Social Partnerships for Governance and Learning towards Sustainability

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the social drivers underlying the emergence of the social partnership as an organisational form and to suggest a framework against which their success can be assessed. Analysis of social partnership functionality has been limited by a fuzzy terminology laden with normative overtones, a rhetoric of diffuse expectations and confusion between process and outcomes. Extant academic literature on social partnerships tends to be polarised around two opposing viewpoints: an idealised view based in trusting relationships formed through constructive dialogue and a contrasting pragmatic emphasis on power and instrumentality, allowing for little in the way of a more contextualised understanding of why social partnerships form and how effective they are in performing this role. In an attempt to provide a basis for more rigorous analysis of partnership functionality, I draw from social theory to set out the underlying processes that are driving the demands for these partnerships.
I argue the drivers for partnership formation relate to the mounting public awareness of social and environmental threats and risks associated with industrial development and the perceived inability of traditional systems of authority and expertise to deal with them. New institutional arrangements such as social partnerships emerge as a result. The paper argues that the key functions for partnerships are a) to provide new forms of social governance to address mounting concerns such as climate change, food security and human rights issues associated with global supply chains, and b) to foster the inter-organisational learning that would enable more creative and effective

responses to these challenges. Armed with this analysis of why partnerships have emerged, and arguing partnership effectiveness needs to be assessed against these functions, I identify critical success factors for their implementation. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research.

1.0 Introduction

Social partnerships refer to a wide range of inter-organisational, cross-sector mechanisms designed to address issues such as the environment, health and education (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Waddock, 1989). Collaborative structures, cross-sector partnerships and other inter-organisational forms are seen as a way of dealing with 'wicked issues'(Rittel & Webber, 1973). These are meta problems that are often intractable (Hardy *et al.*, 2003), characterised by uncertainty and risk (Beck, 1992), bridge multiple boundaries and are socially constructed or framed differently by the multiple actors that are involved (Williams, 2002). Problems concerning environmental and social aspects of sustainability are examples and the value of various versions of social partnerships in addressing health, education and environmental issues was promoted in the Rio Declaration (UNEP, at http://www.unep.org/) and has been widely extolled in the literature since (Elkington & Fennell, 1998; Roberts, Lawson, & Nicholls, 2006). However, critical analysis of the effectiveness of such partnerships in the academic writings has been limited by a fuzzy terminology laden with normative overtones (Tomlinson, 2005), and in the practitioner literature and policy by a neo-liberal rhetoric of diffuse expectations around the benefits of de-regulation (OECD, 2006). The problem of the looseness of the partnership concept is compounded by its coupling with contested concepts such as corporate social responsibility, sustainability and sustainable development (Garriga & Mele, 2004).

In this paper, I attempt to provide a basis for more rigorous analysis of why social partnerships form and how they function in relation to that role. I draw from social theory to set out the underlying processes that are driving the demands for these partnerships. Armed with this analysis of why they have emerged, I then ascertain the critical factors necessary for partnerships to meet these requirements.

1.1 Overview of the social partnership model

Partnership is the most attractive and hence most frequently used term covering all sorts of collaborative relationships (Morse & McNamara, 2006). Social partnerships are an emergent process by which organizations collectively deal with growing complexities, involving some interdependence on the part of the stakeholders (Gray, 1989, p. 227). While having little in the way of formal legal status, they involve a degree of institutionalisation, and are frequently dependent upon virtual structures that link across organisational and national boundaries (Zadek, 2001).

Partnerships and multiple stakeholder collaborative arrangements and networks of all types are now widely deployed as government social or environmental policy instruments, ranging from global arrangements such as the Global Compact to one-on-one partnerships at the local government level. Partnership with business (such as the longterm partnership between McDonalds and the Environmental Defense Fund) or in multiple stakeholder arrangements that include government and business is now also expected of leading NGOs such as Greenpeace or WWF.

The last decade has seen a shift from short-term philanthropic relationships to more long-term and strategically focussed partnerships between NGOs and both business and government (Heap, 2000; Moon, 2001; Singleton, 2006). Other partnership forms include supply chain partnerships which can be business to business (perhaps with

NGO involvement), or industry to industry partnerships such the Forest Stewardship Council that also include social interest and other community based groups.

The policy rhetoric surrounding these voluntary partnerships is of the win-win created by the efficient use of government or inter-governmental resources while enabling protection of public social and environmental goods (Daley, 2007; Prakash & Potoski, 2006). Benefits are said to include advocacy, information exchange, capacity building, facilitation and implementation of innovative environmental and social action and policymaking on the ground that adds business value (OECD, 2006). Much of the academic literature on social partnerships is descriptive, written around phasic or process based approaches to classifying stages in the relationship between NGOs and business organisations (Austin, 2000; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). Austin's (2000) well known model, for example, classifies cross-sector collaboration as either philanthropic, transactional or integrative, and has been much applied in the not-for-profit literature (Edwards & Onyx, 2003).

Extant academic literature devoted to the more critical analysis of the benefits of social partnerships tends to polarise around two contrasting discourses. On the one hand, a set of understandings is constructed around an idealised view of an organic market coordinated through productive dialogue, where partnerships are based on trusting relationships and shared meaning (Ims & Jakobsen, 2006). The opposing discourse is pragmatic, constructing the market as a mechanical system governed by rationality and the law: partnerships are viewed as inevitably involving competition, power and instrumentality (Fadeeva, 2005; Morse & McNamara, 2006). Importantly, both researchers and partnership participants appear to be divided according to these opposing understandings (Tomlinson, 2005). With a few exceptions (eg Lyon and

Maxwell, 2008), the middle ground where an ambivalent view on the social value of such partnerships might be critically expressed is uninhabited.

It is not surprising, then, that the largely case-based research available gives widely different readings of the benefits of these relationships. So, for example, on the one hand, we are provided with examples illustrating the benefits of the partnership-based inclusive capitalism model (eg Prahalad, 2004), while, on the other, we have cases that purportedly demonstrate that contractarian economic thinking associated with the mechanistic and instrumental worldview prevails (eg McFalls, 2007). Only recently have there been calls from business communication scholars for a more contextualised understanding that recognises the ambiguity and complexity of these arrangements (Livesey *et al*., 2009) and assesses them accordingly. Recent reviews in the management literature have also criticised the over emphasis on simple input-output models, calling for approaches to the study of partnerships that are more methodologically sophisticated and which give recognition to the social embeddeddness of the partnership phenomena (Selsky & Parker, 2005)

1.2 Social drivers for the partnership model

In this section I draw from theory concerned with the social dynamics of late modernity to explore the underlying processes that are driving the demands for these partnerships. I argue the shift to partnership is an example of an institutional change associated with trends in post-industrial societies that are impacting on more traditional institutions of authority and influence. The emergence of the so-called social partnership model needs to be understood as a socio-political phenomenon and assessed against the broad dynamics of social change of the world system in which we live (Chase-Dunn, 2002).

In the work of German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, and his academic colleagues, such partnerships reflect new forms of politics that are emerging at local and global levels, a 'sub-political' realm of decision-making operating outside the representative arena, external to traditional political forms (Beck, 1992). These forms evolve as a result of traditional and formal systems of state governance, legislation and science being challenged because of their inability to deal with the high levels of uncertainty, endogenous risks and other social and environmental threats associated with technological development (Beck, 1992, 1997, 1999, 2000; Beck, Bonss, & Lau, 2003; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). 'Sub-politics' emerges in the so-called 'risk society', where society as a whole becomes preoccupied with risks and negative impacts of industrialization on the natural environment and society as a whole (Beck, 1992).

To Beck and associated theorists, 'sub-political' arrangements are playing a key role in the development of a new reflexive capacity in society. They are associated with the emergence of forces for both 'globalisation from above' and 'globalisation from below' and the interplay between them (Chase-Dunn, 2002). So, on the one hand 'sub-politics' refers to the partnership arrangements associated with the global alliances, supra state agreements, international agreements such as the Global Compact and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, while on the other, it refers to the onset of transnational communities of activists and other networks linked by some specific social or environmental normative ideas (Portes, 1996). 'Sub-politics' may also be local, as individual citizens or organizations of all types come together in new, often shifting and temporary networks, partnerships and alliances.

In the context of my examination of social partnerships, the importance of this emergent arena is that it is highly political, decentralised and flexible, and it contains corporations, NGOs, government agencies and outsider stakeholders including organisations of all types, social movements and individual citizens (Benn, 2004). Examples are task forces, community consultative committees, as well as other cross-sector partnerships and networks of all kinds. By opening up decisions around how to manage the side effects of industrialisation to a wider array of participants, outside of the traditional experts and regulators, the 'sub-political' arena has the power to undermine traditional forms of decision-making and power while providing a new and more informal means of governance (Matten, 2004). According to Beck (1997), individual citizens, social movements and organisations are empowered to contest the damaging effects of globalisation and capitalist development, forming alliances that will bring about political change.

In this process, traditional boundaries multiply and dissolve, but are replaced by pragmatically determined, temporary boundaries that are socially selected (Beck *et al*., 2003). The point is that boundary selection is now optional, placing high levels of importance on perceived performance against social and environmental criteria and on expertise and professional credibility. The diminishing influence of the state and other traditional sources of authority and legitimacy represents the pressures of individualisation impacting on organisations as well as citizens (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This forces the search for interconnections between organisations and individuals that may be more temporary, but fulfil emotional as well as knowledge based needs (Bauman, 2003).

Because this new decision-making arena of 'sub-politics' forms around risk and uncertainty, its partnerships, alliances and networks are highly knowledge-intensive

(Healy, 2009) and present opportunities for knowledge sharing and development. As it draws together diverse actors with a range of capacities and capabilities around a common, often targeted goal, this domain has a great capacity to absorb or resolve uncertainty. But as expertise and knowledge become more prized, so they become highly politicised. Beck's view (1992, 1997) is that the self-critical processes of late modernity operating through 'sub-politics' would enable expert knowledge to be democratised. All types of organisations, including business and NGOs as well as the wider public would become active in the co-production of knowledge.

There are of course, countering forces to this democratisation and many of the struggles in the messy 'sub-political' arena concern establishing the legitimacy of certain sources of knowledge, expertise and learning (Benn, 2004; Healy, 2009). Organisations participate successfully in it if they are adaptive and work together with partner organisations to their mutual benefit in the wider context of the 'risk society'. Inter-organisational learning is therefore a key reason for organisations to become engaged in 'sub-politics'.

Recent writings (Beck, 2006) specifically focus on the political responsibility of global corporations. As global political actors they have the power through their global networks and partnerships to influence change far beyond the capacity of nation states, trammeled by what Beck (2006: p.213) calls their 'nation-based egotisms'. This new political stage is linked to the international 'sub-political' dimension supported by communication technologies. But while the conditions of the risk society emerge in association with globalisation, it is important to note that it is not a condition of global uniformity – it is many risk societies, each with their own cluster of perceptions of risk and ways they are restructuring their institutions to deal with these risks (Benn, 2004; Matten, 2004).

In sum, Ulrich Beck's work is important because he was well ahead of his time in forecasting that the negative consequences of industrial activity on the natural environment could have major socio-political impacts. Particularly in Europe during the 1990s, it was influential on a wide range of academic and policy discourses. His work is clearly theoretical and at a very broad level, still in need of empirical and specific investigation, a challenge that could be taken up through the lens of social partnerships.

Drawing on this body of theory, in the next section I suggest that social partnerships are emerging in accordance with the need for new institutions at the sub-political level that can play two key roles: social governance and inter-organisational learning and that therefore partnership effectiveness should be measured against these roles. Both roles are concerned with managing risk and uncertainty.

2.0 Pivotal roles for social partnerships

2.1 Partnership as social governance

2.1.1 Governance as 'sub-politics'

A standard definition of good governance 'is the effective implementation of policy and provision of services that are responsive to citizen needs' (World Bank, p. 5), implying control, coordination, monitoring and assessment functions. For more than a decade, however, influential scholars in public administration and political science have preferred to understand governance as interorganisational and self-organising networks, emphasising it as a highly politicised concept, with its practices construed according to the interests of its proponents (Jessop, 1998; Rhodes, 1996). Governance on this understanding must deal with the 'growing structural complexity and opacity

of the social world', and refers to 'multiple objectives over extended spatial and temporal horizons' (Jessop, 1998, p. 43).

The themes of risk society and 'sub-politics' can explain the emergence of social partnerships as examples of these new forms of governance, associated with the diminishing power and influence of the state and reflecting shifts in power and legitimacy in the form of increased political involvement between corporates, government and NGOs (Matten, 2004b; Matten & Moon, 2005; Moon, Crane, & Matten, 2005; Scherer, Palazzo, & Baumann, 2006; Scherer, Palazzo, & Matten, 2009). These new forms of social governance typify the 'sub-political level'. They involve a range of co-regulatory government/ business voluntary partnerships and business/ NGO alliances and networks, they are decentralised, flexible and temporary and operate as a sphere of influence outside the representative arena.

For example, NGOs are playing a much more active role in corporate regulation and in multiple stakeholder arrangements involving all three sectors (Utting, 2007; Zadek, 2004) . An example is the SA8000 Social Accountability certification standard aimed at guiding companies to protect human rights. This was developed by Social Accountability International, NGOs and other stakeholders (Epstein, 2008). Such arrangements display many of the characteristics that Beck's prescient early writings suggested on the role of 'sub-politics' in an increasingly uncertain and globalised world. They appear to offer a means for the wider participation in decision-making concerning the social and environmental impacts of global capitalism. However, as I will point out, they raise many questions worthy of further exploration.

2.1.2 Implications for corporate responsibility

As discussed, nation states increasingly demonstrate governance failure through their inability to protect their citizenry against emergent social and environmental risks such as climate change. Corporations and global NGOs such as WWF and Greenpeace are moving to fill this governance space through the formation of various partnerships and alliances. In corporate discourses these initiatives are linked to so-called corporate citizenship or corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities.[1] In the context of national settings and cultural factors, CSR is increasingly utilised as a framework to further sustainable business practices (Albareda et al., 2007). But the partnership model should not just be thought of as neoliberalism and deregulation gone wild. More correctly, with NGOs empowered to monitor and adjudicate over corporate social and environmental performance through 'sub-political' measures such as the certification schemes, they represent a form of re-regulation (Utting, 2007).

These new forms of governance have many political implications that are not yet well understood. On the one hand, NGOs and corporations are placed under political pressure from activists, consumers and society at large and need to constantly assert their legitimacy in this space (Grit, 2004). On the other hand, they are each now provided with a new political role and CSR or corporate citizenship becomes an opportunity to access influence and power (Matten, Crane, & Chapple, 2003).

The wide range of voluntary partnership programs that involve government working with business are another variation of these new forms of governance, acting as sets of practices concerning firm environmental or social behaviour that organisations of particular sector, or size, or location can sign on to and then agree to behave

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[1] CSR can be defined as actions that firms take beyond compliance and shareholder value to address the legitimate interests of a wider range of stakeholders such as employees, suppliers, customers, the wider community and the natural environment (Freeman *et al*, 2004).

accordingly. Many of these arrangements involve third party organisations such as NGOS, or various expert consultancies. More indirectly as a source of influence, 'sub-political' pressures from either 'globalisation from above' or 'below' can also encourage leading companies to support more stringent governmental regulation in order to raise industry standards across the board.

Overall, these arrangements represent institutional shifts in response to the emergence of a new political arena and their effectiveness need to be assessed as such.

2.1.1 Critical perspectives

In the win-win discourses, social partnerships act as a form of self-regulation, reducing risks to do with quality management or reputation, often to do with issues upstream in the supply chain. Taking a focus on partnerships in their role of governance in the 'sub-political' arena enables a more nuanced view, raising a number of problematics and areas for future research.

For example, de Man and Burns (2006) suggest that their case analysis of partnerships along the paper supply chain indicates that both NGOs and business tend to focus on issues with high public relations value, and that partnership development is dependent upon involvement of major players – corporations or NGOs with high public profiles (de Man & Burns, 2006). This study challenges Beck's optimistic view that the small players, such as the very many small activist groups engaged in the 'sub-political' arena, can be given a voice.

Lyon and Maxwell (2008) claim that public voluntary programs such as initiated by the US EPA (and by various government agencies in other countries such as Australia) are initiated when regulation is not seen as politically viable. In other words, small carrots or subsidies are offered when big sticks are not seen as possible.

As well, rather than enabling environmental benefits for specific firms, benefits such as information diffusion about pollution reduction opportunities may assist the industry sector overall. In fact, the social value of these voluntary programs may be quite ambiguous. On the one hand, they may act as a less costly substitute for full regulation and thus provide social benefit. On the other, they may undermine government standards, extending business responsibilities into unknown and diffuse areas and raise agency concerns through the involvement of stakeholders such as third party service or accreditation bodies (Heath & Norman, 2004). Voluntarism can have the effect of reducing government scrutiny of business (Banerjee, 2008), serving to benefit corporate reputation while allowing corporations undue and unprecedented influence on government policy (Zadek, 2001).

Relationships between NGOs and business are even more ambiguous in terms of assessing the social value they provide. For example, uncertain outcomes stem from the fact that NGO managers are not always aware of problems caused by the ambivalent roles their partners perceive them as playing: critic and counsellor, accuser and judge, idealist and fund raiser (Arenas, Lozano, & Albareda, 2009). Stakeholder diversity and power differentials associated with resource issues raise another set of variables (Jamal & Stronza, 2009). NGOs, for instance, differ greatly in terms of their openness to corporate partnering and whether they were determined to maintain a watch dog role or were prepared to enter into closer partnerships. Similarly, corporate responses to relationships with NGOs vary according to the extent to which the company is prepared to engage in open dialogue with NGOs (Elkington & Fennell, 1998).

To some critics, social partnerships typify the key problem with the 'sub-political' arena that there is no assurance of democracy in its arrangements (Elliott, 2002;

Skelcher, Mathur, & Smith, 2005). They may offer the opportunity of participation that goes beyond the revolving door of government and business, but they do not guarantee democratic or participatory decision-making. While clearly much still needs to be done to understand the efficacy of partnerships as empowering and equitable forms of social governance, in the next section I suggest that these institutional level changes have the potential to engage multiple stakeholders in social learning and change, with hopefully more positive implications for environmental and social outcomes. I look firstly at why organisations might see the need for partnering as a means of enabling organisational learning and secondly, the mechanisms by which this might happen.

2.2 Partnership as inter-organisational learning

2.2.1 Information processing in 'sub-political' arrangements

My earlier discussion on current socio-political conditions in late modernity emphasised a society preoccupied with struggles around the scientific certainty of various social and environmental risks, many of which are difficult to measure and predict. I emphasised that the emergent 'sub-political' arena is knowledge intensive, with many of the social alliances within it forming around the need to access knowledge and expertise concerning these risks.

Hence I argue that much of the social partnering currently taking place is driven by the need for each of the partner organisations to learn to adapt its behaviour to reduce social or environmental risk or to obtain strategic opportunity around its management of such issues. Basically, for organisations, partnering and networking is about accessing learning and change. The latter particularly applies to partnerships between

NGOs and corporations in connection with their strategic CSR activities (Matten & Moon, 2008; Porter & Kramer, 2006). As previously noted, there can be advantages for all types of organisations in engaging in the organisational learning around social responsibilities that is enabled by cross-sectoral dialogue and interaction (Zadek, 2004). As proponents of the network variation on the partnership model of social governance claim, governance through sub-political arrangements can allow government, business and NGOs to bring their different knowledges, skills and capabilities together to address highly complex policy problems (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004).

Sustainability issues exemplify such problems and are a strong driver for partnerships to form around learning. Risks around environmental issues, for instance, are systemic (Ehrenfeld, 2005) and impact across business and their supply chains, government and not-for-profits and the wider community. Therefore learning is required right along the chain if environmental impacts are to be reduced either for efficiency related or more strategic purposes such as future market positioning (Dunphy, Griffiths, & Benn, 2007). It is important to note that organisational learning and change are not only matters driven internally but that internal and external stakeholders and networks are important pressure factors for these processes to occur (SiebenhÃner, 2008).

The consensus appears to be that partnerships are formed around organisational learning as a major driver, with even critics who condemn partnerships on their high reliance on public relations observe that they do offer social learning opportunities (Strand, 2009). Hence this section of the paper briefly reviews our understanding of how organisations might learn through social partnerships. Firstly, consider Huber's (1991, p. 89) earlier definition of organisational learning: *An entity learns if, through*

its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviors is changed. In the context of this paper, inter-organisational learning happens when companies, NGOs, governments and other partner organisations increase each other's behavioural capacities in relation to social or environmental practices (Roome & Wijen, 2006) as a consequence of *Knowledge acquisition, Information distribution, Information interpretation* and *organizational* memory (Huber, 1991, p. 90). This may involve either exploitative (evolutionary, adaptive, incremental) or explorative learning (double loop, radical, strategic), or a mixture of both in relation to social and environmental risks and opportunities (Roome & Wijen, 2006).

In asking how the partnership facilitates this learning, I refer to knowledge as being inter-subjectively constructed by individuals in processes that can occur both within and across organisations (Preuss & Codoba-Pachon, 2009); dialogue across multiple sectors appears likely to facilitate experimentation, learning, and change (Dietz, Ostrom, & Stern, 2003). Co-learning might occur as a result of bringing diverse knowledge resources together to achieve common goals around shared risks, by introducing partners to understanding of new markets or technologies or by bringing together complementary skills and capacities (Abreu and Camarinha-Matos, 2008; Head, 2008).

Roome and Wijen's (2006) work on stakeholder influence on intra-organisational learning suggests that the effectiveness of the implementation of exploitative learning is dependent on convergence of powerful stakeholder interests, while explorative learning is not so dependent on convergence. I suggest this finding would hold for partnerships where convergence applies between the partners. Overall, this study found that the effectiveness of learning routines is dependent on the motives and the power of actors in the partnership organisations in terms of being able to fulfil the

various critical roles for learning to occur (Roome & Wijen, 2006) – again, this finding would apply to partnerships.

Idea generators, internal champions, gatekeepers or boundary spanner and mentors have been identified as the four key roles to implement innovative learning processes within organisations (Tushman & Nadler, 1996). Inter-organisational learning is likely to be similar in its reliance on these roles, although with higher reliance on the boundary spanners. I suggest inter-organisational learning is also reliant on the appropriate use of boundary objects, those artefacts that allow individuals from different disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and organisational functions to share knowledge and co-generate new information (Oswick & Robertson, 2009; Star & Griesemer, 1989).

Overarching this dependence of learning outcomes on roles, motives and power is the issue of good governance. In the next section, I argue that the inter-organisational learning that takes place in social partnerships is interdependent with the governance function of the partnership.

2.2.1 The relationship between social governance and organisational learning

Empirical research supports Beck's thesis (1997) that expertise can be democratised by extending peer communities such as through community consultative committees or third parties working in SME partnership programs (Benn, 2004; Roberts *et al.*, 2006). Such networks may assist in transferring technical knowledge to the lay public and are stores of relational and systemic knowledge that is particularly crucial to addressing sustainability problems (Head, 2008). But as Chase-Dunn (2002) argues, popular participation at every level is necessary for a move to a more globally relevant approach to ecologically sustainable development.

As discussed previously, power related issues have been shown to be strongly influential on the process and content of learning within organisations (Roome and Wijen, 2006) and are likely to be similarly influential on the inter-organisational learning that occurs in partnerships. Managing power disparities and ensuring participatory approaches to the knowledge development around social issues are matters of governance. Governance raises a number of well known dilemmas (Jessop, 1998) and how they are resolved or addressed will impact on the ability of the partnership to deliver on the learning function.

Drawing from governance and organisational learning literature, I suggest the implications of these dilemmas for organisational learning are as follows:

Goveranance versus Metagovernance: This dilemma refers to the tension between institutional and strategic dimensions of governance, each having differing implications for learning and change. Institutional dimensions of metagovernance need to provide stability and opportunities for collective learning, while strategic dimensions promote development of shared visions leading to new or revised forms of governance (Jessop, 1998).

Accountability versus efficiency: Here the tension is between creativity and accountability. For example, overarching forms of control and coordination appear to limit creative solutions developed across inter-organisational domains (Bertels & Vredenberg, 2004).

Governability versus flexibility: The governance dilemma here revolves around the extent to which complex matters should be simplified so that specific targets can focus information processing through the partnership. Yet at the same time targets need to be seen as relevant to the wider context of sustainability policy setting if

governance through the partnership is to be perceived as legitimate (Bressers and

Brujin, 2005; Brinkerhoff, 2002).

Openness versus closure: Another tension area is how to balance the opposing

governance forces of openness and closure. Jessop (1998) argues that the governance

challenge would be to ensure that the competent are not excluded and the incapable

and inefficient locked in.

Overall, network-based, non-hierarchical methods of governance appear most likely

to address the governance dilemmas as they relate to learning. Research shows these

governance approaches encourage diversity of communication and a shared framing

of the issues (Fiol, 1994; Romme, 1999), key properties of collaborative relationships

if they are to facilitate the generation of new knowledge. But importantly, resolving

these tensions and dilemmas to enable good governance that fosters creativity,

knowledge generation and exchange requires the partnership stakeholders to develop

a self-reflexive capacity – what Jessop describes as a 'self-reflexive irony in that

participants must recognise the possibility of failure but proceed as if success were

possible' (Jessop 1998, p. 44). In particular, given the multiple boundaries potentially

involved in social partnerships (temporal, structural, functional, geographical) this

requires reflexive appraisal of the appropriate level and scale of these boundaries

(Bressers & Kuks, 2003).

Reflexive capacity is clearly a prized organisational resource if partnerships are to

generate learning. Hardy, Phillips, & Lawrence (2003) provide insights into how it

can be generated. Based on their empirical research they argue organisational

interactions or relationships which are 'embedded' (that is characterised by

interactions with third parties, representation and multidirectional information flows)

and show deep involvement (that is, have interactions between many levels of

collaborators) facilitate the changes associated with the generation of new practices, technologies or rules and the building of sustainable and distinctive capacities (Hardy, Phillips, & Lawrence, 2003). Subsequent research has shown that inter-organisational relationships are more likely to be embedded if they bring together different organisational roles and different forms of knowledge and communication (Martin, Benn, & Dunphy, 2007).

This section has described considerable interplay between the organisational learning and governance functions of partnerships. In the next section, I explore the critical success factors to each of these functions.

3.0 Conclusion: critical factors for functional partnerships

3.1 Specific success factors

I have argued that partnership effectiveness needs to be assessed against two key functions. Firstly, conditions of late modernity bring with them the need for new and innovative forms of social governance that can provide legitimacy and trust. Secondly, there is the need for organisations to engage in inter-organisational information processing within these partnerships so as to be better able to deal with the many social and environmental uncertainties and problems associated with industrial development.

In Tables 1 and 2, I draw from a number of empirically based studies in an attempt to summarise the critical success factors that are relevant to the goals of social governance and inter-organisational learning. I note that there is a feedback loop connecting these two roles – a circuit that is enabled through their shared dependence upon a range of relationship factors (Head, 2008). While I hope to have clarified how to achieve functional social partnerships through an exploration of the social

processes underpinning their formation leading into suggestions of specific success factors, it is important that these factors in themselves should not be seen as the end of the partnership. Having said that, partnership participants should recognise and expect a clear overlap between process and outcome and between governance and learning.

Table 1: Social governance success factors

Authors	Partnership success factors: social governance
Gray (1989) Austin (2003)	Direction-setting: Collective direction setting and dealing constructively with differences, clarity and congruency of objectives
Head 2008	Relationship factors: Trust enhancement through frequent communication in formal and informal channels, learning and action learning orientation, roles for boundary spanners, leadership capabilities such as adaptiveness
Roberts et al., 2006 Austin (2000) Seitanidi and Crane (2009) De Man and Burns (2006)	Accountability and equity factors: Social responsibilities and risk assessment factors identified in relation to each stakeholder, symmetrical reporting practices, symmetrical value generation and distribution , normative guidelines
Singleton (2000)	Commitment: Demonstrated commitment of resources and senior personnel
Williams (2002) Singleton (2000)	Decision-making: non-hierarchical via brokering, collective decisions around allocation of resources

Table 2: Organisational learning success factors

Authors	Partnership success factors: organisational learning
Williams(2002) Hamann and Acut (2003)	Skills and competencies: Networking, negotiation, holistic thinking, joint problem solving and entrepreneurial policymaking, complementary competencies, conflict resolution
Head 2008	Relationship factors: Trust enhancement, learning and action learning orientation, roles for boundary spanners, leadership capabilities such as adaptiveness,
Hardy et al. (2003) Martin et al, 2007 Seitanidi and Crane (2009)	Partnership design: Embeddedness , multiple level and role interaction, institutionalisation of the relationship, selection of boundary objects

In conclusion, I suggest that social partnerships do play out some of the key themes and predictions associated with the body of highly influential social theory developed by Beck and colleagues in the 1990s. Yet, nearly two decades on from Beck's first famous publication in English (Beck, 1992), it appears that while some predictions

were prescient, others are still far from being realised. One of his key predictions was that 'sub-politics' would allow for more widespread participation in decision-making on the impacts of industrialisation. Mythen's (2007) critique of this view is supported by recent empirical work indicating that 'sub-political' arrangements only support democratisation of decision-making when public participation processes are in place to cut the nexus between knowledge and power (Healy, 2009).

I suggest that while traditional forms of power are certainly being undermined by new structures such as the partnership model, there are complex governance issues at stake that means they may not necessarily be accompanied by the parallel empowerment of the lay public, the NGOs and community organisations of all persuasions and the 'little players', such as individual citizens and SMEs, in relation to knowledge and expertise. I argue that if social partnerships were examined through the specific lens of the governance and organisational learning critical success factors suggested above, that the more hopeful aspect of 'sub-politics' could be more rigorously explored. This suggestion could be tested in empirical research that would be relevant to two research themes: one revolving around discourse and legitimation and the other with a focus on institutional effects. A discussion of these themes and suggested specific questions concludes this paper.

3.2 Questions for further research

3.2.1 Discourse and legitimation

This paper has focussed on the role of social partnerships as an institutional form, emerging in response to global and local pressures relating to the changing role of the state and other traditional forms of authority and legitimacy. Environmental sites in particular are highly appropriate to study institutional emergence and change such as

the new sub-political forms explored in this paper (Hoffman, 1999). As the study of discourses entails the study of practices, norms and rules as well as what is spoken (van Leeuwen, 2008), critical discourse analysis is suitable as a methodological approach to the study of how partnerships and collaboration might support environmental sustainability through institutional and organisational change. According to Maguire and Hardy (2006, p. 10): '*discursive activity occurs during institution building as actors draw on different discourses in their texts to try to fix understandings, shape interpretations, and justify practices in ways that are commensurate with their interests*.

Hence this approach can bring together experts in critical discourse analysis with management scholars to develop a more interdisciplinary approach to explore partnership processes and outcomes. Discourses provide the frames through which people see their world (Dryzek, 2005) and discursive struggles are frequent in areas of meaning such as environmental sustainability and sustainable development (Hajer, 1997), where competing and overlapping definitions abound. Partnerships may be indeed be a site for discursive struggle and contestation as well as collaboration (Grimshaw, Vincent, & Willmott, 2002; Livesey, 2001). The point is that different discourses, such as around environmental sustainability, are associated with different concepts, different subjects and different power relations and are therefore likely to have different outcomes.

A specific focus for the discourse analysis could be on evidence for discursive influence on partnership programmes, practice and accountability. Another stream of research could build on recent work of business communication scholars (Livesey, Hartman, Stafford, & Shearer, 2009), addressing questions such as: how does partnership discourse make environmental sustainability meaningful for government

decision-makers and for society at large? How does it contribute or not to learning and change in each partner? What influence does it on the institutionalising of new social or environmental practices on the part of the corporate partner?

Another area of research could focus on power relations that are hidden within the discourse of collaboration. How are the normative criteria used to assess social partnership achievements derived? What rules and norms guide the organisational learning and how do they evolve – is this through conscious and deliberative processes, or articulated in goal oriented terms (de Man & Burns, 2006)?

Future research could also draw on the recent review in the organisation studies literature on political aspects of discursive legitimation (Vaara and Tienari, 2008) as it relates to organisational and institutional change. How are partnerships utilised to legitimate corporate activity? Vaara and Tienari (2008) support van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) classification that language can legitimate strategy through four key ways that can also operate together: authorization; rationalization; moral evaluation, mythopoesis and that these strategies can operate together.

According to Vaara and Tienari (2008), the benefits of applying such an approach to management or organisation studies are that it exposes the ambiguities and complexities of corporate actions that have problematic outcomes such as environmental impacts. For example, business forming collaborative relationships with NGOs may be an accommodation strategy where companies make small but explicit changes that enable them to evade going down the transformative path. Although the strategies are linked, legitimation as a strategy works at the level of influencing discourse (unlike accommodation which involves more explicit exchanges) aimed at maintaining and perpetuating 'normative systemic structures' that support the status quo (Hamann and Acut 2003, p. 259).

3.2.2 Institutional effects

NGO activities in partnerships could also be examined through the lens of institutional theory, and the basic premise that conformity to externally prescribed values can only be advantageous for the institution in question, conveying legitimacy, status and access to resources. As NGOs vary in their implicit value system (such as degree of ecocentrism) business organisations that partner with them need to establish what they want their action-leading values to be (Scherrer, 2009). NGOS whose identity is closely linked to environmental protection have difficulties with balancing the three dimensions of social, economic and environmental. WWF, for instance, was found to be an organisation that had expanded from a small organisation focussed on species and habitat conservation to an international organisation with an approach that integrates conservation with development – adapting sustainable development into its overall strategy much more so than Greenpeace for example – in fact it is becoming a distinguishing feature of WWF. (Scherrer, 2009).

This area of investigation builds on work showing how discourses can cohere disparate groups of individuals into a certain identity around certain modes of behaviour or value systems (Kornberger and Brown 2007: p. 510) A similar approach could be used to study identity polarisation or merging in partnerships formed around environmental sustainability and what 'discursive resources' are drawn on by the collaborating partners.

I noted above that the risk society thesis suggests that both partnership roles relate to risk management. Mythen (2007) suggests, contrary to Beck's understanding, that the focus of the sub-political arena may not always be around risk as a negative but around negotiating the positive side of risk such as the stimulation of innovation.

This is not an area that has been explored empirically and could be the site of further

work concerning the motivations and effectiveness of partnerships.

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