

## Public Servants' Approach to the Success Factors of Partnership in Local Government

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**Abstract.** *Inter-organisational partnerships bring enormous benefit to the widest circle of stakeholders. Nevertheless, agreeing to collaborate does not automatically ensure success of the partnership and give a positive social, economical or even organisational impact. According to the scientists, institutional interferences, economic or government disincentives and decision-making handicaps could create significant obstacles to partnership efficiency. The article examines success factors of the inter-organisational partnership effectiveness in local government, with reference to an opinion of Lithuania's local government representatives. The partnerships' success factors indicated by the Lithuanian practitioners coincide with the ones formulated by foreign researchers. However, they are slowly put into practice because of systemic and managerial impediments preventing inter-organisational partnership.*

**Keywords:** *partnership, local government, inter-organisational collaboration.*

**Raktažodžiai:** *partnerystė, vietos savivalda, tarporganizacinis bendradarbiavimas.*

### Introduction

In the time of global changes, partnership and collaboration is perceived as the most profitable strategy to achieve organisations' own and joint goals, and simultaneously to satisfy the needs of a broad range of stakeholders.

Inter-organisational partnership is relevant to the challenges of the contemporary world and especially for public sector institutions. Partnerships and inter-organisational collaboration bring enormous benefit to the widest circle of beneficiaries [1; 2; 6]. Nevertheless, agreeing to collaborate does not automatically ensure success. Collaborative management is a concept that describes the process of facilitating and operating in multi-organisational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved

or easily solved by single organisations [1, p. 4]. Inter-organisational collaboration is not simply a means to compensate for the lack of internal skills, nor should it be viewed as a series of discrete transactions (20, p.119)

Partnerships and inter-organisational collaboration issues have been researched widely during the past near forty years, e.g. Olson (1965), Negandhy (1975), Gray (1985), Powell *et al.* (1996), Kickert, Klijn, Koppenjan (1997), Mandell (2001), Agranoff and McGuire (2003), Geddes (2008), Babiak, Thibault (2009), Lofstrom (2010). In the scientific studies, many factors that contribute to partnership and inter-organisational collaboration success have been identified: willingness to collaborate, mutual trust, team work skills and the leadership competences, the affinity of organisational valuables and culture, clear and consequential joint goal, institutional maintenance [23; 7; 8; 11; 4; 22]. At more systemic level, institutional forces, economic or governmental disincentives and decision-making handicaps could create significant obstacles to partnership efficiency [2; 6; 10; 13; 8]. However, some studies have shown that the character of collaboration envisioned in literature is often far from the one actually occurring on the ground [14, p. 22]. The exploration of inter-organisational partnership practice is on the talking-point of the contemporary researchers in the field. Nevertheless, some Lithuanian authors are interested in concepts of inter-organisational partnership and collaboration (e.g. Gudelis, Guogis, 2009; Puskorius, 2007; Raišienė, 2009), and scientific studies comparing inter-organisational partnership theory and practice are lacking [22].

The **aim** of the article is to examine the success factors of inter-organisational partnership effectiveness in local government, with reference to opinion of Lithuania's local government representatives.

To this end, Western scientific literature analysing the content of inter-organisational partnership and collaboration was studied, and characteristics of successful collaboration were specified.

The empirical research was based on the **method** of semi-structured interview of public servants. Fifty four experts of inter-organisational partnership took part in the research. A criterion of the expertise was high experience in inter-organisational partnership projects or programmes in the local government. Experts represented forty seven municipalities. There are a total of sixty municipalities in Lithuania. Eleven municipalities had no proper experience in inter-organisational collaboration, and two municipalities refused to participate in the survey.

In the empirical research, influential disincentives of inter-organisational partnership implementation in practice were first identified. Then key success factors of the partnership in local government were determined based on the opinion of Lithuanian public servants. Finally, findings were generalised. The obtained findings were compared to the scholars' opinion expressed on the success factors of inter-organisational partnership and collaboration.

In the article, the answers of respondents are generalised and distribution of opinion is presented in percentage terms. The responses most distinctly describing existing practice are quoted.

## Disincentives of inter-organisational partnership implementation in practice

Disincentives of inter-organisational partnership pointed out by the respondents can be divided into two main types:

1. Problems occurring because of the influence of interacting organisations' external environment;
2. Problems occurring because of drawbacks in inter-organisational interaction management.

Answering the question 'What main problems did you observe while implementing inter-organisational partnership in local government?', the survey participants more focused on consideration of problems conditioned by external environment. The problems of partnerships' internal environment were presented with no wider explanations.

The most frequently mentioned disincentives preconditioned by external environment included bureaucracy in State institutions, lack of information necessary for preparation and implementation of partnership activity, fast change in legal environment, partnership formality and unsubstantiated need for joint activity (Fig. 1).

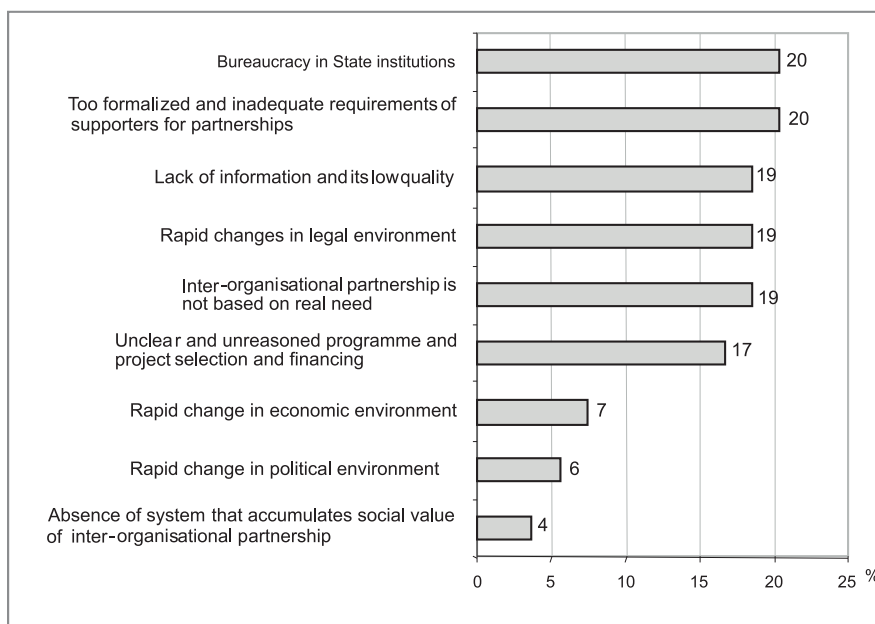


Figure 1: Disincentives caused by external environment

The context of the aforesaid problems is best revealed in the comments of respondents. According to the respondents, in the inter-organisational partnerships:

- There is too much bureaucracy and too many sounding requirements;

- Due to rapid change in documentation requirements, project implementers get stuck in bureaucracy;
- The change in legislation is too rapid. There is so much focus on updating information that it starts impeding the implementation of the project. After certain amendments of legal acts partnership members even faced financial limitations.
- Changes in laws obstruct the work. Much effort is needed so that the law is observed; it takes time to keep up with changes and then partners lag behind with works.
- There is lack of information about the ways for carrying out ordinary tasks. As things change rapidly, successive projects are only a little less complicated.

The problem that tramples upon the essence of inter-organisational partnership is practice of formal partnership. Organisations that subsequently do not participate in inter-organisational interaction are included in the application of projects. Sometimes this is done to gain more financial benefit. This problem is partially conditioned by some of the requirements for projects announced by organisations that finance inter-organisational programmes. According to the comments of survey participants reflecting these problems, 'Very often partners were only 'in paper'. You do everything on your own but include partners because the application form so requires.'; 'The partners disappear after the project is declared successful. Actually, the project applicant remains alone. The key coordinator needs to do everything on his own.'; 'Partners are chosen according to convenience of sharing money. Therefore, partnership exists mainly in theory.'; 'Partners are more interfering rather than participating. You choose the reliable ones and expect that by sharing the benefit in advance you will actually obtain it.'

The respondents also stated that the majority of local government inter-organisational partnership programmes and projects were not based on the investigated need. Thereby, formal attitude to inter-organisational partnership is formed, efficiency of joint activity decreases due to poor motivation of implementers of such projects. Partnership that is not substantiated by the need analysis is not as socially and economically valuable as it could be if specific social needs were satisfied. Respondents argued that:

- The majority of projects neglect the real need. That is why people are passive and do not even try to clarify unclear aspects.
- Projects needs for analyses are fictitious; therefore, the results are not that important for the society. Sometimes citizens see the work of a municipality as a waste of time and money. Unfortunately, according to representatives from municipalities, it is partially true.
- The EU forms partnership funding priorities. Sometimes there is no need for such projects in Lithuania. Nevertheless, they are implemented. Many projects are implemented formally: the aim is to realise the activity and to earn money.

According to the respondents, the criteria for allotting support are unclear or doubtful. And this is also a comparatively urgent problem. Respondents indicated that

there are many undercurrents and political streams in the funding of projects, and the biggest problem is that projects-winners are with ‘political legs’.

The remarks regarding long-term value of inter-organisational partnership and social effect are particularly important. Respondents argue that efficient structure is important for social and cultural collaboration development. Otherwise the project or programme ends, but its results are one-off and short-term and thus considerably less valuable than they should be.

Internal disincentives of local government inter-organisational partnership efficiency most frequently arise because of unprofessional management (problem noted by 26% of respondents), lack of experience in inter-organisational partnership and insufficient collaboration skills (20%), differences in goals and interests of interacting organisations and individuals (19%). More than one tenth of the respondents pointed to insufficient trust among partners and emphasised the absence of system of a reasoned remuneration for project activities (Fig. 2).

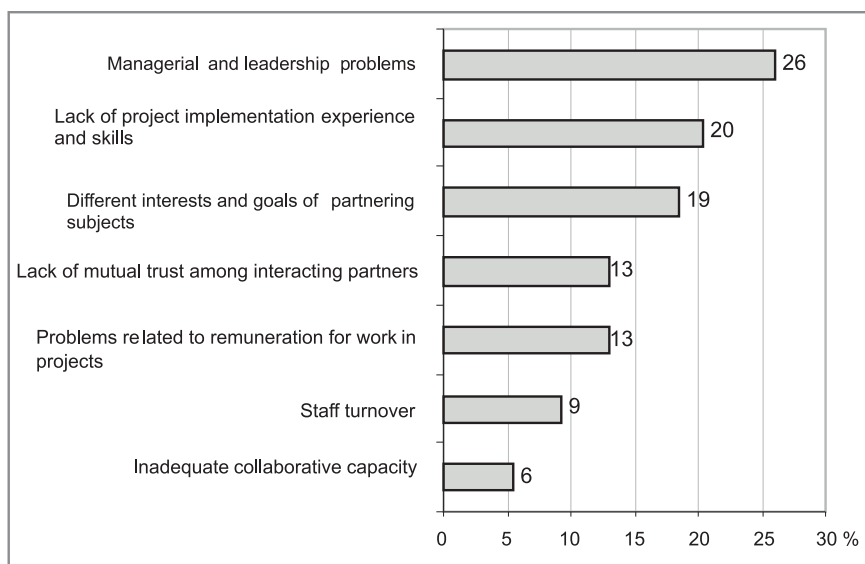


Figure 2: Internal disincentives occurring during implementation of inter-organisational programmes/projects in local government

The following comments most vividly illustrate the abovementioned problems: ‘Insufficient management skills hinder implementation of projects. Managing partners fail to distribute responsibility, oddment persons receives all the tasks, and it is complicated to obtain what was promised’; ‘The largest problem is lack of teamwork skills in partnership’; ‘Because of insufficient competence, unrealistic project goals and deadlines were established’; ‘Monitoring, distribution of responsibility and accountability and transparency is lacking’; ‘The largest problem is devaluation

of work in inter-organisational projects. Only individuals working on the basis of contracts, accountants and project coordinators get paid'.

Some research representatives were disappointed with the existing situation of the inter-organisational programme or project management. They asked rhetorically: 'Can we call it collaboration if tasks travel from the desk of one specialist to another or you receive a direct order from the director?'; 'What can you personally get when participating in a programme? It's only experience. But this experience is already extensive; you do not learn anything new. Foreign countries are no longer examples for us and foreign lecturers do not say anything that we don't know. There is no wish to work for the sake of an idea'.

The above-mentioned and similar comments demonstrate the necessity to solve the identified inter-organisational partnership problems, by attempting to avoid consolidation of negative experience with respect to collective activity.

In summary, it is particularly important to avoid the key disadvantages and obstacles listed above when implementing inter-organisational partnership. However, it is equally important to know and to materialise the success factors of inter-organisational partnership.

In the following section, the opinion of local government servants on the preconditions of successful inter-organisational collaboration is presented.

### **Success factors pertaining to effectiveness of inter-organisational partnership in local government**

In this article, success factors are cogitated as organisational driving forces. Driving forces are internal (such as knowledge and competence of management and workforce) and external (such as economy, technology, governance, social policy, and etc.) [17]. Understanding driving forces is important for strategic planning and any other activity that involves projecting the future.

During the interview, the respondents were asked to identify potential 'success' and 'failure' factors of inter-organisational partnership in local government on the basis of own experience. The majority of responses focused on organisational and group factors of interaction.

Having generalised the results, four factors determining successful partnership were formulated<sup>1</sup>:

1. Common interests and goals of partner organisations and institutions (72%);
2. Experience in collaboration and project activities (57%);
3. Actual participation of all interested groups and transparency in decision-making (50%);
4. Mutual trust (50%).

Other factors of inter-organisational partnership efficiency include: facilitative leadership (43%); teamwork (37%); clear distribution of responsibilities (28%); real need for the project (22%).

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<sup>1</sup> Percentage in brackets denote apart of respondents who indicated the factor.

About 10% of the survey participants pointed out such preconditions for successful activities of organisations as qualified staff, qualified experts, ability of efficient communication, mutual understanding, ability to reach a compromise and tolerance.

## **Conclusions**

By summarising the research results it is possible to characterise the prevailing situation of inter-organisational partnership in Lithuanian local government:

1. Inter-organisational partnership in local government is most frequently initiated striving for fulfilment of local government functions to develop particular social spheres.

2. The principle of social inclusion is not characteristic of inter-organisational partnership. Partnership is rather formal. Sometimes formal partnership is not avoided striving for more extensive financial support.

3. It is not typical of a partnership initiator to coordinate goals and objectives of joint activity with other interacting subjects. Facilitative leadership is atypical in researched situations. Collaboration climate is not perceived as an important factor of interaction efficiency.

4. Inter-organisational partnership achieves moderate results of joint activity and a wide range of factors hinder achievement of better results. Key obstacles emerging from external (systemic) environment include: bureaucracy in State institutions, formalised and inadequate requirements of partnership sponsors, lack of information essential for implementation and development of inter-organisational partnership, too rapid change of legal environment and weaknesses of substantiation of the need for interaction. The most important problems of internal environment include: lack of managerial skills and specific knowledge of project management, different interests of interacting organisations.

5. Generalizing the research findings, it can be stated that the key success factors of inter-organisational partnership and collaboration are the following:

- Proper inclusion of all interests groups, i.e. stakeholders;
- Shared partnership goals and transparency of partnership processes;
- Supportive political, legal and economic environment;
- Institutional support for partner organisations;
- Collaborative and facilitative behavior of partnership managers;
- Clear communication and mutual openness;
- Appropriate interpersonal competencies.

6. The success factors indicated by Lithuanian practitioners coincide with collaboration and partnership features formulated by foreign researchers [2; 5; 3; 11; 13; 8; 18]. Unfortunately, they are slowly put into practice because of aforesaid systemic and managerial disincentives of inter-organisational partnership and collaboration. Inter-organisational partnership in Lithuanian local government requires specific coordination and collaboration capacities from managers as well as assumptions of internal and external organisational environment.

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### **Tarnautojų požiūris į partnerystę skatinančius veiksmus vietos savivaldoje**

Anotacija

Laikmečio pokyčių kontekste partnerystė tampa viena vertingiausių organizacijų veiklos strategijų. Dėl savybės suderinti įvairiapusių interesus tarporganizacinis bendradarbiavimas aktualus viešajam administravimui ir ypač vietos savivaldai. Deja, organizacijų pasiryžimas bendradarbiauti savaime neužtikrina partnerystės sėkmės. Straipsnio tikslas – išsiaiškinti pagrindinius partnerystės trikdžius bei apibrėžti veiksmus, kuriuos vietos savivaldos tarnautojai laiko partnerystės varomosiomis jėgomis. Straipsnio išvados formuluojamos struktūrizuoto tarporganizacinės partnerystės ekspertų interviu rezultatų pagrindu. Atliktas tyrimas rodo, jog partnerystės įgyvendinimo sunkumai kyla dėl bendradarbiaujančių organizacijų išorinės aplinkos neigiamos įtakos ir tarporganizacinės sąveikos valdymo trūkumų. Atkreiptinas dėmesys, jog apklaustųjų tarnautojų nurodyti tarporganizacinės partnerystės sėkmės veiksniai sutampa su užsienio mokslininkų suformuluotaisiais bendradarbiavimo bei partnerystės principais, tačiau dėl sisteminių aplinkos bei valdymo suvaržymų vangiai įgyvendinami praktikoje.

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