UCL

Partnership working for sustainable cities

Note from the UCL Global Policy Fellows stakeholder workshop 2 July 2019

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PARTNERSHIP WORKING FOR SUSTAINABLE CITIES

NOTE FROM UCL GLOBAL POLICY FELLOWS STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOP, 2 JULY 2019

Introduction

UCL's Global Policy Fellows programme aims to build and strengthen connections between the academic and international policy communities. The programme brings together a cohort of practitioners and policy experts - 'Policy Fellows' - from around the world together for a week of knowledge exchange activities in London, hosted by UCL. The theme of the 2019 programme was 'Future Cities' and our cohort of Fellows included practitioners working at the city, regional and international level on the challenge of delivering sustainable and resilient cities.

Aims and objective

All of the Fellows were asked to submit 'challenge' questions in advance of the programme.

The impetus for the workshop came from one of these questions:

> "In what creative ways can the UN system better enable and encourage meaningful partnerships with academia, civil society and the private sector to ensure a real paradigm shift takes hold within the next decade?"

We invited a range of academic experts from UCL as well as UK-based stakeholders with experience and expertise in the field of sustainable cities to join the Fellows in a workshop to explore how partnership working might be improved.

We set the following objective for the workshop:

> "To identify ways to enable and encourage meaningful partnerships between academia, public sector organisations, civil society, international institutions, the private sector, grassroots organisations and citizens to deliver on SDG 11 to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable."

Summary of discussion

To set the scene, presentations were given by three of the Fellows and Professor Adriana Allen from UCL:

- Professor Adriana Allen: Working for Sustainable Cities
- Dr Neil Khor: UN-Habitat Strategic Plan 2020-2023
- Tricia Hackett: EU International Urban Cooperation Program
- Nancy Lozano Gracia and Rafeef AbdelRazek: World Bank Group – Urban, Resilience, and Land Global Practice (GPURL)

Through a series of facilitated discussions, workshop participants were asked to explore the barriers that currently stand in the way of effective partnership working and to identify some possible routes to overcoming them.

An effective model of partnership

A potential pitfall of partnership working is the temptation to treat it like a business relationship, for example by developing partnership agreements that closely resemble business contracts. The problem with thinking about partnerships in this way is that it can encourage individual groups (or funders) within the partnership to focus too narrowly on ensuring their own objectives are met, potentially at the expense of achieving outcomes that would deliver greater benefits to the group as a whole.

A Further risk is that members of the partnership can lose sight of why the partnership was established in the first place, with the partnership becoming an end in itself, rather than a means to achieving some other goal.

In order to avoid this, partnership agreements should seek to answer three key questions:

1. What is the partnership trying to do? Partnerships should be 'impact-oriented', and ideally should be built to address specific issues. There needs to be a clearly articulated goal that all of the partners agree to.
2. What can each partner bring to the relationship? Partnerships may be 'partnerships of equivalence', where each player brings something different to the relationship (funding, expertise, knowledge, skills, networks, infrastructure, physical resources etc). The aim should be to leverage the strengths of each partner rather than to strive for an 'equal' partnership where the contributions from each partner are identical.
3. What will the benefit for each partner be? Partnerships should deliver mutual benefits, and everyone should be clear about what these are.

Partnerships should also ideally be a long-term endeavour and activities that are designed to stimulate new partnerships should bear this in mind; activities with a short-term focus such as quick meetings or visits do not lend themselves to establishing the depth of relationship that is required for a long-term partnership. As one participant in our workshop noted, it is better to have a few strong partnerships than 100,000 weak or short-term ones.

One approach might be to tap in to established networks that are already aligned in goals and vision.

Communications and trust

A lack of trust and transparency can make partnerships ineffective. In addition, cultural differences, prejudice and misperceptions of other players can all present a challenge to effective partnerships. Selecting partners that share similar cultures and values can help to minimise this risk.

For established partnerships, various methods for building trust and maintaining good communication were put forward. These included running secondment exchanges between partners' workplaces and holding regular face-to-face meetings.

The conflict between the value of face-to-face meetings and the carbon emissions associated with flying to meetings was raised. In some cases, technology such as video calls and messaging services could help to maintain good communications while reducing the associated carbon footprint. However, it was also noted that great care must be taken not to inadvertently exclude people who do not have access to the necessary technology.

Engaging the right people

It is impossible to make cities more sustainable and resilient without affecting the people who live and work there. Workshop participants were clear about the need to ensure that any interventions needed to be community-centric and ideally should empower local residents or grassroots organisations to take the lead on urban design innovation. Projects should be should be 'done with', not 'done to' citizens.

There are many barriers that make genuinely community-led projects difficult to achieve. These include:

- Language and communication tools, which may exclude certain groups of people. For example, if a lot of technical jargon is used it may not be widely understood by citizens. If engagement requires access to certain types of technology – such as a smart phone to contribute via social media – some people will be excluded.
- The need for decision makers to spend sufficient time in the affected area so that the local context is properly understood.
- The availability of local citizens to attend workshops and meetings, both in terms of time and also financially – it was noted that project workers would be being paid by their employers to attend any meetings, but the same was unlikely to be true of people who were attending on behalf of the local community.

Many initiatives will include a civil society group as a partner as a proxy for local communities. However, it was suggested that this was not sufficient to truly empower citizens and that grassroots organisations should also be included as active partners in projects.

Funding

Perhaps unsurprisingly, almost every sector represented at our workshop identified a shortage of funding as a barrier to improved partnership working.

Participants explored two routes to addressing this challenge: accessing new sources of funding and making better use of existing funding pots.

Accessing new potential sources of funding

New institutional arrangements might attract new sources of funding. For example, crowd-sourcing venture capital funds could be a new way to raise funding for projects such as urban transport solutions. New business models for infrastructure development and maintenance might also help to unlock different sources of finance.

Making better use of existing funding pots

Participants discussed options such as using the convening power of the Commonwealth to pool resources from different locations towards solving shared problems. Cross-sectoral partnerships may also be better placed to leverage funding from different sources towards a common goal, particularly where funding streams are only accessible to certain types of organisation (for example, research council funding is only available to academic institutions, while some donor agencies will only fund charities).

Data and evidence

Urbanisation policy should be grounded in robust data and so participants were keen to emphasise the need to improve access to data and knowledge in order to achieve this. Several suggestions were put forward to this end:

1. Making data open and accessible to all.
2. Better integrating academia with practitioners to ensure that research is translated into practice and applied in focus. Ways to achieve this include co-design of research questions and setting up advisory groups that can help to align political, public, and research interests.
3. Increased data sharing between different agencies.

Experimentation and risk taking

Workshop participants highlighted the need to scale-up and speed-up experimentation with different approaches to tackling issues of sustainability and resilience within cities. However, while some experiments will hopefully lead to successful new interventions, inevitably some will be unsuccessful.

If partnership projects are to be more open to experimentation, there will need to be a significant change in mindset:

1. Partners must be prepared for the possibility that an experimental approach may not deliver the desired outcome. That is, they must be prepared for individual interventions to fail.
2. There should be systems and processes in place to capture and share learning for any 'failed' interventions.
3. Funders may need to be more flexible in their requirements (such as KPIs) to permit more risk-taking.

4. Crowd-sourcing funding may reduce the exposure for individual funders, and thereby increase the appetite for risk-taking.

Final ideas

We asked the workshop participants to come up with practical ideas that could help to improve partnership working and then to rank them according to how difficult or easy they would be to achieve and the level of impact they were likely to deliver.

The ideas suggested were as follows:

Co-creation platform: Creating facilitated spaces/meetings where players from different sectors can come together to co-produce ideas and agendas.

Crowd-funding platform: Creating new online platforms to facilitate crowd-funding from a wide range of donors.

Access to data: Making data from projects open access and improving data sharing between institutions.

Kids as policy-makers: Children and young people can provide insights into the needs of their communities that might not be obvious to older policy-makers. They can also be a very powerful force for change, as demonstrated most recently by the success of Greta Thunberg and the School Strike for Climate. This idea would hand over some decision-making power to young people on behalf of their communities.

Evidence-based planning: Evidence based-planning: Inform planning processes with sound evidence, and ensure the evidence is available to all of the parties and that the assumptions and biases underlying this evidence are made explicit.

Simplify language: Consciously striving to improve communications through using plain language, seeking common ground and valuing all contributions.

Be open to failure: Making greater use of experimental approaches and being prepared to accept a degree of failure as a result.

Crowd sourcing projects: Collecting ideas for new projects from a wider group of citizens and other stakeholders across institutions and sectors via a crowd-sourcing platform.
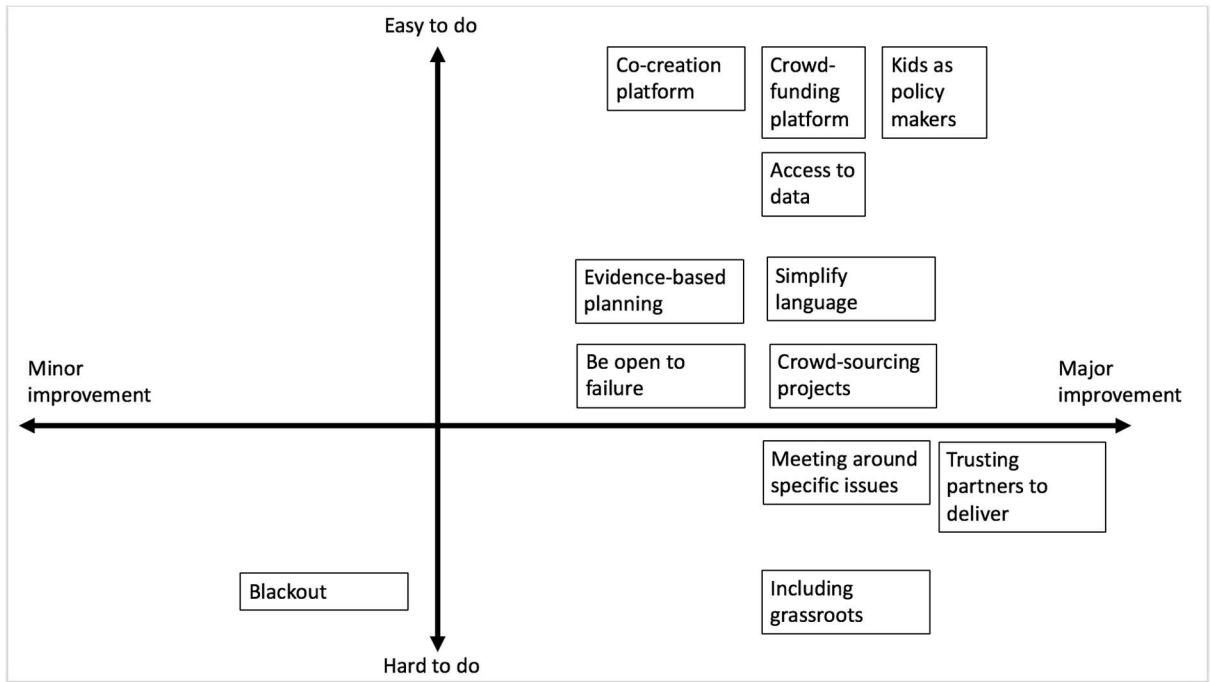
Meeting around specific issues: Taking specific issues as starting points for collaborations or communication, in order to build coalitions of interest.

Trusting partners to deliver: Building more sophisticated partnerships around shared cultures and values to increase levels of trust.

Full inclusion of grassroots organisations: Working harder to ensure that the voices of community groups and citizens are fully included in projects.

Blackout: A stunt that would shut off electricity for one day, which would aim to simultaneously create space and time for people to reconnect with each other and to stimulate thinking about sustainable living.

The interventions were ranked as follows:

Easy to do

Co-creation platform

Crowd-funding platform

Kids as policy makers

Access to data

Evidence-based planning

Simplify language

Minor improvement

Be open to failure

Crowd-sourcing projects

Major improvement

Meeting around specific issues

Trusting partners to deliver

Blackout

Including grassroots

Hard to do

Participants

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