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“Breaking up is hard to do”

Some observations on persistence in public-nonprofit partnerships

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Abstract

For many years a good deal of scholarly interest was directed towards the third sector and the supposedly improbable existence of cooperation between this sector and the public sector. As Salamon and Toepler (2015) state, the long reign of the neoclassical market failure and government failure theory had obscured the understanding of public-third sector relations. However, as research on the third/voluntary sector has evolved, the perspectives have widened resulting in other theoretical approaches, such as voluntary failure theory and new governance theory (ibid.), that seek to explain partnerships and other forms of cooperative relationships between government and the third sector.

The studies on public-third sector partnerships are predominantly made from a third sector perspective. To paint a broader picture an empirical survey was made among Swedish municipalities with the aim to grasp the public partners' motives for seeking or accepting cooperation with nonprofit organisations and other voluntary entities. The result was surprising; the public servants involved in cooperative arrangements were almost more of volunteers than the volunteers themselves.

Introduction

Ever since the last decades of the 20th century there has been a worldwide call for the different sectors of society to join forces in building a sustainable present and future (Third Sector Impact 2016, United Nations 2018, United Nations Statistical Commission 2016). The arguments put forward range from indisputable, such as increasing population, changes in demography, urbanization and wildfires, to politically ideological, such as financial effectiveness, plurality and empowerment. This development coincides with the diffusion of new public management, NPM, and some of its more prominent ideas that address efficiency, competition and contracting. In this context, partnerships between the public and third sector were presented as particularly desirable, assumingly because of their shared ends for the public good, and potentially to counterbalance some of the weaknesses of NPM orthodoxy (Pollitt 2007). But, is that

a viable assumption one might ask, are partnerships between public sector and third sector organisations at all possible? A complication is that there seems to be more than one answer to that question. From one theoretical viewpoint intersector partnerships are anomalies, from another they are regarded as the logical consequence, almost as if guided by a law of nature, of the increasingly complex contexts of social action (see Salamon & Toepler 2015). From the horizon of practice, public and third sector partnerships are well known both as rhetorical figures and as collaborative arrangements of varying scope, content and success. Whether public-nonprofit partnerships are viable or even possible is a question of academic (*sic!*) interest; in practice there is compelling evidence of the existence of such partnerships. As a result from the search for evidence a considerable number of reports have emerged on partnership failures, asymmetries and misused resources. It is tempting to conclude that public-nonprofit partnerships are expected, perhaps even demanded, then initiated, put into action and eventually, fail.

With such prospects, what are the motives for the public sector to enter partnerships with nonprofit organisations? From an NPM view, with its focus on economic rationale, some motives of that order can be imagined. However, the NPM preoccupation with economic incentives has been criticized for not being enough or even adequate, neither for successful management in the sector, nor for fruitful analysis of what is going on. This has led to a change in emphasis, both in academic writings and in practice, playing down the standard recipe of market analogies. In the wake, the post-NPM discourse has emerged, pointing at other values as central for understanding the energy of the public sector. This brings up the question if it would be fair to assume that these other values are of relevance in the quest for public sector motives to enter into partnerships with nonprofits.

The previous research on public-nonprofit partnerships is dominated by studies with a third sector perspective (for example Knutsen 2017, Pestoff 2012, Robbins & Lapsley 2008), leaving the public sector perspective overlooked. As a partnerships per definition has more than one partner, a more complete understanding of the interaction calls for other perspectives as well. Furthermore, in the context of intersector partnerships studies have focused on either sector and policy level or on case studies of successful (or not) examples. The individuals involved in partnerships tend to be left out of the narrative, although it is the people in organisations that interact in partnerships.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the knowledge on public-nonprofit partnerships, filling a gap in the literature and research now biased towards the third sector. More precisely the aim is to investigate the public partners' motives for seeking and/or accepting partnerships with nonprofit organisations.

Terms and theory - views on public-nonprofit partnerships

What, then, is a partnership? And what is implied by a partnership between a public organisation and a nonprofit organisation? The reports on partnerships are diverse, and theoretical as well as empirical frameworks point in contrarious directions. This section gives a quick outline of failure theories that frame much of the third sector research, but first of all, a few words on the terminology.

A comment on elusive definitions

Entering any article, book or other text on the subject, the reader will soon be overwhelmed with a myriad of alternative denominations for interorganisational interaction, as well as for the organisations themselves. This text is no exception despite a minimalistic ambition. Words such as partnership, cooperation, collaboration and intersector relationship are sometimes used as synonyms, at other times used with discretion signalling different meanings. The same applies for terms used for the organisations of the third sector, also known as voluntary or nonprofit organisations. Each of these terms has its own contextual etymology but share an origin of negation in relation to the organisations of the first, private, for-profit sector and the second, public, nonprofit sector. The third sector incorporates some but not all characteristics of the first sector and some, but not all, of the second sector. As the third sector is defined in contrast to the other sectors, it seems essential that there is a clear understanding of what they represent. However, judging from the literature on intersector relations, hybrids, partnerships, etc, all three sectors seem to have foggy boundaries (Billis 1993, Thomasson 2009).

The lack of precision reflects the diversity of organisations and intersector relationships. As will be presented below, interaction between public and third sector organisations in Sweden has many shapes, which bears resemblance to British experiences (Chapman *et al.* 2010). A further complication is that the denominations tend to get lost in translation (cf. Pollitt 2007), not primarily due to a scanty vocabulary, but to the fact that the public administrative traditions in the Scandinavian countries differ distinctly from those of the Anglo-Saxon profile as well as from the Continental European traditions (Kuhlmann & Wollman 2019).

The search for systematic knowledge renders the path of generalizations and abstractions inevitable, often at the expense of precise descriptions and definitions. For this paper I will use the “official” terminology of the conference (EIASM 2019), considering it a lingua franca of studies on intersector relationships. The focus is the interactive relation – *partnership* - between organisations that are part of the public sector – *public organisation* and third sector – *nonprofit organisation*, see figure 1.



Figure 1. Organisations and relation. Terminology used in the paper.

Theoretical views on public-nonprofit partnerships

The most widespread theoretical foundations for third sector research spring from economic failure theories, which have been extensively treated by scholars. A recent and systematic review of theoretical works on sector failures and governance that is of relevance in a third sector context, is presented by Salamon and Toepler (2015). They

state that the long reign of the neoclassical market failure and government failure theory has obscured the understanding of public-nonprofit relations.

The original idea of failure is the neoclassical explanation for the existence of nonmarket solutions, such as government, as providers of collective goods. Market failure occurs when a market solution is not economically efficient because of free riders. In economic theory this is where government is needed, i.e. government is the response to market failure for the provision of collective goods. However, governments are not infallible. The idea of government failure draws on the same logic of insufficient demand for the good provided. The demand not necessarily being defined as the number of beneficiaries but to what extent the provision of goods is supported by voters. When the support is too low the government withdraws, thus failing. According to this theory third sector organisations are responses to market and government failures. Not until one fails arises the power of the other, which makes the idea of partnerships seem very remote. Partnerships between the sectors are principally, logically impossible as voluntary, third sector activities only exist because the other sectors have failed.

Accordingly, the market exchange is regarded as the norm for economic efficiency, and every other form of organising transactions is treated as failure. This makes sense as private gain is the primary motive for action, which is a defining characteristic of the market sector, see figure 2. The public sector on the other hand is characterised by collective action in pursuit of the public good. This pursuit is shared by the third sector but through the mobilization of individual action which it shares with the for-profit sector.

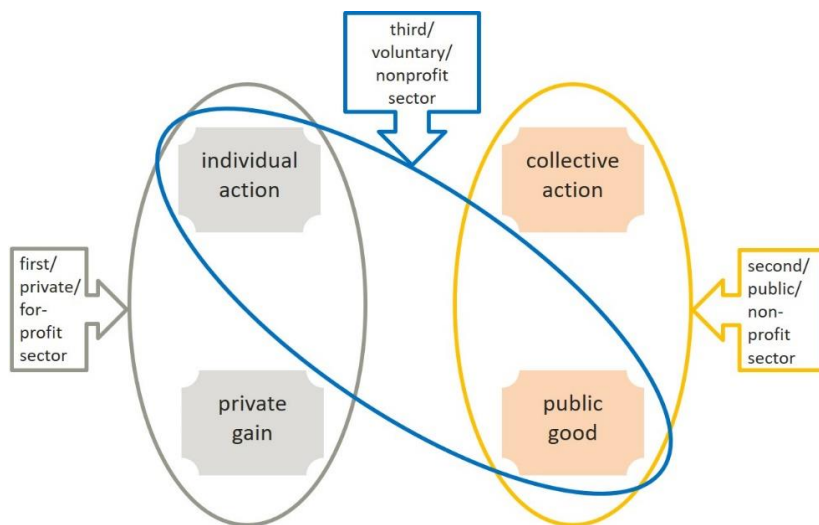


Figure 2. Characteristics of the three sectors. Adapted from Salamon & Toepler (2015).

Neither the market failure nor the government failure theories possess convincing explanatory power when it comes to public-nonprofit partnerships. It has even been suggested that the failure discourse is outdated, that it would be more relevant and constructive to talk about institutional mismatch (Furton & Martin 2019). A contrary way of looking at partnerships, as opposed to market/government failure, is that partnerships between the public and the third/voluntary sector are a pragmatic way to handle complex problems. Problems, not least the wicked ones, call for widespread mobilisation of resources and ideas. Drawing on Salamon's (1987) theory on voluntary

failure and on new governance theory Salamon and Toepler (2015) make the case for a framework for the analysis and explanation of public-nonprofit partnerships.

The rationale for public-nonprofit partnerships is that the weaknesses of each sector corresponds with the strengths of the other (Salamon & Toepler 2015). The idea of voluntary failure, i.e. the weaknesses of the nonprofit partner, mirrors the shortcomings of volunteering. Salamon (1987) lists four weaknesses; philanthropic insufficiency, particularism, paternalism and amateurism, each of which has a stable counterpart in the public sector; adequate and continuous resources, even distribution of services, rights and professionalism. Partnerships in which the public sector is involved rests on two theoretical premises, one being government failure, i.e. that all goods provided are not public enough, leading to inefficient use of collective funding. The other premise is the structure and mindset of new governance that open for partnerships to further the provision of collective goods. The new governance theory overlaps what in other parts of literature is referred to as the post-NPM discourse, signified by a broad scope of ideas, policies and actions to pursue the public good (Kuhlmann & Wollman 2019).

Empirical findings of public-nonprofit partnerships - presence and forms

With the aim to contribute to a broader picture, an empirical survey was made among Swedish municipalities (Hellström, work in progress). The purpose was to grasp the public partners' motives for seeking and/or accepting partnerships with nonprofit organisations. The survey was made through personal phone calls or meetings with 180 public employees in seven municipalities in the southern part of Sweden. The first part of each interview followed a structured questionnaire, focusing on descriptive elements of partnerships with nonprofits. The other part of the interview consisted of open-ended questions where the respondents were encouraged to talk about their experiences of and attitude towards partnerships with nonprofits.

The seven municipalities where the respondents were employed are of varying size, the number of inhabitants ranging from thirteen thousand to more than ten times as many. Although varying in size, demography and economy, all municipalities are subject to the same law requiring that welfare services be provided to its citizens.

The public sector in Sweden

The lion part of the welfare services of the welfare state is provided at the local level. The local level of the Swedish public sector, which is organised in municipalities, is one of three administrative levels, each invested with the power of taxation and with a rather distinct set of responsibility areas. Some areas are solely on the state agenda; for instance, the defence, the universities and the judicial authorities including the police; some are found on the regional level where the dominant issue is the responsibility for healthcare; at the local level the municipalities, in all 290, are by law responsible for the provision of social services, care for the elderly, libraries, education all through preschool to primary and secondary school. Out of tradition and, more recently, out of concern about city branding, most municipalities also engage in a multitude of other

optional services and projects. Some examples are cultural institutions, leisure and sport facilities, tourism, and facilitation for businesses.

Since the early 1990s the instructions for agencies and services of the public sector has been increasingly explicit in expecting, even demanding, some sort of partnership with nonprofit organisations or other voluntary entities. In 2010 a model for regulated public-nonprofit partnerships within the social services was launched. This type of partnership was and is presented as an option for municipalities and regions to use (Forum 2019a). The model has since been applied within the social services, including healthcare, care for the elderly and migration related services, in several municipalities and regions throughout Sweden. Although these partnerships are formalized, the dividing line between them and traditional public procurement is not sharp, leading up to a recent court case where the municipality was found guilty of illegal procurement (Forum 2019b). *Nota bene* that the case was tried against a law regulating *market* relations between the public sector and suppliers, thus another piece of evidence of the vague character of public-nonprofit partnerships.

Mapping the presence and forms of public-nonprofit partnerships

The search for public organisations' view on partnerships with nonprofit organisations resulted in detailed accounts on forms and content as well as anecdotal illustrations and attitudes based on experience. It was evident that partnerships of some kind or other exist in all municipalities included in the study. The municipalities were carefully chosen as to represent all municipal types according to a standard designed by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. It was also evident that partnerships are present in all areas of the municipal services, except for those where the regulations for the exercise of authority exclude all other than public employees.

The recorded partnerships, in all well over 700, represent a wide variety of forms, content and responsibilities. From the findings, a set of categories, "descriptive elements", were created, with which a map of the partnership landscape could be outlined. As shown in figure 3 below, four descriptive elements came out of the material, each element supported by several sub-elements.

The first element, called *activity flow*, clarifies which actors are involved in the partnership. The public organisation is given but the nonprofit partner may be either an individual, although not common, or an organisation of some kind which is the case in more than 90 percent of the partnerships. The beneficiary of the partnership is mostly external to the municipal organisation, as children joining football practice. In one third of the recorded partnerships the municipal organisation itself is the beneficiary, as when an association with expert knowledge holds an update meeting or gives a course for public employees.

The second element, *exchange relation*, is divided into several sub-elements that describe the type of activity that the partnership provides. The first subtype is labelled practical work; some examples are events such as festivals and concerts, an integrative democracy project in a socially exposed residential area, and the joint operations of a



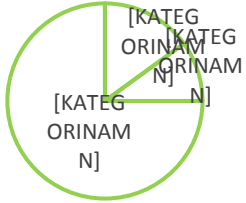
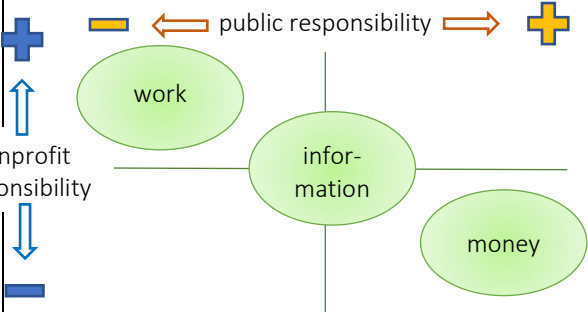
Descriptive element & some numbers	Sub-elements
<p>Activity flow – actors involved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more than 9 out of 10 partnerships involve nonprofit organisations • less than 1 out of 10 involve unorganised volunteers • two thirds of the partnerships are directed to receivers outside the organisations • one third of the partnerships are “consumed” internally 	
<p>Exchange relation – type of activity</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practical work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • events • projects • operations Information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consultation • advocacy • dissemination Monetary resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grants • subsidised facilities • procurement
<p>Contribution - activity's relation to inhouse public service</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • if partnership activity resembles public service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➡ competition, zero-sum or ➡ addition, more service added • if partnership activity bears no resemblance to public service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➡ complementarity, pluralism
<p>Division of responsibility – actor engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responsibility for decision • responsibility for knowledge • responsibility for provision 	

Figure 3. Descriptive elements of public-nonprofit partnerships.

night shelter. About half of the partnerships fall into this category. The second is called information and in more detail; consultation, advocacy, dissemination. The third and last type of partnership has its focus on the exchange of monetary resources such as grants, facilities or procurement.

The third element, *contribution*, clarifies the relation between the partnership activity and inhouse public service. The major distinction is whether the activity is of a type that is or could be produced by the municipality itself, or if it is complementary to the public services provided. Three out of four partnerships fall into the complementary category which includes parents' councils at a school, a local festival and volunteers reading aloud at a retirement home.

The fourth element, *division of responsibilities*, indicates how the partners contribute to the provision of service. The pattern of less or more engagement on either partner's behalf follows the theoretical assumption on the weakness of one partner being matched by the strength of the other.

To sum up, from the result of the survey we conclude that public-nonprofit partnerships exist in Swedish municipalities. The survey shows that there is a considerable variation in scale, scope, content and contribution of partnerships, judging from the number of descriptors needed to capture the essentials of each. However, knowing that partnership is a widespread model for handling different tasks does not fully answer the question on why they do exist. In the next section the public partner's motives for entering partnerships with nonprofits will be examined.

Public motives for public-nonprofit partnerships

One of the questions of the survey touched directly on the motives for the public organisation to engage (or not engage) in public-nonprofit partnerships. A general pattern traced in the interviews is that a partnership is perceived as a win-win situation. Eventually it may turn out not to be, but on a principal level, partnerships are considered rewarding for both parties. To be more precise, partnerships are appreciated by those who favour interaction with nonprofits, but not all do.

All the interviews followed the same guide; first the "what do you do", reported in the previous section, and then the "why do you do it". The character of the replies varied, for example:

There are two reasons. One is that it is a hell of a lot cheaper. The other is that it gives broader participation, both in decisions and activities.
(public employee, culture)

This straight-on, somewhat juicy answer includes the most prominent motives for public engagement that are brought up in the interviews. These two motives, i.e. economic rationality and democratic values, are joined by a third line of reasoning that springs from the need to solve concrete problems. This and the other motives condensed from the study are elaborated in the following. In the last part of the section motives for not engaging in public-nonprofit partnerships are presented.

Ideological and political motives

Municipalities are political organisations. Ultimately all interaction, every partnership with nonprofits can be regarded as an expression of the ideological belief that voluntary activity and engagement in nonprofit associations constitute a positive and valuable force in building a democratic society. Within the group of ideological and political motives three different arguments have been identified.

- Participation in society

This argument is especially relevant for partnerships where the public partner is either a school or a social service agency. The incentive is to develop relations outside the public organisation, to introduce the pupils or the clients to a broader social context.

Volunteers are a link between the social service agency and the rest of society. It is a natural thing that the clients are in touch with the community that they live in. Besides, it may have a preventing effect if clients are known by others, not only by the personnel at the social office.

(public employee, social service)

Through partnerships with nonprofit organisation the contact and the reach of the public service expand.

- Alternatives and marketisation

Partnerships that are motivated by this argument are those that are defined as being competitive or additive in their relation to the inhouse public service.

This type of partnership is a good idea. ... [The politicians] think it's good because it causes competition. Parents think it's good because it provides alternatives to the municipal schools and preschools. The competition has an impact both on quality and costs.

(public employee, education)

Some of the observations that were described as partnerships would perhaps, on closer scrutiny, be found to be ordinary procured contracts. On the other hand, the fact that the respondents called them partnerships may be interpreted as *de facto* statements that the public organisation does get involved. The existence of alternatives is crucial in the social services. Grants are given to nonprofit organisations that offer social service without having to adhere to the formal regulations of the public authority which many people find insulting. To give grants instead of using the money in the municipal social service, is motivated since those rejecting the municipal service otherwise would risk completely falling below radar. Certainly, the nonprofit organisations have other qualities as well that may single them out as more attractive alternatives for their clients.

- Political pragmatism and tradition

Partnerships that are pragmatically motivated are described as either effective ways to execute policy decisions or as the only route to follow in order to comply with legislation. As an example, Swedish law requires all municipalities to constitute a disability council where representatives and associations are members. The council is

referral body to all municipal decisions where issues of accessibility and equal rights are relevant.

The implementation of political decisions is delegated to the public servants. When it comes to public-nonprofit partnerships the instructions are of varying precision, which is apparent when comparing the interview material from the seven municipalities. But the frequency and extent of partnerships vary not only with how precise the politicians are, other factors have a decisive impact.

In this municipality it is a tradition to work like this [to interact with nonprofits], it is a given.

(public employee)

Concrete problems as motives

The group of motives gathered under the heading concrete problems have in common that the engagement has its roots in concrete, well defined situations or activities. Concrete problems may be larger or smaller, of more or less serious character, quickly subsiding or long-lasting. No matter how the problems are described, the incentive for the public engagement in partnerships is an aspiration to contribute to concrete improvements for the citizens.

- Shortage and need

The purpose to ease a need is historically probably one of the most common origins for public-nonprofit partnerships. The partnership takes form when several actors simultaneously reach the insight that a situation must be dealt with and that joint action is the best way to do it.

The boundaries between associations, the churches, the business community and the municipal organisation are no longer as sharp as they used to be. There is a consensus on bigger issues. The community needs venues, not least to reach people who have recently moved here.

(public employee, central office)

Typically, partnerships motivated along these lines are found in circumstances where the municipal service is personnel-intensive but still not enough, where the need for personal contact is insatiable. One example is a partnership that manages practise and activities on a daily basis for patients that suffer from aphasia. Another is voluntary visiting service among elderly people that are in contact with the municipal care, either as residents at retirement homes or as users of home care. Usually the threshold is low for the public organisation to engage in such partnership.

- Threat and danger

Sudden danger or long-term threats are considered to be forceful incentives for public-nonprofit partnerships. The urge to protect values at risk often coincides on individual, organisational and community level making interaction an adequate response. Urgent

situations such as forest fires or disastrous oil spillage call for immediate action from a large number of people.

The municipal rescue service needs to cooperate with volunteers to be able to handle extraordinary situations. The partnerships give access to the individuals [volunteers] and their competencies, their arms and their legs.

(public employee, rescue service)

In rural areas depopulation casts its looming shadow over an uncertain future. In many places this has sparked a mobilisation of public and nonprofit actors with the object to counteract such development. For the public partner the ambition to keep the population constant or increasing is an automatic reflex, in itself a motive to enter a partnership. It is not unusual that the school in the village becomes a node in a local network, partly for practical reasons and partly because the school tends to have a significant symbolic value for the inhabitants. In these partnerships it does not seem to matter who is involved or how the responsibilities are shared.

The real important thing is to use all the resources available in the village. In a small village everyone helps to make it more alive and interesting. As long as there is a school in the village the future is there.

(public employee, education)

Economically rational motives

The third motive is based on economic considerations. There are three different lines of reasoning, one is maintaining capacity even if the municipal budget is cut, the second one is to increase capacity while keeping the same budget, the third is housekeeping.

- Maintain capacity

The first argument touches on a very sensitive subject as it implies that volunteers would replace paid personnel. In the material there is hardly any evidence of partnerships on that ground. The only exceptions are a few agreements with sports associations about the operation of sport facilities. As the leisure department is an optional service it has not caused much friction to come to such agreements. In general, the outcome of these partnerships, from the public organisation's perspective, is lower maintenance costs. However, some of the municipalities included in the survey, and several others in the country, have been involved in costly failures in this type of partnership. Still, the economic incentive for public-nonprofit interaction is very strong.

In other, more regulated services partnerships are not allowed in the core of the service but may be seen as an option for handling less regulated tasks. Adding to the cost aspect is the increasing difficulty to recruit personnel. An argument for partnerships is that they provide a possibility to ease the public employees' workload and thereby making their work less stressful.

If we cooperate with volunteers, we can save our personnel. They need to be relieved. One example is that in this municipality we live far away from a hospital, which means that every visit to the hospital takes many hours. So that's

why we welcome volunteers who can help as escorts in cases when there is no relative to support the patient and keep company.

(public employee, care of the elderly)

- Expand and develop

Respondents mention the economic rationality in interacting with nonprofits to facilitate innovation, renewal, or expansion of the municipal operations. Partnerships that are initiated for such purposes contribute with high quality work at low cost, drawing on the energy, ideas and plurality that often are found in nonprofit organisations. Although the reason for the partnerships is founded in the actual issues, the economic consequences help promote them as hothouses or test balloons with major benefits for the inhabitants and the municipality.

- Housekeeping

The third economic argument is that of wise housekeeping, i.e. think first and do not waste resources. This argument also has a participatory side, as typical partnerships driven by a housekeeping motive are those that foremost have a consultative content.

Through presenting ideas and getting them accepted [by the people in the neighbourhood] before the project has come too far, we save money and time on behalf of the municipality.

(public employee, city planning)

Motives against public-non-profit partnerships

The survey resulted in a considerable number of partnerships but far from every public employee that was interviewed had any experience or knowledge of partnerships with nonprofits. What motivated this absence of interaction, they were asked and they answered, with varying degree of reflection, that either it was against regulation or it was not relevant due to various reasons in the municipal organisation.

- Illegality

The municipal organisation acts with legal authority in some of its responsibility areas, for instance in the social service in matters of social care and child protection. Within the authority partnerships are excluded as that would be a violation not only of the law but also of the legitimacy of the public sector. Furthermore, the space for partnerships is restricted by the handling of classified information and professional secrecy.

- Practical obstacles

The lack of partnerships may be explained by obstacles in the particular municipality or in the particular service. When asked to clarify, the public employees have given a variety of answers; the tradition of the municipality, big-wig territory, the service's repute, red tape and inertia inherent in the organisational structure. One such preventing structure is contracting, as that seems incompatible with public-nonprofit partnerships. In services that are subject to reorganisation or other major changes, interaction with

nonprofits has low priority. This applies even to organisations that under previous, ordinary circumstances have had frequent interaction.

A more general trend in municipal organisations is that the resources are concentrated to the core activities of each service. Within the majority of the services interaction with nonprofits is not regarded as a significant task.

The municipal organisation has “slimmed”, focus is on the mission. It is no longer regarded as the responsibility of the municipality to pursue issues and handle external contacts that don’t directly have impact on the core service.
(public employee, education)

- Mental barriers

In some of the interviews the persons interviewed reflect on the absence of public-nonprofit partnerships in their organisations. Some do it with regret.

In general, the contacts with the client organisations are lousy. We don’t systematically use the experiences we get from clients. There is no tradition of cooperating. We have not regarded nonprofits as a natural partner.
(public employee, social service)

Many public employees need to re-learn in order to be open and not defensive if they are to meet other [nonprofit] partners and new work methods. ... Mental blocks are often caused by fear of failing at your work.
(public employee)

Another reason is that the issue of public-nonprofit partnerships never has been on the agenda, because the municipality or the particular service, has not had any need or interest for interacting with nonprofits. Besides, one informant added, the nonprofits only see to their own activities and are not interested in entering partnerships.

To sum up, a range of motives for public-nonprofit partnerships have been identified from the interviews. The motives fall into three categories, ideological, practical, and economical, and help explain the existence of partnerships and, for that matter, some reasons for their non-existence, see figure 4 below.

Motives for public-nonprofit partnerships			Motives against public-nonprofit partnerships
Ideological & political	Concrete problems	Economically rational	
Participation	Shortage and need	Maintain capacity	Illegality
Alternatives and marketisation	Threat and danger	Expand and develop	Practical obstacles
Political pragmatism and tradition		Housekeeping	Mental barriers

Figure 4. Motives for and against public-nonprofit partnerships.

Another way of putting it is that the categories indicate what benefits the public organisation is expecting to gain in partnerships. Presumably these benefits, categories,

correspond with the theories on failure of government and the voluntary sector respectively. Yet, it is difficult to disregard the reports in the literature on partnership failures which lead to the question on why partnerships continue to exist. The next section will look into that.

Failure and persistence in public-nonprofit partnerships

Looking at the motives makes me wonder whether or not they represent an idealistic or realistic view of what partnerships could achieve. No doubt, the expressed view guides new partnerships. Previous studies of public-nonprofit partnerships have concluded that the motives as well as the continuity of partnerships should be understood as mutual resource dependencies (see Doyle *et al.* 2016, Knutsen 2017, Olsson 2000). The controlled resources being legitimacy, expertise, people and ideas on the nonprofit part, and, administrative capacity and judicial knowledge, financial and material resources on the public part. In their original work on the resource dependence perspective, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), stress legitimacy as the superior resource. Without legitimacy any organisation loses its *raison d'être*.

Ideological and pragmatic motives drive intersector partnerships, but these powerful and supposedly long-lasting drivers are rarely matched by a sustainable organisation. Let's retrace the line of reasoning a bit and have a look at the two actors involved. On the one hand a public sector organisation, a highly regulated and sharply defined bureaucracy. On the other hand, a nonprofit organisation, ranging from formally structured nonprofits to loosely coupled groups, all relying heavily on the voluntary effort of their individual members. This is a perfect setting for enthusiastic efforts, hard clashes and energy draining crashes, leaving the volunteers wishing for other ways to spend their spare time. Seemingly this is the predestined path for a good deal of activity in nonprofit organisations, spilling over on partnerships with the public sector.

Uncertainty

A major topic in the interviews with the public employees is uncertainty. Two types of uncertainty have been identified, one regarding continuity and the other regarding responsibility, see figure 5 below. The public employees' narrative of partnerships departs from an implicit dichotomy where the public partner stands for certainty and stability and the nonprofit partner represents the opposite. The citation below gives a good illustration.

If the whole activity/partnership is based on volunteers, then lack of continuity definitely is a disadvantage. When a person who is deeply involved moves, gets a more demanding private life or quits for whatever reason, then everything falls apart. That is nothing irregular or strange, on the contrary very natural, but when it comes to partnerships it's a disadvantage. That's the reason for me considering volunteers a source of uncertainty. /.../ On the other hand, volunteers can be really dedicated enthusiasts.

(public employee, culture)

Uncertainty	
Continuity	Division of responsibility
Time restraints	Tasks and responsibility
Perseverance	Boundary setting
Recruitment	Communication
Delimitation	Expectations
Organisation	

Figure 5. Factors of uncertainty in public-nonprofit partnerships according to public employees.

The constant risk for discontinuity is certainly something which creates uncertainty and so does every mistake or disregard that reduces clarity pertaining to any aspect of the partnership. For instance, the issue of responsibility is not only a matter of how much responsibility the nonprofit partner can and should accept, it is also a question of what the nonprofit expect the public partner to be responsible for. Several informants have experienced nonprofits having expectations on much too much public involvement, practically asking for an asymmetric relation. An illustration of this type of complexity in a partnership is a café, situated next door to a municipal club for teenagers. Volunteers who live in the neighbourhood run the café. On one occasion some of the employees of the teen club volunteered to help out in the café in their spare time. After a while the “municipal volunteers” noted that the other volunteers – the principals of the café operation – had become passive, seemingly uncertain of their roles in the presence of professionals. The result may perhaps be described as negative synergy. According to the informant the complication was caused by the parties not having made clear to each other what they expected of one another.

Another case; the abrupt ending of a partnership concerning the operations of a municipal teen club illustrates the importance of straightforward communication. During a period of two years, the teen club, visited by twelve to fifteen-year olds, was managed by two adults at a time. The adults were teamed up with one from the municipality, a professional, and the other a volunteer, a parent. Initially it worked out very well but after a while it was obvious that one of the parents had a drinking problem. Apart from not being able to perform his task, the alcoholism was incompatible with the no drugs policy of the teen club. The public employees involved were not certain whether it was known to people in general that the person drinking was a volunteer. Perhaps it was presumed that he was a public employee. The municipality considered it best to end the project immediately and completely. The informant was rather convinced that the outcome would have been different if it had been clearly communicated from the start that the volunteers were volunteers and not employees. Then it would have been sufficient to let the volunteer with the drinking problem end his engagement. As it turned out the whole partnership had to end in order for the municipality to re-open the teen club and present it as something new and different.

Partnerships that depend on the actual work and performance of volunteers cannot be expected to be sustainable, sustainable as in enduring. That would be a contradiction in terms. Perhaps the third sector is best understood as an arena for ideas, activities and forms that represent something else than the private and public sectors, something that

offers time and space for alternative mindsets, whether it takes the shape of political movements or the free zone in a bird watching association (cf Jeppsson Grassman 1997). As mentioned earlier, it is very natural that volunteers quit, the philanthropic insufficiency as Salamon (1987) calls it. But, if voluntary failure is considered normal, how can the partnership phenomenon continue? The mystery is why partnerships continue to exist. How do they maintain their legitimacy?

The idealistic public servant

In this study as well as in others it is rather obvious that the partnerships can be quite demanding and time consuming for those involved. The majority of the respondents share the opinion that being a public partner in a partnership takes time but that it has to be done as the public engagement serves as the basis for the partnership. The public employees' time is needed both in the contact and establishing phase and in maintaining the partnership.

In a short perspective it may take more time to do something through a partnership than if the municipal service had done it on its own. To work with volunteers steals time from things that you **have** to work with – the core and statutory operations.

(public employee)

In general, it has become harder for the public servants to find time for intersector relationships. Due to rationalisations in the public organisations there is hardly any slack left, and only very few public employees have job descriptions that specifically include contacts with nonprofit organisations and volunteers.

But it is not only the public staff that has trouble finding room in the calendar, the voluntary partner also has less opportunity to engage in nonprofit organisations and/or in public-nonprofit partnerships. This is partly explained by less calendar time, partly by other reasons. Several of the informants talk of a perceived change in the general attitude towards voluntary action, less of pro bono, more of for pay, less of collective interest, more of individual comfort. As one informant put it, commenting on the declining number of volunteers,

“people no longer want to produce their leisure activities, they prefer to consume them”.

(local politician)

Although there are many testimonies from the public servants on fulfilled agreements, good working relations, and satisfied clients. Parallel to these are other stories, notes in minor, about the strain of irregular contacts, of uncertainty about what to expect from the nonprofit partner in terms of competence, number, intensity, and individual continuity, of the tendency of volunteers to drop off. It adds up to a disillusioned view of partnerships shared by many public employees.

They [the volunteers] are very enthusiastic and show great joy in the work. But when the project ends they are gone. The consequence is that recruitments have start all over with each new project.

(public employee)

Being the public partner may be difficult, disturbing and hard. There may be friction within the public organisation because of questioned priorities, there may be friction in the contact with the nonprofit partner due to uncertainties and flawed communication. And the scars of failed partnerships will not fade. But still public servants interact with nonprofits, perhaps for the simple reason that...

[t]he outcome would be worse if we didn't cooperate.

(public employee)

So, what may be concluded from this? Based on the descriptions of their work conditions, on their sturdiness in seeing things through, on their apparent belief in the motives for partnership, I find it adequate to suggest that the public servants are nothing less than dedicatedly and enthusiastically voluntary in their behaviour. In Swedish there is a word for this, a word that describes a person who involves herself in associations, projects, events etc, giving of time, energy, ideas to the benefit of a larger context. The Swedish word is *eldsjäl*, which literally translated means soul of fire. It is a forceful metaphor, very graphic, harbouring both the warm and cosy fireplace, the potentially destructive wildfire that destroys everything in its way, as well as the omnipresent risk of the fire going out, i.e. exactly the Janus face of a dedicated enthusiast.

Amnesia and embeddedness – a concluding discussion on partnerships

In the study of organisational action there used to be, and sometimes still is, a tendency to overlook the fact that organisations are, as Granovetter puts it, “ongoing systems of social relations” (Granovetter 1985, p 487). In such systems the actors and their actions are embedded. One implication of this is that, although performed in the name of an organisation, every action is a human action. Another is that the embeddedness “generates standards of expected behaviour” (op. cit., p 498).

An attempt to clarify the general structure of public-nonprofit relationships is shown in figure 6. A partnership is a structure that consists of two organisational partners, but it is a structure without structural components, the components are individual. This is the main conclusion of the study. In the figure, the individuals are volunteers, volunteers that have the right to enter and leave as they please. The lesson learned by public employees is that the behavioural pattern of nonprofit volunteers in partnerships is intense and enthusiastic to begin with and then fades away, to soon be gone. The voluntary patience is on average not longer than a short-term project. Therefore, the public volunteer enters, volunteering beyond the boundaries of his office aspiring to hold the pieces of the partnership together. As one partner never returns the consequence is that the forms and content of partnerships have to be invented and then reinvented with every new interactive arrangement as there is no memory in the organisation. It has been struck with organisational amnesia. The relations are shaped, formed, designed repeatedly.



Figure 6. Memory and learning are lost as partnerships depend on individuals in organisations.

Extending the argument of embeddedness, every organisation is embedded in the sector it is part of, and a sector is defined by the organisations in it as well as formed by external pressures. A public organisation is part of the public sector, a non-profit organisation belongs to the third sector. Public servants are embedded in their public sector organisations that are embedded in the public sector. Setting the structural, bureaucratic embeddedness aside there is another pattern that comes forward, something that perhaps is best captured as ideal embeddedness. Research on public service motivation indicates that public employees attribute a higher value to factors that have to do with democratic values, equal opportunities, societal relevance and impact than to factors pertaining to economic incentives (Hellström 2016, Hellström & Ramberg 2007).

To put it bluntly, public servants are “marinated” in values pertaining to citizen engagement. That may be the argument for public sector volunteers, because they are convinced that a networking governance is needed to deal with the complex problems facing the public sector and society today.

In sum, breaking up is hard to do. Because breaking up is not an option.

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