

Article

PARTNERSHIP PROBLEMS: ANALYSIS AND RE-DESIGN

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Abstract

Multi-agency partnership working is becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly within and between the public and voluntary sectors. However, it is widely accepted that while this method of working brings the prospect of benefits, it also has the potential to be problematic. This paper looks at the difficulties experienced by one particular partnership and describes how the partnership used insight into the effectiveness of its structures and processes, to make changes to its design. The approach used to provide this insight was an application of the Systems Failures Method. This method is explained briefly in the paper and a summary of its application in this context is also given. Links are drawn with research work on partnerships in other contexts, and proposals are made about how the Systems Failures Method could be used at different stages of a partnership's life in order to evaluate its design and monitor and improve its methods of working and its effectiveness.

Keywords

partnerships; Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships; Systems Failures Method; Formal System Model; organizational re-design

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Introduction

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (Stationery Office, 1998), and the Crime Reduction Strategy for England and Wales that followed it in 1999 (Home Office, 1999), stressed the importance of local organizations working in partnership with Local Authorities and the Police to tackle the causes of crime. The legislation led to representatives from the Police Service, Local Authorities and other bodies such as NHS trusts, the Fire and Rescue Service, the Probation Service, Youth Offending Teams, Drug Action Teams and Local Criminal Justice Boards being brought together to form 354 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) across England and 22 Community Safety Partnerships in Wales. Crime Reduction Directors in the 10 Regional Government Offices in England were required to scrutinize and support the performance of each local CDRP.

Between 1999 and 2005, the Home Office awarded grants totalling £926.8 million to fund CDRP crime reduction initiatives. A report on crime reduction (National Audit Office, 2004) pointed to a 39% decrease in the number of crimes reported through the British Crime Survey between 1995 and 2003–2004, and credited much of that success to projects delivered by CDRPs. One example given was an initiative in Blackpool, Lancashire, where 140 prolific offenders were targeted and given treatment and support to overcome their drug problems. An evaluation of the scheme estimated that work with the first 27 offenders had prevented 262 crimes and delivered a net financial saving of £200,430. However, both the National Audit Office publication and another major government report (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2005) concluded that CDRPs could have achieved even better results. In keeping with their remits, both reports paid particular attention to difficulties related to funding arrangements and administrative costs, but they had other criticisms as well. For example, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (pp 5–6) observed that:

... fewer than half of the Partnerships consider that their work has contributed to a measurable reduction in crime.

The Home Office created a considerable administrative burden for Partnerships ...

The National Audit Office also reported dissatisfaction on the part of the CDRPs themselves (e.g., they found that 33% of CDRPs thought they did not receive enough effective feedback from their regional Home Office and 76% said projects were delayed because it was difficult to recruit staff) and commented on difficulties associated with the level of contribution of different Partner agencies. They said (National Audit Office, *op. cit.*, p 9):

The involvement of Partner agencies is critical to Partnerships having the information and skills to design and run crime reduction initiatives. Divisional

Police Commanders and the Chairs of Partnerships typically rated their local Probation Service and local Health Service as less active than other key statutory Partner agencies due to resource constraints and competing priorities.

In suggesting how CDRPs could be made more effective, the NAO and the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts stressed the need to simplify funding and administration and encourage better working between partnerships. The NAO also pointed out that “Crime reduction projects are more likely to be successful when there is commitment and synergy within a Partnership” (National Audit Office, *op. cit.*, p 9) and identified, as one of the items on a list of “ten good practices the Home Office could use to assess partnerships’ plans”, that the structure of a CDRP should be defined and the lead roles assigned by expertise and skills. However, in considering individual partnerships the reports concentrated on what the partnerships should do rather than looking at how they are designed and how they operate. By contrast, this paper focuses on CDRPs at the individual partnership level and places particular emphasis on the design and internal workings of a single CDRP.

The partnership

The CDRP, the subject of this paper, was organized in two tiers. It had a Partnership Board made up of lead officers from the statutory and voluntary partners and an Implementation Group that oversaw the day-to-day operation of the partnership and its sub-groups. Several of the statutory responsibilities of the board were undertaken at the lower level, one example being the planning and oversight of the 3-yearly audit of crime, disorder and drugs in the area. The partnership had recently experienced a couple of changes. First, the small unitary authority in which it was located had seen a change of political control and the election of a number of councillors who were serving for the first time. Secondly, the local Drugs Action Team (DAT) and the Youth Offending Service (YOS) had been integrated into the partnership. As a result of these changes, a number of new people had joined the Partnership Board.

During the early part of 2004, the area for which the CDRP was responsible experienced sharp rises in domestic burglary rates and the partnership saw its position within the performance rankings for CDRPs decline. At the end of 2002–2003, when CDRPs were ranked according to the rate per 1,000 population of vehicle crime, domestic burglary and robbery, the partnership was only just inside the top quartile that contained the 94 partnerships with the highest rates of crime. However, by the end of 2003–2004 it had risen by 29 places and the rise continued in the first-quarter of 2004–2005. Other causes for concern about the partnership’s performance were also raised; spending plans and performance monitoring reports failed to arrive on time and prepa-

rations for undertaking the statutory 3-yearly crime and drugs audit lagged behind those of the rest of the region.

These deteriorations in performance and level of compliance prompted attention from Central Government and the Crime Reduction Director in the Regional Government Office. Initial support took the form of assistance with the use of the standard self-assessment approach that was recommended for partnership use (see Wilson and Charlton, 1997; Glendinning *et al*, 2002; and Home Office, 2003). This approach focussed on particular elements, such as leadership, shared vision, trust and structures that enable programme and performance management to occur. Although valuable evidence was collected by the partnership during this exercise, this approach looked at individual aspects of the partnership rather than viewing it as a set of interconnected parts and the outcomes were reported to be of limited use.

The Crime Reduction Team at Regional Government level then offered to provide the CDRP with developmental assistance to resolve its problems and it is the form and consequences of this assistance that are reported in this paper.

Assisting the partnership to address its problems

Notwithstanding research into the workings of partnerships in general such as Wildridge *et al* (2004), Huxham and Vangen (2000), Banks (2002), Sullivan and Skelcher (2002), Vangen and Huxham (2003) and Wilson and Charlton (1997), as well as the growing literature on partnership problems in crime prevention and crime reduction (see, e.g., Hughes and McLaughlin, 2003; Hughes, 2004; Tilley, 2005; Burnett and Appleton, 2004), the authors' aim was to test out the applicability of an approach that was holistic and took the concept of failure as its starting point. The Systems Failures Method (Fortune and Peters, 1995, 2005) is a systemic method for the analysis of failures and uses the notion of system (as developed by, *inter alia*, Bertalanffy, 1962, Churchman, 1968; Emery, 1969) and systems concepts such as boundary, communication, control, emergence, environment, hierarchy, structure and process, goal-seeking, purposive and purposeful, and the like (see Ackoff, 1971) to investigate situations that have, in the eyes of some, at least, been labelled as failures or potential failures. Its provenance is therefore rooted in systems engineering (e.g., Jenkins, 1969) but it has been applied in a wide variety of organizational settings such as the design of the national curriculum for science (Fortune *et al*, 1993), policing of major incidents (Pearce and Fortune, 1995) and a government agency introducing support for new legislation (Fortune and White, 2006).

A brief history of the development of the Systems Failures Method can be found in Fortune and Peters (2001). It encourages consideration of the failure

and its context in terms of the system(s) from which the failure is perceived to have emerged, and, very importantly, places as much emphasis on the relations between subsystems and components as it does on the subsystems and components themselves. The criticisms that were originally levelled against (that it is positivist (Mitev, 2000), underplays the importance of power in organizations (Mansell, 1993) and “does not have a well worked out theory of subjectivity” (Mansell, 1996, p 503)) primarily stem from its origins in General Systems Theory.

The method has two key features:

- conceptualization and modelling of a situation as a system(s) and
- comparison of that system(s), first with a model of a robust system that is capable of purposeful activity without failure and subsequently with other models based on typical failures.

The stages of the method are shown in Table 1.

The Formal System Model (FSM) that appears at Stage 4 represents a robust system that is capable of purposeful activity without failure. It is central to the whole approach and is shown in Figure 1. In many senses it represents an ideal, and in effect it can be used as a blueprint to determine the extent to which its components, links and other features are present in a systemic representation of the situation being investigated. The Formal System itself com-

Table 1 Stages of the Systems Failures Method

| | | |
|---------|--|--|
| Stage 1 | Pre-analysis | Definition of the viewpoints and perspectives from which the study is being carried out and examination of the situation from the various viewpoints that have been identified as important. |
| Stage 2 | Identification of significant problems and/or failure(s) | More precise specification of the problems in accordance with the outcomes of Stage 1 and structuring of relevant aspects of the situation into a range of possible systems. |
| Stage 3 | System selection | Selection of system(s) to be carried forward to Stage 4. (For the purposes of analysis, the problems are regarded as the outputs of the selected system(s).) |
| Stage 4 | System modelling | Representation of the system using the Formal System Model (FSM) format. |
| Stage 5 | Comparison | Comparison between the output of Stage 4 and the FSM. |
| Stage 6 | Further analysis | Further investigation of the discrepancies between the systems representation of the situation and the FSM. The primary tools are other system-related models concerned with control and communication and particular attention is paid to the human aspects of the situation. |
| Stage 7 | Synthesis | Remodelling of the system at various key levels. |

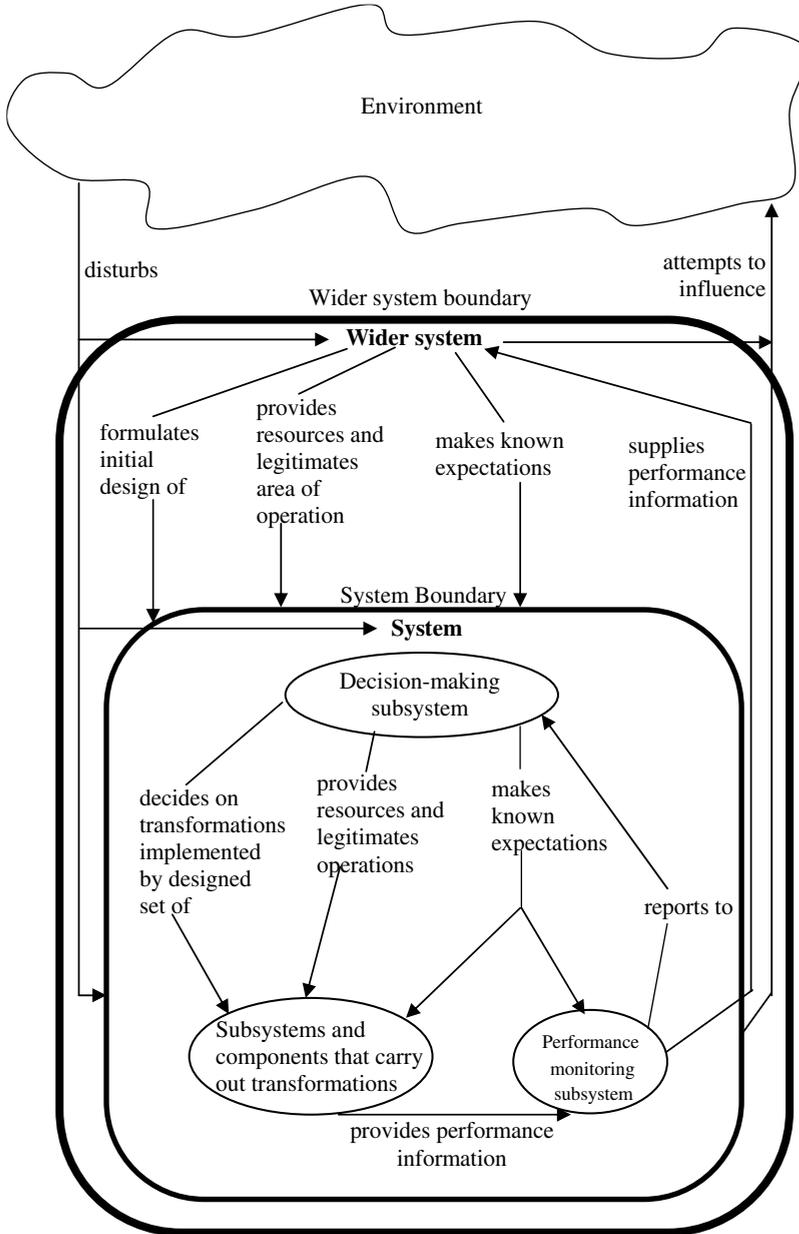


Figure 1 The FSM.

prises a decision-making sub-system, a performance-monitoring sub-system and a set of sub-systems and elements that carry out the tasks of the system and thus effect its transformations by converting inputs into outputs. It also incorporates other features: a continuous purpose or mission; a degree of con-

nectivity between the components; an environment with which the system interacts; boundaries separating the system from its wider system and the wider system from the environment; resources; and some guarantee of continuity. Because of the hierarchical nature of the model, each of its sub-systems can also be perceived as a Formal System each with its own decision-making, performance-monitoring and transformation-effecting components, and in a complex situation it is often necessary to conduct analyses at these various levels.

Using the Systems Failures Method

Conceptualization and modelling of the situation as a system

The information about the CDPR that was needed to inform the conceptualization process was gathered in a number of ways and from a variety of sources. Interviews were conducted with individual members of the partnership, focus group meetings were held and a rigorous analysis of the minutes of partnership meetings was conducted in order to shed light on its decision-making processes. Structural data about the partnership were also gathered. All of this information was used to build a representation of the partnership as a system and to produce diagrammatic representations of its structure and processes. One example is the map of the Partnership System shown in Figure 2.

Comparison of that system with the FSM

Following conceptualization, the next stage of the Systems Failures Method involves taking the description of the situation in system terms and assembling that understanding into a single model of the system within its environment (see Figure 3). It is this model which is then interrogated to see how it compares with an idealized model of a robust system. This interrogation takes the form of a comparison of two models to determine the existence and form of the various component parts of the system and the presence and nature of the linkages and relationships between the system and the wider system and between the wider system and its environment. For example, in this case there were several examples of ambiguity in the accountability linkages.

The key findings from these comparisons were:

- No performance management sub-system could be identified in the Partnership System. Any performance management that was carried out was undertaken by the constituent members of the partnership in an *ad hoc* way. Several members felt that when performance data were presented to the partnership as a whole insufficient time was allowed to discuss the data and often no serious attempt was made to make sense of them in relation to external expectations or targets that had been set. However, this perception was not universally held; some of the longer standing members of the part-

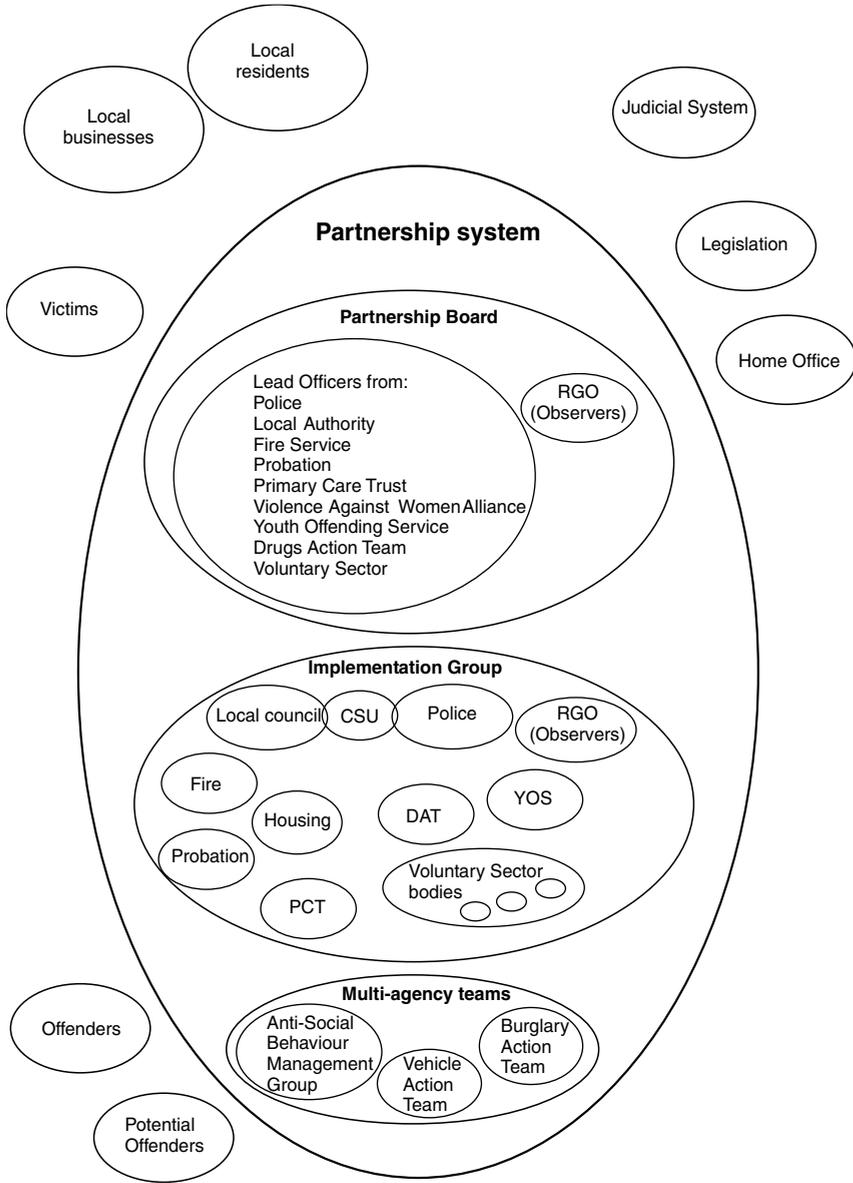


Figure 2 Systems map of the partnership system. CSU – Community Safety Unit; DAT – Drugs Action Team; PCT – Primary Care Trust; RGO – Regional Government Office; VAWA – Violence Against Women Alliance; YOS – Youth Offending Service.

nership who belonged to those agencies with perceived high influence (mainly the police and local council) were relatively satisfied with current processes.

- Accountability links were partial and unclear. Some of the sub-groups responsible for delivery of the action plan (mostly those that had joined the

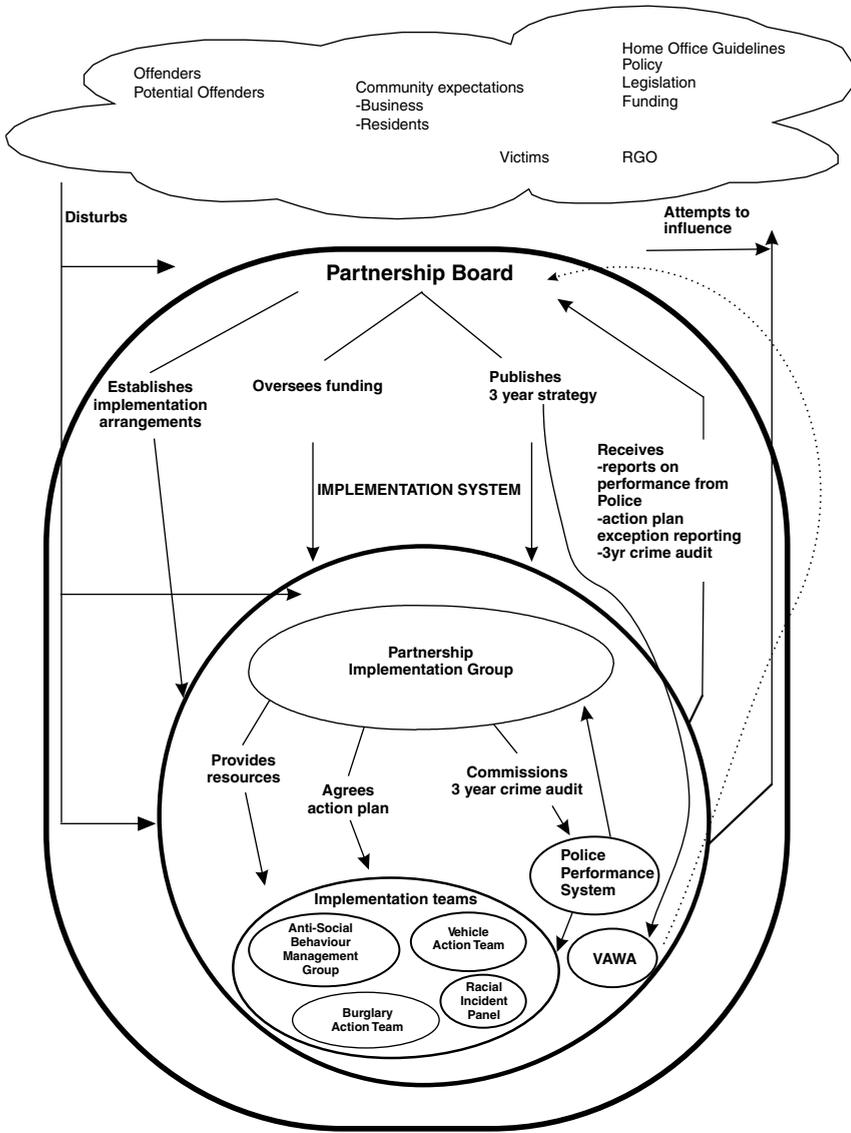


Figure 3 The partnership system in the format of the FSM.

partnership after the initial structure had been agreed) were linked directly to the Partnership Board (wider system) and so information about activities and their levels of performance was not brought to the Implementation Group (decision making sub-system).

- Resource provision was another area where there were mismatches between the FSM and the situation. While responsibility for delivery was delegated to the Implementation Group, the level of delegated authority over resources

and decision-making powers was unclear. This in turn made it difficult for the Implementation Group to clarify its own expectations of the sub-groups responsible for delivery, especially in the case of those that reported directly to the Partnership Board. Here too there were different views about the effectiveness of accountability processes as two quotes from members of the same group demonstrate:

“Confusing. We do not ever reach an end position; unclear who has responsibilities and who is taking action... [we] do not know if targets are met, and [we] did not know who to ask about it”.

Yet,

“[I] was made aware in implementation group, by national statistics, that performance was poor”.

In order to shed more light on the findings from the comparison, further analysis was undertaken. This focussed particularly on communication pathways and group behaviour.

Most of the communication difficulties appeared to stem from the increasing size and complexity of the partnership. The integration of the Drugs Action Team (DAT) and the Youth Offending Service (YOS) into the partnership had not only increased the number of “packets” of communication to be moved around the partnership but had also increased the knowledge base required by those representing these two groups in order to be able to engage effectively in debates and decision making processes. This need to acquire knowledge was exacerbated for anyone new to the partnership as they also had to familiarize themselves with the whole agenda. Dissatisfaction in this area was expressed in interviews in two ways: some participants felt that those who worked as professionals in crime reduction “blinded them with science” in order to achieve agreement to their requests, while some others who were seeking support from the partnership reported feeling abandoned because no one understood their fields of work.

“don’t know them well enough to know if they are experts or not”

“not sure if it is due to the officers reporting being viewed as experts”

“debate is inhibited about performance due to lack of knowledge, you can blind people by science”

Another issue that was raised was the amount of paperwork. This was of particular concern to partnership members from the voluntary sector. The papers

for meetings, which sometimes extended to over 50 pages, were distributed electronically. The cost of printing had to be met by the recipients and this caused problems when budgets were tight. Others commented that when faced with such a mass of paperwork they tended to only read that with which they were already familiar and thus failed to gain new knowledge. Several interviewees suggested that instead of whole documents, single-page summaries should be circulated, as had happened in the past when the partnership was smaller.

“We do not have the same capacity as statutory organisations to do things – we do not have the resources/funding and capacity”

“Lots of e-mails. No one to oversee and filter information”

“Many bits of paper either don’t go out or are not read”

The Team Behaviour Paradigm (Stewart, 1991), which describes the characteristics of teams at various stages of development, was used to examine further the significance of the multiple perspectives expressed by members of strategic and operational groups within the partnership. It revealed useful insights about the operation of the partnership. Some of the members of the partnership seemed to operate as a team within a team. Indeed, it appeared that many of the original partners were exhibiting some of the features of Groupthink (Janis, 1982) whereby a group begins to develop a clan type of operation with strong links and ties to other members of the group to the point where it becomes reluctant to recognize outside influence or advice. If the views of new members of the group run counter to the prevailing culture of the group it becomes increasingly more difficult for them to penetrate the “inner circle”. Where the partnership was concerned, this tended to manifest itself when discussions went against the prevailing view that the partnership was meeting its objectives; evidence was either played down or explained away as indicating only a temporary problem.

“We don’t commission [remedial] actions when reports are adverse”

“There is lots of spin put on the reporting. The poor performance last year was not acknowledged until after the year end”, [if targets are not met], “the discussion is turned away from the subject”

Newer members exhibited the characteristics of anomie which Durkheim (1952) identified as occurring when the ties holding society together are weakened, broken, non-existent or, not regular enough to allow norms to be maintained or established. According to Stewart (*op. cit.*, p 378), these characteristics are often associated with newly formed teams from different cultural backgrounds or even different parts of the same organization, namely:

There is a degree of uncertainty as to exactly what they are meant to be doing and the scope of their authority. The level of communication of team members with previous formal and informal networks is high, showing a propensity to discuss previous activities. There is a reluctance to let drop past “favoured” activities and a possible low commitment to, or understanding of, the new tasks. There is not yet a full identification with the team, nor an understanding of how this new appointment may serve individual member’s long term needs.

All of these symptoms existed to some degree within the partnership. A lack of norms led to dissatisfaction, a sense of hopelessness and conflict. Longer-standing partners felt that there was a lack of commitment from newer partners, while newer partners felt their contributions and knowledge was not valued. It was encouraging that there was a willingness to overcome these difficulties but perhaps because of the problems discussed in the previous section the participants has been unable to find a mechanism for doing so. [A separate analysis of the minutes of partnership meetings supported the views expressed during the interviews.]

From analysis to re-design and improvement

The mechanism for moving from analysis and understanding of the shortcomings of the current arrangements to proposals for re-design and improvement centred around discussions with key stakeholders and the development of a future model for the partnership which would (in systems terms) correct some for the deficiencies in the previous arrangements. This revised model (Figure 4) aimed to incorporate changes in the design of organizational structures, relationships and ways of working. It was a means of translating into concrete terms proposals that, if successfully implemented, would stand up well in comparison with the FSM. The underlying assumption was that systemically sound structures, processes and inter-relationships would increase the chances that this CDRP would operate successfully in the future.

The key features of the potential changes that were suggested by the analysis were as follows:

- Formation of a single group to carry out the tasks associated with performance measurement, monitoring and review, and to undertake the audits of activities that are required and to provide analysis.
- Chairs of all task groups to sit on the management group.
- Chair of the Management Group to provide an exception report to the leadership group identifying particularly good or unsatisfactory performance. Such a report would require the chair of the group responsible for the area of work highlighted to provide a more detailed account of performance.
- Leadership group to require chairs of task groups, and others with a lead role for policy, to provide information on significant policy changes and

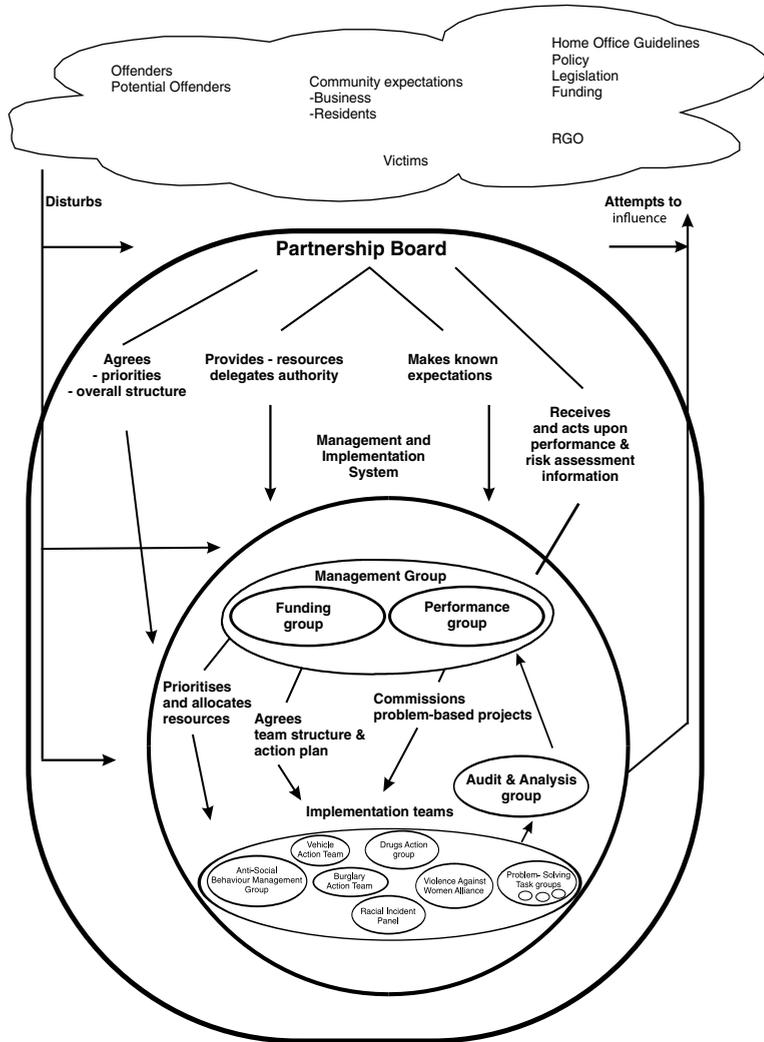


Figure 4 Model for a more successful partnership.

request the opportunity to seek the leadership group’s support where barriers to progress could not be resolved by the management group.

- Management group to commission *ad hoc* time-limited task groups to tackle emerging problems that crossed the boundaries of two or more existing teams.
- Terms of reference that clearly articulate roles, responsibilities and accountabilities to be drawn up for each group.

Following directly from the discussion of these recommendations within the partnership, a number of specific changes were made:

- The Implementation Group (under the new name of Management Group) was strengthened by new terms of reference and the creation of a performance sub-group.
- Accountability arrangements within the partnership were clarified and made explicit, particularly (following in-depth discussions with the relevant managers) to ensure that groups such as the Drugs Action Team and Youth Offending Service were adequately supported.
- An improved audit and reporting structure was put in place.

Other more detailed changes were made and, as would be expected, the involvement in the analysis process and the consideration of its results led to more subtle changes to the processes and behaviours within the partnership.

It is impossible to separate out changes that result from the process of an intervention such as this from the particular characteristics of the approach and the other factors at play at the time. However it is worth noting that the performance of the partnership against its crime reduction targets did improve markedly in the period following the work: Both its performance in absolute terms and relative to its peers improved significantly with its league position improving by over 20 places between March 2004 and March 2006, an improvement of over 40 places from the lowest position it reached.

Relationship to other work

Much of the training and support previously provided to this CDRPs has come in the form of “tool-kits”, the helpfulness of which was queried by some partnership members. Hughes (2004) has already questioned whether the “tool kits” and other “off the shelf” packages can be effectively utilized for emulation or evaluation when local contexts vary widely and Hughes and Gilling (2004) question whether CDRPs are able to be creative, or properly evaluate “what works” given the top-down approach adopted by central government. Hughes’ (*op. cit.*) comments arise in part from his critique of Garland’s (2001) aspiration to develop a theory of crime control which would encompass both partnership activity and governance. Hughes sees this idea as problematic in the context of the greater devolution of governance to regional and local levels. It would be presumptuous to comment on this debate on the basis of one study, but the authors are of the view that an understanding of the governance arrangements forms a key element of a systemic understanding of the context within which a CDRP operates and is necessary for a partnership to be more effective or indeed to explain the reasons that it cannot be more effective.

Looking further afield to partnership working in other contexts, much of the earlier research on the special challenges that partnerships face substantiates the findings of the work reported here and vice versa. For example, Sullivan and Skelcher (2002, p 7) identified a number of obstacles to partner-

ship working. These are broadly divided into political, operational and financial barriers including: lack of resources to support collaboration, slow progress towards goals, lack of inclusivity and domination of the agenda by some partners.

To this list, an Audit Commission report (Audit Commission, 2002, p 14) added other difficulties such as lack of focus, poor information sharing and weak performance systems. Inappropriate performance frameworks and measures are also reported to lead to perverse incentives and failure to demonstrate whether the partnership has added value to the contributions of individual members (see Wilson and Charlton, 1997; Banks, 2002).

Other work, which is also supported by the findings here, for example, the extensive work on collaborative leadership by Vangen and Huxham (2003) has identified key challenges for partnerships generally such as the difficulty of agreeing collaborative goals given the absence of a traditional hierarchy and accountability structure and, in some cases, a lack of clarity about who the partners are. Wildridge *et al* (2004) in their review of the literature on partnership working also concluded that ambiguous boundaries of operation result in ineffective partnerships. Although CDRPs are formally constituted bodies where membership and boundaries should theoretically be clear, this research showed up the impact of the changing membership and hence the fluidity of the boundaries with time.

Wildridge *et al* (2004) also came to the conclusion that the effectiveness of partnerships is further compounded where individual agencies are unable to see benefits to themselves. Although this apparent absence of demonstrable benefits for all individual partnership members did not surface as a significant issue in this case, it is potentially important in circumstances (such as CDRPs) where the reason for the partners to come together is a statutory requirement rather than in response to a locally identified need (see Banks, 2002, pp 6–7).

Implications and conclusion

The potential impact of this study can be viewed at different levels. At its most basic the Systems Failures Method provided a useful framework within which a CDRP saw its own workings in a new way and gained insights that helped it to improve its effectiveness. If this experience is replicated elsewhere then for people working in an existing partnership, the Systems Failures Method potentially provides a conceptual framework within which partners can individually and collectively locate difficulties and understand their role and their internal and external relationships. The level of abstraction potentially allows partners to see specific weaknesses in structures and processes irrespective of whether they are inherent in the way such partnerships have been created or they are linked to particular personalities and/or local circumstances.

More generally, Crime and Disorder Partnerships share the strengths and the weaknesses of other partnerships. The Systems Failures Method provides a

way of diagnosing the specific problems within an existing partnership and guiding its re-design (as in the case presented here) but it also has the potential to assist those establishing new partnerships to integrate good practice and thereby increase their future effectiveness. In particular, the FSM provides an organizing framework within which conclusions from earlier research about such matters as boundaries, goal setting, measures of performance and resource availability can be considered and treated as inter-related. Furthermore, the Systems Failures Method can be used by the partners themselves and/or by outsiders working with the partnership. In this case as in others, the active involvement of the partnership members in the process may well increase the likelihood of organizational learning being embedded whereas using a facilitator from the Regional Office to undertake the analysis seemed to increase the acceptability of the results to those within the partnership and to those to whom the partnership is accountable.

At a more academic level, partnership working has been extensively researched, but the results of that research are not always well known to those working in the field or widely applied in the design of new partnerships. It may be that applying the fruits of research on partnerships in a coherent way has been hindered by the piecemeal nature of the findings. Incorporating research findings, as well as accepted good practice, within a systems view of partnership working of the type provided by the FSM shown in Figure 1 has the potential to provide an effective vehicle for communication as well as yield areas for further research.

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