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Hearing the unheard voices: Practice-based approaches

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HEARING THE UNHEARD VOICES: PRACTICE-BASED APPROACHES

By Michelle Evans and Leda Stott

In order to ensure effective targeting of projects and the promotion of wider sustainable change, partnerships strongly emphasise that all partners and stakeholders fully participate in their work. Hearing and responding to the unheard voices encompassed within these groups, however, demands commitment, time and resources. It involves assessing the visibility, and invisibility, of individuals and organisations working with and within the partnership, confronting the power dynamics that they mask and determining different options for engagement. Partners must therefore have clear incentives for embarking on a process that might mislead by creating false expectations and in some cases be unnecessary.

Genuine partnership engagement requires clearly identifying those who may be marginalised or excluded. This identification entails looking beyond individuals and organisations who ‘speak’ on behalf of a partner or stakeholder group, to those who do not. In making such an assessment, partnership practitioners need to recognise that the space for different voices to be heard is shaped by particular contexts and cross-cutting issues such as age, class, cultural beliefs, ethnicity, gender, rural/urban background, political affiliation and education/health status, all of which may change over time and will need careful unpacking.

Assessing levels of engagement and deciding how to address them necessitates ‘interpreting’ the silence of those who do not speak.\(^1\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low or non-participation could suggest that individuals/groups are:</th>
<th>In which case we may need to:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>Review incentives for partnership participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intimidated</td>
<td><strong>Examine</strong> the partnership culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disenfranchised</td>
<td>Reassess partnership structures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incapable</td>
<td>Examine implicit criteria for participating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waiting</td>
<td>Anticipate triggers for participation</td>
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To hear these silent voices and act upon them, partnership practitioners must ensure that they use approaches that genuinely permit listening, as well as suit specific partnership contexts. Michelle Evans has found the following three methods key to her work as a creative cultural partnership broker in Australia:

1. The Indigenous Australian concept of Dadirri
2. Dreaming the Partnership
3. The praxis approach.

**Dadirri** is about profound non-judgemental watching and listening. It asks us as practitioners to be *in* time, not *on* time. It asks us to be in place. It asks us to receive people individually as well as collectively, to be compassionate and to be committed to hearing beyond the words that are spoken. Miriam Rose Ungenmerr from the Daly River in the Northern Territory is the elder who has developed this concept that is truly Indigenous to Australia. It is the way of learning and being in her community context. She says, “There are deep springs within each of us. Dadirri is about tapping into that deep spring that is within us.”

“**This approach reminds me to listen beyond words, to be in place and to be in time. I have found that it is enormously helpful, especially in Aboriginal community contexts, to be on my feet, in my body, rather than in my head – otherwise, I find that I am being too clever and strategic; there are other times for that. I have found that if I take time to be with people, to listen, to hear where communities are, I can start to develop a deeper understanding of how the partnership and the project fit and how they can start to open that community into the future. I find myself intuitively and mentally mapping possibilities, opportunities and ideas for future development. As brokers in a community and partnership context, we are wired to be strategic, creative, networked, up to date and innovative. This is a gift, and how we use it with the counterpoint of a Dadirri-infused approach can be magic.**”

**Dreaming the Partnership** is the conceptual development and pitching phase sometimes missed or not fully developed between partners in partnership scoping. This is the fun and exciting phase of creatively developing the ‘partnership narrative’ after fully exploring and developing the partnership project and how it relates to each partner. Dreaming up a partnership is both a concept and an approach. The concept is that bringing many creative minds together works. Trying different fits that draw on synergies across organisations and individuals, is enormously helpful to both build the dream and build the profile of the initiating partner’s openness to work in partnership. The approach is a communication plan – a way of pitching a concept, a way of asking questions and drawing the responses into a theme.
that uncovers a rich cultural underpinning. To weave a map of people who add/subtract/link and
enliven through their wide experiences and networks dreams the partnership. By spending time in this
stage, partners can find that many potentialities add to an initial dream and enrich the concept towards
the formalising of the partnership.

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“Working in a cross-cultural context, with marginalised
communities that are often not prioritised, I need to be clear
about how these voices are heard within a partnership context
that includes big corporations and government instrumentalities,
as well as other sometimes-conflicting communities and
organisations. I need to be quite upfront about the postcolonial
context within which this work sits and what it means to this
project. I need to be clear about the political and ethical issues
that may arise when mixing a range of partners within a project. I
have found this part of the work quite dependent on my ability to
communicate and to be strong in leadership and brokerage. I
spend a lot of time reflecting on my approach and the context
within which I work and how certain terms or titles – like the
development paradigm – may impact on the work we do.”
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Praxis. The process of working within the
framework of sustainable development
requires you as the practitioner to question
what your stance and motivation are for
being involved, what level of participation
the community has in the decision-making
around the project and what the partnership
is addressing in terms of social change. This
process is very similar to partnership
brokering. To be reflective in your practice
is your bread and butter. If you can’t ask
yourself those hard ethical, moral, practical
questions about the decisions you make in
your work, or those made within a partnership that you are working – then why do it? Paolo Freire
speaks of praxis in his important text Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), “The oppressed need to avoid
seeing their predicament as irresolvable, but rather recast it as a limiting situation that they can
transform.”2 The terminology that we use is vital to our success. Having a praxis approach of reflective
practice – action and reflection – is instrumental to being open to hearing the unheard voices.
Ultimately, we must acknowledge that we may not be allowing entry to these voices by the structural
paradigm we work within.

Hearing those who are usually ‘unheard’ requires that partnership practitioners adopt communication
approaches that are enormously challenging. They call for us to abandon the comfortable, tried-and-
true traditions of our working lives and move from a position of control into a location of real
collaboration. This is a high-order, creative process that demands that the ego be left behind. In so

doing, we may enable a genuine sharing of ideas, thoughts and dreams so that partnerships for positive and lasting change may be nurtured.