8:0 Conclusions: The Partnership Principle in Practice

8.1 Overall

The Partnership Principle, one of the four principles of the Structural Funds, was first introduced in 1988 and further strengthened in 1993.

This evaluation has shown that partnership, although a relatively recent innovation, has already become deeply embedded in all stages of Structural Fund programming.

There are major differences in partnership practice and consequences between different Structural Fund Objectives and Initiatives. This is especially so between territorial and sectoral funds on the one hand and Objectives 3 and 4 on the other. However, across all Funds an extension of partnership can be seen to include more socio-economic actors and so called horizontal partners and an extension of the roles and activities of partners in terms of Structural Fund programming tasks.

Partnership itself has developed from being a statutory relationship between the Commission and the Member State, to a wider formal mechanism for programme monitoring involving social and other sectoral or regional partners in the form of the Monitoring Committee. It is now a complex nexus of strategic and operational relationships concerned with programme development, programme management and the substantive developmental tasks of programmes themselves. Partnership in many programmes and initiatives has emerged as not only a formal arrangement for consultation, co-ordination and decision making at each of the programming stages as envisaged in the Structural Fund Regulation, but also as a significant capacity for joint multi-organisational action and operations in specific policy areas, sectors, regions and localities. Further, this capacity now often extends well beyond the remit of Structural Fund activities and is in many instances a key resource for regional and local development and for innovations in social policy.

There are significant differences in the participation of partners at different stages in the programming cycle with a more important role for more partners at the planning and project selection stage, a variable role for different partners for various operational tasks, and a less developed role for the full formal partnership in terms of monitoring and evaluation.

The expansion and consolidation of partnership that this evaluation has demonstrated is underpinned by a number of positive benefits widely attributed to the involvement of partners. These benefits include:

- greater effectiveness in terms of programme development and monitoring,
- more effective project selection,
• greater legitimacy and transparency for decisions once taken,
• greater commitment and ownership of Structural Fund outputs,
• opportunities for reinforcing innovation and learning across institutional boundaries and sometimes, given overlapping memberships of partnerships, across partnership boundaries, and
• development of institutional capacity at sectoral and territorial levels.

A number of factors have been identified which have contributed to the shaping of partnership as it has evolved across different Member States. These include:

• The importance of prior experience of partnership working, either within Structural Funds or in preceding national programmes as a basis for mature Structural Fund partnerships.

• The need for Structural Fund partnerships in each Member State to find their own accommodation with national institutional, administrative and cultural traditions.

• The growth of regionalisation, decentralisation and deconcentration across the European Union which has both reinforced more inclusive partnerships and been itself reinforced by the Partnership Principle.

• The role of Commission officials as animators and regulators at key strategic points in the programming cycle – not all of which are exclusively at the planning and programming stage.

It has been found that

• The broadening of partnership to include partners such as NGOs and municipalities enhances the effectiveness of programmes.

• Appropriate secretariat and technical support enhances the performance of partnerships.

• Clear distinctions between strategic and operational roles for different partners enhances programme coherence.

It has also been clarified that there is no necessary trade off between the inclusiveness of partnerships and the efficiency of partnerships.
The development of the partnership principle is uneven across Member States and across programmes. In a significant number of cases there is scope for improvement in:

- Monitoring Committee functioning,
- transparency of partnership functioning,
- inclusiveness of partnership,
- technical support for participating partners,
- partnership at the time of programme development, and
- partnership at the time of evaluation.

The following sub-sections present conclusions in some more detail under the headings of Context, Effects, Participation, The Member States, The Commission, Operation, Social Partners, NGOs, municipalities and beneficiaries, Organisational forms, Innovation, Development and Complexity and overlap.

8.2 Context

1. The specific institutional history of the individual Member State (in a specific mediating institutional culture) is one of the main factors in determining actual programme partnership forms.

2. Partnership is situated in a context of decentralisation. This process of decentralisation is a feature which both conditions partnership and is conditioned by the overlaying of the partnership phenomenon onto pre-existing institutional structures. Implementation of the ‘partnership principle’ has effectively required some member states to ‘invent’ a regional tier of government. The nature of this regional tier varies enormously and includes regionalisation of central government, regional co-ordination of local government, new regional institutions or developing previously weak regional institutions.

A second process of devolution is also observable - what can be termed, deconcentration. This process entails the decentralisation of powers and activities from the centre but within the control of the central state. In particular, deconcentration appears common-place in the ESF in different countries in the Union.

Deconcentration and decentralisation has entailed not only including new partners and new types of partners but has altered the balance of influence between types of partners.
8.3 Effects

3. The Structural Fund Regulation has had significant effects on institutional reform and capacity building in all Member States, and particularly where the Regulation could be positively associated with broader currents of ‘modernisation’ and where the need to be ‘European’/to join ‘Europe’ was deployed as a political factor within the polity.

4. The partnership form of programme governance increases Structural Fund visibility.

5. Partnership can make a contribution to the value added of programmes but does not necessarily do so.

8.4 Participation

6. The contribution of the Social Partners to programme partnerships is limited for reasons of relevance and capacity.

7. The Community’s municipalities are more often excluded from Structural Fund partnerships than included.

8. The Community’s NGOs are largely absent from Structural Fund partnerships (with a number of positive exceptions under the ESF).

9. A progressive expansion of the partnership principle over time can be empirically observed from:

   Commission / Member State
   to Commission / Member State / Region
   to Commission / Member State / Region / Social Partners.

   Such a progression and the maintenance of the arrangements achieved so far, may depend on the continuing presence of the Commission in the partnership on a ‘day to day’ basis. That is to say, the Commission’s presence in operational partnerships has a strategic ‘structuring’ effect on partnership composition and behaviour.

8.5 The Member States

10. The Member States continue to dominate and delimit partnership functioning through their key roles in both negotiating programme content and in determining the extent of the horizontal partnership, and through their habitual roles of providing secretariats and acting as managing authorities.
11. Increasingly, despite initial reservations and resistance, many Member States are welcoming, encouraging or initiating more extensive and inclusive partnership strategies particularly as regards their (sometimes new found) relations with regional partners and social partners.

12. The development of the partnership principle is uneven across Member States and across programmes. In most countries there is scope for substantial improvements in inclusiveness of partnership; transparency of partnership functioning; Monitoring Committee functioning; technical support for participating partners; partnership at the time of programme development; and partnership at the time of evaluation.

8.6 The Commission

13. The Commission plays a valuable strategic role as a provider of guidance, knowledge and advice at Monitoring Committees above and beyond its formal role as a partner. It is important to recognise that a strategic input can be made at different points in the programming cycle.

14. The Commission on occasion plays an 'animation' and 'dialectical' role as an external protagonist helping 'internal' partners to form and present a coherent position.

15. Consistency of approach to partnership on the Commission side and thus greater reliability and predictability for the other partners can be enhanced by even greater co-ordination between desk officers and across Directorates.

8.7 Operation

16. Inclusiveness in partnership arrangements is most needed, and most desired, at the (pre-negotiation) programme development stage. Often what is required at this stage is extensive consultation rather than a more formal arrangement.

17. Effective/successful programme management (by whatever criteria might be used) requires a much more differentiated conception of the roles of partners for different classes of decision.

15. Inclusiveness is not usually at the expense of efficiency. Inclusiveness typically increases efficiency, for example in the speedier selection of better quality funded projects.

16. Partnership can and is required to operate through many different modes including consultation, negotiation, co-option, co-operation and selective inclusion at different programme stages.
17. Partners may become ‘legitimate’ through custom, statute or performance.

18. Formal partnerships improve the transparency of decision making but ‘informal’ partnership continues to dominate decision making in many instances.

19. For operational purposes, partners are probably better understood as having differing spheres and competencies rather than as being ‘vertical’ or ‘horizontal’.

8.8 Social partners, NGOs, municipalities and beneficiaries

20. Partnership membership can place a considerable, and sometimes unwelcome, burden of participation on certain classes of partners such as Social Partners. This is a particular problem in smaller or less strategic programmes where the relationship between input and return is weak.

21. As progress is made in incorporating municipalities and NGOs into partnership structures, the challenge remains in the context of social exclusion to incorporate representation of ultimate beneficiaries in partnership arrangements.

22. The presence of programme beneficiaries and co-funders in partnerships while increasing programme ‘fit’ can give rise to situations of conflict of interest and even to ‘pork barrel’ outcomes but having the involvement of ultimate beneficiaries can also be a strength within partnership.

8.9 Organisational forms

23. Monitoring Committees are not necessarily partnerships and in the absence of additional partnership processes they can be simply a reification of the partnership idea. (Monitoring Committees are not necessarily committees either, they are often assemblies.) Further, over large Monitoring Committees tend to reflect or necessitate effective decision making in informal pre-Monitoring Committees caucuses.

24. Relationships between ‘secretariats’ and Monitoring Committees are often unsatisfactory in that the secretariat which may in theory be responsible to the Monitoring Committees is often in practice provided by the dominant (state) partner, who may also be the official or de facto ‘managing authority’.

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8.10 Innovation

25. There may be tension between smooth programme fund absorption and programme innovation, including innovations in the management of programme (and by implication innovative programme partnership arrangements) if innovation is not operationally well-prepared for.

26. Whilst partnerships can be a force for innovation they can also reinforce institutional inertia, however even long established partnerships tend to be recast by the specific partnership requirements of the Structural Funds.

27. The overlapping institutional membership of different partnerships provides the basis for the transfer of innovation in partnership practice between programmes over time.

8.11 Development

28. Partnership requires partnership capacity and this can only be developed incrementally and over time.

29. Effective/successful partnerships (by whatever criteria might be used) require animation, steering and leadership.

30. Single quasi-autonomous programme management organisations can provide the focus and operational coherence which allows partnerships to work effectively.

31. Evaluation has an important contribution to make to programme reflexivity and partnership effectiveness, yet evaluation is still weaker and more disconnected from programme decision making and partners' concerns than it might be. Partners' commitment to evaluation is usually related to the extent to which it is seen as being related to some benefit for themselves.

32. There is no finite set of partnership options for Member States to choose among. Each Member State needs to develop and agree its own national partnership strategy which reflects and embodies the principles laid out in the (reformed) Regulation, the substantive content of the Structural Fund Objectives and Initiatives, and which addresses the deficits in the current national arrangements while acknowledging national realities.

33. The short ‘lead times’ envisaged for programme formation under the implementation of the reformed Structural Fund Regulation, as with short lead times in the past associated with Member State accession to the Community, may make effective partnership in programme design difficult.
### 8.12 Complexity and overlap

34. Procedural complexity is inevitable in a multi-faceted intervention such as the Structural Funds, but partnership of itself does not necessarily add to, nor alleviate this problem.

35. The Structural Funds can (in theory) lead to institutional proliferation and delay but (in practice) tends only occasionally to cause some transitional confusion over inter-institutional boundaries and roles. Partnerships can help reduce delay and complexity.

36. Inflexibility in inter-programme boundaries leads to less effective partnerships and sub-optimal Structural Fund outcomes - the programme may not define the appropriate partnership unit. In general, any progress towards the principle of ‘one programme per territory’ is to be welcomed.