

Partnering and the Ideal State: Limits to Collaboration

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Abstract:

Networks, collaboration and partnerships between the government and community groups offer prospects for stronger governance and improved public value. Many authors have reported on processes that enhance the prospects for successful collaborations, especially in handling intractable issues, but few have examined the limits to partnerships. A simple theory of government (involving the efforts of “reasonable people”) is devised to explore the issues in creating sustainable partnerships. A graphical presentation is used to demonstrate that successful partnerships rely on more than good management; their success also depends on their effects on the rest of the polity, and the response to those effects. These processes limit the potential for partnerships to offer a general solution to problems of governance. Three conditions for sustainable partnerships are derived; benefit, support and acceptability. Attention to good network management, political risks and sound public administration can improve the prospects for a successful and sustainable partnership, but eventually (like other forms of human endeavour) there are limits to partnerships.

Keywords: Partnership; Reasonable person; Ideal state; Limits

Introduction

In November 2012, editorial writers in New Zealand (*Dominion-Post*, 2012) thundered about mismanagement of Whanau Ora, a two-year-old partnership program administered by Te Puni Kokiri (the Department of Maori Affairs). The program aims at improving the capacity of Maori groups (and others) to organise social services for their communities.

There was some basis for the newspaper's complaints. An evaluation the department had commissioned found that lack of data meant it was "not able to tell a robust and convincing story" to demonstrate that the program had contributed to healthy lifestyles, economic security or other program goals (Wehipeihana 2012, p34). And in the week the evaluation was released, a gang member was convicted in Dunedin for diverting \$20,000 of program funds to purchase cannabis (*Otago Daily Times*, 2012). The political response was immediate, as opposition politicians demanded better controls on government spending (Chapman, 2012).

On the other hand, the evaluation also reported strong favourable community responses and improved community dynamics, and \$20,000 is not a large share out of a total program spend of \$12.6 million. Perhaps the administration of Whanau Ora is no worse than some mainstream programs but, because it is intended to involve non-officials in decision-making and delivery, Whanau Ora presents significant management challenges.

Whanau Ora is just one of many programs and initiatives worldwide that aim to improve flexibility of management so that communities can achieve better results. The basic idea is that communities understand their particular needs and will respond more constructively to activities that are delivered in a way that is sensitive to their preferences. Much academic commentary has favoured partnerships as a way of the future, and has suggested various management processes to improve their chance of success.

However, the political response to developments in the Whanau Ora program suggests that management may not be the only issue. This paper argues that partnerships should not be seen solely through a management lens. In essence, partnerships (as the term is used in this paper) involve some form of special interaction between officials and members of a community. In the partnership, officials focus on the needs of the community (where community refers to some sub-set of the polity), but they work for the government which operates on behalf of the whole polity. This creates a risk of conflict.

This paper takes a theoretical approach to derive some practical advice for officials. It considers whether the nature of government imposes a limit on the ability of partnerships between government and non-government entities to create public value.¹ It then considers the implications of those limitations for the work of government officials.

The next section contains a brief scan of recent literature on collaborative governance, including partnerships, focusing particularly on guidance for officials. The following three

¹ In that context the nature of a partnership (or collaboration or network) is immaterial, and various terms for different types of partnerships are used interchangeably in this paper.

sections construct an analysis which posits the necessary conditions for partnerships to contribute to public value. The implications of those conditions are then considered and the paper concludes with some thoughts for the future.

Partnership, Government and Public value

Partnerships and associated ideas of collaborative governance (including networks, cooperation, coordination, and co-production) have received considerable academic attention in recent decades (Alford and O’Flynn 2012 contains a good account of the issues; for a New Zealand perspective see Ryan 2011, 92-100). This paper does not attempt to review that literature; rather it uses a selection of recent articles to sketch a picture of some disparities and commonalities in current thinking, and the implications for practitioners. This part of the paper takes an inclusive view of the range of processes and structures involved in collaborative governance; a particular definition of partnerships is adopted later.

Articles on collaborative governance vary between the practical “how-to-do-it” at one end and the abstract, even abstruse, at the other. One of the most practical is by Provan and Lemaire (2012); they use a straightforward approach, reviewing articles on networks in several disciplines in order to identify processes that work well. These include: human involvement at many levels; network design; appropriate governance of the network; legitimacy (internally as perceived by members and externally as perceived by potential members and users); and stability (p. 643). Their list does not extend to wider issues of political acceptability or of the legitimacy of government processes; in essence their approach is managerial.

Lewis (2011) is more theoretical; her focus is on the interactions that make a network. She points to lessons from research that suggest the success of networks is related to management rather than organisational form (p. 1230), informal rather than formal connections (p. 1231), and the “embeddedness” of relationships (p. 1231). As with Provan and Lemaire (2012), these conclusions point practitioners towards interactions within networks and say little about the wider polity.

Bevir and Richards (2009) are at the abstract end of the spectrum as they discuss a “decentred” analysis of policy networks. They suggest that analysing networks as entities with objective characteristics effectively imposes a presumption onto the analysis. Instead, they propose looking at the beliefs that participants bring to interactions, because those beliefs shape the networks they operate in. As a result they see “no necessary logical or structural process determining the form networks take, or whether they succeed or fail” (p. 12). Accordingly, though officials might learn from each other’s experience, they should be aware that the approaches (narratives) that work in one tradition may not translate elsewhere.

The analysis offered by Pedersen, Sehested and Sørensen, (2010), is not decentred but “pluri-centred” as public and private actors interact to achieve coordination. These authors offer an optimistic view of “planning in disorder” (p. 385) in which “moments of relative fixation” (p. 388) can be the basis for coordination. Their advice to practitioners is summed up in the Zen-like thought that “coordination is about striking the right balance between fixation and

flexibility, between control and autonomy, between unity and diversity, and between simplicity and complexity” (p. 388). As with Bevir and Richards, they have little direct advice for officials.

Among those who write on practical themes, some are more optimistic than others about the potential of collaborative governance. For example, Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh (2012) review the literature to draw out a general framework for analysis of collaborative governance. Their work approaches the specificity of a wiring diagram as they describe a regime in which four drivers operate through three dynamics, influenced by twelve elements, all summarised in ten propositions. There is much for practitioners to use here, including leadership, goal specification, shared theories of action, shared knowledge and mutual trust (among others), but the framework seems both over-determined and optimistic. The ten propositions are all unidirectional and open-ended, implying that applying more of the things that allow collaborative governance would lead to more and more successful collaboration. That seems implausible; if it were true perhaps the world would be dominated by collaboration. Their conclusions may relate to the emphasis on internal dynamics compared to the passing treatment of the wider political context.

McGuire and Agranoff (2011) are more measured as they explore the limits to network approaches to government. They see operational limits that affect the interaction between network members; performance limits (including measurement problems) which make it hard to achieve tangible success; and bureaucratic limits, which relate to the role of officials and their responsibilities for matters beyond the network. They see network approaches as offering different means for officials to interact with the community, but not changing the essential nature of the government with its unique control of “decision authority, budgets, personnel, and democratic legitimization” (p. 271).

Unlike the other papers cited here, McGuire and Agranoff see the nature of government as an essential aspect which affects the ability of officials to act in partnerships with others. They are not alone in that view; for example Alford and Hughes (2008, p. 140) point out that public officials’ attempts to build trusting and flexible relationships with partners can be hampered by requirements of public accountability, changes in political leadership, competing intra-government priorities, and inertia. Some of those issues can be addressed by good network management, but some cannot; they require a wider perspective.

But if successful partnerships depend on more than good network management, what is the underlying source of the limitation on collaborative governance? And why are the implications of those limits and the options available to officials not more evident in much network analysis? This paper suggests that limits on collaborative governance arise from the nature of government. The practical implications of those limits are often overlooked because many studies are not bedded in a theory of government and, of those that do have a theoretical component, the theories are often based on institutions and interactions rather than on the actions of people.

Indeed, some approaches reflect a theory of government that acknowledges no special characteristics of the government as a player; Kooiman (2003), for example, defines government as “the totality of interactions” (p. 4) involved in addressing social issues, with no particular role for the state or officials. Such approaches may be very illuminating on questions of how social interactions might contribute to collective wellbeing, but offer little practical advice for officials. Alternatively, Klijn and Koppenjan (2000) acknowledge special characteristics of government, including “sizeable budgets and personnel, special powers, access to mass media, a monopoly on the use of force and democratic legitimization” (p. 151). This is closer to the world in which officials work, but it includes a number of aspects (like large budgets or access to media) which can apply to many large organisations. It would be clearer to focus particularly on the matter that sets the government apart from all other organisations – the monopoly on the lawful use of force.

Discussion of governance based on the analysis of interactions can be very illuminating for those wishing to consider how social processes evolve, but it can be opaque for a practitioner looking for advice on what works. Analysis of governance as a process done by people (within a social and institutional context) is more likely to relate directly to the issues that practitioners face. Analysis based on explicit assumptions about the nature of people as the unit of analysis is not common in the literature on collaborative governance. That may partly be because much individual-based theory uses the rational self-interested person, and that doesn't seem to fit a discussion of cooperative modes of governance. This paper avoids that problem by adopting a set of understandings of the person specifically adapted for analysing issues of public administration.

The approach in this paper aims to ensure that insights are relevant to practitioners working in public administration by locating the analysis within an understanding of the work that officials do and the responsibilities they discharge. The roles that people play are central to an understanding of how they *might* best behave, and some insight into the nature of people is necessary to venture ideas on how they *can* behave. Accordingly the analysis begins from an understanding of the nature of government, and of the people involved in any aspect of partnerships. When combined with definitions of partnerships (specifically involving public and private sector participants) and of public values this paper aims to construct from first principles a simple theoretical understanding so that partnerships, networks or collaborative governance can be seen as more than “metaphors” (Dowding 1995).

The method used here draws from economics. In particular the graphical presentation is similar to using a production possibility frontier and community preferences to locate a preferred solution. However, the building blocks (especially the nature of people) and the results are different from most economic analysis.

The theory is built by stepping back from the colour and confusion of real-world examples and starting instead with the simplest possible concept of a state and its processes. From that simple case a more complex analysis is used to arrive at a statement of the limits on partnerships involving public and private groups. The formal approach used here has the disadvantage of abstracting from real situations, but the advantage of minimising confusion.

In particular, if the results of the analysis point to conclusions different from those found elsewhere in the literature, a formal process should make clear where that difference has arisen.

The next section outlines characteristics of people, government, partnerships and public value; these are the core definitions and assumptions that underpin the analysis. An extremely simple form of society and government is outlined so that the essence of partnerships can be explored without real-world complexity. That analysis is then broadened into a more complex (but still abstract) society, in order to consider the generality of the ideas identified in the context of a simple society; in that process the necessary conditions (and therefore the limits) for sustainable partnerships are derived. The implications of those limits on the work of practitioners are then considered.

Building-Blocks for Analysis

People: In this paper people are assumed to be *reasonable* – this is not meant to imply that they behave in a reasonable way, rather it refers to the fact that they are able to reason when they choose to do so. Reasonable people have limited information (that is, information has a cost), and have the following characteristics:

1. Heuristic thinking: people have capacity for rational thought, but a propensity to intuitive decision-making using rules of thumb.
2. Heterogeneous preferences: people can decide which of two states is preferred, or whether they are indifferent between them. Because much decision-making is intuitive, these preferences may be unstable and mutually inconsistent. Preferences for any state are distributed across the population. Initially these preferences are assumed to be distributed randomly; that assumption is changed later.
3. Pragmatism: when considering matters of joint endeavour, people accept approaches that they think will work. Personal flexibility is valued, but where some form of state control offers better general benefits than can be achieved by private means then public control is accepted. That is, there are no ideological priors about the government or its role.

A further couple of characteristics arise from how people respond to limited information, as follows:

4. Substantive honesty: people are generally honest but at times they may be opportunistic and let self-interest defeat their obligations to others.
5. Experiential learning: though capable of evidence-based enquiry, much learning is based on personal experience or knowledge passed on from associates.

Government: Government is a social creation which exists to achieve improvements in social states beyond what could be achieved without a government. Like many other entities, governments may be large, complex, and subject to some form of democratic control, but the feature that sets government apart is its lawful power to require compliance from those within

the government's area of control. That is, government is a process run by people by which public authority is used to achieve public value.

Public value: Public value derives from actions of the government (and associated entities) that affect the lives of people – the public. It has been described as the value created by the government (Kelly et al 2002, p. 4) but that value does not exist in isolation rather it “is rooted in the desires and perceptions of individuals” (Moore 1995, p. 52). However, though value is found in the lives and aspirations of people, it is not the sum of private interests; it also reflects an understanding of the common good. Pragmatism (see above) means that people generally have a concern for the common good. Any assessment of public value must take account of the cost to the public in the form of resources or powers used by the government. That is, public value is a net concept which measures the gain to the public from government activity.

Partnerships: A partnership is some arrangement or pattern of behaviour by which (some part of) the government works with a community to adapt the provision of government services to provide enhanced public value for that community, where each community is a subset of the polity which the government serves. Though the term partnership implies equality between the partners, and that may be the ideal that participants hope to achieve, the unique nature of government as defined here means that no public/private partnership can be equal. That is, partnership is a tool available to governments by which aspects of policy or delivery of public services are adapted to meet the needs or wishes of a community; sometimes this involves a contribution of information, expertise, or other resources from within that community.

These concepts of people, government, public value and partnership will be applied to a very simple society in the following section.

Single-Product, Single-Activity Society

*Scenario*²: Imagine a citizen community on an island in a river delta. The island is subject to frequent but unpredictable floods which destroy the harvest. All citizens (other than government employees) are involved in raising crops; the production of crops is directly proportional to the labour exerted in cultivation, other than occasional losses caused by floods. It is possible to mitigate the risk of flooding by constructing levees. However, any target level of flood security can only be met if the levee is constructed to the same height all around the island. Levees must be maintained each year, thus this is a one-decision repeat game.

Enjoyment of flood-security is non-excludable and non-rivalrous, i.e. flood levees are a classic public good (Samuelson, 1954). Because of heterogeneous preferences, no person can assume that the willing actions of others will lead to voluntary construction of a levee to the height that any individual may prefer. Even if promises were made to build such a levee, the risk of opportunistic slacking (caused by the limits to substantive honesty) and problems of

² This follows and extends the approach in Prebble (2012).

information costs mean that nobody can plan on any level of flood security, unless the government compels contributions to the effort of building levees.

Government activity: The government manages one activity, the construction of levees. Levee construction is planned and supervised by government employees, who enforce contributions from all citizens. Citizen contributions may be labour (which means citizens are diverted from working in the fields and therefore food production drops) or food (to feed government employees and those who are working on the levees).

The aim of the government is to achieve the optimal level of flood protection. Every increase in levee construction reduces the risk of lost crops, but at the cost of reducing current crop production. The construction of levees depends on the contribution made by citizens. Everyone is pragmatic, so that effort is willingly offered by most citizens (except for some opportunism) to the extent that they agree that levee construction is valuable to the community.

However, some citizens regard any level of levee construction as a wasted effort. Such people are likely to put in less effort than others unless the coercion is so great that it cannot be resisted. This avoidance is on top of the avoidance behaviour of opportunists. As the levees rise, the proportion of the population that is reluctant also rises. As more and more effort is diverted to flood security, the productivity of extra coercion may become negative. This is because the process of avoiding (or enduring) coercive force would outweigh effort put in by an increasingly reluctant (and hungry) labour force.

The relationship between government activity and the construction of levees is shown in Figure 1. The use of labour (and the availability of food for private consumption) is measured on the horizontal axis, from zero to one. At the origin all labour is diverted to building levees or feeding levee builders, and there is zero labour for producing food for private consumption. Though this point is shown with a positive levee-height, construction is not

Figure 1
Outcome Curve

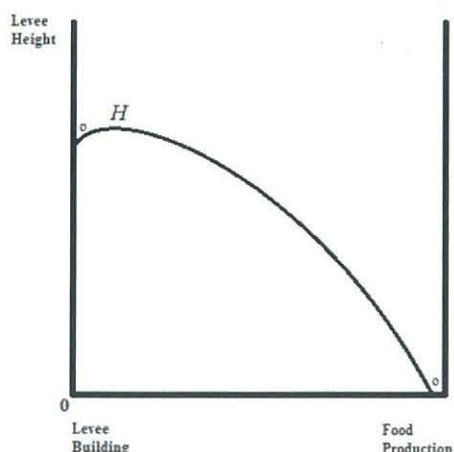
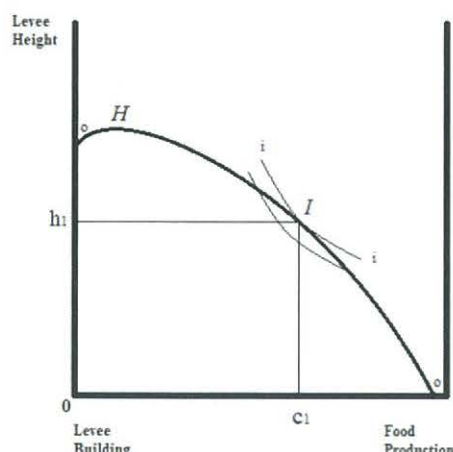


Figure 2
Trade-off Curve



indefinitely sustainable at this rate. At the right hand end of the horizontal axis, all labour is available for the production of food for private consumption, except for the modest tax to feed permanent government employees, who presumably do very little at that point because no levees are being built.

The vertical axis measures the height of the levees and therefore the level of flood protection. The curve $o-o$ is an outcome curve; it measures the level of flood protection that the government can achieve for any given diversion of available labour using existing technology.³ Point H measures the highest possible levee using available technology.

Preferences: Every person has their own preferred combination of food consumption and flood security. Heuristic thinking means that these preferences are not always consistent, but this does not mean that decisions are so capricious they cannot be understood. In general everyone wants some security and some food, and if they are to lose one of these things they need to be compensated by some of the other if they are to remain equally happy. As either food or security reduces towards zero, the amount of the other that is required to compensate for the loss of the scarce item will rise. Eventually, once food or security are at an irreducible minimum, then no extra provision of the other item will be enough to compensate for further loss of the scarce item.

Preferences can be plotted for every person as a trade-off curve. Each curve plots the locus of all equally-valued sets of food and security for an individual. The nature of the trade-offs described in the previous paragraph means that such trade-off curves are convex to the origin.⁴ There is a (potentially infinite) number of curves for each person; curves that are further from the origin represent larger combinations of food and security, so are preferable to curves that are closer to the origin.

A set of trade-off curves for one person are shown in Figure 2. Point I is the place where the highest trade-off curve touches the outcome curve; that represents the optimal level of food and security for that person. Similar sets of trade-off curves could be drawn for every inhabitant of the island, and (because of heterogeneous preferences) optimal food/security combinations for different people will be distributed all along the outcome curve from point H rightwards. Positions to the left of H will only interest masochists because the same levels of flood security are available to the right of H in combination with less coercion and more food consumption. Point H will only interest those who regard the highest available levee height as equal to or lower than their irreducible minimum for flood security; that is, those people are totally risk averse within the range of levee heights that are available using current technology.

³ As well as the motivation of workers, technology also implies that the outcome curve will be concave. For example, every extra centimetre of levee-height demands a stronger and wider foundation, and the last hectares brought into food production are likely to be less accessible or productive than the first.

⁴ At one extreme as food consumption reaches the irreducible minimum these curves would be vertical and at the other as flood protection reaches its minimum they would be horizontal, but in the zones plotted they are convex curves.

Decision-making: Each year democratic means are used to determine the height of the levees and therefore the contribution of labour or food that will be required from each citizen. Democracy might involve a plebiscite on levee levels, or annual election for a governor to determine their height. Either way, over time the result is clear; the height of the levee will be set in line with the preferences of the median voter (Downs, 1957).

For simplicity, assume that the person whose preferences are shown in figure 2 is the median voter; this means that the levees will be built to h_1 and citizen contributions will be required at c_1 . With available technology, point *I* is the point that the public finds most satisfactory; it approximates the highest available public value.

Potential for improvement: Though point *I* has emerged from a democratic process, that does not mean that everybody is happy. To the right of point *I* are people who would rather make less communal contribution and accept a higher risk of floods. To the left are people who would willingly contribute more (and wish that everybody else would contribute more) so they can achieve greater flood security.

In addition, point *I* is not necessarily the best possible state that society could aspire to – it is simply the best it can get using current technology. The role of government employees is to devise efficient means of building levees. If they designed a productivity-improving shovel they could raise the outcome curve across the whole range; that would lift every person to a higher trade-off curve and so shift society to a preferred position. But the shape of the outcome curve demonstrates that public results are not achieved solely by the efforts of government employees. The behaviour of citizens is critical.

Instead of focussing on technical fixes, government employees might come up with a way to nudge citizen preferences and behaviour. Perhaps they might introduce communal singing during levee construction; this might make levee construction so popular that preferences change and the median voter selects higher levees and more citizen contributions. More significantly, the joy of communal singing might induce more rhythm and coordination so the dirt is moved quicker and productivity is improved. That too would lift the outcome curve and improve public value.⁵ That is, government employees may devise methods of work which make citizens into more enthusiastic or effective *co-producers*.

Clustered preferences: Issues of organising co-production and partnering become clear with a small change in the scenario. Assume that the island has a peninsula, attached to the rest of the island by a narrow isthmus, so that it would be technically feasible to construct the levee around the peninsula at a different height from the rest of the island, with a flood gate at the isthmus. Also assume that the community living on the peninsula includes an unusually high proportion of people who favour more flood protection than the norm for the polity as a whole. Government employees have an opportunity to develop a special program of flood protection for the peninsula in partnership with the community living there. The question of

⁵ Any lift in the outcome curve allows the polity to access a new and higher set of public value results; the choice of where they settle along the curve is a distinct issue in this analysis, but the range of choices is always enhanced by lifting the outcome curve.

interest is what conditions are needed for that partnership to improve public value? That depends on the value accruing to the whole polity, peninsula-dwellers and others (“mainlanders”).

Figure 3 shows two trade-off curves. The first curve is the same median-voter trade-off curve as in figure 2, touching the outcome curve at point *I*. The other curve reflects the median voter of the community living on the peninsula, touching the outcome curve at point *P*. For the peninsula community point *I* is inferior to point *P* because point *I* lies on a lower trade-off curve.

Government employees could enter into a partnership with the peninsula community to raise levees around the peninsula to h_2 , while maintaining the levee around the mainland at h_1 . Though this will require extra labour to build the higher levees, this change would improve the value enjoyed by peninsula residents because it moves them along the outcome curve to their preferred position. This meets a basic requirement for improving public value.

Benefits of partnership: Assessing the net impact on public value for the polity as a whole depends on the effect on the rest of the population. There are two issues to consider. First is whether the public-value gains for one group are offset by losses elsewhere; if there are offsets the result is generally indeterminate, since it is difficult to compare benefits for one group with losses for another. The second test relates to the political sustainability of the special program. Irrespective of whether there are benefits for peninsula dwellers, the durability of those benefits depends on the willingness of mainlanders to condone the special program.

Compulsory contributions are at the heart of the calculation of net benefits. Even if the peninsula provides all the labour to build the higher levee, if the workers who build the peninsula levee are fed from compulsory food contributions from mainlanders, then the outcome for mainlanders is no longer at point *I*. Mainlanders are still protected by a levee at h_1 , but their food available for private consumption is reduced to support the extra construction to get the peninsula levees to h_2 . Because the peninsula has only a small part of the coastline mainlanders will not need to contribute as much as c_2 , but they still suffer a food loss to c^* . If peninsula levee construction is supported by island-wide contributions, point c^*h_1 is the new outcome for mainlanders. Compared to the situation without a partnership, peninsula-dwellers enjoy improved value by moving from point *I* to point *P*, but mainlanders are in a worse position than they were at point *I*.

But the loss of value comparing c^*h_1 to point *I* is only part of the loss for mainlanders. The position of mainlanders is amplified in figure 4. Point *I* is still marked in the same place, and the peninsula-dwellers preference is shown touching the outcome curve at *P*, as in figure 3. As well as showing the median voter trade-off curve for the polity as a whole, figure 4 shows the median voter trade-off curve for mainland-dwellers (m-m). Since the mainland population excludes the peninsula, and peninsula dwellers include a disproportionate share of those who

Figure 3
Partner Benefits

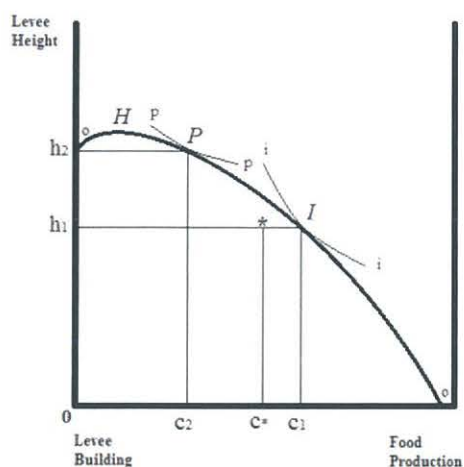
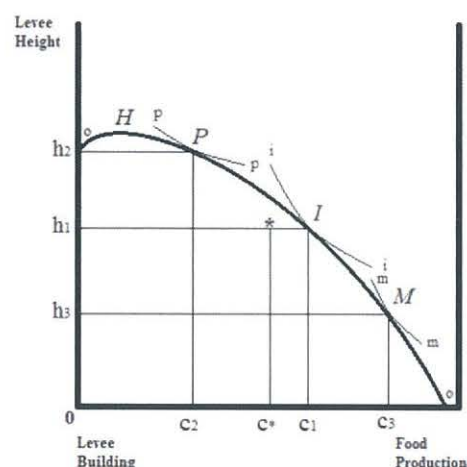


Figure 4
Interests of Others



favour flood protection, the median-voter position among mainlanders is to the right of point I at M . That is, if they had been offered the choice mainlanders would have preferred levees as low as h_3 for which they would happily have contributed c_3 . Instead once the government has entered into a partnership with the peninsula community mainlanders are protected by levees higher than they would have chosen for themselves, and they are paying as well as for the extra-height levee around the peninsula. The disparity between mainlanders' preferred position of c_3h_3 and the partnership result (for mainlanders) of c^*h_1 may be sufficiently annoying that mainlanders use their majority power to close the partnership arrangement.

Sustainability of partnerships: There are several variants that might make arrangements more sustainable. For example, government employees might arrange with the peninsula dwellers that the costs of manual labour to raise the levee above h_1 will be met entirely by the peninsula community. That reduces the impost on mainlanders, but does not remove it entirely. That is because government employees are involved in a more complex process than they were when they designed levees at a single height around the whole island. There are extra design costs and community liaison costs. The bureaucratic costs of designing and implementing two levee schemes might be as much as double the cost of a uniform scheme. In the overall scheme of things the cost of extra bureaucracy may be low, but it might be politically sensitive.

Attempts to appease the mainlanders could lead to approaches that are not partnerships all. For example, if bureaucracy cost is removed by requiring peninsula-dwellers to do their own design and management, there is no longer a partnership because the government is making no contribution. Similarly, if the issue were addressed by allowing the peninsula to administer and fund its own levee-building scheme, and to stand aside from contributing to the levee around the rest of the island, the issue is no longer partnership but subsidiarity or independence.

The central point here is that unless the government moves to complete subsidiarity (without subsidies) partnerships involving the government must engage the public authority of the government in some way. That is a necessary part of providing partnership benefits for the partner community. But at the same time, because public authority is involved the rest of the polity is engaged and their interests must be considered. This is easy to see in the simplicity of a single-product single-activity society, but similar issues exist in more realistic scenarios. These are considered in the next section.

Multi-Product, Multi-Activity Society

The ideal state: If partnership is difficult in the stark example of a single-product single-activity world, what happens in more realistic cases? Figure 2 can be adapted to illustrate the options in a multi-product multi-activity case. In figure 5 the vertical axis is a combined measure of all aspects of well-being and prosperity (outcomes) arising as a result of government activity. Figure 5 assumes away a central issue of public administration – different aspects of public outcomes and public activity are deemed to be commensurable. Analytically that is difficult, but politicians manage this every day as they balance demands in many fields. Figure 5 can be seen as a drastically simplified version of the policy options as viewed by elected leaders.

Figure 5 is an abstraction; like any model it does not purport to be a picture of the real world; rather it is designed to focus on key relationships. In this case the central issue is the relationship between the government's use of public authority and the potential effects on public value. The precision implied by figure 5 is spurious. Strictly, the curves should be broad and fuzzy, representing the imprecision of heuristic thinkers and the effect of averaging the benefits of many services among many citizens, and the intersections should show as zones rather than precise points. However, that caveat does not affect the logic of the diagram and it is easier to read as drawn.

The horizontal axis measures public authority (rising from right to left) and its inverse, private autonomy (rising from left to right). At the origin public authority is maximised; as it drops, private autonomy increases. Private autonomy ranges from zero (at the origin where public authority is maximised) to one (to the right where public authority is nil).⁶

The government and its agents use public authority to achieve outcomes for the good of the public. The results occur partly as a *direct* consequence of government products and services (outputs). But the direct effects of outputs are only part of the story. Government activity also generates *indirect* effects as it influences the behaviour of others. For example public order is promoted by police who patrol the streets and arrest offenders. This is a direct effect of a government output. But members of the public who support the police by reporting offenders

⁶ For this paper private autonomy is defined as the absence of public authority, so the use of public authority and the loss of private autonomy is a zero-sum game. In fact there are many aspects of public authority that protect various personal freedoms; in this paper such gains in personal freedom would be measured on the vertical axis as social outcomes.

Figure 5

The Ideal State

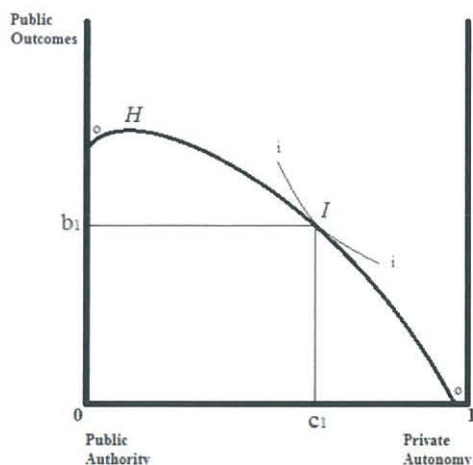
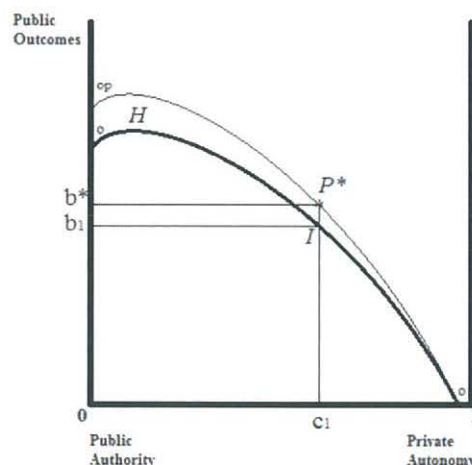


Figure 6

An Ideal Partnership



can substantially increase the effectiveness of police patrols. This is a *complementary indirect effect* of the use of public authority. There are many forms of volunteering or willing compliance with government activity which produce a complementary effect on outcomes.

Indirect effects are not always positive. For example, some alienated people might react negatively to the presence of a police patrol leading to more disorder than would otherwise have happened; that is an *offsetting indirect effect* of government activity. Common offsetting effects include avoidance behaviour and crowding-out, where government activity displaces private activity directed to the same end.

Once indirect effects are taken into account, the shape of the relationship between government activity (as measured by the use of public authority) and public outcomes is predictable. Each increase in public authority (using the same technology) will tend to enhance the intended public outcome, but by a decreasing amount as government activity increases. This is a result of heterogeneity. As government activity increases, an increasing proportion of the population disagree with the program and indirect offsetting behaviour will rise as otherwise compliant people are less likely to volunteer in support of the program or even start to evade their obligations. Eventually as government activity rises to very high levels public opposition may be so substantial that increases in government activity lead to reductions in public outcomes. That relationship is drawn as the outcome curve o-o in figure 5.

The public value of a public outcome depends on the views of the public. Because people are pragmatic there is general acceptance of activities that have a public benefit, so constructive use of public authority (and the consequent abridgement of private autonomy) is generally supported. However, heterogeneity means that there is always debate about the preferred autonomy/outcome balance.

Trade-off curve $i-i$ represents the collective views of the public about the range of outcomes that result from the direct and indirect effects of government activity. Point I is the outcome that society prefers. It represents the best possible public value using available technology; it is the ideal state.

However, though point I is ideal, it is not possible because in a multi-activity world there can be no median voter. Once heterogeneous people are faced with options involving a number of dimensions their preferences cannot be summed. Arrow (1950) demonstrated that summing preferences to reach a social optimum is a logical impossibility for a society of rational people. In a society of reasonable people as defined in this paper the ideal state conceivably could occur as heuristic (and therefore inconsistent) thinkers might coincide in the ordering of their preferences, but that would only be a fleeting event.

For practical purposes the ideal state is an aspirational goal, bedevilled by information costs, transaction costs, inertia, opportunism and associated chaos. Despite those problems, the aim of government employees is to produce outputs that will achieve the best possible public value, as represented by the ideal state.

Officials' efforts to achieve higher public value involve three types of effort. First, they may attempt to increase outputs by improving productivity of public activities; this would lift the outcome curve as a *direct* result of their efforts. Second they may devise methods to encourage or cajole the public into more positive responses to public endeavours; improved compliance or increased volunteering would lift the outcome curve as an *indirect* result of public activity. Third, by advocating or implementing different combinations or intensities of activities within the available bundle of public activities, officials might achieve a shift along the horizontal axis and therefore along the outcome curve; depending on the shape of public preferences, a shift along the curve could result in a move to a higher trade-off curve and therefore to higher public value. Implementing partnerships might involve either or both of the second and third of those approaches.

The role of partnerships: One of the problems in aiming for the ideal state stems from heterogeneity. Though point I is supposedly the point where collective preferences meet available outcomes, the discussion above demonstrated that in the absence of any median voter or another means of identifying a collective preference there is no such point. In a centralised government process every person faces the same range of government activity at the same cost in terms of private autonomy (c_1), but preferences vary for individuals and groups. Many may be broadly contented with the benefits implied by outcomes at b_1 but others would prefer different combinations of obligations and outcomes. Information costs make it difficult to identify those who do not value the set of government activities that are on offer.⁷ Accordingly, trade-off curves are dropped for the rest of the analysis. Instead

⁷ A further point is that problems of access (such as language or culture, not just preferences) may restrict the ability of some communities to enjoy all the benefits of a given level of government activity; for such groups the outcome would fall inside the outcome curve. That case is not teased out in this paper because the implications for partnerships are similar to those involved in addressing heterogeneous preferences; in this paper heterogeneous preferences are just one form of heterogeneity.

results are generated from analysing the effect of government policies on the outcome curve; this is closer to the process that happens as officials interact with community groups.

Partnering is one way to mitigate the problems of information costs and heterogeneity. This is particularly relevant complex and intractable issues (“wicked problems,” Rittel and Webber, 1973). Rather than delivering one policy set for everyone, government employees might work with different communities to identify nuances of preference about the nature of programs so that different groups might get closer to their preferred position.

A successful partnering program might aim for a result like P^* in figure 6, where there is an additional outcome curve, $op-o$; that curve shows the outcome for a partner community. It is drawn above the outcome curve for the polity, because the process of partnership has produced a *complementary indirect* effect as members of the community have altered their behaviour in response to the provisions of the partnership. Altered behaviour might involve taking up available services, such as more parents voluntarily presenting children for inoculation. Alternatively it might involve volunteering, such as participating in neighbourhood watch programs so that members of the community add their efforts to those of officials.

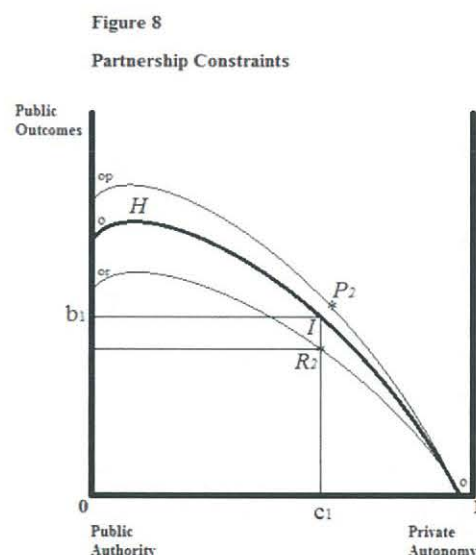
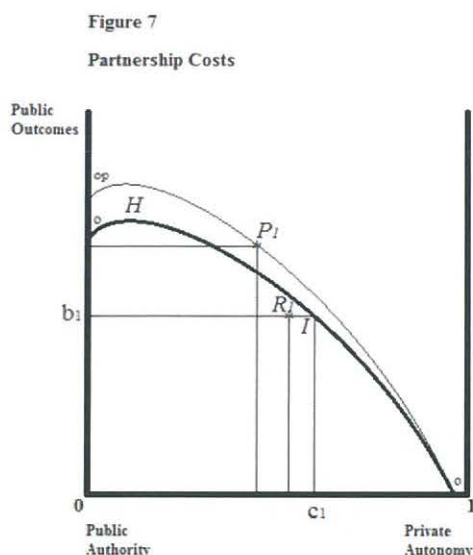
At P^* the partner community enjoys better outcomes; it receives those benefits at no cost in terms of increased use of public authority, so the rest of the polity is unaffected. In this case public value is enhanced because the partner community receives improved outcomes and the rest of the population (the residual, R) are unaffected. The point P^* represents an ideal partnership, in a similar way that I represents the ideal state for the polity as a whole. An ideal partnership, achieves its results entirely by changes in the behaviour of the partner community; there is no extra use of public resources or changed use of regulations. As a result there is no change in the position of the rest of the polity. Mainstream programs continue to get most of the population somewhere close to I , and partnering lifts communities to better results. In that case public value is enhanced by partnering.

However, like the ideal state, the ideal partnership is effectively unattainable, because it is hard to envisage a partnership program that involves no change in the use of public authority. An exploration of the connection between partnerships and public value requires some more plausible examples than the ideal partnership of figure 6.

Partnerships and public value: The most likely change in the use of public authority as part of a partnership is the provision of extra public resources. That case is shown in figure 7. It shows outcome curves for the polity and for the partner community, as in figure 6, but the result for the partner community is not P^* , but P_1 . At P_1 additional public authority is engaged because the partner community receives more resources than it received under mainstream practices. In the example given above, the success of providing more inoculations comes at the cost of more vaccine. Unless the extra services are provided entirely from pre-existing unutilised public resources,⁸ there is a cost to be carried by someone, but it is in the nature of

⁸ In a well-managed government system the existence of unutilised idle public resources is unlikely at any time and very unlikely after a period of austerity.

a public/private partnership that the public cost is not carried by the partner community. The point of the partnership is that the community are beneficiaries and the cost of the service will fall on the rest of the polity who may be described as “obligatees” (Alford, 2001).



In figure 7 the impact of this additional cost on the rest of the polity is shown as a shift from I (the position without a partnership) to R_1 . At R_1 the residual continues to receive the same benefits as before, but at a (slightly) higher cost; they are less well-off as a result of the partnership. The net result for public value is indeterminate; it depends on the relative size of the partner community and the residual and the distribution of gains and losses for each group. More particularly, sustainability of a partnership depends not just on its management, but also on how the rest of the polity views the imposition of additional costs. It may be that the costs are too small to be salient, or the residual may accept that the special needs of the partner community demand extra and different services. But if the rest of the polity resents carrying the costs of the partnership it may be unsustainable.

Figure 8 explores another possibility. Irrespective of the provision of public resources many partnerships involve variations in the terms of provision of government support. For example, income tests that are based on the position of an individual might be varied to take account of obligations to a wider group, with the result that more members of a partner community might be eligible for government assistance. In the conceptual presentation used in this paper, such variances would show as relaxations of public authority, because members of a community are exempted from various provisions that apply to the mainstream. In a successful partnership this greater flexibility encourages a complementary indirect response from the community (as shown by the raised outcome curve $op-o$). The result for the partner community is at P_2 ; this is to the right of P^* , reflecting the reduced obligations faced by the partner community.

Partnerships that derive their results from special (especially relaxed) regulations for partner communities can produce an indirect effect on the rest of the population. In most cases there may be little effect, but if enough of the rest of the population considers that the special regulations are unfair or improper then there could be an *offsetting indirect* effect. That is, if the rest of the population is sufficiently concerned about relaxed provisions enjoyed by partner communities they may become less compliant in various areas, including in payment of tax. If the disillusionment is sufficient the outcome curve for the residual of the population might drop; this is shown as or-o in figure 8. The final result for the rest of the polity, R_2 , could be at various points along the new outcome curve, but wherever things settle the value for the rest of the polity is reduced because the result lies on a lower outcome curve than the non-partnership case.

As with the case where extra public resource was involved, the impact on public value may be indeterminate. However, if the effect of the partnership is to reduce the outcome curve for the rest of the population, then the legitimacy of the government has been called into question. That is, if the residual are so affronted by the special opportunities offered to a partner community that many people withhold cooperation from the government, it is unlikely that public value could be enhanced.

Necessary conditions for enhancing public value: The three partnership results shown in figures 6 to 8 illustrate the way that partnerships can enhance public value, but also the limits to that effect. First, partnerships can succeed only if they lift results for partner groups, and this generally requires some complementary indirect response from the partner community. Second, where partnerships are supported by extra resources provided from the rest of the polity their ongoing success depends on the acceptability of that transfer. Third, where partnerships are characterised by relaxed regulation of a partner community public value can be enhanced only if the rest of the community is indifferent to (or supports) those special provisions.

This can be rephrased in slightly more formal terms as follows:

The necessary conditions for partnering to enhance public value on a sustainable basis are:

1. **Benefit:** the partnership must deliver results that are better for the target community than were achieved in the mainstream program;
2. **Support:** the costs (resource or otherwise) to the rest of the polity must be less than the benefits to the partner community and the transfer of benefits must have sufficient endorsement for the partnership to continue; and
3. **Acceptability:** the administration of the partnering program must generate minimal (or favourable) reaction from the rest of the polity.

In terms of graphical presentation in this paper, these conditions translate as: for public value to increase, partner communities must reach preferred places along or above the outcome curve and the residual must remain somewhere close to the ideal state position I because either they agree that special support for the partner community bestows public value or they

are indifferent to the existence of the partnership. This suggests that the necessary conditions for a successful partnership program are wider than successfully managing the relationship between the partners.

Implications for Partnering

No government system could ever assemble the information needed to arrive at the ideal state. But that does not make the analysis irrelevant. For officials there is a close real-world equivalent to the stylised case of figure 6; the aim is to use partnerships to improve public value for communities more than would have been achieved otherwise, while maintaining public value for the rest of the polity. The three conditions for successful partnering that are derived above apply in real situations, and they push government employees in different directions, and towards different intellectual traditions – management, politics and public administration.

Benefit: The first condition stipulates that the partnership must benefit the target community. This is consistent with the approach of Provan and Milward (2001, 416): “at the broadest level of analysis community-based networks must be judged by the contribution they make to the communities they are trying to serve...” However, some see partnerships as potentially beneficial irrespective of their results. For example McGuire and Agranoff suggest “there could be a ‘good’ network but poor program outcomes” (2001, 273). In the analysis in this paper, that could only be so if the partner community attached so much value to interaction with the government that other factors were trivial. That might be possible at the opening stages of a relationship, but it hardly seems likely to be a sustainable result.

So, if results matter, that raises issues of the design and delivery of each partnership. It directs the official towards a managerial approach, but one which is built on open and trusting relationships. Management is lifted from organisational supervision to stewardship for the community. The prescriptions offered by Klijn, Steijn and Edelenbos (2010), Provan and Lemaire (2012), Lewis (2011), Emerson *et al* (2012) and many others offer a range of matters that must be attended to. All of these call for particular skills and application by government employees as they deal with partner communities.

Whether these approaches are sufficient to ensure that partnerships succeed for their participants is uncertain. Provan and Lemaire acknowledge there is little evidence that partnerships succeed at the outcome level (2012, 643), but Turrini *et al* (2010) mined the literature to find managerial practices that contribute to the success of partnerships in producing improved results. Whether particular managerial practices promote success is beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems reasonable to suggest that there are sets of practices that will enhance the success of partnership programs and that those practices should be used.

The second and third conditions turn the official’s attention to the rest of the polity. In support of this, Turrini *et al* cite evidence that support from the “broader community” tends to promote successful results (2010, 540). However, before considering what might elicit the

necessary public support, this paper suggests it is helpful to first consider which of the two conditions apply.

Support: The support condition has two parts. First, if the partnership confers less benefit than it costs then it cannot be said to create public value; that follows directly from the definition of public value. Second, the condition states that if enough members of the wider polity perceive that members of partnerships are benefiting at their expense and they do not like that result, then the partnership will not endure. This is not a management issue as management is traditionally understood; it is the stuff of politics. (However, strategic management, as advocated by Mark Moore (1995) suggests that officials cannot neglect political issues.)

As expressed, the support condition makes partnerships look like a zero-sum game which will never be tolerated by others. In fact, partnerships seem to operate without complaint in many contexts. There may be various reasons why non-members of partnerships would knowingly accept special assistance to partners: redress for a past inequity; combating social threats stemming from alienation; improving prospects for economic growth by lifting the productivity of poorer groups; recognition of some special status (perhaps bestowed by a court order to meet a special need); or altruism. But unless one or more of these reasons have widespread acceptance, a partnership that provides special support to a community may have a short life.

Meeting the support condition demands political sensitivity from government employees. How that sensitivity might be exhibited depends on the conventions of each polity. In some cases it might be appropriate for officials to argue the case for redistribution policies in public; in other contexts (like Westminster systems) more discretion may be needed (Alford and O'Flynn 2009 and Rhodes and Wanna 2009 offer contrasting perspectives on the issues involved in political management by officials). But whatever the context, officials need a good understanding of issues of political mandate and responsibility, lest they be swamped by a political backlash to a well-meaning program for a needy community.

Acceptability: The acceptability condition offers hope of a less fraught life for officials, as it states that if preferences for the rest of the polity are unaffected by a partnership, then those preferences can be overlooked. In strict terms it is unlikely this condition could ever be met; everything affects everything and someone, somewhere will have a view on the most trivial matter. However, as a practical matter of administration the acceptability condition directs the government employee to considering whether concerns from groups that are not part of the partnership are likely to be significant. As always this depends on where the media, bloggers, opposition politicians, chattering classes and taxi drivers direct their attention. What matters politically may vary from one polity to another and one characteristic of a good administrator is having a sense of what will be salient.

The acceptability condition comes into question not when there is specific resentment about benefits delivered to a particular community (that relates to the support condition), but when the nature of the program or its administration offends a wider sense of what is proper or

reasonable among those who are not part of the partnership. It is not an issue of whether one group gets more than another, but whether the processes and options available to partners seem reasonable. The issue arises because the authority of the state is involved in the partnership; if that authority is used in a way that seems improper to others then that may be sufficient to undermine the legitimacy of the program. Worse, it might undermine the legitimacy of the government.

Part of the origin of this concern is experiential learning, combined with the cost of information. People outside the partnership are aware that they cannot know what is going on in full detail. They also know that even if officials start a partnership with the best of intentions about the welfare of the polity at large the process of forming a trusting relationship with a community must affect the officials. Because of experiential learning and the fact that knowledge is influenced by associates, there is always a risk that officials will place disproportionate weight on the needs of the community that they work with. When this is combined with the likelihood that officials support the activities that they are associated with, there has to be a concern that enthusiasm on both sides of a partnership may lead to excessive sympathy for the needs of partner communities.

The fact that partnerships are intended to allow flexible responsiveness to community needs raises the essential problem: government officials are supposed to work for the whole of the polity, but partnerships are intended to make them more sensitive to the needs of particular communities. Experiential learning means they will put extra weight on the problems that they come to know more about, and the cost of information makes it hard for outsiders to see when that problem starts. The possible risk of opportunism comes on top of this issue.

These issues direct the official towards some traditional concerns of public administration, especially accountability. If critics can point to sloppy administration, questionable payments, dodgy tendering, weak evaluations or concerns from auditors, then the best-intentioned schemes can get into trouble. Since the heart of some partnerships is an aim to reduce compliance costs facing communities and to give them greater control of their lives, the acceptability condition can be problematic.

Greater community control addresses issues of information costs and heterogeneous preferences and so increases the chance of meeting the benefit condition. But if that community control implies idiosyncratic administration and informal arrangements based on trust, there is an increased risk of irregular behaviour. This increases the chance that the acceptability condition will not be met. Irrespective of the support that might previously have been available for a particular partnership under the support condition, once people are sufficiently concerned that the acceptability condition is not met, it may be hard to maintain support for the partnership.

In the Whanau Ora example at the opening to this paper there were insufficient data to establish that the program was delivering for its participants, and partner funds were diverted to purchase cannabis. That means the department is unable to demonstrate that it is meeting the benefit condition, and in at least one case it has clearly failed the acceptability condition.

As it happens, the political circumstances that led to the program mean it can survive these weaknesses in the meantime, but in the longer term this paper's analysis suggests that these issues need to be addressed if the program is to endure.

Conclusion

This paper has used a formal approach in an attempt to arrive at advice for practitioners. The success of such theorising can be assessed in several ways: does it arrive at unusual insights? Is it sufficiently general to have wide application? Does it produce testable hypotheses? And are its conclusions sufficiently tangible to be useful to practitioners?

The test of insight is inspired by Dowding's (1995) criticism of the looseness of much analysis of networks, but also of his admonition about theorising, when he said:

The paradox of formal analysis is that it must yield results which by and large fit with what we know by descriptive methods – otherwise we know something has gone wrong with our formal analysis. What we require to justify formalism is some surprising results, or paradoxical conclusions, which then justify closer qualitative analysis (156).

It may not seem very paradoxical or surprising to conclude as this paper does that successful partnerships rely on attention to politics and to traditional matters of public administration, as well as to issues of network (or partnership) management. But if it is so obvious, why is the point not made more often in the literature on collaborative governance?⁹

Second, it is reasonable to consider the plausibility and generality of the assumptions behind any theory. Again, in Dowding's words, "a true theory must be generalizable to all objects to which it is supposed to be applicable" (p. 140). In this paper that translates into whether the opening assumptions and definitions point appropriately to the world in which practitioners work, and whether the tests of benefit, support and acceptability apply across all (democratic) governments.

The definition of government as the application of public authority to achieve public value is clearly abstract – it pays no regard to institutions or regulatory structures. But that is the means by which the analysis achieves generality while focussing on the one aspect (the lawful use of coercion) that sets government apart from all other activities. Similarly no person can be summed up in five characteristics, but as an abstraction, the reasonable person provides a basis to consider how people behave in matters involving public activities. Together the definitions of the government and of the reasonable person make for a parsimonious analysis of public administration in general and collaborative governance in particular. The conclusions may be simpler than might be found in a management manual, but their applicability is general.

Third, does the theory produce testable hypotheses? In effect, this paper can be summarised as suggesting that predictors of success in public/private partnerships should be extended

⁹ McGuire and Agranoff (2011) and Alford and Hughes (2008) provide examples of those who have looked more broadly than management, but even they have not pushed the analysis to its conclusion.

beyond managerial processes to include political circumstances beyond the partnership and the robustness of public administrative systems that are applied to the partnership. Personal experience is consistent with this hypothesis but the proposition could be checked empirically.

The fourth test is whether the advice is comprehensible and useful to practitioners. From my experience in dealing with officials who were confused at the public turmoil that surrounded their well-meant mistakes, some clear advice about the need to attend to politics and the basics of public administration, as well as to managing within their networks, would have been very helpful. Hopefully an explanation of the dynamics in the simplicity developed in this paper may help to make the reasons for those basic messages more widely understood.

Clearly this paper does not give a practitioner's guide to the management of partnerships; that was never its intention. Nor does it provide a diagnosis for the management of the Whanau Ora program or for similar schemes in New Zealand or Australia. However, practitioners following the advice in this paper will be clear on the need to attend to issues of benefit, support and acceptability. In the process they will need to attend to public administration, politics and management – and that is no bad thing.

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