



Evaluating Catchment Partnerships: Avoiding a Watered Down Approach

Karen Potter and Carol Jacklin-Jarvis

EasyChair preprints are intended for rapid dissemination of research results and are integrated with the rest of EasyChair.

August 13, 2019

How to Evaluate Catchment Based Partnerships & Avoid a Watered Down Approach?

Karen Potter and Carol Jacklin-Jarvis

*Department of Public Sector Leadership and Social Enterprise, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4750-0056>*

Catchment management was initially seen as a 'physical' need for the integration of water policy issues, but a collaborative approach has more recently emerged as a key feature in the Government's policy approach to decision making and implementation. Thus voluntary sector organisations (e.g. Rivers Trusts) are charged with leading multi-level partnerships to not only take on significant physical challenges, but to manage the 'partnership' that are increasingly seen as central to transformational change. The paper is contextualised against a 'Catchment Based Approach' Partnership in receipt of significant funding, to highlight the challenges of developing and the potential utility of an evaluation framework. We draw on and begin to explore a realist approach evaluation, to focus on the ways in which voluntary organisation led catchment partnerships can create the conditions that make environmental change possible. In doing so, we also proffer to enhance our understanding of the role of this vital subsector of civil society.

Introduction

The recent Civil Society Futures Inquiry (2018) sees a re-energised civil society as having a vital role in helping to address the challenges that lie ahead in England, being at the heart of rebuilding social fabric and reviving a dented democracy. The two year independent enquiry also recognised the great challenges of climate change and environmental degradation, and that it again will be civil society enabling us to address the increasing urgent issues of a rapidly changing environment, organising to conserve the country's precious wildlife (Civil Society Futures, 2018, p6). The Civil Society Futures Report also concluded that the very aptly named 'wider ecosystem' has a critical enabling role, that civil society, the government and businesses are interdependent and need to work together towards the future thriving society.

'Partnership working', 'collaboration' or 'working together' across sectors has a long history in England. It initially dates back to community development initiatives in the 1960s, placed at the very heart of government strategy as a 'third way' form of governance for delivery of public services with the Labour government across the turn of the century (1997-2008) and now under the current political climate we see the strong (and contested) emphasis or discourse on 'civil society'. The present government continues the narrative that has become familiar internationally over the past three decades or so, that Government alone cannot solve the complex challenges facing society. It is however only much more recently that the Government Department in England responsible for the environment, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), has decentralised any power and responsibility to the voluntary sector (Potter and Jacklin-Jarvis, 2018). Water management in England in particular has been typified by a top-down, technocratic and exclusionary approach to any participation (Benson et al., 2014). DEFRA first

announced a range of 'civil society' framed initiatives in 2011, including pilots to engage stakeholders to gather evidence of local pressures on rivers, integrating their action with the Environment Agency. Across this very short history, in what amounts to less than a decade, we now see 'the Catchment Based Approach (CaBA)' as a fully-fledged civil society initiative. Rivers Trusts now not only 'work in partnership', they act as the 'hosts' and find themselves placed firmly in the leadership role of partnerships with Government, Local Authorities, other Voluntary Organisations, Privatised Water Companies and other businesses in order to maximise the natural value of our environment (see CaBA, 2019).

We welcome the acknowledgement of the role of the environmental sector of Civil Society in the Civil Societies Report (2018). However, we would respectfully suggest that of the hundreds of workshops and meetings in the two years of the enquiry, there was very limited engagement with (and/or from) environmental voluntary organisations. In our previous research we have started to re-dress a poor, 'patchy at best', understanding of the field and scale of activity in the environmental voluntary sub-sector (Clifford et al., 2013: 242). We have detailed a strong account of social/welfare focused researchers committed to gain further understanding of the third or voluntary sector, not witnessed to date within the water governance sector (Potter and Jacklin-Jarvis, 2018). We have more recently committed to support a small-scale evaluation of a CaBA partnership led project funded from a non-Government source, which has the aim of delivering a substantially healthier river system for the benefit of people and wildlife. It is however *the partnership* that is seen as central to transformational change in the Catchment, that *effective partnership working* can deliver multiple benefits and have a greater impact on the environment than if organisations were operating alone. The partnership aims to demonstrate the benefits and power of collaboration and forge a way of working through the funded project that will be sustained into the future.

In this paper, we wish to reflect upon our initial and ongoing work to address the challenges of developing and the potential utility of an evaluation framework for an 'effective partnership'. We continue in this paper the notion of opening up of lesson drawing across policy fields, this time delving into the literature on the evaluation of partnerships. We seek to advance what Kirsop-Taylor (2019) also notes is a limited contemporary literature about how EVSOs are faring in contemporary governance settings, but in considering the implications of the evaluation, also open up and extend the debate on the 'future' of this small but significant sub-sector that strengthens and delivers on environmental values in civil society. In the following we offer a little further context to our CaBA partnership led project, discuss how partnership targets have been frequently set for environmental or 'physical' impacts and outcomes in water management, but we now see monitoring and evaluation considered increasingly important as regards 'an effective partnership'. In the second section, we detail the efforts from the social/welfare based researchers to attribute the impact from collaborative working in terms of outcomes, before offering a first exploration of the utility of a realist approach to the evaluation of a catchment based partnership.

Catchment Based Partnerships – Increasing the Flow from Civil Society

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) launched the Catchment-Based Approach (CaBA) in 2011, signalling its intent that more locally focussed decision making and action should sit at the heart of the debate about the future direction of improvements to the water environment (Defra, 2013). DEFRA also expected that over time, the approach would become self-sustaining and mature as a mechanism for ensuring that there is strong local support, consensus, effective coordination and efficient channeling of existing and new funding and other resources to deliver local aspirations for the water environment (Defra, 2011). This change in intent also coincided with the new coalition Government's (Conservative/Liberal Democrat) localism agenda to decentralise power and responsibility (Potter and Jacklin-Jarvis, 2018). A National Support Group now champions the CaBA approach and supports partnerships nationally, chaired by and with secretariat support from the CEO and other members of the Rivers Trust, also comprising representatives of the other organisations involved in CaBA (e.g.

environmental 'NGO's', Water UK, CIWEM, DEFRA, the Environment Agency, Natural England, National Farmers Union, Crop Protection Association and the National Flood Forum) (CaBA, 2019). We are focusing our current research on an evaluation of a front running partnership, to remain anonymous in this early stage of the research. As with other CaBA initiatives, the partnership brings together over many different cross-sector and multi-level organisations, including the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Natural England, Local Authorities, National Park Authority, privatised water utilities, in addition to 'civil society', that being voluntary sector organisations and community groups, such as the RSPB and Woodland Trust. As well as delivering on a series of complex physical improvements to the natural and built heritage, the project is also making a difference to the lives of the communities that live in, work in and visit the catchment, including education and enabling skills development, changing attitudes and behaviour and boosting the local economy. The Rivers Trust acts as the lead organisation of the partnership, holding responsibility for oversight on delivery of core activities. In particular, the partnership continues to work together to identify and secure funding to secure its future and continue the functioning of the partnership, specifically to fund mutually agreed core activities and also the delivery of practical catchment projects.

As a condition of funding, the partnership have been asked to carry out a self-evaluation, as with social or 'welfare' domain counterparts, the drivers for an evaluation of partnerships, include the justification of resources, to identify and therefore aim to replicate what has worked well or conversely to modify or end interventions that have been shown not to work (Boydell and Rugkåsa, 2007). The wider CaBA Community also sets the objective of evaluating its programme, to: identify the benefits of partnership working and champion the work of CaBA partnerships; to explore the characteristics of a successful and maturing partnership; and to identify the capacity-building needs within the CaBA partnerships (CaBA, 2017). The evaluation and proposed evaluation report's dominant focus, clearly, is on the physical changes brought about by the project. For example, in the Catchment, the majority of the rivers suffer from urban and industrial pollution, agricultural impacts, fragmented habitat and general mistreatment – predominantly littering. Natural hazards, including floods and droughts, and rising temperatures associated with climate change also exacerbate the challenge. The core objectives and indicators are thus centred on improving biodiversity, reducing pollution and improving water quality, also enhancing the amenity value of the catchment. However, the project team also notes that before the CaBA partnership, there was not a single environmental project drawing organisations together to tackle water related matters across a catchment scale and it is through this formation of a catchment partnership of organisations (who have previously worked together on a smaller, albeit fragmented scales), that it is believed the expertise and relationships will be brought together to deliver on an integrated catchment strategy. The monitoring and evaluation plans also take into direct account the collaborative element of the project, in seeking to evaluate the difference the project makes on more effective partnership working. Hence as part of the range of monitoring activities to measure the difference the project has made on the natural heritage and the lives of communities, the task also includes undertaking an evaluation of the 'effectiveness of partnership working', and to understand how catchment governance has adapted to meet the challenges of the project.

Towards a Realist Evaluation of 'an Effective Partnership'

Working across boundaries has become the 'modus operandi' for governing in the 21st century (O'Flynn, 2014), we observe, as with those researchers involved in welfare-based partnerships two decades or so ago, that DEFRA and funders assume a collaboration will be more effective than a project completed by a single organisation or sector, that they emphasize the added value of partnership working per se. Evaluation frameworks that have been previously developed proliferated in the previous Labour Government era of 'Third Way' Governance, that is before our CaBA partnerships were initiated, for example led by the Audit Commission, frameworks developed by the Health Development Agency and Strategic Partnering Taskforce (Boydell and Rugkåsa, 2007). At this point with partnership working at its height, there was a strong emphasis on 'what works' in evidence-based policy making, that is policies could work better if there was a better understanding of how policy mechanisms bring about social changes and the desired outcomes

(Lamie and Ball, 2010). Following over two decades of study and after significant amounts of money have been invested in complex evaluations of collaborative efforts, social/welfare based researchers still allege they lack sufficient evidence concerning the impact that collaborative working has in terms of outcomes that are essential to drive high quality collaboration (Gajda, 2004; Jeffares and Dickinson, 2016; Woodland and Hutton, 2012). Evaluating an 'effective partnership' is also known to raise substantial methodological challenges (Boydell and Rugkåsa, 2007). When the aspirations for collaborative working are broad (for example reducing health inequalities or reducing gaps in educational attainment rates), it has proven very difficult or even impossible to ascertain whether there are any changes over a relatively short period of time. If changes can be detected and measured, then it remains a challenge to attribute these to collaborative efforts and not some exogenous factors, the evaluations were unable to capture all the possible complexities and impacts of processes (Jeffares and Dickinson, 2016).

As a consequence of such methodological difficulties, and the difficulties in demonstrating whether or not multi-sectoral collaborations have influenced outcomes, 'realism' as a philosophical approach began to exert an influence on evaluation, notably through the pioneering work of Pawson and Tilley (1997) (Robson, 2000). In taking a realist approach, theories are set up to make proposals about how and why the programme or project works. Programme mechanisms are supposed to trigger some sort of change, this switches the emphasis to 'the way' in which programmes bring about change (Boydell and Rugkåsa, 2007). These formative style evaluations pay particular attention to partnership processes rather than to any measurement of the partnership's impact (ibid). It has been highlighted that good processes are not necessarily any guarantee of good results, hence although process evaluation is important, it should not be carried out alone (ibid). However, it is very challenging, or downright impossible, to derive an objective measure and apply this research in a practice environment that is dynamic and subject to multiplicity of complex influences. In the realist evaluation language of Pawson and Tilley (1997), theories are set up that make proposals about how *mechanisms* operate in a particular *context* to produce project or programme *outcomes*. 'Realistic Evaluation' models propose that any outcomes are derived from the interaction between mechanisms and the contextual factors in the environment in which interventions are carried out (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

We note that there has been a substantial debate in the social/welfare literature questioning the very basis of partnership working, that partnership working could potentially generate more costs than benefits or even not provide any betterment to the problems they are set up to address (Boydell and Rugkåsa, 2007). However, we also note and share the fundamental concern that State bodies and funders might assume that the hard work and graft undertaken to form relationships amongst partners and the learning that therefore takes place are 'soft' benefits, carrying too little currency when they are typically more concerned with accountability (ibid). We are interested in 'partnership' as the mechanism and have begun to draw from scholars interested in developing a theoretical, realist approach to partnership evaluation. For example, Boydell and Rugkåsa (2007) developed their model in the context that the constraints to measuring outcomes of health partnerships were difficult to overcome and hence found it "more fruitful to focus on the ways in which partnerships create the conditions that make change possible" (p225). In taking partnership as the mechanism, Boydell and Rugkåsa's (2007) approach allows us to focus the attention on how the partnership creates the conditions for change. They stress that it is important to pay attention to the way in which the partnership (mechanism) is implemented. However, given the success or 'effectiveness' versus failure can be inherent in all forms of 'mechanism', then the evaluation task also seeks to surface the contextual factors in which partnerships are most likely to produce successful outcomes (Boydell and Rugkåsa, 2007). Boydell and Rugkåsa (2007) studied partnership cases in a number of contexts and with different subjects and through a process of theory-building, they created a model or 'pathway' of how change may occur through partnerships. The model is intended to conceptualize the benefits that may accrue through the different developmental stages of the partnership, designed to capture the 'soft' or intangible benefits that are not typically taken into account, or are not perceived or understood to be related or due to 'the effective partnership'. It states that the model works 'under favourable conditions', and explicitly takes into account the complexities of the environment into account where the partnership is operating.

Towards a 'Realist' Evaluation of the Catchment Partnership

We take the call of Boydell and Rugkåsa (2007) to apply the conceptual model, to another context and policy domain; which is essentially from human health to the health of a catchment. The model enables a focus on the way in which, with effective processes and under the conditions of a favourable context, catchment partnerships may impact on the conditions that improve the health of the catchment. The model proposes that if the partnership enables the partner organizations within to influence more effectively any of the determinants of catchment health, through the mechanisms identified, this will lead indirectly to the improved health of the catchment, see figure 1.

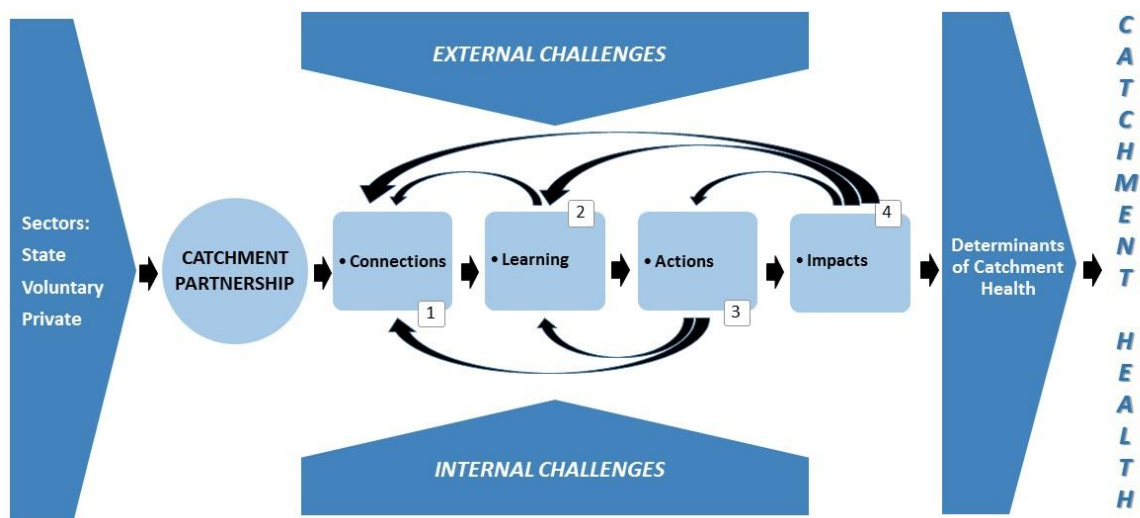


Figure 1: A model of the benefits of effective catchment partnership working (adapted from Boydell & Rugkåsa, 2007).

The purpose of catchment partnerships is to reverse the decline in catchment health, depicted at the right-hand side of the model. Catchment health is determined by a broad range of threats, pressures and problems, the RLT consultation exercise identifying climate change, physical modification, invasive non-native species, flooding, diffuse pollution and sewage. The consultations also identified that the above risks are protracted and exacerbated by a lack of: a Catchment Strategy; partnership working and education. Still on the right-hand side of the model, we have acknowledgement of the strength of the existing evidence of these risks and aggravating factors, that changes and actions on these conditions have the potential to reverse the decline of the catchment. Moving to the left-hand side of figure 1, the model also depicts how a variety of statutory agencies, voluntary and private sector organizations work with various environmental, social and economic policies or concerns for which they are accountable or have a particular interest. When the Government faces intractable, complex problems that it cannot address on their own, the governance response is often to form a partnership (Boydell and Rugkåsa, 2007).

The far left and right-hand side of the figure thus sets our context. We are particularly interested in what occurs in the four boxes, this sets out the theory on how the partnership creates the conditions for change. Following Boydell & Rugkåsa (2007) as an example illustrating the potential of such a model, once a partnership forms and begins to meet, partners connect with one another and begin to develop relationships, furthermore, they begin to connect one another to further networks outside their own partnership (box 1:

connections). Partners begin to get to know each other, to learn and understand more about each other's organizations, agendas and work, partners begin to develop trust and they may develop a more holistic understanding of their catchment's needs (box 2: learning). As a result of increased knowledge, understanding and trust, partners have the potential to begin to act differently: they may find the partnership enables find them to do their own jobs better, to meet their own organizations' agendas and also help others to meet theirs; they may find ways of tweaking resources or influencing others to achieve a broader goal (box 3: actions). Then ultimately (box 4: impacts), these developments from within the partnership can potentially lead to more effective projects, programmes, improved and realised opportunities for improvement of the health of the catchment. To note that the potential benefits of partnerships do not arise in a linear fashion, and hence the arrows attempt to indicate the highly iterative process.

The pathway described so far takes place under favourable conditions. The model also accounts for internal or external constraints or what we have captured as 'challenges'. Internal challenges represent those factors inherent to the partnership itself, including conflict between partners and the time-consuming nature of collaborative work. The literature identifies a whole host of barriers or challenges to partnership working and collaboration (e.g. Balloch & Taylor, 2001; Bauld et al., 2005; Glendinning, Powell, & Rummery, 2002; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). External challenges are factors that can impact on the ability of the partnership to achieve its goals, but are beyond the direct control of the partners. These may include, for example, changing and conflicting government policies, the availability of resources and in particular under the catchment context, the impacts of climate change.

The benefits identified in the first initial stab at the model are, by Boydell and Rugkåsa's (2007) admission generic, but enable a focus on the benefits for partners from all sectors which can "enable all of them to work more effectively, ultimately for the benefit of the communities they serve (p226). We will continue to add to the model, exploring through the literature and empirical research further relevant conditions for change. We have begun to observe the building of trust and commitment between partners, the improved targeting of resources, how partnership goals are being incorporated into individual corporate objectives. The next stage in this research is to further involve the partnership in the development of the model, to interview all partners in the partnership, in particular to further understand the critical role of the EVO partnership managers and their team and how they nurture relationships.

Local CaBA Partnership: Small but Significant Fish in the Civil Society Pond?

Catchment management was initially (and still predominantly) seen as a 'physical' need for the integration of water policy and management issues, but a 'collaborative approach' has more recently emerged as a key feature in the Government's policy approach to decision making and implementation in England. There have been calls to prioritise study to further our understanding of factors that will determine the longer term sustainability and success of catchment partnerships, particularly as they are a recent phenomenon in this important area of contemporary environmental governance (Benson et al., 2013, p756). Any specific acknowledgement of the role of what are termed 'non-government actors' within the water governance literature is however rare. The role of environmental voluntary organisations is acknowledged in the voluntary sector Civil Futures Report, but might lack a deeper understanding of their wealth of local knowledge and enthusiasm for improving many aspects of catchment management as well as their human communities. In this paper we have presented a first attempt at a conceptual model to set out how partnerships may be a mechanism for improving catchment health by creating the conditions which make change possible. In following Boydell and Rugkåsa (2007) we take on intention to "give currency to the 'soft' or intangible benefits of partnership working, which are by no means easy to achieve" (p227). We see a realist evaluation, in setting out and developing the theory on how a partnership creates the conditions for change, will help further our understanding of how our single CaBA partnership operates, and furthermore,

begin to understand the wider role of the national project in Civil Society Futures. It has been argued that if they were better targeted and supported, EVOs could act as genuine lynchpin actors in the England's water governance system and present potentially transformative opportunities for sustainable water management (Robins et al, 2017). Our model is stated to work 'under favourable conditions', and explicitly takes into account the complexities of the environment into account where the partnership is operating, it enables us to look at the 'ecosystem' which shapes, influences and supports the operation of civil society. The Government has placed itself in the role of helping to bring together the resources, policies and people who can solve the complex challenges facing society together (Government, 2018). The model allows us the potential to critically evaluate what Civil Society Futures (2018) terms a blurring of boundaries between the state and civil society, with shared programmes of work and how the actions of government shape the environment within which civil society works.

As the Civil Society Futures Report (2018) states, we need to recognise when assessing funding proposals "that building social capital, alongside achieving social change, requires support, engagement and long-term trust", we need to ensure "that the costs of the time and effort needed for trust, relationship building and connection are included in funding for projects" and ultimately that we need to "find ways to measure trust and reflect it in how we evaluate success" (p96).

Acknowledgements

The authors would particularly like to thank the Trust and their partners for the discussions that have enabled our thinking to date.

References

- BENSON, D., FRITSCH, O., COOK, H. & SCHMID, M. 2014. Evaluating participation in WFD river basin management in England and Wales: Processes, communities, outputs and outcomes. *Land Use Policy*, 38, 213-222.
- BOYDELL, L. R. & RUGKÅSA, J. 2007. Benefits of working in partnership: A model. *Critical Public Health*, 17, 217-228.
- ENVIRONMENT AGENCY. 2016. A Catchment Partnerships Action Fund, Environment Agency Report (2015-16).
- CIVIL SOCIETY FUTURES. 2018. Civil Society in England: Its current state and future opportunity.
- HM GOVERNMENT. 2018. Civil Society Strategy: building a future that works for everyone. London.
- JACKLIN-JARVIS, C. & POTTER, K. 2018. A tale of two states? A comparative study of cross-sector collaboration in children's services and flood risk management. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 9, 89-97.
- JEFFARES, S. & DICKINSON, H. 2016. Evaluating collaboration: The creation of an online tool employing Q methodology. *Evaluation*, 22, 91-107.
- KIRSOP-TAYLOR, N. 2019. Surviving tough times: an investigation into environmental voluntary sector organisations under austerity. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 10, 19-37.
- LAMIE, J. & BALL, R. 2010. Evaluation of Partnership Working within a Community Planning Context. *Local Government Studies*, 36, 109-127.

POTTER, K. & JACKLIN-JARVIS, C. 2018. Brokering relationships with the state: what new understandings can 'environmental catchment VOs' filter from the social welfare domain? The Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference, London, 2018.

ROBSON, C. 2000. Small-scale evaluation : principles and practice, Thousand Oaks, Thousand Oaks : Sage Publications.

WATSON, N. 2014. IWRM in England: bridging the gap between top-down and bottom-up implementation. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 30, 445-459.

WATSON, N. 2013. Organisational Understandings and Commitments for Collaborative Catchment Management: A Survey of Local Initiatives. DEFRA PROJECT WT0997.