

# ***Levels and Networks in Community Partnerships***

**A framework informed by our  
overseas partners**

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Our international civic engagement (ICE) work revolves around an annual 13-day study abroad course that convenes in the Commonwealth of Dominica. This small, rugged island country is about 750 km<sup>2</sup> in size and has a population of around 70 000. Dominicans are primarily of Afro-Caribbean heritage and speak both English and French Creole. The study abroad course features ongoing collaboration with non-government organisations (NGOs) and community organisations in Dominica, and focuses on mutual learning about how we can live more sustainably. It also emphasises the importance of local organising for sustainable economic development and transcontextual learning about local activism for sustainability. The students in the course collaborate with our local partners and their communities in a range of hands-on activities around these themes. Such activities are as diverse as teaching at a primary school, engaging young adults on the topics of educational attainment and career paths, helping at a botanical garden, harvesting fair trade bananas, and supporting and participating in a village festival day.

In addition to the study abroad course led by Thomas Klak, he and a team of undergraduate and graduate students have conducted geographical research projects on the island since 2005. The research projects and the study abroad course complement each other, by sharing contacts and deepening our understanding of Dominica's political ecology. Emma Mullaney worked on the Dominica project for two years as a graduate student while conducting research on the politics of access to land. Another graduate student created a host family program so that villagers could obtain more direct benefits from visitors, and to facilitate more direct cultural engagement. Yet another graduate student carried out a water quality analysis at ecotourism sites heavily used by cruise ship visitors, while a different student mapped the potential for landslides, which often wreak havoc on this steep and rainy island. Through these and other research projects and the annual course, we have developed long-term partnerships with Dominicans of many stripes, including ecotourism operators, school principals, local politicians, public sector employees, ecologists,

farmers, village organisers and NGO leaders. These Dominica activities in synergistic combination constitute the international civic engagement (ICE) project described in this article.

The context just presented leads to the central questions of this article: What does all of this civic engagement activity mean to our Dominican partners? How do they perceive our partnerships, and to what extent do their perceptions and priorities parallel or contrast with our own? From our perspective, we can observe that the benefits to our Dominican partners include financial and material inputs, manual labour, relevant research projects, and an outside interest in contributing positively toward their meeting community challenges. But until the research reported in this article, we had not explicitly asked our overseas counterparts for their perspectives. Indeed, the literature on civic engagement suggests that partners' perspectives are seldom solicited (more on this in the next section). We report on our efforts to gauge their impressions of our work. Through better understanding of their priorities and concerns, we hope that our relationships can continue to deepen and become more productive in the future.

This article unfolds across four sections. The first provides an overview of the diverse literatures which inform our operationalisation of ICE. The second explains the methods through which we solicited our Dominican partners' perspectives. The third details our research findings, including ways of characterising partnerships on three levels according to intensity, depth of engagement, and complexity. The article concludes by emphasising the need for further work which addresses ICE's challenges, and which better incorporates partners' views.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PARTNERSHIPS**

Our overseas work is informed by a diverse set of literatures. In this section we follow Bringle (2010), who identifies many important connections between the best practices and the literatures on study abroad, international education and service-learning. Though these literatures have in many cases developed separately, we see each as connected to ICE and find the links between them valuable and informative. Throughout this literature review, we reflect on how the ideas from these fields have influenced our own international partnership efforts.

### **Distinguishing Community Outreach Projects near Campus and Abroad**

At the outset we found it helpful to distinguish the kind of partnership relationships we have developed in Dominica from those associated with many service-learning activities near to campus, which are often organised quite differently. Service-learning near campus involves, in many but certainly not all cases, sending students into community organisations in order to help – to 'volunteer in needy communities' (Hondagneu-

Sotelo & Raskoff 1994, p. 248). Community partners in such programs interact primarily with undergraduates, who in most cases are involved only over the short term. In an example of this approach from California that is representative of some of the concerns, a focus group of dozens of community partners revealed dissatisfied reactions to the service-learning program: 'There was an overwhelming clamor among these community partners that faculty should be more directly involved with their sites and work to better understand the culture, conditions, and practices of their community co-educators' (Sandy & Holland 2006, p. 37). One of the interviewed community partners noted that 'I've never developed a relationship with a professor. I work with the service-learning coordinator primarily, and some students' (Sandy & Holland 2006, p. 37). Such an approach can reinforce divisions between the realms of academic inquiry and community engagement when, in effect, students are deployed as extension officers. The absence of actively engaged professors in other service-learning contexts also raises questions about the activities' intellectual content (Woolf 2005).

Whatever the applicable critiques of ICE as we attempt to carry it out in the Eastern Caribbean, they are unlikely to centre on a lack of sustained faculty engagement. Such commitment is a cornerstone of our program for several reasons. Logistically it would be difficult for undergraduates to work in communities overseas without direct faculty involvement, particularly in developing partnerships over time that make possible undergraduate engagement. Beyond that, our international partnership relationships are not about placing undergraduates in service-learning environments, although service-learning of a different sort does occur through the course's engagement activities. Our university group and our Dominican counterparts are dedicated to working to understand one another across the various divides between us, including culture, global economics, race, class and geography. Kahn (2010) usefully argues that international work like ours should involve people in the host countries at an early stage of problematising, instead of aiming to generate benefits at the end. Providing help to needy people is inadequate. University groups need to work with their partners more directly on the fundamental organisational issues associated with the partnership (Kahn 2010). We feel that our interviews and follow-up discussions with partners are steps in this direction.

To capture the differences in involvement described above, we prefer the term *civic engagement* rather than *service-learning* to describe our overseas project. The term 'civic' is etymologically linked to citizens, citizenship, and democratic engagement and responsibilities. We seek to encourage global citizenship thinking among our students (Battistoni, Longo & Jayanandhan 2009). We seek to encourage our host partners to see our collaborations as transcending conventional national borders of citizenship. In our case, the processes of 'service' and 'learning' are both mutual

exchanges. Even when students and faculty carry out individual research projects, they do it as members of a university team with a variety of host community connections, and they work to deepen relationships that have developed over years (Klak & Mullaney 2011). For us, international civic engagement, more than service-learning, encapsulates this long-term, collaborative and reciprocal project that combines study abroad, research and service related to sustainable living (Bringle, Hatcher & Holland 2007; CCPH 2005, p. 13).

### **Conceptualizing Relationships with Partners and Host Communities**

Our distinction between service-learning and civic engagement leads into other conceptual issues regarding the people with whom we partner and interact during study abroad. One is an often-repeated point that is nonetheless worth emphasising: one must take great care not to homogenise, containerise or reify the notion of a host community (Baumann 1996). However reassuring it may be to imagine a unified and fixed host community eagerly awaiting our arrival, their society is just as complex and full of contradictions as anything coming from the university side. It is too easy and too common to implicitly imagine supposedly consensual, homogenised communities in the rural Global South that are organic and inherently sustainable (Mohan 2001). In fact, considering the reality of differences within the host society with regard to economic standing, political party politics and other priorities, one should expect more diversity than unity. An impact of host community diversity and dynamism is that key players in our partnerships move in and out over time (as they do on the university side). This is a normal and appropriate feature of partnerships that should not be considered a sign of weakness or failure.

This discussion raises the question of whether it is helpful to deploy the concept of *host community* at all to refer to groups of people with whom we interact. Conceptually, we prefer (but admittedly do not always adhere to in conversation) terms such as *partners*, *partnering groups* and *collaborators*. These terms are more precise and don't imply, as community often does, homogeneity and consensus. Referring to partner relationships rather than to host communities also reminds us of the particular nature of our engagements: only certain people living in the regions where we work are engaged and benefit directly from the relationships (cf. Bringle, Clayton & Price 2009). In many cases, these individuals are higher in social and/or economic status. Many others in the same village are excluded and this exclusion can spread resentment, an outcome antithetical to the notion of partnerships of mutuality, democratic engagement and social justice. A constant challenge of partnerships like ours is therefore to creatively spread the relationships and associated benefits more widely and inclusively. In this article, when we refer to host communities, we do not suggest unity of purpose and benefits.

We understand host communities as localised populations within which our university group interacts unevenly. One of our goals is to encourage dialogue and cooperation among members of the host community who may not otherwise be motivated to work together towards a common purpose. In our case, that common purpose is hosting visiting groups such as ours in a way that disperses the benefits widely, with new partnerships snowballing from earlier ones, which contributes incrementally to sustainable community development. Therefore, while we take seriously the problems associated with engaging a 'community' through its most accessible, engaged and prominent members, we consider this concept an appropriate starting point for relationship building, both between our groups and among our hosts.

Another concern with service-learning arises from a tendency among practitioners to conceptualise their community partners in terms that render them alien: we and they, our group and theirs, etc. While it is difficult to avoid such dualistic thinking in partnerships, it must be approached with scrutiny lest such conceptions inadvertently reinforce social divisions rather than bridge them. As development studies scholar Lakshman Yapa has argued, institutions of higher learning engaged in community outreach often 'view the community as the domain of the problem, and the college as the domain of the solution' (quoted in Enos & Morton 2003, p. 20). Such a blinkered perspective obscures agency and culpability on both sides of this largely culturally constructed divide and hinders democratic collaboration across it.

### **Impacts on Partners**

A decade and a half ago, Holland and Ramaley (1998, p. 3) levelled some concerns about civic engagement activities by universities before a federal forum on 'Connecting Community Building and Education Reform':

*Unless [community-university] collaborations move away from an emphasis on reforming organizations, to a stronger community base and a larger vision for the community, too much time will be spent defining and managing relationships and success will be more likely to be defined in terms of effort expended on institutional improvement rather than community impacts or human impacts.*

Unfortunately these concerns continue to resonate. The impacts of collaborative projects on community partners remain notably under-studied. Research has to place much more emphasis on examining and theorising civic engagement and service-learning from a pedagogical standpoint. Previous research has primarily evaluated the impacts on students (useful literature reviews include Bringle 2010; Giles & Eyler 1998; Imperial, Perry & Katula 2007; McLeod & Wainwright 2009; Perry & Katula 2001; Perry & Thomson 2004).

Equally important, yet less often examined, is the impact of such programs on the host collaborators and their communities. As Dorado and Giles (2004, p. 126) explain: 'The emphasis on

community partnerships in the service-learning literature is both relatively new and quite sparse. While there has been some emphasis on the community impacts of service-learning in the research literature, a focus on the partnerships themselves is new.' Sandy and Holland (2006, p. 30) even suggest that the process by which partners benefit is something of a black box:

*[S]ervice-learning practitioners often do not often know if, when, and how this is achieved. To date, there are few published studies documenting the perspectives of community members in partnership with universities, and the field acknowledges that this area continues to be under-represented in the overall service-learning literature.*

Given the social justice orientation of ICE and other community outreach programs, this is a disconcerting gap in the literature. Following Holland and Ramaley's (1998) model of community-university collaborations as 'knowledge-based learning organizations', we argue that in order to contribute to mutual transformative and collective social change, we must seek out and reflect upon the feedback from everyone involved, not least of which are our community partners who host, and in the process educate, our students.

As we critically examine and seek to improve our civic engagement efforts, we keep in mind planner Sherry Arnstein's maxim that 'participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless' (Arnstein 1969, p. 216). Our training in geography and theories of power provides us with insight into how privilege operates to reinforce existing inequalities. Arnstein's warning remains as urgent today as it was in the 1960s: 'participation' can be a dangerously beguiling term, deployed on behalf of everything from manipulative and exploitative relationships to truly transformative partnerships. Our goal in soliciting the perspectives of our participants was to address what fellow geographers Bailey and Grossardt (2010) more recently called the 'Arnstein Gap', that is, the difference between the perceived and desired relationships that participants have with our civic engagement program. In the sections that follow, we detail how we approached gathering participant feedback, the findings we generated, and the implications for improving our partnerships as we move forward.

## **METHODS**

Our interview questions are found in Appendix A. They were designed by following an approach that Torres (2000) refers to as revisiting the essential elements of the partnership. She advocates that partners regularly convene for evaluative discussions of issues such as benefits, modifications and goals. Our questions also extend from those of Sandy and Holland (2006, p. 31), who described their research project as follows:

*The goal of this study is to better understand the diverse perspectives of long-term community partners collaborating with institutions of*

*higher education, and to identify partner recommendations for ways to transform higher education practice to strengthen mature and well-established partnerships.*

Previous research also prompted us to focus our questions on *the partnership as the unit of analysis*, which is particularly lacking in the literature (Dorado & Giles 2004; Klak & Mullaney 2011; Sandy & Holland 2006). We believe that this focus has the unintended but positive side-effect of dampening trepidation partners might have about speaking freely, because the reflections concern the *connections* established between us, rather than the performance of any individuals. Finally, our questions were motivated by suggestions from Whitney and Clayton (2010), who recommend that such inquiries go beyond investigating ‘What impact does the [International Service Learning] program have on the local community?’ to more fundamental and actionable issues such as ‘What should we be trying to achieve together?’

The initial 21 interviews with our Dominican partners were completed in 2009, with follow-up conversations and reflections with them extending from the initial interviews several times over the ensuing few years. Since 2009 these sit-down sessions have become regularised and seek to gauge our Dominican partners’ impressions of the impacts of and priorities for our collaborative work. The interviews presented challenges and choices. We were aware that our partners were likely to be hesitant to be openly critical of us regarding our relationships. In response, we began the interviews with questions soliciting word associations that were non-judgemental about the relationships, and introduced more direct queries about the nature of the relationships only towards the end. Indeed, the interviews established a new dimension to the partnerships, with regular opportunities for partners to reflect on positive and negative aspects of their mutual experiences and to set future priorities.

An obvious alternative data-gathering method would have been to have someone unassociated with this ICE project conduct the interviews (Sandy & Holland 2006). This arrangement would have been less practical and perhaps even less desirable in this case. Practically speaking, it would be difficult and expensive to arrange for someone sufficiently knowledgeable about the partnerships, yet unassociated with the university project, to travel throughout Dominica to find and interview our partners. Though we have many contacts throughout the country, including with institutions of higher education, at the time of this research we had not identified anyone with both sufficient training and the availability to join what is inherently a highly time-consuming project. This situation reflects some of the challenges of working in a small island state with limited infrastructure, as well as patterns of escalating pressures on university educators and researchers that extend far beyond Dominica. The research presented in this paper is one step in an ongoing long-term project, and we look forward to continuing to building on it in the future.

In terms of desirability, it is worth underscoring that no one understands the details and history of the partnerships better than those people who have been most involved with them over the many years. Having the principal person involved in the partnerships from the university side conduct the interviews has the advantage of contributing to deepening the relationships. This is valuable, not only for the relationships' longer term, but also as motivation for our partners to participate in the interviews. Indeed, the interviews have served as a step towards building stronger relationships through regular dialogue and reflection.

The interviews targeted key informants, that is, the individual in each organisation who had been most involved in the partnership. In all cases, this was a person previously identified as a leader within that local organisation. Data collection was at the one-on-one level, in order to allow the partner to have the full opportunity to articulate his or her opinions and priorities. This data-gathering approach contrasts with others that have deployed focus groups, which can draw out overarching points that transcend the particularities of one partner's viewpoints (Sandy & Holland 2006). In this case, it was those particularities that were of greatest interest. Four partners were interviewed in greater depth, and 17 others in lesser depth. The distinction between these two types of interview corresponds to the depth of the partnership, as discussed below. We had worked with all interviewees for at least a year and a half at that time, so none were at the one-time project level depicted as a partnership entry point by Enos and Morton (2003).

This project followed a protocol for conducting ethical research involving human subjects, as established by our university Institutional Review Board and the related national guidelines for ethical research articulated by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI – [www.citiprogram.org/aboutus.asp?language=english](http://www.citiprogram.org/aboutus.asp?language=english)). We adhere to these guidelines by excluding partners' names, instead describing them by their organisational positions, jobs and/or expertise.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Characterising and Differentiating Partnership Levels and Networks**

Travelling to Dominica with the express purpose of seeking feedback and perspectives from our partners about our relationships proved enlightening on several levels. The experiences underscore that it is worth stepping back on a regular basis from the ongoing details of engagement and activity, coordinating and scheduling, to assess the status and quality of the relationships. Three general points emerged from the initial interviews and follow-up sessions. We will first present these three broad points because they frame the entire set of partnerships. We will then turn attention to prominent themes articulated by partners.

The first point highlights an important geographical constraint on the partnerships that indirectly imposes barriers



to what the partnerships can achieve. It concerns the *acute geographical obstacles associated with international civic engagement partnerships*. Developing deep and sustained relationships with overseas partners, particularly those located in a difficult-to-reach foreign country such as Dominica, is immensely challenging. It is only possible for the lead person on the university's side of the partnership to spend about three weeks in Dominica each year. Fieldwork for each student thesis project adds another month or two of contact and relationship-building to the overall project. This amount of contact is quite limited as compared to the possibilities available to university groups working in communities proximate to their home base. It is also limited when compared to the kind of intense daily interactions typical within Dominican communities, as in so many village-oriented societies around the world. It may be surprising to readers that, although we are in a global telecommunications age, email and telephone communications are constrained by access, quality and cost for our Dominican counterparts. Few Dominicans use email as regularly as we in university settings do. And, further, electronic communications cannot substitute for face-to-face contact, particularly in a society where such contact is the norm. An effect of these geographical obstacles is to underscore that the university partners are fleetingly present outsiders separate from the day-to-day activities and relationships in Dominica. Our discussions in Dominica about the nature of and possibilities for the partnerships are unavoidably constrained by this geography.

A second general point to emerge from the feedback sessions with partners is that *our choice to engage a variety of partners located in different regions of Dominica creates an additional challenge*. Whereas many civic engagement projects are focused on a single community, our Dominica project has sought to engage several geographically dispersed communities throughout the country. The study group stays three nights each in four different regions of Dominica, in order to interact with a wide variety of people engaged in a host of sustainability issues from fisheries and forestry to farming and handicraft production. We do this broad sweep in order to support a variety of grassroots initiatives, to obtain a countrywide understanding of sustainable development issues, and to learn from the regional comparisons and contrasts. While this itinerant approach offers students a broad experience, it limits the depth of local work and engagement. Despite the country's small size, communities are distinct, and regular intense community work happens to a large extent at the local scale. The possibilities for our partnerships are therefore also constrained by the limited time we spend in any particular place.

The third and most important result of the interviews, and one requiring more elaboration below, leads us to conceptualise partnership levels and networks. *Our partnerships differ from one another in their levels of intensity, engagement and complexity, and many are interdependently connected through relationship networks*.

By ‘network’ in the context of our study abroad partnerships, we mean an informal system of interconnected relationships between groups of people with overlapping interests or concerns who interact and provide mutual assistance or support.

Our sit-down sessions with partners revealed to us that partnership longevity is often correlated with its depth, as others have previously noted (for example, Bringle & Hatcher 2002; Sandy & Holland 2006). In other words, partnerships that have endured over the longer term tend to be deeper. However, for many of our Dominican partnerships this is not the case. We find that more important than partnership longevity is multi-dimensionality, which does not necessarily expand linearly with time. By multi-dimensionality we mean the number of different activities associated with the partnership. For example, a deep partnership may involve mutual fundraising, shared meals, cultural activities and gardening/farming. This multi-dimensionality parallels the ‘closeness’ dimension identified by Bringle, Clayton and Price (2009). This finding is also consistent with that of Dorado and Giles (2004), whose interviews led them to posit that time only partially correlates with partners’ commitment to service-learning relationships. In contrast, our differentiation of partnerships differs from Dorado and Giles’ (2004) three-way classification, which they refer to variously as (a) tentative, learning or new, (b) aligned or active, and (c) committed, nurturing or longer term. Ours are even less time-dependent and based primarily on the number of dimensions the partnership engages. The dimensionality can grow quite quickly, particularly if a relationship can be built on other longer term network relationships in the host country and tap into previous trust and positive experiences with other locals the partners mutually know and respect. This is a common occurrence in a small country such as Dominica, where social and professional networks are dense, critical to ongoing local development issues and extend countrywide. Our partnerships tap into this existing dense national network of leaders. Indeed, it is striking in conversations with community leaders how often other contacts from throughout the country are well known to them. Dominica is a country of just 70 000 people, but the social networks appear much denser, richer and more thorough than any comparable western city of similar size.

More specifically with regard to our partnerships, our interviews have led us to conceptualise three levels. Assigning each partnership to one of the three categories is a useful exercise, in that it helps to define the parameters, qualities, expectations and extent or scope of each relationship (Table 1). The main feature that distinguishes the three levels is the number of dimensions that pertain to the partnership. Level C is focused on a particular activity, such as an annual day’s activity centred on tropical ecology or organic farming. Several of these Level C partnerships are long running, rewarding and enriching for both sides, attesting to the fact that achieving Level A status is not necessarily a goal in many cases. Level B relationships are often deeper than those

at Level C, but for various reasons have not reached the highest level. In some cases, this may be simply because the partnership is relatively new. It is sometimes only after years of working together that the trust and integration of mutual agendas can occur. In other cases, the overseas partner at Level B is simply too busy with other important things in his or her life to devote time to cultivating a partnership that would take it to Level A.

**Table 1: Three levels of partnership relationships**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Dimensionality</b>	<b>Distinguishing features</b>	<b>Examples of partners' fields</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>I</b>
A	Multiple	Conceptualising the partnership; brainstorming new initiatives; nurturing the partnership; working to expand the activities and participants	Community and environmental leaders, educators, activists, administrative leaders, ecologists, tour organisers	4	4
B	Two or three	Partnership scope is narrower; partner is otherwise preoccupied; sometimes nascent relationships; greater emphasis on friendships than on building partnership projects	Farmers, artisans, community organisers	14	12
C	Singular	Restricted to singular activities; contact is relatively limited; partnership is not conceptual or 'big picture'	Drivers, guides, teachers, host families, guest speakers, restaurateurs, ecologists	12	5

T – Total number of partners at this level  
I – Number of partners at this level interviewed

In our Level A partnerships, both sides envision a broad picture of the partnership's aims, possibilities and trajectory. Relationships of this sort are characterised by regular interactions between leaders on both sides concerning the breadth of the project and how it can be enhanced. Both sides willingly invest in nurturing and extending the relationship. Level A partnerships often concern themselves with the relationship between our university and the country of Dominica as a whole. One example of such an issue of interest to both sides is the way in which visiting groups can have an impact in villages and surrounding rural areas that is bigger than what happens at the level of small group interactions. In other words, the partnership works to contribute in a modest way to integrated regional development.

In our ICE project, there have been in recent years only four Level A partnerships. Notably, owing to community dynamism and the evolution of the partnerships, some of the Dominicans involved at the A level have shifted in and out over time. As mentioned earlier, such change is normal and appropriate. Level A partnerships are relatively few, in part because of the time and effort required on both sides to cultivate such relationships. This suggests another reason why it should not necessarily be a goal to advance partnerships to the A level. They require continuous contact and nurturing, and this is difficult and perhaps even undesirable

for the success of the broader ICE project. On a related note, Level A partnerships are few also because engaging at the highest level of intensity is not possible for, or of interest to, most Dominicans. They, like most people in the world, are preoccupied with their own work, family and social activities. Given all of life's demands, why invest deeply in a primarily overseas relationship? Dominicans are among the world's friendliest and most welcoming people, but the geographical barriers to the overseas partnerships noted at the outset of this section dampen relationship development.

There are many more partnerships at the two lower levels. Again, this became clear when interviewing partners in light of the research questions. It became apparent that some of the questions were not suitable for the experiences that our relationships have had, despite the fact that many of these relationships were several years old. One Level C partner replied, when asked to characterise the relationship between our university and our Dominican counterparts, 'I hadn't really thought about it'. In such situations, the interview dispensed with direct questioning along these lines. Instead, inquiry was shifted to a more general conversational level, to allow the partner to raise and articulate issues that were particular to her/his experience, and to begin to share the broader collaborative picture, as appropriate and meaningful, with B and C level partners. Partnership nurturing and dialogue can and should continue, no matter the level of partnership intensity, and as appropriate to that level.

Our conceptualisation differs from the partnership levels distinguished by Sockett (1998) and others following him (for example, Nye & Schramm 1999; Ramaley 2009). The four levels these authors have identified are service relationships (fixed time and task with the university providing the service); exchange relationships (exchange information and gain access to each other for mutual benefit, project specific); cooperative relationships (joint planning and shared responsibilities, long-term, multiple projects); and transformative relationships (shared decision-making/operations/evaluation intended to transform each organisation). We find these distinctions from the literature useful but, based on our interviews, posit different relationships between the levels. As Nye and Schramm (1999, p. 70) help to explain, 'Sockett's higher levels [represent] more successful partnerships, consistent with the empowerment model'. Ramaley (2009) adds that their partnership levels, from service to transformative, increasingly have 'more impact'.

In contrast, our conceptualisation stresses that there are network-like connections between many (but not all) of our partnerships at different levels, so that any success of the partnerships at higher levels is not independent of lower level relationships. For example, a Level A partnership with a successful eco-lodge owner (called transformative in Sockett's model) is enriched by lower level partnerships with local practitioners of sustainable farming and village organisers (perhaps these would

be exchange or cooperative relationships for Sockett). As another example, a Level A partnership with a village mayor is enriched by lower level (but notably long-term) partnerships with homestay families and a local cultural heritage/music group. In both of these examples, the supportive connections between these Dominican practitioners and our university group are many. Indeed, we cannot conceive of our more and less intense partnerships separate from one another, because they are intricately and synergistically related, and each contributes in its own way to the overall ICE project.

Sockett's (1998) partnerships at different levels are presented as if they are independent of one another. However, we suspect that interconnections between partnerships at different levels, operating simultaneously and synergistically, are not unique to our ICE project. In university-community organisation partnerships, often conceived as simply bilateral, are there not in fact other crucial collaborators (Level B and C partners in our schema) providing particular expertise, insights and experiences that enhance the principal partnerships (Level A for us)? We would like to know if other civic engagement practitioners find such interconnected networks among their partnerships.

We also notice a tautology in Sockett's partnership model: if partnership success is defined by the attributes, arrangements and circumstances associated with the fourth type, namely transformative relationships, then the other three types and purposes of relationships can never be as successful. There are two ways out of this circular logic. One is to define only transformative relationships as partnerships, and relegate the other less intense relationships to more general terms, such as associations or working relationships (Bringle, Clayton & Price 2009). The other option is to allow the concept of partnership to apply more broadly while understanding that, depending on the partnership level, it has different purposes and goals by which success is defined.

Our experience makes us uncomfortable deeming the less intense partnerships as inherently less successful. In many cases they appropriately have narrower agendas which should not be considered less successful. Indeed, as we have mentioned, maintaining more than a few partnerships at the most intensive level would be time and energy prohibitive for both our university and the Dominicans. Maintaining a network-like structure of partnerships that differ in level of intensity is appropriate and indeed necessary, and can be deemed successful at all levels. The different levels of partnership in the network need each other for the overall ICE project to achieve success.

### **REFLECTIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRIORITIES FROM OUR DOMINICAN PARTNERS**

Our interviews and follow-up sessions elicited a wealth of positive feedback, from praise for the maturity and contributions of our students and expressions of satisfaction after working with our researchers, to comments on the ways that our study group

benefits a wide range of Dominicans. Negative sentiments have been concerned primarily with the short duration of our stay in any Dominican locale and the desire for more Dominicans to participate in our exchanges. What follows are a few quotes illustrating these sentiments and themes. Taken together, they illustrate how the partnerships have extended our impacts in Dominica beyond that of a typical study abroad tour.

One owner–operator bus driver employed to transport the study group described a day course participants spent in a fishing village:

*Yes, we should have more student groups like yours and not so many other tourists. Why? Because the money goes further and deeper. If I had a group like yours for 10 days every month, I would be laughing! You have had a good day, and the kiosk lady, she has money tonight to buy for her children. The fisherman has money to buy chicken, so the farmer he buys from has money for school fees. You [the study group] help a lot and don't make demands that things be a certain way.*

A different Dominican partner lauded our organised sessions, wherein the American students dialogue with their Dominican counterparts, saying that they serve as a ‘motivator’ for the latter, and that they ‘force them to listen to serious talk’.

A school principal stressed that the partnership works for all involved because ‘first of all it is a mutual relationship’. Another principal sent this follow-up email after a recent reflection session we held in Dominica:

*At my parents teachers association meeting on Monday 13th i spoke to my parents about your great plans for the students and the school. Everyone sends their love to you and your students especially the parents who are receiving the scholarship fund for attending the preschool.*

Beyond the positive feedback, partners effectively ‘raised the bar’ when asked what they believed we should do to make partnerships even more successful. If you ask partners what they would like to see us do more of, they list out many intriguing but ambitious things, and then it’s up to the partnership leaders to try to make them happen. This puts an even greater burden on the partnership organisers, which is exciting and challenging but unnerving at the same time. It is safer and less taxing to simply carry on the partnership as it incrementally develops over time, without encouraging host partners to think proactively about the future. It should be clear from this article that we are not advocating a retreat from more deeply incorporating partners’ perspectives; rather we are acknowledging the additional challenges to an already very ambitious overseas effort that may emerge from any data-gathering effort soliciting partners’ suggestions in the future.

None of the partners' recommendations seemed off the cuff. On the contrary, the suggestions were so detailed as to suggest that they extended from considerable prior thought about what they would like to see in the future. Two Level A partners recommended specific ways that we should deepen our collaboration. An ecologist working for the Dominica government would like to see more direct collaboration on research projects, particularly so Dominicans can gain a fuller understanding of the research methods that they can deploy themselves in the future. This partner put it this way:

*If we had the wherewithal, I would like to see a passing along of skills [from student researcher to public employee]. I would like to attach one or two of staff with the student to share knowledge and skills, but there is no concerted effort as yet to do this skill transfer.*

In addition, he would like to see 'off island training' for his staff, such as in ecological science, methods for data gathering and analysis, and GIS [geographic information systems] at our university. We find these appropriate extensions of the partnership, but unfortunately resource constraints on both sides have not allowed us to implement these recommendations. We will continue to advocate with our university for such partnership extensions.

Another Level A partner took the opportunity availed by the initial interview to imagine a well-orchestrated teleconference between students and staff at our university and in Dominica. He sees the two sides being brought together by the senior member of our university team: 'You are the connector'. He suggested that, when our study group was next in Dominica, the senior member make a presentation at one of the universities which summarises our collaborative work on the island over the years. The presentation should point to the future: 'These are the lessons we are carrying forward'. Comments and questions should come not only from students and staff present at the event, but also from our university back in the US. He even suggested that university students and staff on other Caribbean islands be invited to participate in the teleconference. Regarding the entire event, he says we should 'film it for the record as an evaluative tool', both for the details about our collaborative work and as an example of teleconference-based collaboration across international space. Finally, he suggested an accompanying written report on and evaluation of our experiences of the prospects and challenges for community-based sustainable development: 'Next time I would like to see an overarching report and assessment'. Clearly, these suggestions represent a tall order, challenging in terms of the logistics, commitment, technology and content! Although we have not been able to achieve this rather grandiose version of interaction at a distance, these partner recommendations have led to additional interaction by way of Skype and discussion of shared reading materials.

Other Level A partners made similar suggestions, emphasising the value of better documenting of our engagement activities. One recommended annual reports written

collaboratively by our students on sustainable ecotourism, based on their interactions with Dominicans. This partner noted that it might be valuable to see how such reports change over the years, as students' experiences in Dominica change, and as the ecotourism sector itself evolves:

*Maybe students can do -- in order to make a difference -- a report at the end, of recommendations. -- What do your students think we should be doing? Ten annual reports from students. A singular group report – I'm sure everyone [i.e., our Dominica contacts and people in the ecotourism sector] would like to see what collectively they see and recommend.*

A primary school administrator also suggested we better document our collaboration. We should 'prepare a letter to the minister of education' describing the details and successes of the matching funds campaigns for local schools. This same partner asked for help with strategies for a seemingly universal problem, namely ways to enhance parental involvement in the educational process: 'Regarding the school: getting parents to be more fully involved is a difficulty – I would like some strategies for greater involvement. Bring some ideas from the US.' Suggestions such as these have prompted ongoing discussion about ways that our mutual projects can be publicised and about ways we partners can engage more contributing participants.

Lastly, one partner suggested other ways that our student research projects could be better disseminated. He suggested that such students 'give a public lecture or something on the radio'. In response, we organised a session in which graduate students presented their research findings, attended both by undergraduate students from our university and a wide range of interested Dominicans.

These comments underscore the ongoing need for researchers from the Global North to share their findings with those in the host society who help make the research possible. All of them are wonderful and appropriate suggestions for ways to deepen and extend our partnerships. Summarising them here serves as a record of our partners' visions for future steps. Our plan is to continue to work to find ways to operationalise them, if not fully, then at least through activities that move the partnerships in the suggested directions.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This article reports on efforts to probe the perspectives of our overseas partners regarding the performance of the partnerships and how they can be improved. It has conceptualised partnerships in light of burgeoning literatures on service-learning and civic engagement. The literature defines successful university-community partnerships as those that are long term, deep and multi-dimensional. Our findings, on the contrary, suggest that partnership success can occur at all levels of intensity. Successful



partnerships vary in their levels of intensity, engagement and complexity, and many are interdependent in network-like relationships. The highest partnership level is associated with multi-dimensionality of purpose and spans issues such as teaching, fundraising, community development and conceptual brainstorming about collaborating across international borders on issues related to sustainable living. Lower intensity partnerships often contribute crucially to the overall success of the community engagement project, and also provide valuable support for higher level partnerships. By conceptualising partnerships in terms of their dimensionality and relationship networks, practitioners can better appreciate the different contributions and expectations at each level toward the project's overall success. We encourage research to assess the extent to which this framework applies to other civic engagement partnerships, both near campus and abroad.

We conclude with a discussion of five wider issues associated with civic engagement projects, particularly international ones and the associated study abroad courses. First, we find that international partnerships are even more challenging than domestic ones (we do have local partnership experience for comparison). ICE projects face acute communicative and geographical challenges which can easily appear insurmountable and threaten to undermine the entire effort. These include not being locally situated within the milieu of community experience and organising, and attempting to maintain contact with distant people with limited telecommunications access. However, our experience is that the rewards exceed the challenges, and we urge other educators to commit to long-term investment in such transcultural and transcontextual partnerships.

Second, it is important to be sensitive to the power dynamics associated with partnerships between an American university and people/communities in the less developed world. We find that the power dynamics cut both ways, with each side bringing different capacities, interests and motivations to the relationship. The American university and its staff and students hold considerable power in the relationships owing to their financial and technological resources and related ability to travel to and stay in the host society. Therefore, we feel morally obligated to continue to work to deploy our relative resource wealth in ways that benefit our Dominican hosts. We do this in a variety of ways, as we have recounted in this article. We try to provide income to disadvantaged Dominicans during our study tours, contribute disproportionately to mutual fundraising projects, obtain computers and other much-needed inputs for partnering organisations and (least successfully thus far) press our university administration to contribute resources to our overseas educators. That said, it's important to appreciate that the power dynamics are not entirely one-sided, because our overseas partners bring a different kind of power to the relationships – call it 'hosting power'. The success of our program relies on our partners choosing to

invest time and effort to engage with and host us. We guests rely on them for all aspects of our experience in their country. In all cases, our hosts choose to welcome our university group into the daily rhythms of village life. It is an open question as to which side in the partnerships needs the other more. Ongoing, open dialogue among partners is required to assure that the relationships, despite the power imbalances, are of mutual benefit. We feel that the partner interviews and follow-up discussions reported on in this article contribute importantly towards mutuality.

Third, it follows that better communication is the antidote to poor or imbalanced relationships. This article and the interviews it is based on have been invaluable to our ICE project. It serves as a record of what we have been trying to achieve in our project and identifies ways that our partnerships can deepen in the future. We hope that it will encourage other academics working on civic engagement partnerships to more systematically assess their progress and partners' views to help fill the related gap in the literature. More important than the scholarly contributions is the positive impact on the project itself. This research experience makes us certain that such dialogue contributes significantly to enhancing partnerships and the overall impact of overseas activities for all involved.

Fourth, a partnership caveat to keep in mind is the principle that activities should be mutual. Discussions with host partners about future actions should focus on activities that will be undertaken mutually by both sides of the partnership. It's easy to err (as we admittedly have) by asking host partners what they would like to see in the future and obtaining a list of activities that are quite grandiose, difficult to accomplish and imbalanced in terms of effort and engagement. Mutuality dictates that activities should involve both sides, rather than one serving the other, although in some short-term situations one-sidedness is necessary.

Fifth, this study leads to suggestions for course design. We recommend that study abroad courses include conceptual readings on ICE such as presented in this article. In other words, readings and associated discussions to prepare for study abroad should not only focus on course topics (for example, physical or cultural geography, history, ecology) and current issues in the host communities, but should also familiarise students with the aims of the civic engagement project. Devote class time to discussing how a civic engagement course differs from a more conventional one, and to the associated responsibilities of all participants. We similarly recommend spending time as a class reflecting with overseas partners on these very issues. This relates to a key finding of Sandy and Holland (2006) that community partners highly value their role as co-educators; as paraphrased from Jane Addams, 'everyone's a teacher and a learner'.

Despite their many challenges, international partnerships yield unusual rewards for all participants through intercultural understanding, collaboration and solidarity, and transformational learning for students.

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**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. What **words come to mind** to describe your relationship with [our university] professors and students?
2. What are the most important things that you would like to **teach or show** visiting [our university] students? Please explain.
3. Has your **view** of [our university] professors and students **changed** over time? If so, how?
4. What **benefits** do you obtain from your relationships with [our university] professors and students?
5. Are there any **differences** between your relationship with [our university] professors and students compared with other visitors to Dominica? Why or why not, and please explain.
6. What would you say is the **worst thing** about your relationship with [our university] professors and students? Or: **do you have any concerns?**
7. What is **most important** for you to get from your relationship with [our university] professors and students?
8. What would you like to see **happen in the near future** so that your relationship with [our university] is better for you?
9. To what extent do you see your relationship with [our university] as a **partnership?** Please explain.
10. What would you like to see happen so that your relationship with [our university] would be **more of a collaborative partnership?**
11. Is there **anything else** you would like to say about your relationship with [our university] professors and students that we have not covered?