Partnerships in Perspective: About Sustainable Relationships between Companies and Voluntary Organisations

Judith M. van der Voort\textsuperscript{1)} and Lucas C.P.M. Meuls\textsuperscript{1)}

\textsuperscript{1)}Business-Society Management at the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University Rotterdam

To date, there are little or no examples known of real integrative and sustainable partnerships between companies and voluntary organisations in the Netherlands. It is concluded that besides a Direct approach to these partnerships, a unique Dutch or Indirect approach is taken in which local mediators bring companies, voluntary organisations and the local government together. A set of common characteristics regarding partnering perspective, barriers and success factors, is introduced as a basis to interpret and compare both perspectives. It is stated that both a (lacking) definition and (lacking) success factors are at the basis of understanding and overcoming barriers to a partnerships’ evolution.

Key words: Profit, Non-profit, Partnerships

1. Introduction: Business Community Involvement?

An ever-increasing number of companies are putting their corporate citizenship into practice by leveraging co-operative relationships with non-profit organisations and/or governments. New social partnerships, inter-sectoral partnerships and public-private partnerships, are only some of the terms that are used to refer to these co-operative relationships between companies, non-profit organisations and governments. Nelson and Zadek (2000) present the following definition of a ‘new social partnership’: ‘People and organisations from some combination of public, business and civil constituencies who engage in voluntary, mutually beneficial, innovative relationships to address common societal aims through combining their resources and competencies’.

Sustainable relationships between companies and voluntary organisations contain four common characteristics (Van der Voort 2003). Partners should agree to a common goal/agenda, should both invest in and yield benefits from their co-operative relationship (reciprocity) and recognise the synergetic effect of bringing their unique resources and skills together. Finally, evolution refers to the long-term character of a partnership, as a prerequisite to achieving synergy.

Austin (2000) mentions three succeeding stages of partnering within cross-sectoral relationships:

1. Philanthropic: A company gives money and materials, and a non-profit organisation receives this charity humbly. Interaction is mostly limited to donating and receiving a cheque;

2. Transactional: Company and voluntary organisation are ‘business’ partners. Both partners invest in and derive benefits from their collective activity or project. Both partners pursue their own interests and goals;

3. Integrative: When partners’ missions, people and activities begin to experience more collective action. Begins to look like a highly integrated joint venture that is central to both organisations’ strategies. The partners have agreed to a joint policy and common vision to the future. Individual value creation escalates to joint value creation.

Partnerships undergo an evolutionary path, from philanthropic activities, to transactional and integrative relationships: from Business Community Involvement (BCI) as charity to BCI as a strategic activity, central to the primary activities of the profit partner. Kjaer and Tennyson (2003) refer to evolution as ‘the growing up from a more personalised to a more formalised working relationship, through the greater engagement of organisations and the creation of management systems’. As more people from executive and operational layers of both partner organisations are involved in the partnership, a variety of collective projects and activities are
undertaken, a common agenda is set, the partnership is of strategic importance to both partners, the organisations are concerned with their partners’ internal affairs and future, and social value is strived after, the partnership can be concluded to have reached the integrative or sustainable stage. The experiences of the first two stages are necessary prerequisites to building trust relationships. Lewicki and Bunker (1996) call this the ‘stagewise evolution of trust’. From ‘I am prepared to enter into a partnership’, to bonding: ‘I can identify myself with my partner’. Next to sustainable partnerships, two other sustainable strategies to focus BCI activities can be identified, namely: sustainable projects and a sustainable impact area (Meijs and Van der Voort 2002). An example of a company committing itself to a sustainable project is KLM. Each half year it organises two project weeks during which KLM employees are able to devote themselves to local community projects. Voluntary organisations can react to this kind of sustainability by supplying their volunteering activities in project form. A sustainable impact area implies that the business organisation brings focus in its BCI activities by limiting the scope of their activities, for example to ‘handicapped people and sports’ or to ‘young entrepreneurs’. Voluntary organisations have to make clear to their business counterparts in what way their activities can be linked to the business’ chosen impact area.

2. Research Question and Methodology: How to Develop BCI in the Netherlands?

In the Netherlands, the previous ten years can be characterised by a revival of Business Community Involvement (BCI). This revival can be attributed to the largely USA and UK best practices and literature. The focus is on corporate employee volunteering, which is only one of the wide ranges of possibilities to bring BCI into practice (see Olde Hanter, 2002). This reintroduction of BCI in the Netherlands is pushed forward by the national Business network ‘Samenleving en Bedrijf’ (Business and Society), the peak organisation on volunteering ‘Nederlandse Organisaties Vrijwilligerswerk’ (Dutch Organisations Voluntary work), some private consultants and the national government. The recent state of affairs regarding BCI in the Netherlands is as follows. Early 2003, about fifteen largely multinational companies are involved in ‘Samenleving en Bedrijf’, there are numerous business practices known of companies that have organised or are still organising BCI projects, about thirty local government supported intermediaries offer their brokerage services, and some nationally organised non-profit organisations are developing policies towards their business relations in terms of money as well as in-kinds, volunteer time and knowledge. To date, there are little or no examples known of real integrative partnerships between companies and voluntary organisations in the Netherlands. This article therefore focuses on the following research question: What are the barriers to sustainable relationships between companies and non-profit organisations in the Netherlands and how can these barriers be overcome?

To answer this question a review was made of USA and UK literature on collaboration between businesses and non-profits (Austin 2000, Coogins and Rochlin 2000, Huxham 1996, Moss Kanter 1999). Based upon this review a preliminary model of common characteristics, success factors and barriers to sustainable partnering has been developed. This model was presented at workshops to and discussed in interviews with representatives from Dutch practice. Sixteen interviews have been held with representatives from amongst others: ‘Samenleving en Bedrijf’, Good Company, Fortis, Rabobank, KPMG and the Dutch Red Cross. All thirty local and regional intermediating networks have been involved in this research by filling in an e-mail questionnaire. During this process it became clear that there might also be a unique Dutch model of partnering that differs from the dominant USA and UK approach. In this perspective, local and regional support organisations play a mediating role in bringing companies, voluntary organisations and the local government together. The special feature of the Dutch mediating support organizations is that in most cases they are initiated and financed by (local) government. The influence of the business and non-profit sector organisations in these local mediating structures is limited¹. Some of those local mediators function in the form of local business networks; other initiatives are co-ordinated by a local social welfare organisation. Some of them focus on supplying ‘good days out’, while others try to focus on finding innovative ways to bring the business and voluntary sector nearer to each other. The final part of this research is an in-depth analysis that has been undertaken of two well-respected Dutch cases, representing both perspectives. A short description of both cases studies can be found in Text Box 1.

¹ In this research we were not able to compare the Dutch intermediates with USA intermediates such as United Way. Nevertheless we have the impression that United Way’s are much closer to the business community and looser from government than are their Dutch counterparts.
**Partnerships in Perspective: About Sustainable Relationships between Companies and Voluntary Organisations**

---

### A good practice of the Direct approach in the Netherlands: The Fortis-Cityteam partnership

Fortis is a multinational, financial service provider operating in the field of insurance, banking and investment funds. Her desire to become the leader in BCI, has resulted in the establishment of the Fortis Foundation the Netherland in 2001. Cityteam is a community organisation, which is dedicated to supporting young people who have problems getting their future on the right track. Supported by Cityteam coaches they follow a nine-month work and learn trajectory including community activities, workshops, a local company internship and a job search. There are Cityteams in Utrecht and Zoetermeer. The first contact between Fortis and Cityteam (in 1998) is made by two Cityteam board members who happened to be Fortis employees as well. After some teambuilding activities, a financial donation, the design of a Cityteam brochure and an active contribution from Fortis employees to the Cityteam anniversary, both sides agree to formalise their partnership by drawing up and signing a three-year partnership agreement in 2002. Third partner to this agreement is the HRM department of Management & Career Development, which is responsible for Fortis’ one-and-a-half-year traineeship program for newly hired employees. These trainees have the opportunity to organise workshops for the Cityteam youngsters as part of their traineeship or to participate in Cityteam community projects. Since this year it’s also possible for Fortis trainees to organise a thematic workshop for Cityteam coaches, for example about financial or marketing management. An advisory committee is introduced in 2003 in which trainees can take place and which will function as an advisory body to Cityteam management.

Cityteam benefits from this partnership through the support it receives in terms of knowledge, people, facilities and money. Fortis benefits too, in terms of training- and communication skills, company pride, motivation and a sharpened image of society. In evolutional terms, this partnership has just passed the transactional stage and is heading to the final, integrative stage. Both Fortis and Cityteam has pronounced their willingness to continue the partnership after the first partnership agreement will expire in 2004.

---

### A good practice of the Indirect approach in the Netherlands: De Arnhemse Uitdaging (DAU)

DAU is a local network of company representatives and the local government, initiated in 1999 as the follow-up of a comparable initiative called ‘Mooi zo, Goed zo Arnhem’. The responsibility for its activities is laid down at the foundation Rijnstad, a municipality financed organisation in control of all social- and cultural work in Arnhem. Roughly thirty businesspeople, both seniors and young managers, are via so-called ‘Tafelgroepen’ directly involved in its mediating activities. DAU’s ultimate goal is to improve Arnhems’ quality of life by mediating between help requests from community organisations and the willingness from the local business society to bring their social responsibility into practice. Money and materials as well as volunteers are mediated for. DAU is run by a very eager coordinator and supported by a comparably enthusiastic mayor. DAU is famous for its innovative mediating formula. It’s not the coordinator, but a group of so-called ‘oude rotten’ (senior managers) and ‘jonge honden’ (junior representatives), representatives from the Arnhems’ business society, who spend one or two hours a week closing mediating deals. For that very reason that a big group of voluntary people is involved in the brokerage function, makes this initiative as innovative as it is. This year a second exchange market has been held to stimulate direct contacts between the business society and community organisations in Arnhem. Until now, the community organisations have no direct say within the mediating organisation. The first step to actively involve both community organisations and the government in its activities has meanwhile been made on the initiative of the local government. In 2002 she made a request of forming a think thank of business representatives to discuss possible future economic activities of homeless people in Arnhem. In the first meeting it was concluded that both government and community representatives should be involved to confront this complex problem. At this moment, thought is given to the future structural form of this multi-stakeholder initiative.

---

**Text Box 1** Two Dutch Cases
This article compares the USA/Direct and the Dutch/Indirect model on the following three topics:

- The perspective on partnering;
- Barriers to partnering;
- Success factors for partnering.

The article concludes with overall conclusions and ideas for further research.

3. The Perspective on Partnering

As stated before, four common characteristics are used to define a partnership between a company and a voluntary organisation: evolution, common agenda/goal, synergy and reciprocity in terms of benefits and costs. In the Indirect model, mediators focus on improving local living conditions. Local business, community and government representatives work together to realise this common, social aim. Reciprocity is above all related to those organizations, mostly business organisations, which are directly involved in the local mediating structures. Their investments in time and energy have to be balanced by possible gains in terms of employee morale and reputation, as a prerequisite to sustaining their commitment for the long term. Because of its emphasis to social impact, this notion of reciprocity is less of an issue in the Indirect model, as it is within the Direct perspective. This social accent appears also from its perception of synergy. In the Indirect model, synergy is arrived at by the collective action of a large number of local participants. A great amount of small scale, unique community activities and projects deliver in all an important impulse to the quality of life within a specific neighbourhood or village. The rhetoric behind this notion of synergy is that no one single organisation or sector is able to confront the present-day social challenges on its own (Huxham 1996). Austin (2000) calls this ‘Inescapable interdependence’.

This notion of synergy is the result of an evolutionary path that is comparable to the one described by Austin (2000). The evolution that a mediating network undergoes starts with the brokerage of money and materials in the philanthropic stage. This relatively easy task of canalising the charity efforts of local businesses to community organisations in need is the basis on which contacts are made, a network is established, local publicity is gained for and enthusiasm is created. The municipality could stimulate this kind of mediating services by providing an enabling network. This is in essence, a consolidation of the traditional division of roles and responsibilities in the local context. The transition to the transactional stage is marked by an awareness that companies are allowed to profit from their community involvement activities too. This results in the mediating of marketing agreements and corporate employee volunteering projects. The local government can make a good example by acting as an applicant to volunteering projects as well. In the final, integrative stage of its evolution, the mediating network has developed into a sustainable form in which community organisations, businesses and the municipality are working together as equal partners in confronting common agreed to social priorities; a Civil Society in which shifting coalitions of the three sectors address more complex, social problems.²

As opposed to the Indirect model in which an equal partnering role is attached to the local government, the Direct model leaves no room for this kind of government involvement and relationship. In many cases it relates the rise of sustainable partnerships between companies and voluntary organisations exactly to a withdrawing government! Dutch practitioners of the Indirect model claim to accept an equal partnering role of the municipality, as the local partnership touches upon the municipality’s traditional terrain of responsibility and because of the fact that the local government has relevant networks, knowledge and financial resources available. Focus is another point of difference. The qualitative research makes clear that the direct way of partnering is constrained in its use to (multi) nationally organised organisations that have enough resources and manpower to keep the relationship going. Even though the focus for these relationships is on societal benefits as well, emphasis is paid to internal benefits, the so-called collaborative advantage: the putting together of unique resources as a way to gain benefits for both partners and their partnership (Huxham 1996). Austin mentions amongst others the following benefits to this kind of direct partnering between companies and voluntary organisations: benefits of scope regarding potential clients/members, marketing knowledge, material support, enlarged networks, cheap training possibilities, improved employee morale, access to new markets and the possibility to test new products and services. The added (potential) worth of the Indirect perspective, is the fact that it leaves room for

---

² The research presented here focussed on barriers to forming an integrative partnership. Of the 30 mediating structures the DAU case is the only example that comes close to that stage. Early 2003 most mediating structures are still struggling to start up philanthropic and transactional relations between the sectors.
Partnerships in Perspective: About Sustainable Relationships between Companies and Voluntary Organisations

3.1. Barriers to partnering: Two perspectives

Why are sustainable partnerships between companies and voluntary organisations, both in a Direct and Indirect perspective, lacking in the Netherlands? Which factors impede their evolution to this final, sustainable stage? Huxham (1996) calls this ‘collaborative inertia’: the situation in which the partnership gets stuck in a less satisfying and less sustainable form. Austin (2000) refers to this as the ‘collaboration frontier’. Table 2 summarises the research findings regarding barriers to partnering.

Above all, ‘collaborative inertia’ is the result of a lack of experience with and therefore a lack of knowledge about this kind of partnering, both in terms of benefits and success factors. Within the Direct model, this ‘ignorance’ results in a perceived difficulty in contacting potential partners. ‘There is no common basis from which to initiate community investment partnerships’ (Taskforce 2002, 1998). In the Indirect perspective, the newness of the mediating terrain is an important impeding factor. Good experiences are not shared and the mediators are said to be too little ambitious. These mediators are not aware of their role in mediating volunteers, without having gained experience in mediating money and materials; the first stage of their evolution.

Since representatives from two widely diverging sectors join forces, organisational and cultural differences and the related communication problems, are unavoidable (see: Steckel et al. 1999, Van Tulder and Van der Zwart 2003, Huxham 1996, Kearns 2000). In the Indirect perspective this manifests itself in two related problems: mediators representing one sector (mostly business/government) have difficulties in reaching the other sector and mediators have trouble matching supply and demand. Meijis (2001) claims that voluntary organisations are not prepared to gain from this new source of (employee) volunteers yet. They have yet to accept that companies have more to offer than money.

Related to this problem is the so-called ‘gratefulness’ and ‘charity syndrome’ (Austin 2000). Voluntary organisations

---

Table 1 The Direct versus the Indirect Perspective on Partnering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective on partnering</th>
<th>Direct model</th>
<th>Indirect model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographical focus</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Local focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parties involved</td>
<td>Private-private sector relationships</td>
<td>Private-public-private sector relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus in purpose</td>
<td>Internal focus: what can we do for each other?</td>
<td>External focus: what can we do for the local community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving synergy</td>
<td>Synergy through combining unique resources</td>
<td>Synergy through collective action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Barriers to Partnering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct model</th>
<th>Indirect model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Cultural and organisational differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience and Knowledge</td>
<td>Lack of knowledge, experience and best practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>Lack of strategic vision to partnering; gratefulness and charity syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Frame gap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Short term vision and high expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>The influence of stakeholders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
do not perceive themselves as equal partners to businesses and the business sector in their turn, perceive their business community efforts as philanthropy acceptable in times of economic prosperity. Especially this dependency thinking of voluntary organisations is a big problem, according to Kees Fijneman, manager at Rabobank Nederland.¹ 'We are so pitiful and small. The big business society has come to help us. That forces voluntary organisations into an underdog position, and that’s a self-fulfilling prophecy'. In the Indirect perspective this problem manifests itself in a lack of direct participation of voluntary organisations in the mediating network. The more so since they are not expected to play an active part either! Too little thought is given to the voluntary organisations’ strengths and what they are able to contribute to the partnership. Related to this issue, is the concept of power; ‘The power to dictate what the collaboration does is often felt to be in the hands of those who hold the purse strings’ (Huxham and Vangen 1996). Companies in their turn, lack a strategic vision to cross-sector partnering. They do not perceive this partnership as an investment, but as a form of philanthropy lacking benefits for the long run, whilst running great risks like losing autonomy and creating resource-dependence at the same time. That makes it difficult to keep them committed when an economic recession sets in. That’s especially a problem in local mediating structures, which are mostly run by representatives from the local business society who have their priorities outside this local network.

Hamel and Doz (1998) refer to another barrier to partnering in the Direct model, namely the frame gap: partners look at (social) problems and their solutions from different professional perspective, through which their partnership get stuck at the negotiations phase. Coogings and Rochlin (2000) mention their (un) natural relationship as the source of problems. A lack of knowledge about and contacts with the other sector feeds stereotype prejudices and a turf mentality. Kearns (2000) defines this turf mentality as the tendency of partners to defend their emotional jurisdictions; a ‘we’ and ‘they’ instead of an ‘us’. In the Indirect model this turf mentality is fed by a long tradition of an active welfare state and a strict division of roles and responsibilities between local representatives of the three sectors.

The context, finally, plays an impeding role in both perspectives on partnering. The necessity to account for their actions to a wide range of both internal and external stakeholders makes the partnership far less autonomous than the partners would have expected at the outset (Huxham and Vangen 1996). Moss Kanter (1994) mentions the following stakeholders that have to be accounted for: clients, financiers, employees, volunteers, management, members, the municipality and possible other partners. The evolution to the integrative stage can be hindered, when these stakeholders are less informed about, involved in and committed to this partnership. This is especially a problem when ‘the first generation’ of people that started this cooperative relationship disappear from the partnership scene. The (local) context plays an essential role in the Indirect perspective as well, since this local network can be perceived as a representation of this local society; at least concerning the societal problems it focuses on. A mediator is therefore not able to fulfil her brokerage function without the support of a large network of companies, community organisations and the local government. Especially the lack of a supporting and stimulating local government is perceived to be an important barrier.

Henk Kinds from Community Partnership Consultants, a consultancy bureau on new social partnerships, states that policy makers have no notion of how they could put on this kind of business support in achieving local social development.² In short: ‘It seems that there are more forces working against partnerships, than forces stimulating this kind of cooperation’ (Coogings and Rochlin 2000).

3.2. Success factors: Two perspectives

Literature does not present a blueprint for the Direct model; instead six success factors are mentioned, the so-called alliance drivers and alliance enablers (Austin 2000). Alliance drivers are those factors that speed up the evolution process, namely fit in missions, strategies and values, personal commitment and friendships and continual value creation. Alliance enablers support the partnership on an operational level. A clear goal and focused attention, clear expectations and attention to communication and communication processes are counted for as alliance enablers. The fit in missions, strategies and values implies that the partnership is strategically relevant to both partners, as a prerequisite to a continual and long-term commitment. Both partners should perceive their cooperative relationship as a rewarding investment and link their partnership activities directly to their primary activities. Emphasis is paid to the added worth of small beginnings, as a way to test fit, develop trust and to

---

¹ Interview, 13th Jan. 2003.

² Interview, 29th Nov. 2002.
Partnerships in Perspective: About Sustainable Relationships between Companies and Voluntary Organisations

Table 3 Success Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alliance drivers</th>
<th>Direct model</th>
<th>Indirect model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>Fit in missions, strategies and values</td>
<td>A vision on mediating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building trust</td>
<td>Small beginnings</td>
<td>Small beginnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Emotional connections and friendships</td>
<td>The role of pioneers and the creative outcomes of a group process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Local support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value definition</td>
<td>Continual value creation</td>
<td>Small scale; district oriented working method</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alliance enablers</th>
<th>Direct model</th>
<th>Indirect model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Clear purpose and focused attention</td>
<td>Business-like attitude, professional working method, results oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Attention to communication and communication processes</td>
<td>Communication: network management, public relations, experience sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stimulating and supporting role local government in evolution process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Besides fit, emotional connections are essential to success: ‘The mission connection is the driver, and the personal relationships the glue that binds the organization together’ (Austin 2000). It’s not organisations, but the people in it that build relationships. Moss Kanter (1995) refers to these friendships as social capital that is built on delivering on promises as a prerequisite to developing trust. Both partner organisations should make sure that their employees, volunteers, members and managers have the opportunity to learn from and participate in the partnership, for example by organising an employee volunteering project. Value creation implies that both partners deliver added value to and invest in the partnership (Moss Kanter 1999). Value creation starts with a sense of equality, both among partners and between benefits and investments. Austin (2000) claims that the benefits to partnering should be balanced against possible risks and costs. To what degree this notion of value should be quantified, depends according to Moss Kanter (1994) on the wishes of the relevant stakeholders. A shift in attitude is essential: from how can this partnership generate value for me, to the situation in which the partners are continually engaged in generating value for their partner and their partnership.

A clear goal or purpose manifests itself on two levels: that of the partner and its partnership. At the level of the partner, Austin (2000) refers to the so-called ‘collaboration portfolio’; the whole of philanthropic, transactional and integrative cross-sector relationships a specific organisation possesses. At the level of the partnership a common purpose should be set that satisfies both partners’ expectations, in addition to the partner’s own agendas. A common purpose brings external focus to the partnership and stimulates a results-oriented attitude. Austin (2000) claims that high expectations are a prerequisite to partnership success, as long as a long-term focus and sufficient resources meet these high expectations. High expectations are translated into results through a long-term commitment and a strong sense of accountability. Finally, communication is mentioned as a necessary condition to discuss differences, to discover fit and value creation possibilities, for building trust relationships, to evaluate the partnership process and its outcomes and to inform relevant stakeholders.

The qualitative research in general and the case study about DAU in particular, produce a number of success factors for the Indirect model that are different from the ones mentioned for the Direct model. Table 3 contains both perspectives’ success factors. One of the success factors is shaped by the personal characteristics of the local networks pioneer(s). They have be enthusiastic, active, motivating, convincing and to be able to network. If these pioneers are supported by a group of local society representatives, creativity and the innovative capacity, and therefore the capacity to reach the integrative stage of their evolution will be enhanced. Small beginnings are also reckoned to the success factors of this perspective. Emphasis is paid to the added worth of the first two stages of the evolution in terms of experiences, knowledge, public relations and networks. If
the network aims at bringing about a change of attitude towards a local civil society, it has to deliver results first. Striking is the fact that although companies are mentioned as ‘part of the problem’, the public does not perceive them as being an active ‘part of the solution’. If voluntary organisations, mediators and the local government want to cooperate with representatives from the local business society, they need to embrace a more business-like attitude! This is because the demand for help outweighs the supply from businesses in terms of money, materials and volunteers. Those mediators that understand the business language, that are professionally organised and results oriented, are therefore perceived as being most successful.

Further, mediators have to realise that they are colleagues in achieving a local Civil Society. It’s for that reason that they have to share their experiences and good practices. They have to carry out a vision of public spirit: of a jointly shared interest in the social and economic quality of the local community. Both network management and public relations are essential, since a mediator has to have a large amount of local contacts on its disposal if it is to realise a great number of matches. Directly related to this success factor of communication, is the notion of local support. A mediator is not able to function properly if it is not actively supported by all three local sectors, especially in the light of its evolution towards a local Civil Society.

The local government is separately mentioned, in view of the fact that it is able to provide an enabling framework in terms of finances and regulations. Furthermore, it’s the municipality that has to make room for and allow the active participation of representatives from other sectors within the traditional boundaries of local government. Finally, it is recommended that mediators take a small-scale approach to their mediating activities. By subdividing their working area into smaller-scale districts, their work remains survey able in terms of societal problems and the number of companies and voluntary organisations involved. Moreover, this approach satisfies business’ need to focus their business community involvement activities to the local neighbourhood in which they operate.

3.3. Explaining barriers to partnering

Why is collaborative advantage aimed for and collaborative inertia reality? Why are some factors perceived as barriers to reaching sustainable partnerships between voluntary organisations and companies? Two explanations apply. Partners may manage an incomplete or limited definition of a partnership, or their relationship lack some or all of the above mentioned success factors. The reverse is true too. A (faulty) definition and (a lack of) success factors can be perceived to be at the basis of both explaining and overcoming barriers to partnering. The Fortis and City team case illustrates these assumptions. It seems that a lack of knowledge and experience with cross-sector partnerships, the partners’ reluctance to give up (part of) their autonomy and the financial context that is threatening Cityteams’ survival, are perceived by both organisations’ representatives to be the most important barriers to reaching the integrative stage of their evolution. In terms of success factors, this case seems to lack a common purpose as well as a link between the partnership and the company’s primary activities. The partnership is simply not sufficiently (strategic) important to the business’ partner and that will be the case as long as Fortis does not connect this partnership to her primary, local banking activities. There are possibilities to help Cityteam’s survival and generating strategic, HRM and marketing benefits for Fortis at the same time. For example by organising Cityteam community projects for local Fortis employees, by making Fortis managers responsible for introducing a Cityteam in their working area or by jointly organising a Cityteam community program that is open to other companies, the government and educational facilities.

DAU has not yet reached the integrative stage in its development as well, due to a lack of knowledge about the concrete filling in of this end stadium. There is no arsenal of best practices available within the Dutch context from which lessons could be learned. Time is a crucial factor.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In this article the following research question has been answered: What are the barriers to lasting relationships between companies and non-profit organisations in the Netherlands and how can these barriers be overcome? The research makes clear that this question should be answered from a two-fold perspective. On the one hand, USA literature forms the basis for a Direct model of partnering between companies and voluntary organisations. These relationships undergo an evolution from traditional philanthropy to transactional and integrative relationships. The partnership between Fortis and Cityteam is a best practice of this perspective on partnering. On the other hand, a second approach, the so-called Indirect perspective, can be distinguished in the Netherlands. In this Indirect model of partnering, a mediator
brings local companies and voluntary organisations together by closing matches between requests for help in terms of money, materials and volunteers, and the need from the business society to bring their community involvement into practice. Its task is to bring about a change in attitude towards a local Civil Society in which representatives of local companies and voluntary organisations, as well as the local government, work together as equal partners to confront specific social challenges in their community.

Two models, two approaches to partnering. Both perspectives are systems-in-progress, at least within the Dutch context. There are no examples known of partnerships/local mediating networks that have reached the integrative stage of their development yet. In fact, most intermediates struggle to start up transactional relations between the sectors. Both models are apparently hampered in their evolution by specific barriers to partnering of which the following, amongst others, can be mentioned: lack of best practices and experience in cross-sector partnering, a charity and gratefulness syndrome and cultural and organisational differences. Both (a lacking) definition and (the lack of) success factors are at the basis of understanding and overcoming these barriers to their evolution. By introducing a set of common characteristics regarding the perspective on partnering (including definition), barriers and success factors, and interpreting these for the Direct and Indirect approach, both models can be compared to and set forth against each other. This notion of the Direct and Indirect model can also be used to compare the Dutch non-profit — profit partnerships practice to other European and non-European perspectives on partnering between voluntary organisations and companies.

More research is essential, for example with regard to the specific role of the local government in a Civil Society. Should local government organise three-sector meetings to make local impact agenda’s involving? Or should local government meet with the two sectors independently? What will be the effect of political changes on developing business — non-profit relations? Other research could focus on the value of the Indirect model and the intermediating structure. What are the particular effects of this model for the local infrastructure? Is it possible to achieve synergy through collective action? Is the Indirect model indeed a separate model or is it only a stepping-stone in the development of direct relations between companies and non-profit organisations? To research this, cases as the ones described in this article, should undergo a longer term research: what will their position be on the Collaboration Continuum two or five years from here? Another question that needs to be answered is: to what degree is this Indirect model really specific for the Dutch context? Are there any other perspectives on partnering between companies and voluntary organisations in and outside Europe?

For the time being, it can be concluded that the last words about cross-sector partnering have not yet been said of written down! We are faced with an exciting challenge and we just have to do it: create experiences and learn from them!

‘The gold was not discovered until they started digging’
(Austin 2000)

About the authors

Judith van der Voort has graduated on the subject of partnerships between voluntary organisations and companies at the Faculty of Business Administration/Erasmus University Rotterdam. At the moment, she works as Ph.D Candidate at the department of Business-Society Management of the Rotterdam School of Management. Her Ph.D. is on the strategic use of business community involvement. Lucas Meijs is professor on “Volunteering, civil society and businesses” at the department of Business-Society Management at the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research focuses on non-profit management and governance, (corporate) volunteering and profit non-profit cooperative relationships.

Contact: jvoort@fbk.eur.nl / lmeys@fbk.eur.nl

References


