

A NETwork of Partners.

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ABSTRACT

GhostNets Australia (GNA) operates on a sub continental scale on the issue of abandoned, lost and discarded fishing gear known as ghost nets. As 90% of this rubbish is non-Australian, the issue is complex; therefore the organisation relies heavily on strong, effective and mutually beneficial partnerships across a broad range of sectors to achieve its goals. These partnerships range from culturally diverse and geographically isolated communities, various government departments, research bodies, international organisations and other agencies. Engaging and maintaining such a broad spectrum of partners requires, not only understanding the mutual benefits of the partnership, but also their potential unintended outcomes and communication needs.

Using GNA as a case study, this paper explores the pivotal role that partnerships play in making projects a success by comparing and discussing three different types of partnerships: Expedient, Opportunistic and Strategic, where the focus for each is different. This paper shows how these different partnerships can affect the design of a project, its communication strategies and ultimately why GNA places such a large emphasis on Strategic partnerships.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

GhostNets Australia (GNA) aims to find a solution to the high numbers of ghost nets (abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear) that wash onto north Australian coastlines, 90% which are from South East Asian fisheries that work in the Arafura and Timor Seas region. This coast and islands, between Broome (WA) and Princess Charlotte Bay (east coast Qld) is an extremely remote environment, which is sparsely populated and difficult to access by sea or land.

Established in 2004, GhostNets Australia has been instrumental in removing over 8,000 nets from this coastline, recording detailed information about the nets to assist in identifying the source of the problem, and, initiating an art movement that re-uses this rubbish. GNA could not achieve any of this without strong effective partnerships across a broad spectrum of stakeholders including but not limited to: 22 Indigenous communities (who are majority of the region's population); the CSIRO; the fishing industry; NGO's working in the marine debris and fisheries related fields as well as local, state, national and international government agencies.

In the context of this discussion 'partnership' refers to a cooperative relationship between people or groups who agree to share responsibility for achieving some specific objective or goal. The nature of this agreement determines the level of contractual process. Agreements can be bound by handshake, Memorandum of Understanding or contract. (Wikipedia)

Although there are commonalities for creating good partnerships, such as having mutual respect, good communication and understanding the other partners' needs, the working relationship for each of these stakeholders varies greatly. This is determined not only by the

duration and amount of involvement of the partnership but also the focus of that relationship such as whether the partnership is about gaining resources for a project, sharing activities to improve outcomes or building the relationship for a greater common outcome. For this discussion they will be labeled Expedient, Opportunistic and Strategic Partnerships.

PARTNERSHIP TYPES

The simplest and most common partnerships, for all projects need them, are the **Expedient** ones – expedient because they are practical and necessary as the focus for the primary partner are the obtainment of resources for the project such as: funding; use of, or purchase of, capital equipment or volunteer labour. For the secondary partner the focus is not related to the project at all, often vague notions of “doing something for the environment” by volunteers, enabling a corporate sponsor to comply with its ‘corporate social responsibility’ to shareholders or government targets that address broad socio-economic issues.

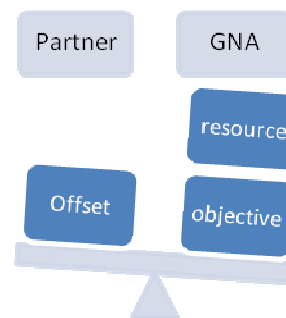


Figure 1: Expedient or Resource focused partnerships benefit one partner more than the other.

This type of partnership is usually offset by a mutually agreed upon activity from the primary partner such as the provision of media recognition or acknowledgement on websites. Expedient partnerships therefore tend to be unbalanced as they award one partner more than the other. They are also limited to the agreed upon outcomes so do not provide much input into the potential growth of the project (Figure 1).

A good example of this unbalance is the partnership that GNA had with Alcan in 2006. The objective was to move a six tonne net from the water’s edge in the Nhulunbuy harbor, NT, to the local refuse area. Alcan supplied one very large side-tipping truck, a bobcat and backend loader with three operators for a whole day, which happened to be a Saturday. It took 5 hours just to get the net in the truck. GNAs part of the deal was a story for the local newspaper and a ranger to take care of any live animals (two juvenile turtles as it happens).

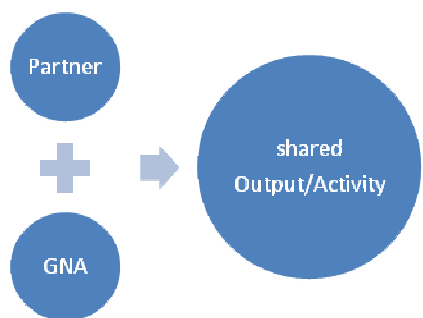


Figure 1: Opportunistic Partnerships focus on shared activities that value-add to each partners’ outcomes.

The second partnership type is labeled **Opportunistic** because it is a partnership that cannot be planned, evolving through a certain set of circumstances in time and place. The focus of these relationships is collaboration ie the sharing of similar activities. The detail of how that is negotiated will vary according to the situation even though often it revolves around the sharing of resources. This is different from The Expedient example because the resulting activity from the collaboration value adds to each partner’s intended outcomes (Figure 2) over and above the practicalities of the partnership.

An example for this type of partnership is the unlikely

collaboration that GNA has with the Centre for Remote and Rural Mental Health Queensland (CRRMHQ). Unlikely and unplanned for because: What does mental health have to do with marine debris? One of the biggest dilemmas for the ghost net program is what to do with the rubbish apart from burning it in situ or taking it to landfill (like the previous example) where it still gets burnt or buried. Neither of these are good environmental options. So, through a long and devious route, the program began to deliver art workshops in some Qld Indigenous communities to encourage the re-use of ghost net material into art and merchandise. A team from the CRRMHQ happened to be visiting one of these communities while the GhostNet Art workshop was in progress. They were inspired by the laughter and fun that was occurring during the event, and how the workshops bring people together for important social interaction that helps prevent mental health issues. The collaboration was formed to facilitate more workshops in other communities.

For GNA the value-added outcome for the project is the broadening of the conceptual value of the artworks themselves. Artwork is valued not only by the obvious skill and use of techniques of the artist but also by the “story” that goes with it. The GhostNet Art story now encompasses the social benefits that occur as a result of the workshops as well as: the transfer of traditional knowledge and techniques into a new artform and medium; environmental issues surrounding ghost net and marine debris; the cultural significance of the oceans and marine life to the communities and the artistic collaborations working with non-traditional fibre artists. This combined technique and “story” has resulted in GhostNet Art pieces being purchased for prestigious permanent collections such as the British Museum and Australian National Art Gallery.

For the CRRMHQ art workshops called “Creative Recovery” are already an important tool for sponsoring social interaction in communities. The added benefits of ghost net art workshops are: lots of outdoor activities, which helps physical health, through beachcombing; greater attendance as the workshops have a purpose beyond a community activity; and they are more culturally aligned.

Finally, **Strategic partnerships** focus on developing symbiotic relationships with organisations to achieve greater outcomes beyond the scope of any one party individually. In this partnership often the goals of the secondary partner can take precedence over the goals of the primary partner in the short term in order to achieve the project outcomes. The importance of these partnerships over the other two types is that they retain an element of dynamism and flexibility that lead to broader social or environmental outcomes over and above the scope of the initial project. (Figure 3)

GNA recognised from the outset that for the project to achieve its goals of reducing ghost nets drifting into

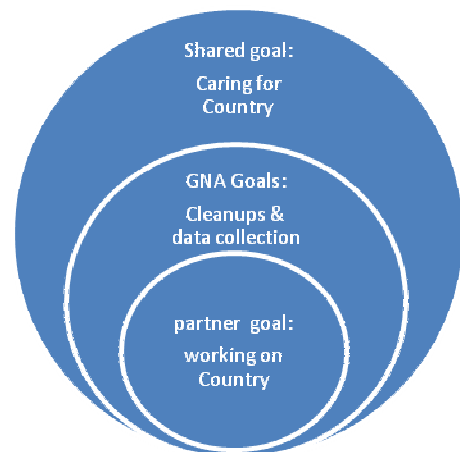


Figure 3: Strategic partnerships focus on building the relationship of the partnership to achieve both each others as well as shared goals.

Australian waters, it was necessary to develop appropriate and long term partnerships with the Indigenous communities impacted by this rubbish, for it was a shared problem. Apart from the initial target of massive cleanups of the rubbish and comprehensive data collection the project also needed ongoing sustainable management of the issue for the overarching solution was never going to be a 'quick fix'. However, at the time, how that was to be achieved was not clear.

The alternative solution, GNA could have negotiated, was an expedient partnership with the Australian Defense Forces for the removal of the nets. The ADF would have been able to provide strong 'top down' management and large supplies of manpower and equipment. This collaboration would have achieved fast and spectacular clean up results but the downside would have been no ongoing management and very limited data.

Through an intense consultative process prior to the project, it was obvious that Indigenous people of coastal north Australia shared the desires to mitigate the threats to their marine resources, as well as to be "working on country" utilising their customary knowledge and exceptional "bush skills". The consultation also highlighted the culturally diverse backgrounds and wide range of experience and training in environmental management across indigenous people of the north. This meant that before the program objectives of cleanups and data collection could be met, GNA first had to resource and train the rangers in a variety of skills so they could confidently and accurately do the work. To facilitate this GNA adapted a system of "Fee for Service" that was on trial with established ranger groups in NT by AQIS so that each partnership was tailored to suit the specific needs of that community.

By choosing to forge strategic partnerships with these communities GNA inadvertently became part of a fledgling community driven movement towards long-term social, cultural, physical and sustainable economic development called "Caring for Country".

MAKING IT WORK

On face value it would appear that GNA's Strategic partnership with the Indigenous communities is actually lots of Expedient partnerships in reverse, where GNA is resourcing the rangers to be able to receive data in return. The key to understanding each of these partnership types fully is to know how the partnership actually affects the decision making process within the project. When managing a large project such as the ghost net one, the decision making process is often done in isolation of the partners as it is sometimes difficult to be inclusive and is thought of as time wasting and onerous. From experience, the more inclusive that a project can be in including its partners in the decisions that affect them as well, the better the outcomes.

A group of USA concerned citizens of similar mind, were so appalled at the increasing evidence that government departments and large corporations spend too much of their time and money justifying their decisions re public infrastructure, that they formed an international association to address this need. The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) promotes the importance of including the public in the decision making process, where the public are impacted by that decision, to improve overall acceptance and outcomes of the decision. This would hold true for partners as well.

IAP2 designed a tool, called the Public Participation Spectrum, to assist with the selection of the 5 levels of participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower, that defines the

public's role in the decision making process, the promise being made to the public at that level and the communication requirements. (Figure 4).

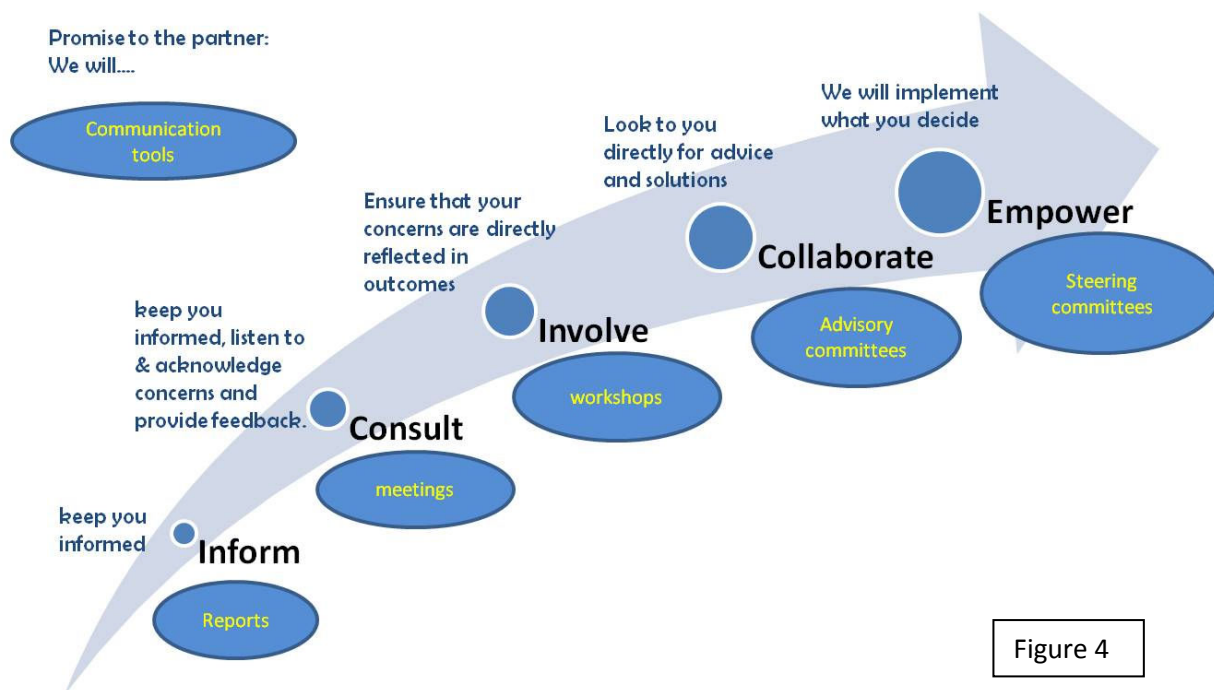


Figure 4

This tool is equally valid in determining the promise being made to the partner at each participation level, although we have only three types of partnerships. It also aids a projects communication strategy for it helps answer questions such as: when is it sufficient to provide feedback to the project sponsor, or necessary to involve the partner in the core decision making process?

Working with the Spectrum, the Expedient partnerships would tend to only need to work on the thinner wedge, 'Inform', where the promise is to keep the partner informed about the projects progress in relation to their investment. The communication tools for this would be reports, presentations and newsletters, where the interaction is mostly one way. Depending on the depth of the partnership will determine whether the Expedient partners need to be consulted as well which means they do have the opportunity to express concerns and receive feedback about those concerns at meetings.

On the other hand, opportunistic partnerships definitely promise involvement as it is a collaboration of a shared activity. If all the decision making and communication is one sided the partnership will tend to wither and die. Each step of the Spectrum includes the previous steps so "Involve" includes "consult" and "Inform". So, the communication tools for working with these collaborative partners, includes workshops where both partners work through concerns together as well as reports, newsletters and meetings.

For Strategic Partnerships to work both partners must commit to full collaboration or even empowerment of the secondary partners in the decision-making process. The promise to these partners is that the primary partner will look to the secondary for advice as any outcome will

affect them directly and that the primary will even endeavor to implement what they decide. GhostNets Australia has a steering committee of representatives from all the indigenous communities we work with which has set the direction of the program since its inception. This direction has been sound and the commitment of our partners to the project is strong because they know that they are part of the solution.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

Partnerships are essential to any functioning organisation. Partnerships provide necessary resources, shared activities that lead to improved outcomes and shared outcomes that cannot be achieved by the organisation alone.

Organisations must be open to partnerships that fall out of the immediate scope of the project, or organizational objectives, as often the outcomes are not immediately obvious but can have knock on effects that no-one would have dreamed of.

When Involving partners in the decision making process be very prepared to listen, learn and adapt for this advice can lead to innovation and workable solutions as the partners often have knowledge or a different point of view that the organisation may not.

Maintaining partnerships requires good communication. It is important to understanding the foundation of the interaction of those involved in a partnership so that structuring the arrangement and ongoing communication helps the partnership to grow. Maintaining partnerships is worth the effort.