
Gray and Purdy offer us a short book on multistakeholder partnerships and their role in alleviating complex problems, building on and extending Gray’s classic 1989 book on the topic. Academics and expert practitioners will enjoy the authors’ review of current research on the topic because of its comprehensiveness and disregard for disciplinary bounds. Readers will also appreciate its novel articulation because of how it links concepts from the collaboration and institutional change literatures. As in its previous incarnation, the book includes a rich array of case studies—three in detail—covering the spectrum of the complex problems facing us today. The cases bring to life the opportunities, challenges, processes, steps, outputs, outcomes, and impact of multistakeholder partnerships.

As in the prior book, this one follows Eric Trist’s conceptualization of complex social problems as problem domains. The concept is useful because it suggests that tackling these problems will be facilitated by partnerships that link organizations from different sectors: the state, businesses, nonprofits, etc. Gray and Purdy point to the strong parallels between the concept of problem domain and the concept of issue fields offered in institutional theory. This conceptual linking is valuable for at least three reasons. Most directly, it provides a platform useful to tie scholarship on multistakeholder partnerships to the processes of institutional change. It also offers a productive interdisciplinary space to advance our understanding of processes tackling complex social problems. Finally, it yields a novel conceptual venue to explore how field change is triggered, motivated, or advanced by multistakeholder partnerships.

The book has 11 chapters, and chapters 1 through 3 provide a three-part introduction. Chapter 1 discusses the growth of multistakeholder partnerships. It introduces the reader to the range of partnerships discussed in the book, including global partnerships such as the Global Reporting Initiative and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, national ones such as Honey Care Kenya, and bilateral partnerships involving nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and businesses. The chapter also provides a sort of glossary of the terminology used in the book and establishes the book’s motivation “to conceptualize partnerships as forms of organizing that hold promise for transforming institutional fields.”

In chapter 2, the authors introduce the plurality of problem domains in which we have observed multistakeholder partners operating: income inequality, health, environmental degradation, identity conflicts, and violent weather events. They also discuss the book’s main three profiles of partners—
government, businesses, and NGOs—with a particular focus on their motivation to pursue and participate in multistakeholder partnerships. The chapter ends with a brief typology of partnerships considering the motivation of the parties involved and the purposes they seek to advance.

Finally, chapter 3 provides the theoretical framework for the book. It introduces the concept of institutional field and links the effectiveness of partnerships in the tackling of complex problems to their ability to bring about field change. The authors highlight the potential for partnerships to bring change to societal norms, practices, and relational networks that frame how stakeholders see their roles in relation to specific complex problems.

The three cases used to illustrate concepts in the remainder of the book are described at length in chapter 4. The first case describes two partnerships involving Rabobank (a Dutch bank) and two NGOs, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and Friends of the Earth. The partnership with WWF brought about Rabobank’s launching of a climate-neutral credit card, while the partnership with Friends of the Earth involved strategizing to create “climate friendly” banking products and policies. The second case describes a participatory process lasting over 15 years that guided the redefinition of hydroelectric dam regulations in the United States. The process was remarkably inclusive of parties, most notably indigenous groups, with conflicting interests and disparate understandings of the natural environment. The third case describes the conflicts and processes that yielded the formation of Mesa de Diálogo y Consenso, a partnership involving a mining company and the community in the area of Peru where it operated. This last case points to the specific challenges for partnerships among parties with lopsided power differentials, conflicting interests, and a history of failed promises.

Chapters 5 through 9 provide a thorough survey of research on multistakeholder partnerships. Chapter 5 discusses their design and evolution. The authors provide a particularly interesting discussion of *interveners*: individuals or organizations that can play a critical role in convening and designing partnerships, as well as acting as facilitators, mediators, recorders, educators, and advocates.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the topic of conflict, a central concern in all partnerships. The discussion comprehensively considers factors such as the presence or absence of trust; the potential for differing frames, i.e., categories used when making sense of an ambiguous reality; the likelihood of conflict; its sources; and the potential for conflict to have a positive role. The authors also discuss what we have learned about how to avoid and tackle conflict in partnerships.

The concept of power is the focus of chapter 7. The concept is central as power dynamics define the structure, processes, and relationships in partnerships. The authors point to the multiple meanings of the concept of power and discuss power as authority, which implies that it is socially validated. They also grapple with the power differentials that emerge as products of resource dependencies, as well as the power that emerges from parties’ discursive abilities to frame issues in ways that serve their interests.

Chapters 8 and 9 review recent developments in the research on multistakeholder partnerships. The focus of chapter 8 is partnerships in the context of environmental sustainability, with discussion centered around the question “What are the best practices for firms to collaborate with other organizations to
advance sustainable businesses?” In chapter 9 the authors review the concept of collaborative governance—a relatively novel way to describe a specific type of multistakeholder partnership involving or assuming responsibilities previously associated with government. Examples include the Montreal and Kyoto protocols.

In chapters 10 and 11, Gray and Purdy return to the main question of the book and provide an appealing theoretical framework to consider the role of multistakeholder partnerships in efforts to alleviate complex social problems. Chapter 10 explores cross-level dynamics with the help of empirical illustrations of how local efforts can bring change to challenges on a global scale. Chapter 11 examines how multistakeholder partnerships can transform institutional fields, with the focus on articulating an understanding of the connection between partnership dynamics and field change. Scholars have approached these two topics separately, building on discipline-bounded and paradigmatically diverse ways of understanding the social world. Gray and Purdy elegantly braid the two. They build on Strauss’s concept of negotiated order as shared conceptual ancestry, and the link is productive as it provides a solid theoretical framework to guide future research on the topic.

This book is packed with information and may be particularly useful for doctoral students. Curiously, the longest section is the reference list, which includes sources from a plurality of fields, both classic pieces and recent work; its length showcases the extensive legwork that Gray and Purdy have done for our benefit. The book is well written with powerful language, and I only wish it could have been longer. At times it felt that the authors were compacting information out of concern for a required page limit. Gray’s 1989 book was 300 pages long. This book should have been at least that length.

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REFERENCE
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