

Projects as Partnerships: Project management and cross-sector partnering approaches to stakeholder engagement^{1, 2}

David F. Murphy

Institute of Business, Industry and Leadership
University of Cumbria, UK

and

Andrew W. Gale

Department of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering
The University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

The fields of project management and cross-sector partnering are both said to share the challenge of enabling meaningful stakeholder engagement. There is growing attention to stakeholder involvement in projects. In cross-sector partnerships, practitioners and researchers have long grappled with balancing interests of partners and the wider stakeholder community. This challenge has increased as project management methodologies, skill sets and perspectives have been assimilated widely in the public, private and non-profit sectors. Funding agencies are often making both project management and cross-sector partnering practices mandatory in bidding and delivery. Inter-agency working is now axiomatic in effectively tackling complex health, socio-economic, environmental sustainability, and human security challenges. Questions about values and trust are fundamental to successful project and partnership outcomes. To what extent do projects and partnerships facilitate and enable stakeholder inclusion? We explore synergies and differences between project management and cross-sector partnering in relation to stakeholder engagement, with particular interest in strategies and approaches within project and partnering contexts. We conclude with a call for more collaborative action research by project management and cross-sector partnership academics and practitioners to share knowledge and experience and to identify more inclusive stakeholder engagement strategies and practices, using appropriate tools.

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1. Introduction: What is the paper about?

When is a project a partnership? To what extent is a partnership also a project? These are important framing questions for our paper, which explores connections between what appear to be two distinct fields of practice and academic study – project management and cross-sector partnering. How might project management and cross-sector partnership practitioners and academics benefit by learning about the experience and research of the other field? How do project managers, teams, and partnership practitioners each work with stakeholders within their respective (inter-) organizational environments? What are some of the parallels and variances in how stakeholder engagement and related ideas are understood and practiced in project management and cross-sector partnering contexts? There is apparent value in considering potential synergies and differences between project management and cross-sector partnering contexts, concepts, theories, frameworks, methodologies, and tools. This paper considers these questions, challenges, and opportunities.

2. Narrative Overview of Project Management Contexts and Concepts

We can consider the management of projects through an enquiry analogous with the anthropological tradition, in which we learn **with** the environment to which we are responding. This is within physical, historical, political, economic, psycho-social, and emotional contexts, concerned also with the materiality of place and making, a proposition endorsed by Ingold (2013). Arguably, all projects involve making, which includes things virtual. Projects are also about delivering beneficial change. This implies a relationship between the values of the project organisation and the beneficiary. Is the beneficiary always the project sponsor? For example, who are the beneficiaries of a public infrastructure project? We argue that the management of projects, or behaviors associated with the conception and realization of projects, is axiomatic to the human condition. The creation of cave art, for example, would have involved at least one person in the realization but, we conjecture, more than one, thus engagement with others for the work to be achieved and witnessed. Currently, the oldest known human artwork in a cave first appeared in the Iberian Peninsula around 64,000 years ago (Hoffmann et al, 2018). Morris (2013a, p11) argues that the first suggestion of project management as a formal discipline was in the 1950s, citing the Manhattan Project as an early example. Led by J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Manhattan Project was a joint scientific and military initiative established in 1942 to develop a functional atomic bomb. This project would have not succeeded without the creative collaboration of some 600,000 individuals (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003; Wallerstein, 2013).

Morris (2013b, p20) states that "...the discipline [of project management] needs to be less inward looking: more relevant, not just to the sponsor's needs but to society's challenges in general. We can foresee several changes in the years ahead in the ways projects and programs will be managed...". Despite the apparent growing importance placed on stakeholder identification and engagement in the Body of Knowledge (BoK) of the UK-based Association for Project Management (APM, 2022), or the American-based Project Management Institute (PMI, 2021),

we suggest that project sponsors or clients are usually preferred over the end users of projects. End users are stakeholders, and they often have little agency, due to their lack of skill sets, organisational power, and resources. Another consideration is the ‘worldview’ that can be inferred from most of the literature and methodologies supporting the discipline or domain knowledge of project management. The language used is usually uncritical of the capitalist construct. Tsing (2021) has written extensively about what she calls “salvage accumulation” within complex collaborative supply chains. To what extent might the theory and practice of project management contribute to reductionist and/or instrumental perspectives?

Whether or not project management is a discipline or knowledge domain is the subject of much debate. Higher education institutions research and teach and there is certainly an internationally widespread community of academics investigating the management of projects using mainly the term, project management. Only five of the nine “key project management journals” listed by the University of New South Wales (UNSW, 2023) are granted a Web of Science Impact Factor (WoS, 2023), whereas a high proportion of the 433 “management” journals listed by WoS are ranked. It may be that the project management literature is distributed widely in management journals of course. The limited number of journals purporting to specialize on project management with an impact rank may be the reason why some argue that project management is not a discipline. There are academics who define themselves as specializing in project management and there are those who would self-define as researching and teaching management within which project management is situated. Morris (2013a, p.231-3) discusses this, arguing both positions to be valid. Industrial and not for profit organisations are increasingly aligned to the two main models: APMBoK or PMBoK, or sometimes draw on both. In some cases, organisations construct their own models. Arguably the two main BoKs can be viewed as complementary.

Another important frame of reference within which project management is codified is through contracts. A good example of this is the New Engineering Contract (NEC) suite, predominantly designed for civil engineering projects. This is said to support and promote “good project management” (ICE, 2023; Mott Macdonald, 2020). It is argued to be successful in terms of facilitating the delivery of projects within budget, on time and meeting the specification, minimizing disputes and conflict-based delays through collaboration, and reduced adversarial relations. However, the language used within the contract is not overtly concerned with collaboration or partnership with all stakeholders. Other contractual arrangements such as Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) and Public Finance Initiatives (PFIs) use the language of partnership and collaboration but are primarily concerned with transactional processes over relatively long time periods and do not seek to maximize collaboration or partnership with end users. Although the process of managing projects requires human collaboration, the BoKs, contractual forms, literature and curricula appear to be situated mainly within a worldview characterized by managerialist, transactional relationships. For the most part, this may indeed be the case; nevertheless, the seventh edition of APMBok offers an alternative perspective with one of the four chapters entitled ‘People and Behaviours’ including sections on stakeholders, engagement and influence, facilitation, and communication among other related topics. With

the seventh edition of PMBOK, PMI has adopted a similar position as APM with respect to the behavior of people and engagement of stakeholders moving from a process-based approach to one which is more adaptive, and principle based.

3. Narrative Overview of Cross-sector Partnering Contexts and Concepts

Partnership has always been about the sharing of resources. Whether we are referring to business partners, romantic partners or cross-sector partners, the essence of a partnership can be found in its etymology. In the 14th century, the Old French word ‘parcener’ referred to one who shares or partakes in something and ‘parçonier’ described an associate, joint owner, joint heir. In a related vein, ‘part tenour’ or part holder was someone who shared power or authority with another (Harper, 2020). As a relationship based on resource and power sharing, a partnership is usually confirmed or formalized by an agreement or contract.

In contrast, collaboration has tended to be more about the process of people working together with collaborating individuals and organizations being those who undertake joint labour. First used in English in the early 19th century in literary and scientific settings, the roots of collaboration lie in the Latin word ‘collaborare’ meaning to work with (Harper, 2018). In practice, collaboration is usually a less formal cooperative relationship in which the participants are not necessarily bound contractually.

Unlike project management, partnership is not a distinctive academic discipline or field of study; there is no such thing as partnership studies per se. As a legal construct, partnership is codified and studied in law and practice either as a business partnership: two or more persons carrying on business in common with a view to profit (Wilson, 1912); or as a civil partnership: a legal union (similar to marriage) between two unrelated persons (Stychin, 2005). Within diverse cross-sector and multi-stakeholder contexts, partnership is explored in a wide range of academic fields – business and management, organizational studies, sustainability science, development studies, policy studies, political science, among many others. Understanding cross-sector partnership and collaboration within the contexts that they occur is key to strengthening their development and implementation, as well as the achievement of positive outcomes (Murphy & Stott, 2021; Stott, 2022; El-Ansari et al, 2001).

Cross-sector partnerships first gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s as business and wider societal responses to a turbulent, uncertain post-industrial context with some academics originally describing them as collaborative problem-solving networks (Austrom & Lad, 1986) and social partnerships (Waddock, 1991). Early examples of cross-sector collaboration included business-environmental NGO partnerships such as the WWF UK 1995 Group which brought together environmental groups and businesses to endorse well-managed forest products (Murphy & Bendell, 1997) and multi-stakeholder partnerships including the Ethical Trading Initiative founded in 1998 by a group of UK companies, trade unions, and NGOs to promote workers' rights in global supply chains (Bitzer and Schouten, 2022). Most of the early cross-sector partnerships were either bi-sector or tri-sector initiatives.

Unlike public-private partnerships (PPPs) based on contractual arrangements where private sector partners deliver and fund public services (OECD, 2012), cross-sector or multi-stakeholder (sometimes referred to as social) partnerships may include less formal arrangements based upon “the voluntary collaborative efforts of actors from organizations in two or more...sectors in a forum in which they cooperatively attempt to solve a problem or issue of mutual concern that is in some way identified with a public policy agenda item” (Waddock, 1991, pp481-82). Bendell and Murphy (2010, p307) build on this definition by noting that “such partnerships may or may not involve formal agreements or financial exchange; they can be based on legally binding contracts or purely voluntary arrangements. Activities of the partners can differ, yet serve a common interest, or the partners may agree to work together on a set of activities that are undertaken for different interests.”

In recent years, a more inclusive approach to both cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships has begun to emerge under the umbrella of the United Nations with ‘Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (UN, 2015) which includes the associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda is a plan of action for “all countries and all stakeholders” (*Ibid*, p3) underpinned by the principle that “no one will be left behind” (*Ibid.*). Both top-down and bottom-up multi-stakeholder partnerships and other forms of multi-actor collaboration are needed at all scales and levels. Diverse partnering processes are integral to achieving sustainable development. Other less formal methods of multi-stakeholder collaboration and engagement are also needed.

A related important inclusive element of all or most partnerships and other collaborative arrangements is the centrality of inter-personal connections between pairs and groups of individuals across diverse forms of relationship within, between and across different types of organizations, sectors, and settings. Partnerships tend to emerge, thrive and flounder based upon personal relationships and narratives (Stott & Murphy, 2020). The partnering process is as important as the outcomes, with Stott (2022, pp108-109) arguing that “investment in the partnering process is central to collaborative effectiveness”, and that this requires “careful attention to process factors and the nature of interactions among partners.”

How do projects fit within such cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnering processes? As both governance mechanisms and project methodologies, partnerships comprise and deliver various projects and other activities. Under the umbrella of a partnership framework agreement, the partners work together towards the achievement of shared goals as well as individual partner objectives both of which depend upon the development and implementation of successful projects.

Two different views of the place of projects in partnerships are offered here. The European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities has developed a toolkit to support the development of project management skills in a partnership context. This approach is based on “the principle that those who are intended to benefit from

the initiative should be involved in designing and managing it” (EC, 2005, p5). A different perspective is advocated by La Caixa Foundation (2018, p6) which argues against the application of traditional project management mindsets and instead proposes Social Innovation Platforms for Sustainable Human Development “to build spaces for experimentation [and] generate long-term systemic impacts.”

Table 1, below, offers a summary of some of the main differences between established contexts of traditional project management and cross-sector partnership working (Stott, 2019).

Project management	Partnership working
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conventional leadership• Vertical hierarchies• Contractual relationships• Limited room for testing out approaches and processes• Results focus• Impact measurement mainly following project delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborative leadership• Horizontal decision-making• Mentoring & facilitation• Space for experimentation, reflection, and learning• Process and outcomes focus• Ongoing assessment of processes and results

Table 1: Project Management & Partnership Working Compared
(Adapted from: Stott, 2019)

4. Stakeholder Management and Engagement Concepts & Contexts

The stakeholder concept has always been about managing resources and the balancing of competing interests. The word stakeholder was originally used in 1708 to describe someone “with whom bets are deposited when a wager is made” (i.e., the holder of the stakes). By 1965, the stakeholder had evolved into a broader notion of “one who has something to gain or lose” primarily in a business context, or “one who has an interest in” a particular issue or concern (Harper, 2018). By the 1980s, stakeholder management was promoted as a both a management theory and a strategic business tool (Freeman, 1984).

Stakeholder engagement approaches that enable actors to contribute meaningfully to both projects and partnerships are often complex, challenging, and unfolding processes (Andriof & Waddock, 2017; Clayton, 2014). To what extent do methodologies adopted by project managers and partnership practitioners facilitate or impede purposeful stakeholder inclusion? In the management of projects, some of the key stakeholders are determined in the project conception stage or planning phase (HBR Editors, 2016). In cross-sector partnerships, significant stakeholders are often identified in the scoping and building phase (Tennyson, 2011; PBA, 2019). At all stages or phases of a project or a partnership, other stakeholders may nonetheless invite themselves and pose challenging questions about the purpose, value, resources, progress, results, and impact of the project or partnership. End users and beneficiaries may be partially or completely overlooked or deliberately excluded.

This in turn influences how all the stakeholders are perceived. Stakeholder management could be conceived as managing the ‘other’. Limited stakeholder engagement in the project life cycle particularly early on often has an adverse impact on anticipated project outcomes. Engaging diverse stakeholders in projects is challenging given that their varied interests and values rarely align and are often in conflict, especially in sustainable development contexts (Bahadorestani et al, 2020).

Project management literature and practice tends to view stakeholders as internal or external to the project and falling somewhere on a “*stakeholder matrix*”: y-axis importance; x- axis influence, as in Smith (2000). “External” implies, the ‘other’, to be managed. If collaboration or partnership are mentioned in the context of stakeholder maps, engagement, or management this usually relates to “*internal stakeholders*”. Careful consideration of non-financial external stakeholders is often absent particularly in traditional project management settings.

In cross-sector and multi-stakeholder partnering contexts, all partners are stakeholders but not all stakeholders are partners. And while not all stakeholders of any given partnership will necessarily have collaborative mindsets or partnership aspirations, the views and actions of the various stakeholders have the potential to enable or impede partnership development and implementation. The roles and contributions of stakeholders in both projects and partnerships are naturally context dependent. At different stages or phases of the project or partnership life cycle, stakeholders will be engaged or enraged to varying degrees from design and development through to implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Stakeholder engagement in partnerships is arguably a logical, desirable, and necessary part of the consensus building process, however as Stott (2009, p1) notes “a clear understanding of who partnership ‘stakeholders’ are, and how they might be appropriately ‘engaged’ in partnering activities is often absent.” A review of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership by Stott (2018) revealed inappropriate and inadequate “participation channels for genuine stakeholder engagement in programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation” and an overreliance on ‘usual suspects’ over ‘non-traditional partners’ (Stott, 2022, p127). End users and local level stakeholders in such contexts have the potential to contribute new ideas and experience to both partnerships and projects. This view resonates with earlier research by Sloan (2009) who advocates a collaborative model of stakeholder engagement where stakeholders become a source of opportunity, learning, innovation and ultimately transformation.

This shift is necessary to adapt to the pace of change and disruption in the operating environments of both projects and partnerships. McKinsey (2018) intimates that the “machine organisation” of the 20th century is being replaced by the “agile organisation”. Early realization in projects of stakeholder benefits is important to keep momentum and interest, along with an acceptance that partnerships may be more fluid with stakeholder interest rising and waning given their own wider needs and objectives. We see this with the adoption of agile or iterative project management methodologies that focus on business need, early realization of benefits,

flexibility and collaboration using more integrated approaches (Zafar et al, 2018). Another example of how project management is evolving can be found in efforts to incorporate social procurement in construction and infrastructure projects as a cross-sector collaborative mechanism to facilitate more positive contributions to local communities (Loosemore et al, 2022). Within a context of growing aspiration for more agile and sustainable organisational and societal transformations, early and ongoing stakeholder identification and appropriate inclusion are essential for optimal delivery success in both projects and partnerships.

5. Conclusions

This conceptual paper has investigated project management and cross-sector partnering as distinct but related fields of practice and research. One of our aims was to share experience and facilitate learning of practitioners and academics working in these different domains. People working in project management and cross-sector partnerships share similar challenges in enabling meaningful stakeholder engagement. At the same time, there is growing recognition of the importance of building trust and reciprocity, creating both economic and noneconomic value through mutually beneficial stakeholder and partner relationships. This requires a shift from stakeholder management as a control mechanism to stakeholder inclusion as an opportunity for diverse multi-stakeholder collaboration in project management and partnering contexts. Stakeholder identification and participation are essential for the design and implementation of both projects and partnerships, and in sustaining outcomes. This implies more bottom-up, local community engagement and a rethinking of stakeholder processes to ensure more emphatic involvement. We advocate for a new shared action research agenda linking project management and cross-sector partnership practitioners and academics, which challenges existing ways of thinking and working with stakeholders, offers alternative approaches based on inclusion, dialogue, critical listening, and which also supports more meaningful forms of participation.

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About the Authors



David F. Murphy, PhD

Ambleside, Cumbria, England, UK



Dr David F. Murphy is Associate Professor of Sustainability & Collaborative Leadership and Academic Lead of the Initiative for Leadership & Sustainability (IFLAS), University of Cumbria. He is also leading the university's new Doctor of Business Administration program.

David has extensive international experience of working on multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration with senior leaders and change agents in business, government, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and the United Nations system, including related teaching, applied research and consultancy on partnerships for sustainable development.

Recent research and knowledge exchange projects include: an international review of the transformational potential of partnerships for sustainable development; partnering capacity building for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Lancaster (UK); and empowering micro, small and medium enterprises for the SDGs. David has also recently been appointed as co-chair of the Zero Carbon Cumbria Partnership, which brings together diverse organizations to work towards the shared goal of carbon reduction.

David holds an MSc in Comparative Development and International Policy, and a PhD in International Policy on Sustainable Development, from the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, UK.

He can be contacted at david.murphy@cumbria.ac.uk



Prof Andrew W. Gale, PhD

Manchester, England, UK



Andrew Gale, BSc (Hons), PhD, CEng, FICE, MCIOB, MACostE is professor of project management in the Department of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering at the University of Manchester, UK. A graduate of Brunel and Bath Universities, he spent 13 years in industry (UK and Middle East) prior to his academic career. Chartered engineer experienced in collaborating with various higher education institutions and industry developing of masters education in project managers. He has significant professional and academic experience in the Middle East and Asia Pacific.

He is a member of the Senate of the British University in Dubai (BUiD) and leads an academic collaboration with the Faculties of Engineering and Business at BUiD. He is Leader of the Management of Projects Expert Group, comprising 15 academic staff and 40 PhD students, in MACE, and is Programme Director for the MSc Project Management Professional Development Programme (PMPDP), a flexible modular programme led by an industrial consortium comprising: Rolls-Royce, AMEC, Goodrich, EDS, Sellafield and E.on.

He is a very experienced university lecturer and has 30+ years of experience in undertaking educational needs analysis in the UK and overseas, teaching project management in all its aspects. He is very experienced in designing and delivering courses for mature students and to those for whom English is not their first language. He manages research on people, organisation and culture aspects of project management and has published over 150 articles and papers.

Since joining UMIST (now The University of Manchester) in 1990 he has secured and managed over £2.3 million worth of research and consultancy grants. His research focus is on the application of project management in engineering, infrastructure, construction and aerospace sectors covering design, manufacture, construction and services. Examples of the issues that he has investigated include: project complexity, project risk management, design change support tools and project managing carbon footprints. He led a research partnership with Rolls-Royce Risk Function, investigating the application of risk management strategies and tools in the context of projects, programmes and the enterprise. He has been co-vice-chair of the Global Accreditation Centre Board for the Project Management Institute in the United States. He is also currently External Examiner at the University of Limerick, Ireland and visiting Professor at Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland.