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**Can Partnerships offer an Alternative Mode of Governance  
within the Contemporary Local Political Domain? An Initial  
Approach**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper attempts to identify if partnerships between public, private and voluntary/community organisations provide an adequate mode of governance in today's local political domain. In order to do this the paper refers to the notion of governance and its current meanings as well as to different modes of governance applied to local politics. It argues that the 'Network and Policy Communities' mode is the one that matches most accurately the nature and functioning of partnerships. Based on this, it then empirically examines the existence of partnerships as governance modes in the cases of two partnership schemes (one in the UK, one in Sweden) and the implications of cultural and other differences reflected in the formation of partnerships. Following the theoretical and empirical evidence the paper argues that current policy-making procedures implemented within local orientated partnerships can be considered as features of an alternative governance mode. It recognises however existence of significant dysfunctional elements.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Governance has become a political catchword during the last decade. Political scientists as well as practitioners have considered the notion of governance as a new way of thinking on the capabilities of the state and the relationships between state and non-state actors (*Pierre & Peters, 2000*). Governance today is associated with a series of political subjects such as organisational theory, international relations (as 'global governance'), public administration (with the rise of New Public Management) and local politics (as 'local governance'). According to *Stoker (1998)* governance involves government and non-governmental actors in joint activities. This relationship is not only about services. It is mainly about achieving collective benefits that could not be obtained if the different parts acted separately. In this respect, the different actors collaborate under a scheme of a partnership.

Partnerships have also become a 'buzz-word' during the 1990s. They exist for several socio-economic reasons, create different structures, involve different partners and set up different goals and objectives. In addition, there exist several barriers that can prevent the partnership approach from running smoothly and different obstacles partners need to overcome.

This paper focuses on the development of alternative modes of governance in today's local political context. It attempts to prove that some of these modes are suitable for explaining the current situation in local politics. It then tries to relate these modes of governance to local partnerships and to prove that partnerships can constitute real examples of these modes of governance. At an empirical level the paper presents two cases of partnerships, one in the UK and one in Sweden, as examples of these modes of governance. It concludes that there exist significant signs proving the existence of partnerships as governing modes, though with dysfunctional elements.

## ALTERNATIVE MODES OF GOVERNANCE IN TODAY'S LOCAL POLITICAL DOMAIN

### *What is Governance?*

Governance is a fashionable concept in today's political domain. This is due to the rapid, if not turbulent, changes, which have occurred in politics in the last couple of decades or so. According to Pierre and Peters (2000) a major reason for the current popularity of the concept is its capacity to cover the whole range of institutions and relationships embraced in the process of governing. Moreover, they identify that lexicographically the word 'governance' derives from the Latin 'cybern', which means 'steering' (Pierre & Peters, 2000).

Attempting to define what 'governance' is Rhodes (1999) refers to it as the concept of self-organising with the following characteristics:

- *Interdependence between organisations. Governance is broader than government, covering non-state actors. Changing the boundaries of the state meant the boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors became shifting and opaque.*
- *Continuing interactions between ....members, caused by the need to exchange resources and negotiate shared purposes. ....*
- *A significant degree of autonomy from the state. (Rhodes, 1999: p xvii)*

In addition to what has been mentioned above, Jessop identifies governance as a type of governing, which applies as the rejection of the polarisation between the market and the hierarchy-bureaucracy in favour of the concept of 'heterarchy' i.e. '*horizontal self-organisation among mutually interdependent actors*' (Jessop, 2000: 15)<sup>1</sup>. In this respect the main modes of governance are explored in the next paragraphs.

### *Modes of Governance*

Before beginning to refer to specific modes of governance it is worthwhile mentioning that the vagueness and inclusiveness of governance constitutes a useful concept as it permits the appearance of different approaches, some of which are even mutually contradictory. Coming down to the specific modes of governance in local politics, it could be argued that those by Rhodes, and by Pierre and Peters are considered as the most accurate. This is due to the full coverage of the topic by the specific authors.

Beginning with Rhodes (1997) he points out that the uses (modes) of governance are as follows: Governance as a minimal state; governance as corporate governance; governance as the new public management; governance as 'good governance; governance as a socio-cybernetic system; governance as self-organising networks. It could be argued that Rhodes chooses to focus more on the newer functions of governance e.g. governance as policy networks. On the contrary, Pierre and Peters prefer to refer to the whole range of governance embracing even the traditional functions of governing. According to them there exist the following modes of governance: Traditional authority; Autopoiesis and network steering; Cybernetics and

steering; Policy instruments; Institutional Analysis; Rational Choice; Networks and policy communities; Neo-Marxism and critical theory. Which one then of these modes applies most to the current local political domain? Which one reflects most what is going on in local politics today? Bearing in mind the recent situation in the local government context it seems that more than some agencies -e.g. local authorities and the market- employ policies in the field. In addition to that, all of these agencies are recognised as part of a system, which is diversified, compared to the ones applied in the past. According to Stoker (1996) this is the field where governance applies, considering both the internal power relations of the governmental system and the broader distribution held by external societal interests.

### *Networks and Policy Communities' Mode of Governance*

Considering the explanations being given in the previous section about the modes of governance, it could be argued that some are more reflective to the current changes in local politics than others. In this respect, the really alternative modes of governance are: the 'autopoiesis and network steering' one by Pierre and Peters, and the 'cybernetic and steering' and 'networks and policy communities' ones by Pierre and Peters as well as by Rhodes. However, Rhodes instead uses the names of 'socio-cybernetic system' and 'self-organising networks' respectively.

With regard to autopoiesis mode of governance there exists a serious weakness that does not permit it to reflect on the change occurred in the context of its implementation. This is the ability of the government to establish the basic parameters within which the markets, and other interest groups, function (Pierre & Peters, 2000). In this way, the mode is very influenced by the traditional theories about governing. Therefore, it is not applicable to this topic. Additionally, the cybernetic mode of governance is rejected because it lacks empirical evidence. In addition to this, there exist normative objections in relation to cybernetic mode as '*it is too oriented towards the status quo [of traditional mode of governing] ...*' (Pierre & Peters, 2000: 41). Thus the only applicable case of governance mode seems to be that of networks and policy communities.

Networks are '*a widespread form of social co-ordination*' (Rhodes, 1997: 52). Different actors at a local level collaborate, define their roles, decide about issues, which are included or excluded from the policy agenda, and they privilege certain interests according to their aims. Summarising what networks are about Larson points out that '*the network form of governance*' highlights '*reputation, trust, reciprocity and mutual interdependence*' (Larson, 1992; in Rhodes, 1997: 52). The development of networks implies the creation of an alternative to top-down approaches, as it emphasises in the action and reaction of different culturally groups implementing their policies in the same geographical area. As Pierre and Peters put it: '*In this view governance is an emergent property of interactions rather than the imposition of control from above*' (2000: 45). Nevertheless, they point out that very often the creation of networks and policy communities could involve other levels of government such as local authorities, so government may not be entirely out of the picture.

Referring to the work by Osborne and Gaebler (1992), they emphasise the advantages-characteristics of a decentralised government system. This applies to the

'Networks and Policy Communities' mode of governance as it explores the importance of different groups acting in the same area of interest. They suggest that institutions under this regime:

1. *Are far more flexible than centralised institutions; they can respond quickly to changing circumstances and customers [local residents]' needs.*
2. *Decentralised institutions are more effective than centralised institutions.*
3. *Decentralised institutions are far more innovative than centralised institutions.*
4. *Decentralised institutions generate higher morale, more commitment, and greater productivity (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992: 252-253).*

Apart from these characteristics a sufficient mode of governance nowadays should concern itself with the area and the communities within, as to extend its responsibility beyond the services and to attempt to satisfy the needs of local residents towards an overall social and economic well-being. In addition, such a mode should work in different ways providing services both in a direct and indirect way, working with and through other organisations. Furthermore, it should realise the most effective way of use of the financial resources available. Finally, such a system should be close to local citizens, consulting them, and responding to their needs in the most efficient manner.

Could such a mode of governance exist in the current local politics' context? Is there sufficient evidence of the development of examples that could comply with the preconditions of the 'Network and Policy Communities' mode? Partnerships seem to have the characteristics needed to match with such a model and this is going to be explored in the next section.

## **PARTNERSHIPS AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE NETWORKS AND POLICY COMMUNITIES' MODE OF GOVERNANCE WITHIN THE CURRENT LOCAL POLITICAL CONTEXT**

### *What is a Partnership?*

Partnership in this context has become a very popular word since the early 1990s. The activities of a partnership between different organisations provide the way for a nevertheless new approach to face several issues at a local level. These are the activities and the actors that make a partnership a multi-dimensional organisation with cross-sectoral programmes. Wilson and Charlton, in an attempt to define partnership,<sup>ii</sup> suggest:

*Three or more organisations - representing the public, private and voluntary sectors - acting together by contributing their diverse resources in the furtherance of a common vision that has clearly defined goals and objectives (Wilson & Charlton, 1997: 10).*

However, based on the recent experience, participation in partnerships could embrace actors from any other interest group as long as they could agree to work together for achieving the common set goals and objectives. The wide range of issues covered in

the agenda setting for a partnership leads to the creation of different types of partnerships. For instance, the actors participating in the construction and implementation of a programme about local economic development and technological modernisation tend to be businesses, chambers of commerce, local companies, universities and trade unions. On the other hand, the restructuring of the local welfare state needs to expand the sphere of participation into actors such as welfare groups, local authorities and community groups.

### *Do Partnership Functions comply with the Prerequisites of the 'Networks and Policy Communities' Mode of Governance?*

Attempting to find out if partnerships comply with the preconditions of the 'Network and Policy Communities' mode of Governance I shall start with the first assumption that partnerships are flexible organisations responding quickly to changing circumstances and local people's needs. In order to prove this a suggestion by Lowndes and Skelcher will be employed. They point out that a partnership can have different types of governance in its life cycle as follows:

- Pre-partnership collaboration that is characterised by a network/community type of governance based upon informality and a sense of common purpose.
- Partnership creation and consolidation, which is characterised by hierarchy based upon the formality of the procedures and a type of differential authority.
- Partnership programme delivery, which is characterised by market (or quasi market) mechanisms of tendering and contract.
- Partnership termination or succession in which the network/community mechanisms are provided again as a means to maintain community involvement and staff employment (*Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998*)

These different types of governance, according to Lowndes & Skelcher, overlap and coexist throughout the life cycle of a partnership. In this way partnerships do not only respond to specific needs of the locality. They also extend their policies in order to cover every type of need expressed through their cross-sectoral functions.

With regard to the fourth of the assumptions that partnerships generate more morale, more commitment, thus greater productivity it could be argued that this assumption applies to partnerships. This is because the main idea of constructing partnerships is that they seek to achieve what no single organisation could do. Therefore, as Wilson and Charlton suggest, the ideal picture of a partnership is that of partners working together towards a commonly set of goals and objectives. In doing so the partners deliver more than the sum of its individual components (*Wilson, A. & Charlton, K. 1997*). As a consequence, partnerships need to generate more morale and commitment through trust and reciprocity.

In respect to the assumption about the work of partnerships towards the most effective way of use of the available financial resources, this depends on the organisational structure of the partnership. Some partnerships are strongly integrated and the partnership bodies play a guiding and co-ordinating role with regard to the main executive agencies. In the more weakly integrated partnerships the central body plays a more 'authoritarian' role in the resource allocation (*Harding, 1998*).

In relation to the assumption about the responsibility of partnerships to be close with the local residents living in the particular area, offering the most effective services, this is one of the essentials of constructing a partnership. It might be of worth to look at an example of a partnership mission to examine the applicability of the above mentioned. In the mission of Ebor Gardens Partnership<sup>iii</sup> we can see:

- *To promote and support new and existing initiatives to improve the self-esteem of the residents.*
- *To identify and encourage resources from all areas of the community to play an active role in fulfilling the vision.*
- *To develop a better understanding of challenges facing the residents of the estate and the initiatives already in place, and how these are impacting on daily lives.*
- *To make available the appropriate skills and resources, which enable residents to achieve their maximum personal potential to lead fulfilled lives.*
- *To ensure a consistent communication framework is established to inform and consult all residents of the initiatives taking place on the estates (Wilson & Charlton, 1997: 31).*

In relation to the final point about the advantage of a partnership, as a decentralised organisation, to be innovative this comes out as a logical sequence of the thought that each of the participants brings something new to the partnership -material or immaterial. Therefore, there is more likely to be innovation within the partnership scheme because of that compared to a centralised organisation e.g. a governmental department.

However, there are some potential losses associated with the construction of partnerships. The most obvious one is related to the decrease of accountability and control that characterise such arrangements. The lack of visibility makes accountability something difficult to achieve. In the same way, control of policy is difficult to achieve because of the ambiguity of partnerships and its existence between the participating actors (Peters, 1998).

## **METHODOLOGY**

Before embarking on the task to explain why the method of case studies is used in this paper it seems of worth to deal with the institutional approach<sup>iv</sup> as the proper one related to methodology on partnerships.

Partnerships can be considered as institutions because they are conceptualised as stable, institutional structures that are governed by rules, which have been agreed previously (Peters, 1998). According to Rhodes (1997) the institutional approach does not rely any more on the skills of the historian and the lawyer. After the behavioural revolution [!] there is more methodological sophistication in the study of politics. As a consequence, there exist a range of methods. Case studies are one of them.

A case study is used when it is tried to illuminate a decision or an organisation or a process: why they are taken; how they were implemented; with what results (Yin,

1994). Considering the latter, it could be argued that using case studies for this particular paper helps to examine the implementation of its theoretical considerations. Additionally, the method of case studies is needed because of the empirical nature of the paper. Can partnerships count as an example of an alternative mode of governance? As Yin points out a case study is an empirical inquiry that '*investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident*' (Yin, 1994: 13). In this paper's case the phenomenon of governance is investigated within the real-life context of partnerships taking into account that the boundaries between the two are not clearly evident because of the premature appearance of partnerships as a mode of governance. Two case studies are investigated: The First Stop York Partnership, as the 'native' case, and the Strategic Forum for Flemingsberg in Sweden.

## **TWO CASE STUDIES**

This section briefly illustrates some of the issues developed above by considering these two cases. Both of them concern inter-organisational partnerships acting in a specific geographical area and they can be interpreted as examples of governing bodies with their serious weaknesses. The fact that the first case applies to the 'native' environment and the second one to the environment abroad express the desire if not curiosity [!] of the writer to compare the different environments where the particular partnerships functioned.

### *FIRST STOP YORK PARTNERSHIP - York, North Yorkshire, UK*

The First Stop York Partnership was established in 1995 in order to develop further tourism in the city of York. It consists of public and private organisations such as the council, York Tourism Bureau, the local Chamber of Commerce, York and District Hospitality Association. In October 1999 a three-year plan was launched to continue the city's development as a visitor destination and to bring together a series of objectives supported by all the partners (Apostolakis, 2000).

It seems that the partnership followed the life-cycle types of governance suggested by Lowndes and Skelcher (1998), as about 20 partners on a collaborative basis have established it. As the partnership moved on a type of hierarchy was established through the Strategy Group, the significant point of its organisational structure. The group consisted of leading people from the various participants. Additionally, there were two primary groups: from the council the Economic Development Unit, which did the administrative work; and the implementation group, York Tourism Bureau, which focused more on marketing and promotion issues. With its new three-year plan launched in the late 1999, the partnership seemed to enter to its 'programme delivery' face as it focused on marketing and market research, product development and quality issues (Apostolakis, 2000).

With respect to the morale and commitment should exist between the members of a partnership, the research revealed that this attitude was at the time of the construction of the research more established within the FSYP than before. However, according to some interviewees there was confusion in relation to roles and responsibilities in the

partnership, which created conflict. This was due to an *'almost endless series of ad hoc decisions made about the running of the partnership'*. With regard to the allocation of financial resources the main body of the partnership, the Strategy Group allocated the resources. According to the research findings there were more than one contributor to the partnership, so it was difficult to identify a partner that could stipulate the allocation of resources because of its financial strength (Apostolakis, 2000).

Despite the fact that usually partnerships lack in accountability, FSYP presented a type of accountability to its members and furthermore to local residents of York, as there existed several meetings of the participating groups such as the one called York Tourism Forum. In this meeting every single business related to tourism was invited and thus it was very useful for the partnership's progress. In this way there was a continuous feedback of what was going on (Apostolakis, 2000).

It could be argued then that the partnership applied policy in its area of expertise in York. That examines the appearance of the 'Network and Policy Communities' system of governance in the particular context. However, according to the research findings, there existed elements of a secretly traditional way of governing. As members of participating groups interviewed pointed out, in many cases, the decision-making process *'was taken place into two places'*, within the official body of the partnership but also within the officers of the council (Apostolakis, 2000).

### *STRATEGIC FORUM FOR FLEMINGSBERG - Flemingsberg, Stockholm, Sweden*

The Strategic Forum for Flemingsberg was established between May and October 1999 in order to solve vital socio-economic problems in Flemingsberg, a small urban area very close to Stockholm. The partnership's creation followed the primary work of two consulting companies, which had the task to bring together local interest groups willing to develop the deprived area of Flemingsberg both economically and socially. The main partners of the SFF were (after the final meeting in October 1999): The local University College; Huddinge hospital; the local authority; Novum Science Park and local land/property owners (Barczyk, 2000).

The partnership's construction seems to follow a different approach compared to the FSYP in York. In this case consultants were employed to start investigating the potential of creating a partnership. This indicates a type of formality and hierarchy since the beginning. Even more, the two consulting companies belonged to the public sector, which gives a *'public mentality'* to the whole attempt from the very beginning. As the constructor of the research noticed *'behind the contract [of creating a partnership] stood local politicians who decided to outsource steering and elaboration of the intellectual process'* (Barczyk, 2000: 110).

The goals the partnership had to achieve were many and very diversified reflecting the objectives of each one of the partners. These goals ranged from the simplest ones, such as to create a new travel centre, to more complicated ones such as to raise financial support e.g. co-ordination of financial obligations, more involvement by the

state authority, raising EU funding, etc. Nevertheless, the partners obtained to create a climate of mutual trust, commitment and reciprocity as *'all the participants were aware and felt safe in the position to exploit the freedom of absence or reservation from the programme's formulation'*. In addition, *'[the participants] were allowed to bound themselves only to such objectives, which they agreed to follow, after 'anchoring' them in their organisations'* (Barczyk, 2000: 115). Thus, it was obvious from the very early stages that the drive for common vision for Flemingsberg was the widespread concept within the partnership. What is not clear enough though is the role of the consultants as it seems that they got the power to promote an approach of steering the partnership until they would not be needed any more. This possibly reflects the cultural differences between the two cases of partnerships. As we saw in the case of York, 'secondary' participants pointed out that they would not accept being given directions and policies by the 'important' partners.

There is no information about the manner the Strategic Forum for Flemingsberg used to allocate the financial resources. According to their targets it seems that they sought to get funding from several sources, including the state and the EU. This probably indicates difficulties in raising funding.

With respect to the way the partnership attempted to fulfil the expectations of the local residents in Flemingsberg by its effectiveness and closeness to their needs, it seems that the whole attempt had its first successes. Despite the big size of the partnership and the different aims of the partners during its first year of running SFF achieved to be accepted as the new source of power, innovation and political influence in the area. As Barczyk points out the 'big players' tended to compromise their aims with them of the other members of the partnership. An indicative example is the one of the land/property owners who decided to invest to projects that were not relevant to their goals such as the new R & D centre, ComSoft centre.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Partnerships are one of the numerous and growing set of organisations that exist in the intersections of the public, private and community/voluntary organisations. At a local level, these are important mechanisms for reaching public policy and also important manifestations of the capacity of interest groups to be involved in the policy process.

From the evidence shown in the empirical part of the paper it could be argued that partnerships can provide an alternative mode of governance as they tend to exploit the main issues for steering: Power; decision-making process, delivery of policy-making, allocation of resources. In addition, partnerships tend to involve 'traditional' types of governance such as hierarchies and markets because of their often multi-complex nature (participants from all backgrounds coming together to achieve common goals and objectives). This type of governance seems most likely to be based on a network and policy communities' mode as partnerships fulfil the vast majority of the pre-conditions needed for such a mode. In this sense, partnerships can formulate alternative policies to the traditional public and market ones by attempting to involve a wide range of members to work together having mutual trust, reciprocity, commitment and flexibility.

However, there are dysfunctional elements in the functioning of partnerships that prevent them from being an alternative mode of governance. These elements such as top-down approaches, 'ruling' partners, decrease of accountability, loss of control indicate that partnerships are still in a premature stage to be considered as a mode of governance. They also show a tendency to use conventional ways of 'steering'. This is not to say that these dysfunctional elements cancel the whole idea of partnerships giving a different paradigm of governance. As Pierre puts it: '*We expect them [partnerships] to be created in a more purposeful way and evaluated more in terms of their achievements than in terms of what they represent*' (1998: 197)

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> According to Kooiman (1993: 258) "Governance can be seen as the pattern or structure that emerges in a social-political system as 'common' result or outcome of the interesting intervention efforts of all involved actors"

<sup>ii</sup> Mackintosh (1992) argues that partnerships is a concept that "*contains a very high level of ambiguity*" with its potential meaning subject to "*conflict and renegotiation*" (Hastings, 1995)

<sup>iii</sup> Ebor Gardens Partnership was established in Leeds, in 1994, as a business-orientated initiative in order to work with the residents of the Ebor Gardens estate on a range of social, economic and environmental issues (Wilson & Charlton, 1997)

<sup>iv</sup> The basic point of the institutional approach is that there are structural and organisational aspects of social life that shape behaviour and have as much or more influence over decisions as do the properties of individual decision-makers (Peters, 1998: 15)

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