FORTRESSES OR COALITIONS?

Partnership brokers explore the implications of our turbulent world

In 2012, the newly formed Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) published *What Do Partnership Brokers Do? An Enquiry into Practice.* The publication was based on an analysis of a hundred log books[1] compiled by individuals between 2003 and 2011 as part of their work towards Accreditation. In order to avoid the risks that might come from pre-conceptions, assumptions or outright bias, the research was undertaken by 3 university students[2] who knew nothing about the emerging profession of partnership brokering but who came to the task with open minds, strong research skills and an abundance of curiosity.

Partnership brokering as an idea and a practice was first articulated in 2002[3] and became a professional development project in 2003[4] offering training followed by the option to undertake an assessed programme to become formally qualified. By the time PBA became an independent entity,[5] partnership brokering was gaining a level of acceptance as an important (perhaps even critical) element in achieving effective partnerships that were genuinely co-owned, self-determining and sometimes truly transformative. And, as importantly, where the outcomes of the collaboration were sustainable even when the partnership itself came to an end.[6]

The log books confirmed one hugely important (and often forgotten) distinction – namely, that whilst the **process** of partnering is universal and remarkably transferable, every **partnership** is unique and entirely context-specific.

The log books also confirmed that whilst partnerships could legitimately be highly diverse, there was mounting evidence that the term 'partnership' was being used so loosely that many so-called partnerships didn't hold to even the basic core principles that partnership brokers aim to support and promote.[7] In such situations, partnering, far from being a collaboration between equals, was often experienced as a mechanism for containment and control.

The activities and characteristics of those operating in partnership brokering roles emerged from the log books as those of serving, supporting and accompanying rather than promoting, directing or shaping. The concept of partnership brokers 'holding space' for partners to collectively grow their partnership being seen as a core skill and one that was most likely to produce the essential qualities of commitment, perseverance and resilience that are so important to partnerships with ambitious and transformational goals.

The log books reflected the various different global contexts as they were at the time they were compiled but fast forward fourteen years and the world that we, as partnership brokers, are working in feels like a very different place.

Partnership brokers – including those with well-established track records and reputations – are experiencing a significant amount of push back about the value and validity of partnering in the current climate from those who wield influence and power. It seems that the very notion of 'collaborating' for sustainable change is being abandoned almost before it has had a chance to fully prove itself and there is a rapid slide into unilateral (often dogmatic and divisive) decision-making with an ever-widening gap between those who have a lot and those who have very little – across the whole globe not just those in the so-called 'global South'.

[1] A form of journaling designed to capture reflections day-to-day partnership brokering experiences

[2] Priti Bhattarai, Akua Boateng and Francesca Rhodes

[3] In a publication published by the United Nations Fund for Partnerships (UNFIP) entitled: *The Guiding Hand: Brokering Partnerships for Sustainable Development* co-authored by Ros Tennyson & Luke Wilde

[4] Under the umbrella of two UK-based organisations – the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF)

[5] Registered in the UK as a not-for-profit social business

[6] There is a school of thought that suggests cross-sector partnering is best conceived of as a temporary-but-powerful way to challenge and innovate – judged by what it transforms rather than how big it grows or how long it lasts.

[7] These are a commitment to: Honouring Difference, Building Equity, Promoting Transparency, Ensuring Mutual Benefit and Being Courageous

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"This turbulence is faster paced than at any other time in history – how is it possible to keep up and, where necessary, to let go of old assumptions and certainties where they no longer serve?"

Many people feel assaulted from every direction – whether these assaults come from: rampant pandemics; the catastrophic impacts of climate change; the crumbling of multilateral cooperation; the dramatic shrinkage of aid funding; the possibility of extinction from uncontrollable AI; displacement, ethnic cleansing and genocide; relatively local wars that have devastating impacts on global security and / or the real possibility of global economic meltdown. The response from most (or at least the most powerful) of the world's leaders is to take command, seize control, pull up the drawbridge and dictate policies and programmes that, typically, give priority to their own vested interests.

Partnerships as a solution to these assaults may be out of favour but, as Mark Carney[8] put it so eloquently at Davos a few months ago, the only realistic alternative to 'fortresses' are 'coalitions' – using another, possibly better, term for partnerships.

So where does this leave us as partnership brokers? What do we observe in terms of the rapidly changing partnering landscape? How might our role need to be re-defined and our ways of working need to change in response to this time of upheaval and threat on almost every front?

In October 2026, PBA hosted three short conversations[9] about this issue. Participants came from a rich mix of countries[10], contexts and cultures, all equally keen to share their experiences, observations and anxieties as well as to seize the opportunity to explore with peers how best to re-energise global commitment to collaboration in the face of global turbulence.

This is a summary of what emerged from these conversations.[11]

Characteristics of the turbulence we are experiencing: [12]

The emotional effects of uncertainty, fear and anxiety typically lead to a retreat into self-preservation – whether at individual, organisational or national levels – where the focus is on survival and compliance not on empathy and compassion.

In a world in which we are technically more connected, many experience greater loneliness and alienation than ever before. That, coupled with a global downturn in the levels of trust in leaders and decision-makers, leads too easily to a sense of hopelessness, isolation and lack of agency.

In these circumstances, it is harder to persuade people to believe that change is possible or that individuals with conscience deserve to be heard or that dialogues at all levels really matter.

"How can we be ethical, collaborative and transformative in world that is increasingly the opposite of all those things?"

We live and work in increasingly fragmented societies where traditional solidarity structures are breaking down – very clearly in the level of the international institutions that were created to ensure justice, peace, health, education, food and fairness for all but also, for many, at the family and local community level as well.

Informal structures are likely to be under increasing pressure from the global turbulence and it is highly probable that the formal structures (that, in any case, all too often fell far short of what was needed) will never be restored. If current practices are the new norm, our national and international institutions are likely to be replaced by increasingly competitive rather than collaborative alternatives with little time or tolerance for the constructive communication between all affected parties that is so vital to building understanding, trust and the capacity to work together for a common purpose.

[8] Prime minister of Canada speaking at the World Economic Forum in January 2026

[9] These were each 1.5-hour conversations offered in different time zones

[10] Aotearoa / New Zealand, Australia, Cambodia, Canada, Ethiopia, Fiji, Germany, India, Indonesia, Mali, Nepal, Netherlands, Papua New Guinea, Poland, Sweden, Syria, UK, Vietnam, Zambia

[11] This is one of three 'outputs' – a second is a slide pack of materials for Accredited partnership brokers to adapt and use as they see fit and the third is a set of suggestions for PBA itself about how it needs to change to be fit for purpose in what it offers to those operating as partnership brokers in this radically different global landscape.

[12] These have been retrospectively clustered under sub-headings

This is a kind of pendulum, swinging between collaboration and competition – where the question *'what interests do we share?'* at one end of the swing is replaced by *'what's in it for us?'* at the other.

The impact on partnerships and other collaborative models

Conscious collaboration between different sectors and entities (i.e. 'partnering') has never been easy for a number of reasons including:

- The fact that the term 'partnership' is itself is often misused and mis-applied
- Many 'partnerships' – imposed by others – are experienced as more like forced marriages
- Equity (a core partnering principle) is routinely undermined by those who control the flow of resources.
- The all-too-frequent glaring gap between pro-partnership rhetoric and anti-partnering behaviours
- That even when partnerships are genuinely co-created and co-owned rather than required and imposed, they are highly vulnerable to the changing priorities and changes in personnel of those involved

These are the kind of challenges that partners and partnership brokers grapple with every day and it is, undoubtedly, very hard work to build and maintain substantive and impactful alliances that can change the rules of the game for the benefit of humankind and the preservation of the planet. But when equitable collaboration works well – and there are some extraordinary examples of transformative collaboration across the globe – it points to new models and ways of operating that counteract scepticism and offer a serious alternative to domination by the few by promoting something radically different and far better.

Those who criticise partnerships do so on the basis that they seem to take so long to operate optimally that the 'return on investment' is just far too slow. In our rapidly changing environment and with the growing urgency of need, this is judged to be untenable (with, of course, some justification). Arguments of this kind are being widely deployed as the rationale for the massive reduction in resources available for building robust partnering approaches to all aspects of development in favour of imposing pre-determined solutions or simply abandoning the most vulnerable.

However, not all leaders and decision-makers feel this way, and if Mark Carney is correct in his assertion that 'coalitions of the willing' are the only real antidote to the turbulence we face, then we need to make a much stronger case for investing more not less in partnering options – as well as adapting our partnership brokering approaches to ensure that the coalitions we support become efficient and productive at a significantly faster pace.

"In this time of chaos and budgetary constraints, how can we help people understand that this is precisely the time to invest in partnerships and partnership brokering?"

Making a stronger case for collaboration

It is clear that the term 'partnership' has become tired and now carries a great deal of unhelpful baggage. We could start by reclaiming the term and ensuring that it is clearly defined or, where necessary, replaced by a more appropriate term. We can also school ourselves to become more scrupulous in how we use it and relentlessly challenge those who use it too casually or manipulatively.

As suggested above, the issue of time is also vitally important – in many current scenarios, time is of the essence, so it is absolutely necessary to challenge and change the perception that partnering is always – and of necessity – a slow business. Yes, it takes time to form strong and constructive working relationships, but a partnership building process that is well managed can take days rather than months or, in the worst-case scenario, years. It is often good to start working on some specific projects ('quick wins' that are not controversial) early on, even prior to a formal agreement, to test the water and learn how valuable it can be to work together by actually working together!

Alongside this, we can encourage a different understanding of what constitutes a partnership's value – judging each one in terms of its role in transforming a situation or a system, or in terms of how far the outcomes are sustainable, rather than measuring success by the longevity of the partnership itself. Partnerships increasingly seen as temporary

arrangements that have immediate and dynamic impact (i.e. partnering as a means to an end rather than an end in itself) may liberate us into a more dynamic and innovative approach.

Above all, those of us who deeply believe in the potential power of partnering – especially in this increasingly turbulent world – cannot keep our heads in the sand and ignore the urgent need for:

- Quick decisions and early results
- Reaching scale and having significant impact
- Speaking truth to power

What choice do we have but to be as creative as we can possibly be in making the case for collaboration convincing, constructive and capable of significant impact?

Re-framing the role of partnership brokers

In this turbulence-inspired new 'world order', what is the emerging role for partnership brokers? Is it the same but more insistent or might it require quite a radical re-think? If significant change in how we operate is necessary, what is that change and how do we adapt our practice and re-frame our role? In other words, what is really needed now? [13]

Key pointers raised in the conversations include:

- Believing and confidently asserting that partnering can work at the pace and scale needed and that partnership brokers can play a key role in moving from aspiration to action
- Recognising that it is no longer possible (or even desirable) to rely on earlier norms, assumptions and institutions and that it is a priority to design and build quite new models of collaboration that demonstrate the power of collaboration-led alternatives
- Shining a light on the many small and important movements – across the globe and at all levels – that give a sense of optimism to counteract the dominant narrative of those who wield power and dismiss collaboration as being ineffectual
- Pushing strongly for a completely new approach to resourcing partnering initiatives and partnership brokering work – far beyond pre-planned (rather than co-created) project funding
- Supporting all those willing to challenge the demands for compliance from many decision-makers and who push for an equitable, flexible and emergent process fully 'owned' by partners and stakeholders
- Building the growing global network of partnership brokers and other partnering professionals dedicated to truly collaborative, resilient and courageous practice
- Understanding the current global situation as nothing more or less than a truly urgent call to action.

"As partnership brokers, we have a very important role in helping others to believe in the potential and critical importance of effective and powerful collaboration. This requires (at least) three things from us. First that we deeply believe this to be true (and are prepared to keep on keeping on). Second that we are able to provide compelling evidence that the wide-ranging, transformative and sustainable benefits can completely justify the investment. Third, that we actively and unreservedly support each other in our individual determination to make a difference – whatever it takes."

[13] This is explored more fully in the slide pack being circulated to the Accredited Partnership Brokers (APBs) Community of Practice.

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