. The link between inter-sectoral partnerships and sustainable development was formalized when partnerships were declared an important tool for implementing sustainable development at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (Van Huijstee et al, 2007), notwithstanding significant concern expressed over the way in which some partnerships are used to allow governments to shirk their responsibility for sustainable development and for unsustainable business corporations to use them as 'greenwash' (Oliver and Whelan, 2003; Hague, 2004).

Poncelet's (2001) ethnographic research on four environmental partnerships in the EU revealed a non-confrontational ethic, centred around cultural discourses of collaboration, ecological modernization within a shared socio-historic perspective. Crucially, partnerships were seen as opportunities for the production and social organization of (new) ways of thinking, talking, and acting with regard to environmental issues. This philosophy lies at the heart of the LEADER initiative (Ray, 2000).

At more national, regional and local scales, the environmental movement has been characterized by the creation of various partnerships from a range of different motives and drivers. For example, Scott (1986) charts the way environmental NGOs formally collaborated within a partnership to form Wildlife Link in order to present a more consistent and efficient voice against the dominant agricultural lobby in the lead up to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The success and resilience of the partnership is testified by its continued presence today. Within the marine environment, partnerships have also been promulgated as effective vehicles for delivery, given the complexities of the coastal zone in terms of stakeholders and statutory responsibilities (Scott, 1998; Stojanovic and Baker, 2008). In their national review of coastal partnerships in the UK, Stojanovic and Baker (2008) noted a mixed performance in the achievement of their stated goals, with notable failures in communication and engagement aspect, particularly surrounding private sector stakeholders, and the difficulties and limitations involved in taking a resource-intensive, consensus approach. These problems were exacerbated by the fact that these partnerships have no statutory basis (see also Scott, 1998; 1999). Further problems with local communities related to raised expectations over what could be achieved and, in this context, a more realistic re-aligning of roles in favour of improved discussion and knowledge was deemed more appropriate.

Morris and Wragg (2003) have documented how the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) process has re-focused attention on biodiversity as a driver for environmental planning partnerships, although the extent of public buy-in to the claim remains unclear. Selman and Wragg (1999) examined the partnership processes within the Oxfordshire BAP partnership. Here, green interests involving both professional and lay publics were positioning themselves in a partnership linking explicitly to national priorities. The focus on inclusion and consensus meant that there was little room for groups or views which were not mainstream. Moreover, the focus on nationally-set targets within these partnerships grossly distorted the focus and efforts of partnership working, but provides

the socio-political context within which the state controls the direction and outputs of the partnership process itself (Thompson, 2005). The BAP process illustrates this well, with an obvious tension by demanding simultaneous rationalisation and democratization processes; the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity requires the production of national biodiversity strategies and plans, whilst also calling for a participatory approach to conservation. The UK response ranges from the scientific priorities identified by the conservation elite, through the national level UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP), to the devolved local biodiversity action plans (LBAPs). Significantly, there is local variation in the way these LBAPS have been operationalised as revealed through a nationwide study of these partnerships using the Black Willow as a focus (Lawrence and Molteno, undated).

In his work on the Blackdown Hills partnership, Kitchen (2000) highlighted important problems with respect to the political and financial dependencies on the funding, work, membership and activities of the partnership which necessarily constrain actions and views. In order to command local legitimacy, it was argued that the partnership needed to move to financial and political autonomy. This theme of legitimacy is important and is explored by Connelly *et al.* (2006) in their work on partnerships in the Peak District National Park. Within two forums, both using deliberative processes for the development of a transport strategy, there were significant problems associated with the different forms of knowledge brought to the table and the resultant outcomes. Although both partnerships were initiated by the Park Authority in response to traffic problems, there were subtle differences in the way the forums were structured and operationalised. The Stannage Forum was open to all, but was dominated by the recreational NGOs at the expense of conservation groups and local authority interests. The highly structured focus on consensus was problematic, with internal challenges to the way the forum worked and proceeded from groups who felt disadvantaged or disenfranchised and certain groups like landowners refusing to participate. The Transport Forum had a closed membership and consisted primarily of local authorities with one environmental NGO, the CPRE, on the management board. Whilst there was more consensus and a timely strategy was produced, the CPRE was unable to sign up to it. Indeed, both forums' outputs were challenged externally in light of their 'lowest common denominator' approaches and through external groups claiming expert knowledges.

The issue of representation is important, as noted by Scott (1999) in his assessment of LA 21 partnerships where the domination of environmental interests led to a false sense of consensus with wider problems of external legitimacy. The question remains as to the central purpose of the partnership and, in this vein, environmental partnerships reflect a wider problem of who they are there for, and who they actually represent, and how they fit into the wider governance area.

Are partnerships effective tools for rural development?

Osbourne *et al.* (2006) synthesized from the literature three fundamental questions about the efficacy and relevance of rural partnerships which help frame this section on evaluation.

- Can partnerships promote social inclusion and the development of local community capacity to engage in the regeneration of their own communities (Geddes, 2000; Shucksmith, 2000)?
- Can partnerships promote new forms of governance and accountability for local communities within their own structures (Jones and Little, 2000; Whittaker *et al.*, 2004)?
- Can partnerships address existing power imbalances between the local state and local communities which privileges the former over the latter (Cloke *et al.*, 2000: 2002)?

Indeed, the strategic and more pervasive question on whether partnerships actually work has not really been given the attention it deserves (Valentinov, 2008; Derkzen and Boch, 2009; Hague, 2004; Sanginga *et al.*, 2007). Focusing on unpacking the bigger picture of partnership additionality, Valentinov (2008) applied property rights theory of the firm to partnership working. Whilst acknowledging some of the benefits of partnerships, he argues that positive effects alone are not sufficient to serve as a legitimization of partnerships before it is ascertained that no similar or greater effects could be achieved by alternative institutional arrangements such as by private profit-oriented firms. He concludes that rural stakeholders have increasingly recognized their common agendas in rural development, and rural partnership has been the most effective governance structure that enables the equal assignment of property rights to match the equality of interests represented.

Hague (2004) calls for an urgent re-evaluation of the partnership concept, arguing that the state may be better placed and a more efficient vehicle for delivery of rural development in developing nations. Furthermore, Edwards *et al.* (2001) note increased state centralization and manipulation of partnerships, thus questioning fundamental assumptions of their inclusiveness and endogeneity. Edwards *et al.* (2000) also question their efficiency in a landmark study on partnerships in Wales, where they identified over 150 health partnerships operational in the Mid Wales region alone.

Nevertheless, individual evaluation studies of partnerships have generally highlighted sporadic and piecemeal benefits (Ward and McNicholas, 1998; Schucksmith, 2000, Hodge and Midmore, 2008; Ray, 2000), but crucially these have been framed within limited, centrally imposed evaluation criteria and indicators rather than through the experiences and learning of the participants themselves (Midmore, 1998; Ray 2000: Sanginga *et al.*, 2007). A key problem here has been the lack of good and reliable indicators to support such assessments with 'the number of jobs created' the most universally applied and yet, seemingly, the most limited (Midmore, 1998: Hodge and Midmore, 2008).

Ray (2000) and Clark *et al.* (2007) both shed further light on this evaluation dilemma by noting fundamental tensions between the requirements of a managerialist state for evaluations to be positivistic and quantitative versus the necessity for local participants to be involved in more reflective qualitative evaluations as part of an ongoing learning experience. Ultimately, according to Clark *et al.* (2007), this conflict can fracture partnerships, limiting their overall effectiveness. Hodge and Midmore (2008) agree, and argue that the shift to more territorial and endogenous forms of rural development actions within partnerships pose significant methodological challenges in devising appropriate evaluation procedures.

"…but we have little systematic information on the roles and impacts of networks and associations in improving social and economic conditions. And we know less about how they may be successfully established and sustained. Analysis crosses the boundaries between economics and sociology. Quantitative information is required on economic activities but it must be complemented by analysis of the influence of networks, trust or social norms" (Hodge and Midmore, 2008, p. 9).

Sanginga *et al.* (2007) note that this research deficit poses serious limitations in understanding processes and outcomes which have taken place from the perspective and experience of local participants. With the increasing emphasis on the strategic importance of stakeholders' participation in research and development (Chambers, 2005; Cook and Kothari, 2001), there is also a growing recognition that monitoring and evaluation should be participatory (Guijt and Gaventa, 1998: Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008). Sanginga *et al.* (2007) used action research to provide a comprehensive evaluation of partnerships with the Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) in Africa programme. The paper is innovative in that the evaluation is based on partners' self assessment, reflection and participatory evaluation of their experiences with the partnership. The results reveal the importance of adequate funding, effective management and leadership, interpersonal trust and participant commitment. Ultimately, building sustainable multi-stakeholder partnerships is a dynamic process, requiring significant front-end investment of resources and time if the partnership is to be successful. These findings are reinforced in Martin's (1995) evaluation of England's Rural Action programme (see also Prins, 2005). This has led to calls for improved education of both professionals and local people about the benefits of locally determined action (Roberts, 2003), notwithstanding these more intangible outputs of community development, capacity building and empowerment are time-consuming to achieve and measure (Goodwin, 2003), high risk (Herbert–Cheshire and Higgins (2004) and unpredictable endeavours (Hodge and Midmore, 2008).

Work by Bull *et al.* (2008) on social learning is informative here in addressing these more elusive outcomes from partnership processes. Using semi-structured interviews, they identified significant instrumental and communicative learning from partnership action undertaken some 10 years previously within a waste initiative in Hampshire, and concluded that the partnership process had worked due to its initial focus on knowledge accumulation. Mickwitz *et al.* (2009) also highlight the importance of knowledge generation in the development of sustainable development indicators where the process of 'loose' workshop format and complementary knowledge(s) and expertise provided, across the range of partners involved, was highly influential.   These notions of 'longevity' and 'learning' in programme evaluation are extremely important and under-researched (see Shucksmith, 2000 for a critique; Derkzen and Boch, 2007: Sanginga *et al.*, 2007).

A significant body of literature examining the factors that influence partnership success highlights the crucial role that individuals can play (e.g. Edwards, 1998; Fitzduff, 2003; Francis and Henderson, 2003; Asby and Midmore, 1996; Midmore, 1998; Ray, 1998). This focus on the skills and social capital of particular individuals as opposed to communities is an important issue that goes to the heart of individual versus collective social capital discourse (Portes, 1998; Shorthall, 2004). This suggests that success has more to do with the presence of individual animateurs who have the capacity or authority to "make things happen" rather than the design of any scheme or support network. This

pattern can clearly exacerbate spatial inequalities in the way funding is secured and re-secured.

This need for a more considered focus on evaluation of partnerships, particularly in terms of their implications for realizing their eventual and stated objectives, accords with the views of Hague (2004, p. 273) and informs the way the rest of the chapter is structured. Drawing from the review thus far we can identify the key themes of inclusion, accountability and power which now form the framework for our evaluation.

Are partnerships effective tools for social inclusion?

Whilst rural partnerships, in theory, have social inclusion outcomes at their core, case studies on rural partnerships across a wide suite of rural priorities have revealed this proposition as fallacious (see for example Hague, 2004: Edwards *et al.*, 2000: Derkzen and Boch, 2009).

In particular, research has shown how policy makers use their positions in partnerships to exclude certain groups from influential roles. For example, Esparcia *et al.* (2000) noted how local actors may be excluded from key phases of partnership development and operation.

> "Public partners seem to have a key role in the constitution of the partnerships and in its first stages. At later stages, the contribution of the private and civic sectors increases but the decision process still seems to be dominated by the public sector" (Esparcia, 2000, p. 284).

Scott (1998) and Carter and Darlow (1997) investigating LA21 partnerships and Stojanovic and Baker's (2008) work on coastal partnerships in the UK found consistently that business and cultural interests were deliberately excluded, with the membership heavily skewed to environmental interests, whilst Yarwood's (2002) work on rural housing partnerships reported the consistent marginalisation of parish council representatives.

This raises fundamental questions concerning the ways in which partnerships achieve their knowledge(s) and how they seek to involve the wider public(s) and community. Here, Osborne *et al.* (2004, p. 166), in their work across rural regeneration partnerships in the UK, found significant problems with participation going beyond the "usual suspects":

> "There is a real danger that it is the usual suspects that get wheeled out, there is a real danger that it is those with loud voices and who are always seen [that get heard] ... you've got to work very hard to bring in the silent majority. But equally you can't reject the people who are actually getting on and doing the work".

It appears that these findings resonate across the whole rural policy arena. Edwards *et al.* (2000) found that, in the majority of programmes, the partnership process had mobilised the "established elite of active citizenry", rather than "opened doors to the community as a whole". Cloke et *al.* (2000; 2002), in work on homelessness partnerships, observed a significant lack of community involvement.

Perhaps the most explicit findings are by Edwards *et al.* (2000), who found that less than a third of partnerships they studied in Wales had representation from all three sectors, and that a significant proportion of partnerships were solely between public sector agencies. Overall, the voluntary/community sector was represented in only 46% of partnerships and the private sector in 56%. This raises important questions as to the diverse motives that lie behind individual agencies' participation or non-participation and the multiplicity of meanings lying behind any partnership (Derkzen and Boch, 2009; Edwards, 1998; Edwards *et al.*, 2001).

Nevertheless, Edwards *et al.* (2001) revealed how successful bids for partnership funding were often awarded on the basis of inclusion.

> "We were looking for partnership, and we were looking for a demonstration that the town council were involved, that the business sector were involved, that the chamber of commerce were involved, that the voluntary sector were involved, and so on. All of this obviously strengthened an application if the application was seen as a partnership effort" [development agency manager] (Edwards *et al.,* 2001, p. 266).

In another scheme, however, the process was skewed in favour of recruiting individuals who would work well together; a theme also evident in Scott's (1999) work on Ymlaen Ceredigion LA21.

> "What we did was to invite people to sit on our group from various organisations. But rather than inviting the organisations to send somebody we instead almost `cherry picked' from the organisations that we wanted in order to make sure that we could get people working together" [Market Town Initiative scheme committee member] (Edwards *et al.*, 2001, p. 267).

Roberts (2003) and Martin (1995) provide useful insights here, noting the relative lack of experience of partnership working by actors and agencies entering into programmes. There is also sparse evidence of training provision to develop the required skills; seemingly actors and agencies 'learn by doing'. This situation is compounded by the absence of trained and experienced regional strategic planners, economic development officers and operational regional managers to provide the necessary leadership and facilitation skills.

An alternative and minority viewpoint from these more negative assessments is found by Derkzen *et al.* (2008) in their work on Objective 1 funding in West Wales. Whilst acknowledging the local authority as the most powerful player in terms of resources, they did not conclude that the partnership was dominated by the public sector over time at the expense of the local community. Rather, by taking a longitudinal power-perspective analysis that recognized pre-existing inequalities of partners, they argued that these inequalities were constantly mediated and negotiated over time, thereby improving inclusivity within the partnerships they studied.

> "Despite the inequality, the local authority is somewhat counterbalanced by a strong community organisation. It is remarkable that respondents referred to the partnership as a 'real' partnership. In their eyes, it is not a 'talking shop' but a successful example (or struggle) of co-operation in rural development)"(Derkzen *et al.*, 2008, p. 465).

The idea of partnerships as reproduced and re-confirmed within ongoing power struggles, conflict, identity and mediation is also a powerful theme emanating from Mackenzie's (2006) work on the North Harris Trust.

Are partnerships effective forms of governance and accountability for local communities?

The question of accountability is an important but hitherto neglected theme in partnerships, providing something of a governance dilemma (Stoker, 1998; Connelly *et al.*, 2006; Whittaker *et al.*, 2004; Osborne *et al.*, 2002). Partnerships exhibit fragmented structures and processes, which in turn leads to a blurring of responsibilities as each partner may sacrifice some of its sovereignty in joining a partnership. Whilst it may be claimed that the partnership is accountable, there is often no direct mechanism by which partnerships can be held accountable in a proper fashion (Bovaird, 2004). This compares unfavourably with the elected representatives in agencies that operate within the same policy spheres as partnerships (Connelly *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, whilst representatives of public agencies within partnerships can operate within the mandate of their agency, for other private and community representatives, this is less obvious and potentially contentious. For example, Scott (1999) found that academics tended to dominate partnerships and, notwithstanding this expert knowledge was undoubtedly useful, it raises wider questions as to how such expertise was being traded, and whose interests were actually being represented (Edwards, 1998). Further concerns are also evident with particular regard to conduct of the partnerships: the topics that are considered, their networks of relations, their funding behaviours and how particular views, decisions, actions and policies are made within this collectivity of individuals (Derkzen and Boch, 2009; Scott, 1998; Osborne *et al.*, 2002; Hague, 2004; Van Huijstee, et al., 2007; Connelly *et al.*, 2007).

Hague's (2004) influential work in Bangladesh revealed the often fragmentary and confused nature of partnership governance amidst a plethora of competing objectives, programmes, actions and interests. This obfuscated any coherent rural vision within which partnership activity took place and led to further problems of accountability and political distortion by government and state agencies (see also Giguere, 2001). Goodwin (2003) develops these concerns further with his recommendations for clearer governance of partnerships.

> "The task for policy makers is not simply one of ensuring that all partners are able to contribute effectively to a single partnership, but also of providing a policy framework which allows partnerships working in different service areas to co-operate and deliver a co-ordinated range of outputs" (Goodwin, 2003, p. 33).

 Jones and Little (2000) provide an interesting perspective to this question in their evaluation of the rural challenge programme of the Rural Development Commission in the 1990s. Their findings reveal that competitive funding arrangements 'force' partnerships to take many forms including illusory or 'paper' partnerships, in order to chase funds rather than to create a legitimized body working to address local priorities. In such a climate, the sustainability of the partnership is highly questionable. This problem of chasing funds rather than addressing the key needs of communities has become a critical theme in programme evaluation. F urthermore, it is recognized that

those groups with successful track records tend to secure additional funds, thereby compounding the geography of funding spatialities and social capitals (Dwyer *et al.*, 2007: Brinkerhoff, 2002). The financial dependencies within which partnerships form and operate also constrain resultant actions and this has given rise to calls for partnerships to have financial and political autonomy from the members within them (Kitchen, 2000).

Accountability is a key issue within EU funding streams for which an extensive body of literature now exists. Several research studies have assessed EU funding programmes and have expressed significant concern over the disjuncture between the rhetoric and reality of rural partnership programmes (Bocher, 2008; Shucksmith, 2000; Ray, 2000; Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008; Whittaker *et al.*, 2004; Dergzen and Boch, 2009, 2007).

In their assessment of the EU Objective 5b programme, Whittaker *et al.* (2004) concluded that local actors were virtually impotent in this new territorial governance with a trust deficit evident at all scales of operation.

> "Although the accounting demands placed by the EU might be depicted as an attempt to wrest some power away from central governments of member states and to channel it down to the local level, nevertheless, the bureaucracy involved in ensuring this, coupled with member state procedures, often led local actors to feel they had little influence" (Whittaker *et al.,* 2004, p. 188).

The following quote by Bocher (2008, p. 382) encapsulates the accountability dilemma set within the wider institutional context within which such groups exist.

> "Rural partnerships such as the LAG (Local Action Group)have no clear democratic (input) legitimacy but in LEADER+ they can make important decisions about the distribution of several € million in support funds in their region. Democratically elected institutions and actors in regional government are usually sceptical about supporting actor networks, as they want to stabilise their own power and see insufficient democratic legitimacy in LAG networks that usually consist of voluntary actors."

Similarly, Bruckmeier (2000) and Dargan and Shucksmith (2008), in their analyses of the LEADER initiative, found that the concept, operationalisation and evaluation of innovation (central to the LEADER philosophy and funding stream) was largely imposed on local actors by the EU itself. This led them to conclude that the partnerships were more an expression of EU logic and intent than any concerted, meaningful local action or governance. The situation was also compounded by the imposition of very short time scales which disadvantaged those local groups lacking social and cultural capital from securing funds; though these were the very groups arguably in most need from these initiatives (Shucksmith, 2000: Hague, 2004). Consequently, we see Goodwin (2003) arguing for longer timescales and Roberts (2003) advocating longer lead-in times to allow effective relationships and networks to develop. Furthermore, Dwyer *et al.* (2007) reveal the unnecessary complications and bureaucracy in funding arrangements that further hinder local accountability and governance within the Rural Development Programme.

> "There is a need to move away from the detailed design of measures and delivery systems in order that these tasks can be undertaken at more local

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levels, and instead focus more clearly upon the overall purpose, balance and desired outcomes of funding" (Dwyer *et al.*, 2007, p. 885).

Whilst the preceding discussion has highlighted deficiencies in the way partnerships operate, it is important to realize that there are positive outcomes mentioned in all these studies. Indeed, Robert's (2003) comprehensive analysis of the Structural Funds across several European case studies provides a degree of contrast to the above studies, although he does acknowledge the asymmetries of power, particularly in the UK context.

> "The overall impression is that most partnerships have made considerable progress since their inception and that at their most effective the regional partnerships are "pioneering new, more creative and vibrant forms of governance based on trust and dialogue rather than central control and direction" (Roberts, 2003, p.61).

He concludes that "the partnership experience provided by the Structural Funds programmes has generally offered a positive learning experience for all participants and that the participants have then been able to apply the lessons in other areas of activity (Roberts, 2003, p. 61).

Are partnerships effective tools for changing power-relations between the state and local communities?

Commentators have long argued that the processes within partnerships are equally as important as the product or outcomes. A further dimension apparent relates to the effects of partnerships within the wider policy environment in which they operate and their impact on power-relations. It is noticeable how little research has been conducted on this theme (Derkzen *et al.*, 2008: Derkzen and Boch, 2009). Of those studies that have tried to address this, there is clear negativity apparent. For example, Edwards *et al.* (2001, p. 308) conclude that "the capacity of partnerships to redistribute power away from the state is illusory"; whilst Victor and Vidal (2009) and Mackinnon (2002) observe, in their assessments of LEADER and Scottish Highland partnerships respectively, that the key issue was actually how to prevent the programme being "captured" by the most powerful groups and used to reinforce the "status quo". This becomes more difficult as partnerships may be funded by key players within them (Kitchen, 2000). The essential argument being advanced in all these studies is that existing elites continue to govern governance largely through control of key aspects of partnership roles, remits and funds (Hague, 2004). Goodwin encapsulates this problem admirably:

> "The substance of community involvement is variable, with the local community being more commonly engaged in the initial identification of needs than in either project implementation or providing feedback and monitoring. As such, it could be argued that the much vaunted 'community engagement' is simply used by many partnerships as a 'resource' which must be enrolled and demonstrated in order to secure funding, rather than as a necessary system of accountability and capacity building. This in turn raises questions as to who is being 'empowered', and for what ends? Policies aimed at empowerment will need to stress the development of a rural programme designed specifically to enhance community capacity and social capital at the local level" (Goodwin, 2003, p. 31).

Derkzen and Boch (2007) reveal how professional knowledge(s) in partnerships can actively disadvantage local community representatives through a partnership process characterized by technocratic and scientific rationales as opposed to one rooted in true bottom-up dialogue. This echoes with the way that top-down ideology drives many partnerships, despite the rhetoric of local governance and empowerment (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008).

Shucksmith (2000), in recognizing the disjuncture between partnership theory and practice, calls for improved qualitative research to investigate the experience of partnership development over time. Further calls have been made for research to critically examine the mechanisms through which social capital can evolve and to examine the way partnerships deliver in conjunction with other actors in the rural arena. At present, there appears to be a significant local element to the 'losers' and this needs more investigation and unpacking (Bull *et al.*, 2008; Derkzen and Boch, 2007 and Macareavy 2006). It is here that the work of Macareavy (2006) is informative, with a focus on reflexivity focusing on the micro-processes of partnerships. The role of personality conflicts and clashes, social interaction and goal achievement are complex and elusive to outside researchers and, indeed, may remain hidden to all but the embedded researcher who has time and freedom to explore these avenues.

Summary and prospect: lessons from rural partnerships

This paper has introduced the concept and practice of partnership as the principal manifestation of the shift from government to governance. The rhetoric surrounding partnerships has been challenged through extensive research which highlights emerging problems concerning their efficacy and relevance as tools for neo-endogenous rural development. In particular, issues surrounding their accountability, legitimacy, inclusiveness, power and potential for social learning signify the need for more careful consideration of partnership formation and knowledge environments (Derkzen and Boch, 2007), training and preparedness (Roberts, 2003), effective timescales (Goodwin, 2003) and outcomes (Hague, 2004), incorporating research on both processes and outcomes of partnerships, with a move away from the focus on partnerships as ends in themselves (Hague, 2004). Crucially, research needs to be positioned on the range of participants involved within particular partnerships and the operational and decision making processes that subsequently evolve (Connelly *et al.*, 2007), and the network of relations with extant actors in the policy spheres of operation (Derkzen and Boch, 2007). Appropriate evaluation procedures need to be developed to incorporate both the exogenous and endogenous aspects of project goals and the time taken for their achievement (Midmore, 1998; Bocher, 2008). Crucially, there is no 'one size fits all' to the partnership model and more consideration needs to be given to the process by which partnerships evolve and adapt through their lifecycles (Derkzen and Boch, 2009; Scott, 1998).

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