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How broker organizations can facilitate public–private partnerships for development

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Collaboration;
Learning

Summary Broker organizations increasingly facilitate the partnering process of public–private partnerships (PPPs) for development. In this paper, we argue that their function goes beyond simply match-making between partners and develop a theoretical framework for the broker organizations' roles throughout the PPP life cycle. Research on 19 broker organizations shows that these organizations act in the roles of convener, mediator, and learning catalyst. We analyze how and why they can facilitate the partnering process through these roles and discuss the research findings in the light of the social capital, collaboration, and inter-organizational learning literatures. The discussion highlights the benefits of broker organizations in the partnering process of PPPs and how those organizations' roles can best be performed.

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Introduction

In view of the complex problems faced by humanity, including climate change, poverty, and inadequate public services, public–private partnerships (PPPs) for development have come to be seen as the “collaboration paradigm of the 21st century” (Austin, 2000, p. 44). Indeed, these partnerships between private, public, and civil-society organizations can offer benefits to every partner, as well as communities (McQuaid, 2000; Waddock, 1988). However, PPPs are not simple ventures and the potential benefits of the collaborative approach are often jeopardized by challenges hampering the partnering process (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Such challenges, which stem, for example, from the cross-sectoral nature of this type of collaboration, the partners' limited experience, poor governance, and

complex settings (Kolk, van Tulder, & Kostwinder, 2008), provide a *raison d'être* for broker organizations that intend to facilitate the partnering process. In recent years, organizations specializing in facilitating partnerships have flourished and become increasingly important (World Economic Forum, 2005). Likewise, organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and many development agencies have shifted their agenda towards facilitating PPPs for development (Googins & Rochlin, 2000).

In this article, broker organizations for PPPs are defined as organizations that have specific experience and capacity to build and/or facilitate PPPs. More precisely, they are third parties that facilitate negotiation on and the development of PPP arrangements and help research, maintain, monitor, review, and evaluate PPPs over time.¹

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¹ Based on the Partnership Brokers Accreditation Scheme (www.partnershipbrokers.org).

Although scholars acknowledge the importance of broker organizations in facilitating the partnership process (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006; Googins & Rochlin, 2000), research has not addressed the question of how such facilitation is achieved. Consequently, our goal is to explore how broker organizations facilitate the partnering process and develop a framework for the roles they play.

The term “broker” is widely used in the social networking literature for characterizing an actor which connects otherwise unconnected contacts (Burt, 1992). In the absence of a link between two actors (i.e. a structural hole) which are both linked to a third actor, the latter enjoys preferential access to information and can use its brokering position to span these structural holes (Burt, 1992). In this regard, brokerage is a process “by which intermediary actors facilitate transactions between other actors lacking access or trust in one another” (Marsden, 1982, p. 202). In the context of PPPs for development, a distinction is made between internal and external brokers (Tennyson, 2005). Internal brokers, also known as boundary spanners (Williams, 2002), are managers from a partner organization that promote the partnership. External brokers are independent professionals mandated to facilitate the partnership. This paper focuses on the latter. We argue that broker organizations can facilitate PPPs in situations in which the partners – businesses, governments, and civil-society organizations – lack access to cross-sectoral networks, trusting relationships, and experience with PPPs for development. Compared to individual brokers, their organizational capacities, including such elements as specialized staff and processes, a large network, a solid reputation, and knowledge-management systems, allow them to offer more substantial support to the partners than a single person can.

In the literature on collaboration, Gray (1989) is one of the first to provide valuable insights into the early steps a broker organization can undertake in a PPP’s life cycle. She finds that by identifying and bringing to the table all legitimate stakeholders, some organizations function as conveners for a partnership approach. Wood and Gray (1991) expand these initial insights and illustrate four different forms of authority a convener may use to identify and persuade stakeholders to participate. They conclude that more research is needed on the “functions of these convener modes and their effects on collaboration processes” (1991, p. 153). This call, however, has so far received only limited research attention. A systematic review of works building on Wood and Gray (1991) showed that scholars acknowledge the importance of a convener to bring partners together, guide the partnership design, and ensure that all parties benefit (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Lackey, Freshwater, & Rupasingha, 2002; Legler & Reischl, 2003; Sharma & Kearins, 2011) but do not draw full research attention to the convener role. A valuable exception is the contribution by Dyer and Nobeoka (2000), who describe how Toyota, as a convener, built its US knowledge-sharing network and interpret it in the light of network ties.

A recent study on foundations as brokers (Von Schnurbein, 2010) helps further develop our understanding of the convener role. The author analyzes this role using social capital theory while distinguishing between bonding and bridging social capital. Social capital is defined as a set of resources such as trust, norms, and values (Coleman, 1990) that are

accessed through the network of social relations and can be mobilized to facilitate action (Adler & Kwon, 2002). In this context, bonding social capital stems from strong social ties embedded in sound relationships and shared norms among members of a closed network (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Closed networks facilitate the creation of trust as norms can be more easily developed and controlled (Coleman, 1990). Based on trust, open communication, and information sharing, strong ties facilitate the cooperation and coordination of joint activities (Coleman, 1990).

While the bonding views focus on a group’s internal characteristics, the bridging views emphasize social capital as a resource located in the external linkages of a focal actor (Adler & Kwon, 2002). By bridging structural holes between different groups, actors can provide access to new contacts and resources (Burt, 1992). Thus, these boundary-spanning linkages to actors outside a focal group can make new information and resources accessible (Granovetter, 1973). Von Schnurbein’s (2010) analysis shows that foundations are especially useful in building bridging social capital by spanning structural holes between different actors. Indeed, the foundation analyzed brought together the partners to start the project, regularly provided them with information, and organized events to allow them to reconnect. Furthermore, the foundation motivated partner commitment through the principles of altruism, credibility, and voluntary work. Von Schnurbein (2010) concludes that more research is needed to analyze a broker’s role in the light of social capital. He suggests a research design covering a broader sample, as well as exploring whether brokers can also promote bonding social capital and how this is interlinked with bridging social capital.

Following this call, we argue that a broker organization’s role goes beyond simply match-making between different actors and providing bridging ties. Consequently, we seek to explore what roles these organizations adopt to facilitate the partnering process throughout the entire PPP life cycle and how they do so. Overall, the purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework that expands existing insights into broker organizations’ roles which, so far, center on a convening role in the early PPP phases. In view of this purpose, our paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss the partnering process in PPPs for development, inherent challenges, and the potential need for external facilitation. We then explain our methodology to explore different broker roles and give two practical illustrations. In “The broker organizations’ role” section, we present our results and integrate them into a conceptual framework. We discuss the findings in the “Discussion” section in the light of the social capital and inter-organizational learning literatures. We then discuss the implications for the successful performance of the broker organizations’ roles and the conditions under which these roles are particularly helpful for the partners.

The partnering process in PPPs for development and the need for broker organizations

Since the 1992 Rio Summit and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, PPPs have been

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