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Public-Private Partnerships: Addressing a Nebulous Concept

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There is a great deal of confusion about the meaning of the concept public-private partnership (PPP). Much is written on the subject but only rarely do authors give an adequate account of what they mean when they talk about PPP, nor do they acknowledge that there exist qualitatively different PPP research traditions. The lack of conceptual clarity leads to false statements about PPP, since what is true for one specific PPP-type does not necessarily apply to other forms of PPP. This paper reviews the literature on PPP and argues that there exist at least five distinct approaches in the burgeoning PPP literature with different origins and that it is vital for analytical clarity that authors place themselves within one of these traditions when doing research on PPP.

Introduction

There is nothing novel in stating that PPP is a contested and ill-defined concept. This has previously been done by many others (see for instance, Hodge & Greve, 2005a & 2005b; McQuaid, 2000:10ff; Domberger and Fernandez, 1999; Kettl, 1993; Van Ham & Koppenjan, 2001; Linder, 1999, Tvarnø, 2005). Typically, authors point out that there are definitional problems attached to the term PPP and that it can mean very different things. Subsequently, they attempt to define the concept but often the definitions put forward are so open-ended and inclusive that they do not clarify much of the confusion that exists around the PPP concept. As Wettenhall notes, there have been previous efforts at developing a classification of partnership arrangements but "...there is much more to be done" (2003:98).¹ An often used definition is that PPP is a:

"...cooperation of some sort of durability between public and private actors in which they jointly develop products and services and share risks, costs and resources which are connected with these products" (Van Ham & Koppenjan, 2001:598).²

This is a very all-encompassing definition which allows for great variance across parameters such as time, closeness of cooperation, types of products/services, costs, complexity, level of institutionalization as well as number and type of actors involved. Moreover, it does not specify whether a partnership has to rest on a legally binding contract or not in order to be a partnership. Thus, outsourcing, entrepreneurship partnerships³ and joint ventures all can be considered to be public-private partnerships. In fact, most forms of public-private collaboration are partnerships, when this definition is used. How can it be that most authors prefer to operate with such wide-ranging definitions? Moreover, that some scholars resign

¹ Although, I disagree with Wettenhall that efforts in direction of developing a classification system have to consider the objection that partnerships that work along vertical/hierarchical lines are unlikely to be true partnerships (see Wettenhall, 2003:98-99).

² Klijn & Teisman (2004) use a similar definition. They define PPP as a: "... cooperation between public and private actors with a durable character in which actors develop mutual products and/or services and in which risk, costs, and benefits are shared."

³ By entrepreneurship partnerships I refer to innovative partnerships on the grass root level involving representatives from the civil society as well as representatives from the public and private sector.

from trying to define or classify the concept and instead settle with less ambitious statements such as the claim that PPP is an empirical concept (Mörch and Sahlin-Andersen, forthcoming). This, in my view, does not do much to enhance research and certainly lessens the possibilities for cross-national learning from experience. If the concept is void of any specific meaning, then we might just as well abandon using the concept at all. If it means everything, then in fact it means nothing at all.

This paper argues that the lack of an authoritative definition of PPP stems from the fact that there exist several distinct PPP research traditions in the literature and that it does not make sense to try to construct an authoritative definition of PPP. It is not logically possible and certainly not without violating one or several PPP strands in the literature. What is more promising is to survey how the PPP concept is used in practice in order to find out of what the meaning of it is. Linder (1999 & 2000) has made an excellent attempt at this but only on the discursive level. He focuses on discursive uses of the term and claims about partnership rather than partnership practices.

Instead, this paper reviews the literature on PPP and uncovers how the concept is applied in practice in the literature. On that basis, a number of distinct PPP research approaches are identified. It is then argued that by carefully placing oneself within one of the identified PPP approaches, research can be enhanced and false or misleading statements about PPP can be avoided. It does not for instance make sense to say – on a general level – that a downside with PPP is a lack of transparency and public participation (see for instance Shaoul, 2003). This might only be true for a certain type of PPP. Other authors have in fact concluded the exact opposite; that PPP can act as channels for local mobilization and participation (see Andersen, 2004). Likewise, some authors have stated (for instance, Spackman, 2002) that it was the UK Labour Government that first introduced the concept of PPP in the late 1990s. This is also a deceptive statement since in reality the PPP concept has been in use since at least the late 1970s (see for instance Beauregard, 1998; Fosler & Berger, 1982). Ghobadian et al. (2004:2), in addition to stating that the PPP concept is relatively new and developing, go as far to argue that UK is leading the way in the development of PPP. This certainly depends on what one means by PPP. Yet others argue that partnerships can only be successful as long as trust can be established and maintained between the partners (Klijn & Teisman, 2000; Huxham and Vangen, 2000). This might be true in relation to certain types of partnerships but not necessarily all types of partnerships. Logically, it can be assumed that the importance of trust varies between for instance a partnership that is strongly regulated legally and a partnership that rests only on informal network structures.

As the above examples illustrate, many authors simply do not recognize that there exist divergent traditions in the partnership literature and they fail to recognize that public-private partnerships do not only vary according to a number of parameters such as level of institutionalization and number of actors involved but also that there are qualitatively different meanings attached to the concept. By the same

token, there is little explicit cross-reference between the different traditions. The regrettable consequence of all this is that conclusions from disparate research traditions are mixed, which leads to great confusion and which also inhibits cumulative knowledge-building and lesson-drawing. It is very common to find general statements about the pros and cons of public-private partnerships in the literature. Such statements must logically be false, since conclusions about the functioning of PPP cannot be lifted to a general level, when the concept in reality means very distinct things.

This paper argues that there exist at least five qualitatively distinct approaches in the literature: First, there is the tradition to use the PPP concept synonymously with public-private relations and constellations in a certain sector area; i.e. the policy approach. Second, there is a distinct literature dealing with PPP in relation to local economic development; the local regeneration approach. Thirdly, there is the infrastructure approach, where PPP is used synonymously with infrastructure projects involving private capital and the bundling of for instance the design, construction, operation and maintenance of infrastructure projects. Much of what is written on PPP in recent years does in fact deal with this type of PPP. Fourth, there is the governance approach, which is quite similar to the policy approach. No specific definition of PPP is given and instead, PPP is approached in the context of a governance perspective. It is seen as a natural extension or continuation of the New Public Management which has swept around the public bureaucracies the past two decades. This approach is very inclusive and it incorporates a variety of forms of private involvement in the delivery of public goods and services (for instance, contracting out, strategic partnerships, entrepreneurial partnerships and private sector ownership in state owned businesses). Fifth, there is the development approach, where PPP is dealt with in relation to development and capacity building in less developed countries. Finally, this paper concludes that in addition to placing oneself within a certain PPP approach, it is necessary to operate with approach-specific PPP typologies. This will enhance analytical clarity and enable more apt generalizations about the functioning and the pros and cons of PPP.

The paper is structured in the following way: In the subsequent five sections an account is made of each of the identified PPP approaches. The background of each approach is clarified and an outlay is made of the origin of and the central issues within each approach. In the seventh section, the benefits of adapting the five PPP approaches are outlined. The second last section briefly reviews some previous attempts at classifying the PPP concept and argues that these attempts are inadequate in relation to bringing more clarity into the PPP field. In the same section, it is debated whether or not there are any common denominators encompassing all forms of public-private partnerships. The conclusion is that there is no such core to the PPP concept, rather there are multiple cores. The final section sums up the basic points of this paper.

The Local Regeneration Approach

The local regeneration approach has already existed for several decades. Here, the focus is on public-private partnerships in relation to local economic renewal and development. This approach has its roots primarily in the American urban governance literature (for instance, Barnekov et al., 1989; Boyer, 1983; Buencker, 1973; Davis, 1986; Fosler & Berger, 1982; Squires, 1989). As Bovaird observes, 'the story of PPPs in the modern era starts in the US' (2004:223). Others argue that public-private partnerships were a steady component of the activities of postwar urban governments in Western democracies (Stoker, 1998:34). Some authors note that PPP became notably popular among state and local policy makers during the 1980s (Pierre, 1998:4) and others, once again, that the term 'partnership' can be traced back to the Carter Administration's effort to enlist private sector's financial participation in urban redevelopment projects (Linder & Rosenau, 2000:9, originally Berger, 1985). Some authors suggest that that public-private cooperation has always formed the touchstone of urban development policy in the US (Bovaird, 2004:222, originally Fainstain, 1994). Correspondingly, Beauregard argues that the strong tradition of organizing public-private relations through joint participation in institutions can be viewed against the historical background of 'an enduring tradition of privatism' that has dominated US ideology since the early nineteenth century (Beauregard, 1998:54).

Decisive factors in the emergence of public-private partnerships in the US included a lessened role of national governments in local affairs and a declining faith in government as well as an aversion of taxes. Furthermore, a critical factor was weak local economies. Governments were assumed to require the private sector's capital in order to address the problems of weak local economies (Beauregard, 1998; Harding, 1998). As Stephenson notes, politicians and executives '...have embraced such relationships [i.e. public-private partnerships] as a central vehicle by which vital private capital can be attracted to otherwise economically declining or depressed communities' (1991:109).⁴

In Britain, many local authorities entered cooperation with private sector actors because the central government exercised influence on them to do so. This is very different from the US case, where a lessened role of the federal government was a triggering factor to the creation of partnerships. Traditionally, there has been a rather strict formal and legal division of labor between the public and private sector in the UK and there has not been a strong tradition of organizing public-private relations through participation in institutions (Harding, 1998:72). With the accession of a Conservative Government in 1979, the reasonably predictable balance between central and local government disappeared and during the 1980s one of the key themes of the Conservative Government was to increase the role of

⁴ Note that Beauregard argues, that although most authors in this tradition seem to confine public-private partnerships to weak local economies of postwar America (for instance, Stephenson, 1991) there are also authors that do not solely confine partnerships to distressed cities but also focus on partnerships engaged in resource mobilization on a more general level, '*that is, those concerned with expanding markets or increasing the market capacity of local entities for the purpose of enhancing local economic growth*' (Beauregard, 1998).

the private sector in the delivery of public goods and services (Harding, 1998; Ghobadian et al., 2004:3). In order to retain a role for themselves local governments often chose 'the partnership route' (Harding, 1998). Hence, in the UK case, the central government was a catalyst for the establishment of public-private partnerships in local economies in the 1980s.

In the local regeneration approach the concept public-private partnerships refers to activities that apply private and public resources to perform specific tasks. Representatives of the public and the private sector establish an instrumental, calculative and more or less enduring relationship for mutual benefit (Stoker, 1998). Local regeneration partnerships are all about how local governments cooperate with local businesses in order to enhance local development. Such cooperation can take on many forms but some defining characteristics are that the partnerships involve: a) two or more actors, as a minimum one of which is public; b) each participant is a principal; c) partnerships are continuing relationships among the actors; d) each of the participants brings something to the partnership and, e) they share the responsibility for the outcomes (Peters, 1998).⁵ Hence, the exchanges between the partners must be 'unforced exchanges', which are based on 'inducement and mutual interest', not command (Harding, 1998:78). These characteristics rule out service contracts and outsourcing, which are types of PPP that for instance can be found within the governance approach (see below).

Some recurring issues in the regeneration approach are issues of democratization, accountability and equity. Involving the private sector in the delivery of public goods and services gives rise to normative questions such as whether or not it damages the democratic structures of the urban economies. As Peters notes, the public sector might risk 'giving up too much of its responsibility to the public for limited gains for that public (1998:29). There is also the danger of the 'private appropriation of the public interest' (Peters, 1998; originally Lowi, 1979).⁶

What is interesting to note in relation to the local redevelopment or local regeneration approach is that it existed long before the heydays of New Public Management. Already in the late 1970s American scholars were occupied with explaining the worth and merits of partnerships in local economic development. As early as in 1984, one author noted that every year "...the public-private concept is growing and taking on new meanings and new advocates" (Durenberger, 1984:7). Keeping this in mind, it is more or less misleading to say that PPP is a natural continuation or a part of the NPM or, as for instance the trade unions in the UK suggest, that PPP can be viewed as 'back-door-privatization' (see Flinders, 2005:220).⁷ There might be some truth in these statements in relation to some PPP approaches, but certainly not all. It would be more correct to say, as Stoker does,

⁵ It should be noted that similar defining characteristics are often used by authors belonging to the other PPP traditions (see page xx below).

⁶ Note that similar considerations are also present in the other PPP approaches. (for instance, the infrastructure approach).

⁷ There might be some truth in this in relation to some PPP approaches, but certainly not all.

that the *increased* use of PPP can be assumed to be a part of changing governance structures (Stoker, 1998:34, my emphasis).

Some authors point out that partnerships give associations to corporate forms of governance and that this new phenomenon hardly implies anything more than a continuation of local corporatist structures (Andersen, 2004, originally Bailey et al, 1995; Savitch, 1998). According to Savitch, the new thing about PPP is that governments have 'come to espouse PPPs systematically and as an integral part of national purpose'... 'PPPs have taken on a new and exalted status, and are in the process of achieving an unprecedented role in governance and economic development' (1998:176). Whatever the reason for the increased popularity of the PPP concept during the 1990s and the early 21st century, it should be noted that the historical roots of the PPP concept itself can be traced back to the American urban governance literature dealing with the interaction between the public and private sector in local communities in the light of the declining economical base of post-World War II American cities.

The Policy Approach

The strand in the PPP literature which I refer to as 'the policy approach' primarily originates from the American public policy literature (see Rosenau, 2000 for an example). In this approach, the PPP concept is quite open-ended. It does not encompass any specific form of public-private cooperation but instead it mainly focuses on describing and analyzing public-private constellations within a certain policy area. The institutional environment and institutional set up of public-private cooperation in certain policy fields are the focus of analysis. For instance, Rosenbaum talks about the institutional challenges in relation to public-private partnerships in the commercial nuclear power sector in the US. More precisely, he talks about the industry's 'institutional misdesign' referring to the legal and political structures (Rosenbaum, 2000:65). Similarly, Stiglitz and Wallsten (2000) address government support of private sector research and development in the US as being an example of a public-private partnership. In the same way, the US RECLAIM emission trading system is considered to be a PPP (Kamieniecki, Shafie and Silvers, 2000).⁸ Some scholars talk about public-private partnerships in education referring to the linkages between the public and private sectors in elementary and secondary education. For instance, public assistance to private schools and business education partnerships (where private firms in various ways can support a school) are considered formal partnerships (Levin, 2000).

In the policy approach, the focus is on how the service production in welfare programs is divided between government and private, primarily non-profits, firms by contracting out, privatization etc. (for instance, Rom, 2000). All this comes under the umbrella term PPP. Lovrich (2000) negotiates when and how social capital facilitates public/not for-profit-private partnering (cooperation). Again we

⁸ In the emission trading system the private industry is assigned the duty of maintaining and improving air quality by reducing emissions and the Government sets the parameters and standards for the system.

see a very broad understanding of the PPP concept. Schneider's (2000) treatment of PPPs in the U.S. prison system is yet an example of the PPP policy approach. According to Schneider, there are three basic types of partnerships in the history of prisons in the US; a) ownership of the facility, b) private use of prison labor, and c) private management of the facility. Hence, by partnership he seems to refer to all kinds of different forms of private involvement in the prison system including privatization and contracting out.

As should be obvious from the above, in the policy approach the word PPP is more or less used synonymously with public-private cooperation or public-private constellations in a certain policy area, i.e. more or less as a euphemism for everything. In this approach, PPP refers to the relations between the public and private sector actors in a certain policy field and analyses how the production of services or goods are divided between the public and the private sector. The ambition in this approach seems to be in each instance to identify and examine the appropriate role for the public and private sector in various policy fields. It seems evident that a partnership simply means relations or cooperation/collaboration between different actors in a certain policy area. As such privatization, outsourcing and a range of other forms of public-private cooperative arrangements are included in the policy analysis. PPP is not viewed as a policy instrument as such but rather as a term that is used in order to uncover how public-private relations are unfolded empirically in certain policy sectors.

In some ways, the policy approach is similar to the local regeneration approach. Both approaches operate with very open-ended understandings of what constitutes a public-private partnership. The main difference between the two approaches is that the first focuses primarily on public-private cooperation on the local level across varying policy sectors at the same time, while the latter focuses on public-private cooperation or relations within a certain policy sector on the national level. Furthermore, in the regeneration approach the scholars do operate with some few defining characteristics of PPPs. For instance, that each participant is a principal and that the participants share responsibility for the outcome and that the relationship is enduring, instrumental and calculative. Such defining characteristics seem to be absent in the policy approach. Hence, the policy approach can be viewed as an even more inclusive PPP approach than the local regeneration approach.

The Infrastructure Approach

There is a great deal of literature on infrastructure partnerships. This literature deals with public-private cooperation in relation to diverse financial arrangements. For instance BOT (build-own-transfer), BOOT (build-own-operate-transfer), DBO (design-build-operate), and different Sale-and-Lease-Back arrangements (see chapter nine in Savas, 2000, for an overview). Most official PPP websites around the world refer to such infrastructure partnerships and not the softer, loose and informal versions of PPP, which can be found in some of the other PPP approaches, e.g. the local regeneration approach and the policy approach. Thus the

homepage of the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships (www.pppcouncil.ca), the National Council for Public-Private Partnerships in the US (www.ncppp.org) and the Federal Highway Administration in the US (www.fhwa.dot.gov) all seem exclusively or primarily to refer to the infrastructure version of PPP.

Similarly, in Denmark it is the infrastructure approach which is prevailing on the policy agenda. PPP was introduced by the Danish Government only a few years ago⁹. It is evident that when speaking of PPP the Danish Government does in fact have the infrastructure version of PPP in mind.¹⁰ The same goes for the governments in many other countries (for example, the US, Canada and the Netherlands). Recently, a Danish Consultancy presented a report on barriers to establishing PPPs in Denmark. This report was ordered by the government and it solely focuses on infrastructure partnerships (National Agency for Enterprise and Construction, 2005). Some people claim that Denmark is a laggard when it comes to the use of PPP in the delivery of public services.¹¹ In reality, in the light of some of the other PPP approaches presented here, Denmark has a strong tradition of PPPs. This is only yet an example of how the lack of conceptual clarity and the failure to distinguish between different PPP ‘schools’ or ‘approaches’ leads to dubious conclusions. An example of a long-standing Danish PPP is for instance the partnership between the Danish public sector and the commercial company Falck.¹² This partnership has existed for nearly a century (Greve and Hodge, forthcoming) but in the infrastructure approach this cooperation does not qualify as a PPP. The confusion about whether or not Denmark has any PPPs highlights the inconclusiveness that exists around the PPP concept.

Amusingly, there are scholars, who claim that the kinds of public-private cooperation that are dealt with in the infrastructure approach are not PPPs by any means. For instance, Klijn and Teisman (forthcoming) distinguish between PPP contracts or concessions (e.g. infrastructure projects), and PPP as organizational cooperation projects. They go as far to claim that the former type is not a PPP at all but just ‘...a revamped form of tendering...’ (Klijn and Teisman, forthcoming). This is a very bold statement considering the fact that much of the recent PPP literature in fact exclusively deals with infrastructure partnerships.

⁹ See the Danish Ministry of Economics and Business Affairs, 2002; the Danish Ministry of Finance 2003a; the Danish Ministry of Finance 2003b and the Danish Ministry of Economics and Business Affairs, 2004.

¹⁰ See the Danish Government’s ‘Action Plan for Public-Private Partnerships (Danish Ministry of Economics and Business Affairs, 2004).

¹¹ For instance, at a conference organized by the Confederation of Danish Industries in May 2005, Jørgen Rosted, the Director of the Research Unit FORA, which is a unit under the Danish Ministry of Economics and Business Affairs, claimed that there are hardly any PPPs in Denmark in the strict sense of the words and that Denmark was lagging behind other countries in this area.

¹² Falck is now part of the global company Group 4 Falck. Initially Falck provided an ambulance service in the Danish capital Copenhagen. Today, fire fighting and other rescue operations are included in the business (Greve & Hodge, forthcoming).

Within the infrastructure approach there are varying definitions of what constitutes a PPP. In most instances, the definitions are quite inclusive and they incorporate a wide variety of financial arrangements between the public and private sector. For some, contracts, franchises, and divestments are public-private partnerships (see Savas, 2000:241). Others operate with a more narrow understanding of PPP where a project is only considered a PPP if the private contractor either *finances* and/or *operates* the project (Tvarnø, 2005; Government of Quebec, 2004, National Agency for Enterprise and Construction, 2005). Other arrangements, where the private sector for instance designs and builds a project and the public sector finances and maintains the project, are not considered to be PPPs but rather conventional modes of cooperation.

Within the infrastructure approach, there is a distinct strand of partnership literature dealing with Private Finance Initiative partnerships (PFI/PPP). This is a certain kind of partnership, which originates from the UK and subsequently has been spread to many other countries, for instance Portugal, Holland and Australia (National Agency for Enterprise and Construction, 2005:7). The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) was introduced by the UK Conservative Government of John Major in 1992. It came about in order to increase the amount of privately financed projects. This was also one of the reasons why the 'Ryrie Rules' from 1981 were formally abolished in 1989 (Spackman, 2002:284-285). The Ryrie Rules prescribed that a project should only be privately financed if this was more cost effective than public financing (Spackman, 2000). Since the abolishment of the Ryrie Rules did not bring along more privately financed projects, the Government launched the Private Finance Initiative in 1992. It was an effort '*...to address the underinvestment in public assets to secure the long-term future of public services*' (Ghobadian et al., 2004:6). The Private Finance Initiative provides a way of funding capital investments in infrastructure such as roads, tunnels, harbors, and schools. It enables private contractors to design, build, operate and own public sector facilities such as schools and hospitals (Falconer & McLaughlin, 2000). Contracts typically last for 25-30 years and they involve private financing. By 2003, PFI had delivered over 600 new operational facilities (HM Treasury, 2003) and in 2003-2004, PFI investments made up 11 % of total investment in public services in the UK (Flinders, 2005:221).

Research to date on PFI/PPP has primarily examined the performance of such projects (narrow material and economic considerations), while research on the operation of PPP has been more limited (Ghobadian et al., 2004:8, 289). For instance, typical research questions have been; does PPP give value for money (VfM), do the services or goods produced have the right quality, and does PPP deliver on time and budget? Furthermore, there has been a predominant focus on financial and legal issues (for instance, contractual matters and risk transfer).

Although introduced by a Conservative Government, after the general election in 1997, Labour adopted the PFI scheme and indeed PFI has been expanded under the Labour Government. Hence, the number and average value of PFI projects have increased (Ghobadian et al., 2004:7) under Labour, and the use of the term PPP has

also become much broader. Today, the UK Government does not only use the PPP concept in relation to PFI deals but also in relation to a wide range of other arrangements where the public and private sector cooperate with one another. Ghobadian et al. note that one might distinguish between at least five distinct ways that the concept is used in the UK context (2004:274-275); as long-term service contracts (outsourcing), strategic partnerships, PFI projects, private sector ownership into state owned businesses, and wider markets (i.e. partnership arrangements where public-sector assets and know-how are exploited commercially). A House of Commons research paper (2001) further distinguishes between three types of PFI: free standing projects, joint ventures and purchase of service from the private sector involving capital outlay and long term contracts, the latter being the most common form of PFI (Ghobadian et al., 2004:284). Correspondingly, Shaoul observes that ‘the objectives and rationale of the policy [i.e. the British PPP/PFI policy] have changed over time’. In the beginning the major argument was that PPPs would enable the public sector to access finance for capital investment without breaching the commitments under the Maastricht Treaty (macro economic argument). Recently the microeconomic argument about ‘risk transfer’ and ‘value for money’ is put forward (2003:186, see also Flinders, 2005). This corresponds with the broadened usage of the concept.¹³

As some authors have observed, PPP has become ‘*an umbrella term that is used both interchangeably with and includes the Private Finance Initiative (PFI)*’ (Shaoul 2003:186). For instance, the PPP Forum – a forum initiated by the private sector in order to promote the benefits of PPP in UK – defines PPP as being ‘*any alliance between public bodies, local authorities or central government, and private companies*’. Similarly, the PPP Program (4ps) – a local government procurement expert in the UK providing advice and skills development to local authorities undertaking partnerships defines PPP as being ‘*a generic term for the relationships formed between the private sector and public bodies often with the aim of introducing private sector resources and/or expertise in order to help provide and deliver public sector assets and services*’. Both examples illustrate that in the UK context the PPP concept no longer exclusively refers to PFI infrastructure projects but to all sorts of public-private cooperative arrangements.

There has been some criticism of the increasing scope of usage by the UK government (see examples in Falconer & McLaughlin, 2000:124) and some go as far to say that partnership is simply a buzzword which is used to convey a feeling of comfort rather than exact meaning (Falconer & McLaughlin, 2000:124: originally Beckett, 1998). Corry (2004:27) notes that the Labour Government confuses different types of PPPs and does not distinguish between different types of partnerships such as the bundling of services, involving private finance, and regular contracting out ‘... *Labour ministers tended to mix all these things up.*’, Corry notes.

¹³ Some scholars argue that the macro economic argument is largely false, since all PFI capital spending in UK between 1999 and 2002 could have been financed through traditional methods without breaking either the *golden rule* or the *sustainable investment rule* (see Flinders, 2005:235).

Although PPP has become an umbrella term, many people usually still refer to the long term PFI contract when they talk about PPP. Furthermore, much of what is published today on PPP – especially in the UK and the European context – is in fact about PFI projects and not all the other “new” forms of partnerships (although this is not always made clear). Moreover, it is also typically PFI projects that are registered in UK PPP databases and not the other forms of public-private cooperation that are also encompassed by the PPP concept; see for instance, Partnerships UK (<http://www.partnerships.uk.org.uk/index.html>) and the HM Treasury (<http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/>). Considering the significant amount of resources allocated to the PFI program in the UK, there is perhaps nothing peculiar about this.

To recapitulate, there is a distinct literature that deals with infrastructure partnerships. Within this approach there are different understandings of what constitutes a PPP. Some state that in order to be a PPP the finance and the operation or maintenance of a project must be included in the arrangement. Others operate with more broad usages of the concept. Finally, it should be noted that the launching pad for the increased interest in PPP in the 1990s and in the beginning of the 21st century was the Private Finance Initiative of the UK Government. This initiative instigated an explosive amount of literature dealing with PFI/PPP. During the past decade, the UK has expanded its use of the concept and the scholarly work on PPP is now also proliferating in relation to other PPP types (see the section on the governance approach below). Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind, that more often than not, PPP is still used synonymously with the PFI/PPP in the UK context.

The Development Approach

By the development approach, I refer to the approach taken to PPP by international non-governmental organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations as well as other national and international governmental and non-governmental actors involved in development programs and policies. Here, the focus is for instance on combating corruption, nation-building, the challenges of poverty and social deprivation, environmental challenges, and global disasters. Furthermore, PPPs are means of providing sustainable infrastructure. For instance, the World Bank has a Public-Private Partnership in Infrastructure (PPPI) program, which has the goal of establishing a business environment conducive to the development of PPP for the provision of infrastructure services.¹⁴ Among other things, the program aims at providing knowledge on options and mechanisms for securing PPPs, educating regulators and authorities on modern regulation tools, and providing an

¹⁴ August 2005

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/WBI/WBIPROGRAMS/PPPILP/0,,menuPK:461142~pagePK:64156143~piPK:64154155~theSitePK:461102,00.html>

understanding of the interests of main contracting parties in an infrastructure project transaction.¹⁵

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) similarly has a range of PPPs to help meet sustainable development objectives. For instance, there is a program for PPP for the Urban Environment (PPPUE) aiming at alleviating poverty through public-private partnerships. The goal of the program is ‘...to increase access of the urban poor to basic services such as water, sanitation, solid waste management and energy by promoting inclusive partnerships between local government, business and communities’.¹⁶ Additionally, there is a program called the SEED Initiative, which is a joint initiative by a network of international organizations (including UNDP, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources and the United Nations Environment Programme). The program focuses on innovative partnerships between local stakeholders from both the public, private and the civil sector. Under the auspices of this program, there is for instance a project where a network of women slum dwellers in India collaborates with UK engineers and a French water company in order to improve water delivery in their communities. Another example is the collaboration between a consortium of European companies, the Ecuadorian Government and coffee farmers to ensure that the water is not contaminated by pesticides.¹⁷ Basically, the SEED Initiative intends to support and build the capacity of locally-driven entrepreneurial partnerships to contribute to the delivery of the Millennium Development Goals and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. The UN partners of the program work closely with the German Federal Ministry for Environment, the government of the United States, and the UK and Norwegian environment ministries.¹⁸

The Seed Initiative and the PPPUE are the ‘flagship’ PPP programs of the UNDP but the organization also supports other PPP initiatives in collaboration with governments, international institutions and non-governmental organizations. One such initiative is the Partnership for Principle 10 (PP10), which was developed as a Sustainable Development Partnership under the auspices of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. The PP10 aims at enhancing public access to information, participation, and justice for environmentally sustainable decisions.¹⁹ Finally, there is the ‘Unleashing Entrepreneurship: Making Business Work for the Poor’ initiative, which is a report conducted by UNDP on how the potential of the

¹⁵ 8 August 2005

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/WBI/WBIPROGRAMS/PPPILP/0,,contentMDK:20267229~menuPK:461110~pagePK:64156158~piPK:64152884~theSitePK:461102,00.html>

¹⁶ 8 August 2005 <http://pppue.undp.org/>

¹⁷ See <http://seedinit.org/>

¹⁸ 8 August 2005

<http://seedinit.org/mainpages/about/introduction/index.php?PHPSESSID=75721f30432c12099a3b516e94ed44ec>

¹⁹ <http://www.pp10.org/about.htm>

private sector and entrepreneurship can be unleashed in developing countries and how the private sector can be engaged in that challenge.²⁰

The UNDP examples illustrate that PPP in the development context can take on varying forms.²¹ Development PPPs can be infrastructure projects, strategic partnerships or entrepreneurial partnerships. There are as such not any defining characteristic of a development PPP. What distinguishes the development approach from the other approaches is that the partnerships take place in a development context. PPP in relation to development raises quite other issues than PPPs in for instance the policy approach or the local regeneration approach. The essential point is that there exists a distinct PPP development tradition and within this tradition continuous learning takes place. These policy lessons cannot automatically and without problems be transferred to PPP practice in western democracies.

In the development context, the term ‘partnership’ has a mixed origin (Hailey, 2000:313). Some point to a World Bank report from 1968 that argued that future development strategies should emphasize cooperation between donor and recipient, and others point to radical solidarity movements from the 1960’s and 1970’s (Hailey, 2000:313). Today, the partnership concept “...is increasingly used in a pragmatic way to describe and define a variety of development relationships” (Hailey, 2000:313).

The Governance approach

By the governance approach, I refer to work on PPP where the concept covers a great variety of cooperative arrangements between the public and private sector. What distinguishes the governance approach from the other approaches is; first, that it does not deal with PPP in any specific context. PPPs are dealt with at all levels of government and not only on for instance, the local level or in relation to development.

Secondly, PPP analyses are not confined to specific policy sectors, but rather they are approached from a governance perspective. Here, I use Rhodes understanding of the word governance. In his terminology, the concept governance refers to ‘a *new* process of governing; or a *changed* condition of ordered rule; or the *new* method by which society is governed’ (1996:652-653). In the governance approach, PPP is, implicitly or explicitly, approached as being an integral part of this ‘new way of governing’. For instance, some authors note that the emergence of partnerships is connected to and influenced by changed relations between what is public and what is private, changed ways of governing the society as well as a development towards more project organization in the public sector (Mörth and Sahlin-Andersson, forthcoming). Others explicitly view PPP in the context of the appearance of the network society (Klijn & Teisman, 2000). PPP is viewed as a

²⁰ <http://www.undp.org/cpsd/indexF.html> and <http://www.undp.org/cpsd/documents/report/english/fullreport.pdf>

²¹ See Osei (2004) for an example of a typology of partnerships for development. The typology is developed on the basis of the criteria of ‘agency’ and ‘purpose’ (Osei, 2004:253-254).

continuation of the NPM of the 1980s and the 1990, and management instruments related to NPM are viewed as being PPPs; for instance contractual agreements for the delivery of services (see Domberger and Fernandez, 1999; Kettl, 1993).

A third characteristic of the governance approach is that there is a predominant emphasis on organizational and management aspects. For instance, the focus is on issues of managing partnerships, trust and interaction processes (Reeve and Hatter, 2004; Klijn and Teisman, 2000, Klijn and Teisman, forthcoming; Huxham and Vangen, 2000).²² Unlike for instance the infrastructure approach, the governance approach does not pay heavy attention to financial arrangements or legal issues. Rather, the governance approach encompasses more 'softer' notions of PPP where cooperation/collaboration and processes are the central focus of analysis. This is perhaps best exemplified in a recent publication by Klijn and Teisman where they – as noted earlier – state that the contract form of PPP, as it for instance is found in the English Private Finance Initiative, is not a PPP at all (Klijn & Teisman, forthcoming). In order to be a PPP, they say, there has to be some form of extensive co-production during the whole process. In PFI arrangements co-production is limited and occurs primarily prior to the tendering process (Klijn & Teisman, forthcoming). According to Klijn and Teisman, the defining characteristic of a 'true' PPP is that it is an organizational cooperation project which entails 'close-knit and intensive' cooperation. Moreover, the public party does not take on a role of supervision, as it does in the PFI model, rather the relationship between the two sectors is marked by joint decision-making (Klijn & Teisman, forthcoming). Wettenhall makes a similar point indicating that 'true partnerships' involve horizontal non-hierarchical relationships (Wettenhall, 2003:90). It should be noted that not all the collaborative arrangements that I have listed under the governance approach share this third characteristic, since it rules out outsourcing and other types of service contracts which also belong to the governance approach.

Finally, what characterizes the bulk of the literature, that I have chosen to coin the governance approach, is that it is of recent date and that it encompasses a myriad of different ways of dealing with PPP as it has emerged especially in the UK and Europe during the late 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century. What unites the governance approach literature is that it cannot in any meaningful way be categorized in any of the other PPP approaches. Hence, what I have chosen to coin the 'governance approach' is a patchwork of different ways that PPP is approached and understood today. It is a melting pot approach which encompasses innovative understandings of the concept that have emerged in the light of the increased popularity the concept has gained especially in the past 5-10 years.

Since the late 1990's public-private partnerships (PPPs) have ranged highly on the management and policy agenda all around the globe. There has been devoted

²² It should be noted that process related aspects and management issues have started to appear in publications on infrastructure PPP projects too – although only to a very limited degree (for instance, Reeve & Hatter, 2004; National Audit Office, 2001).

massive attention to PPPs both by academics, politicians, state officials, experts, consultants, international organizations and several others. Conferences have been held on the subject as well as professional meetings, seminars, workshops and so on. Furthermore, networks, working groups and other arenas of discussion and knowledge-sharing have been established in many countries in the past few years. PPP has become a part of the 'Zeitgeist'. Everybody wants to do PPPs and PPPs are everywhere. PPP has become a buzzword and more and more organizations voice that they want to establish partnerships with stakeholders, with customers, with sponsors, with clients and a variety of other actors. PPPs have a very strong symbolic appeal (Pierre, 1998:198) and it is difficult on the outset to be against PPPs. Universities make partnerships with businesses²³ and businesses establish partnerships with civil sector organizations (Jested-Nielsen and Bundgaard Lind, 2003).²⁴ To make a long story short, in the past few years PPP has become what Røvik calls an 'institutionalized super standard', i.e. a globally diffused and geographically detached organizational recipe (1998:22-23). The governance approach encompasses all of these new ways of understanding PPP (apart from the new models of infrastructure PPPs such as the British PFI).

The UK Labour Government usage of the PPP concept does in several ways correspond with the governance approach put forward here in the sense that most forms of public-private cooperation are viewed as partnerships, and partnerships are in turn viewed as ways to meet the challenges that the economy faces today. Furthermore, it was only quite recently that the Labour Government extended the PPP concept to include other cooperative arrangements than the PFI. As Falconer and McLaughlin observe, the Labour Government 'displays a highly pragmatic view, acknowledging the need for a flexible system of public sector funding and service provision which makes the best use of what the public, private and voluntary sectors have to offer, through the establishment of a *wide variety of partnership* arrangements' (2000:124, emphasis added). Some authors note, that 'PPP neatly falls into the Third Way favoured by New Labour' (Ghobadian et al., 2004:8). As the chief secretary to the Treasury stated in 2001, it does not matter who delivers the services, 'what matters is what works' (Flinders, 2005:218).

There are two recently published anthologies and one anthology in press that can be labeled PPP literature within the governance approach (see Osborne, 2000; Hodge & Greve, forthcoming and Ghobadian et al. 2004). The infrastructure approach is nevertheless also present in all the three mentioned books. This is very telling of what the PPP literature of the 1990s and the 21st century looks like; either the focus is on infrastructure projects (especially PFI arrangements) or alternatively PPP is explored in a much broader manner including amongst other things outsourcing and strategic partnerships but also a much wider repertoire of PPP. The

²³ For instance, the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) establishes partnerships with business organizations: http://www.cbs.dk/corporate_relations CBS has its own Partnership Program.

²⁴ At Copenhagen Business School the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy is teaching students how to deal with the increased interaction between public, private and voluntary organizations (The CBS Cornet, 2005).

literature within the infrastructure approach and the governance approach is primarily European, while the literature belonging to the policy approach and the local regeneration approach seems to be most prevalent on the North American continent.²⁵

The Merits of Adopting the Five PPP approaches

Clearly, the five distinct approaches presented here do not encompass every single text written on PPP. Of course, there are scholars who would defy being categorized in any of the five constructed approaches. Some might in fact operate within several of the approaches at the same time. Although there are not ‘waterproof shutters’ between the different approaches, they might nevertheless prove very helpful in relation to enhancing research on PPP as well as providing more clarity about the multiple meanings of PPP.

The existence of the various different research traditions expounds that there is no use in trying to find an all-encompassing definition of public-private partnerships. It similarly spells out that it might be a bad idea to ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’, suggesting that PPP is just a generic term that does not have any particular meaning besides that of public-private cooperation. By doing this, we lose many of the lessons already learnt within each of the five PPP approaches (for instance, in the UK there is now extensive experience with how to deliver PFI procurement). What works in the context of redevelopment of municipalities in western democracies does not necessarily work in local areas in for instance Afghanistan or Niger. Hence, it is important to recognize that although the different approaches do not contain clear cut definitions of the PPP concept, they do certainly have distinct understandings of the concept and they refer to distinct practices. Furthermore, the different PPP approaches have divergent objects of focus, divergent origins, and typically they discuss different issues too (see table 1).

Table 1 PPP Approaches in the Literature

	Local Regeneration Approach	Policy Approach	Infrastructure Approach	Governance Approach	Development Approach
Focus	Development	Delineating and	Infrastructure	New ways of	How to

²⁵ Often work affiliated with the governance approach attempts to understand the emergence of PPPs on the policy agenda in the 1990s and the subsequent diffusion of PPP practice around the world. Besides describing PPP practice in differing contexts (Wettenhall, forthcoming; Almqvist and Högberg, forthcoming; Oppen, Sack and Wegener, forthcoming) and focusing on performance (Domberger & Fernandez, 1999, Hodge & Greve, 2005) there is also a focus on relational aspects of partnerships (see for instance Klijn and Teisman, forthcoming; Klijn and Teisman, 2000, Reeve & Hatter, 2004). Moreover, there has been done some work on the motives and the politics of PPPs (Collin, 1998b; Flinders, 2005; Coghill & Woodward; forthcoming).

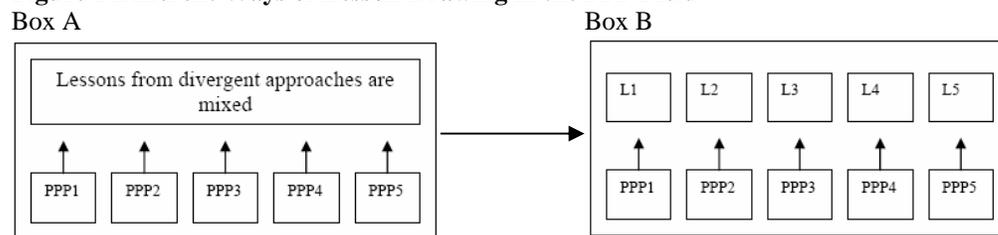
	Local Regeneration Approach	Policy Approach	Infrastructure Approach	Governance Approach	Development Approach
	of local economies, weak local economies	evaluating the public-private divide in policy sectors, the respective roles of the public and private sectors	projects; predominately from a financial or legal perspective	delivering public services	enhance development in less developed countries via public-private collaboration
Definition of PPP	No specific definition	No specific definition	The bundling of the finance, design, construction, maintenance and operation of infrastructure projects ²⁶	No specific definition	No specific definition
Central issues	Economic development, issues of democratic legitimacy	The optimal public-private constellation in different policy sectors	Contract negotiations and financial aspects, ideological debates, democratic legitimacy	Organizational and management issues, conditions for cooperation, the movement from government to governance	Development objectives such as sustainable infrastructure and alleviating poverty
Origin	US urban governance literature	Primarily US policy literature	UK Government, Private Finance Initiative (1992)	UK Government PPP policy post-1997. The movement from government to governance	Mixed genesis
Exponents	Pierre, 1998 Andersen, 2004	Rosenau, 2000	Savas, 2000	Hodge & Greve, 2005; Klijn & Teisman, 2000 & 2005	Primarily practitioners in the development field.

What is essentially the defining characteristic of many of these approaches is the *context* that they are put in. A development approach is first and foremost a development approach, because PPP is viewed as a tool for development in less developed countries. A development PPP can be both an entrepreneurial partnership at the local level and an infrastructure partnership involving various national and international governmental actors and non-governmental actors. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that by using the five distinct PPP

²⁶ Some authors within this approach do work with broader definitions of the PPP concept, where private finance and the maintenance and operation of a project do not have to be included in the definition.

approaches, it becomes possible to gather important lessons within each approach. For instance, barriers to the establishment of the PPP infrastructure projects might be completely different in Denmark respectively an African country marked by corruption, weak infrastructure and low levels of welfare. Similarly, entrepreneurial partnerships between public and private sector actors in a European city are in all probability very different from the ones that take place in rural areas in for instance Nicaragua under the auspices of the UN or some other international non-governmental organization. Distinguishing between different approaches enables more valid conclusions on what works and what does not work. Today, there seems to be a tendency to draw general conclusions about PPP without specifying that the lessons drawn only are valid in relation to a specific context (see Box A, figure 1). This heralds the danger of *talking at cross purposes* as well as the risk of putting forward misleading or false statements about PPP similar to the once mentioned in the opening of this paper. A more desirable practice would be to draw approach specific lessons (see Box B, figure 1). For instance, authors within the local regeneration approach should explicitly state that although PPP in the local economic development context might act as channels for local mobilization, the opposite might be true for other PPP areas.

Figure 1 Different Ways of Lesson-Drawing in the PPP Field



The merit of delineating the context in which one does research on PPP is that it enables cumulative knowledge, more apt generalizations about the pros and cons of PPP, analytical clarity, and last but not least it helps us to avoid misleading statements such as: PPP is a resent phenomenon that should be viewed in the context of the shift from government to governance; that the UK is a leading country in relation to the use of PPP; that PPP can act as a channel for local mobilization and participation; or that PPP contracts or concessions such as infrastructure projects and PFI arrangements are not PPP in the true sense of the word. These statements are only valid within certain contexts. Hence, although the PPP concept itself is open-ended within the majority of the approaches identified here, it does have its merits to actively adopt them in future research on PPP.

Previous Attempts at Classifying PPP

In the vast PPP literature there have been many previous attempts at defining or classifying the PPP concept. This section will review some of these attempts and will demonstrate that, although useful at some level, they do not enhance research in a sufficient way nor do they properly elucidate the multiple approaches to PPP. Subsequently, I will afresh make an argument for using the PPP approaches developed above.

Systems of classifications

Harding differentiates between defensive, offensive and shotgun partnerships (1998:74). A defensive partnership takes form when agency A can no longer achieve what it previously achieved by itself, e.g. because of reduced resource base. An offensive partnership is a partnership which is established when Agency A wants to achieve some new things which require resources, expertise or knowledge beyond its competence. Finally, shotgun partnerships refer to situations where the governing authority demands that A enters into a partnership, i.e. externally induced partnerships. This typology might prove helpful in some analytical contexts, i.e. in the local generation approach, but it is not a system of classification relevant for all five PPP approaches identified here. The same goes for Klijn and Teisman's distinction between PPP contracts and PPP organizational cooperation projects (forthcoming) as well as Hodge and Greve's distinction between social (or organizational) partnerships and economic partnerships (Hodge and Greve, forthcoming). Such PPP types can be found within one single PPP approach; for example the development approach or the local regeneration approach. Elsewhere, Hodge and Greve argue that the biggest divide seems to be between those who view PPP as a governance tool and those who see it as a language game (2005a). Again, on some level it is useful to operate with this division but it does not capture the rich variety of PPP approaches recognized here. The same argument applies in relation to Koppenjan's distinction between respectively the 'alliance model' and the 'concession model' (Koppenjan, 2005:137-138) as well as Dunn's distinction between policy level partnerships and project-based partnerships.

A range of further PPP typologies can be extracted from the literature. The dimensions used in order to classify different types of PPP are for instance: degree of transaction costs (Stoker, 1998:40), the nature of the financial and organizational relationship in a specific partnership (Hodge & Greve, 2005a), the extent of the target (broad/limited), types of agents (national/local), degree of formalization and motivations (Andersen, 2004:4). Other parameters could be: 'purpose' (and whether the partnership is strategic or project driven), 'who' (key actors and the structure of their relationship), 'when' (the timing or stage of development of the partnership process and changing relationships and activities over time), 'where' (the spatial dimension), and 'how' (how the activities are carried out, implementation mechanisms). Another example is Linder and Rosenau's use of 'revenue sources' and the 'legal standing' of the entities involved as parameters for classification (Linder & Rosenau, 2000).

Although helpful at some level, the examples of classification above do not make clear that there exist qualitatively different PPP approaches. The different dimensions can be used *within* different PPP approaches in order to facilitate *approach specific* typologies but they fail to illuminate that there are different PPP research traditions with different accumulation of knowledge; knowledge which

can not be easily transferred from one PPP approach to the other. Furthermore, they do not remedy the current conceptual disorder in the PPP literature.

The Search for Common Denominators

Frequently, scholars indicate that there exist some generic characteristics common to all public-private partnerships. For instance it is claimed that public-private partnerships as a minimum involve a) a public and a private actor, b) an enduring cooperation between these actors, c) risk-sharing, and d) a principal-principal relationship (for instance, Andersen, 2004; Pierre, 1998; Hodge, 2004:37; Klijn & Teisman, 2004).²⁷

In the light of the rich variety of PPPs identified in the previous sections, the argument about the existence of any such overarching defining characteristics of PPPs is undermined. Although being general in nature, these characteristics do not apply to the qualitatively different types of PPPs recognized here. For instance, each participant in an infrastructure PPP is *not* a principal. Only the public sector organization is a principal. The private sector actor is an agent, and a monitoring regime is established to ensure that the agent fulfills his obligations. The same holds true for service contracts and outsourcing. Similarly, the argument that partnerships are long-term continuing relationships does *not* fit all PPPs. Contracting out does not necessarily mean anything more than a handful of years of contracting relations between a public and private sector party. The same applies to development partnerships at the grass root level involving representatives from the civil sector. Furthermore, all forms of PPPs do *not* necessarily entail the trait that the public and private sector actor share the responsibility of the partnership. For instance, one author points out that the concept of risk transfer in the context of essential services is fundamentally flawed (Shaoul, 2003:193). Furthermore, Flinders (2005) has argued that the argument about risk transfer is potentially hollow, as the government cannot allow essential public services to fail.²⁸ Additionally, within the policy approach, risk-sharing is not necessarily an issue at all. Finally, in the light of some of the newer understandings of PPP, actors from the private sector need not be involved in a PPP, rather the partners of the partnership can be public-public or public-civil, private-civil or even private-private.

The only trait that seems to be capable of encompassing all the various PPP types presented here is that actors from various institutional settings collaborate in different ways, in different degrees, and with different aims. Consequently, the only common denominator in the PPP is 'collaboration', and this is most certainly not a satisfactory definition or characterization of the PPP concept. This leaves us with a nebulous definition of PPP, similar to the one presented in the introduction

²⁷ Note that Hodge argues that this is the common ground among PPP definitions in Australasia. He recognizes that there exist broader understandings of the concept elsewhere.

²⁸ Note that the statements of Flinders and Shaoul are primarily made in the context of PFI/PPP.

of this paper, and it does not do much in relation to enhancing analytical clarity in the increasingly fragmented and pre-theoretical PPP literature.

However, there is a way forward. Rather than dismissing the PPP concept altogether (as being an empirical concept with no core) we can acknowledge that *within* each PPP approach there might be some common definitional denominators. Hence, instead of searching for some critical core of PPP, we need to settle with the notion that *multiple cores exist*. This could be a potential manner to mitigate some of the bewilderment that currently exists in the PPP literature.

Summary

This paper argues that previous attempts at defining and classifying the concept of public-private partnerships have been inadequate. These efforts do not take into account that there exist qualitatively different PPP research traditions, and hence they fail to recognize that it is not logically possible to determine an all-embracing definition of PPP that does justice to all the disparate meanings of the concept. Erroneously, it has been presumed that there is some sort of basic core to the PPP concept and that it is possible to identify this core and develop a universal definition of PPP. The regrettable consequence is misleading statements about PPP and a tendency to mix conclusions from dissimilar research traditions. Some have acknowledged the multiple meanings of PPP and advocate a resignation from trying to define the concept; deeming it to be exclusively an empirical concept. As a compromise between abandoning the concept altogether on the one hand and finding a universal core on the other hand, this paper proposes that scholars explicitly place themselves within a research tradition when doing research on 'PPP'. The paper identifies five distinct PPP approaches: a) the local regeneration approach, b) the policy approach, c) the infrastructure approach, d) the development approach, and e) the governance approach. Within each research approach, there is a qualitatively different understanding of the PPP concept; there is a dissimilar focus of analysis; and each approach has a distinct background/origin. While some PPP approaches focus on local economic development by means of for instance joint ventures, others focus on the respective roles of the public and private sector within policy sectors. Yet others focus on how to facilitate sustainable infrastructure in developing countries. Some have their origin in the US urban governance literature, others in the UK Private Finance Initiative of the early 1990s. On a variety of levels the identified PPP approaches differ from each other. This paper concludes that in order to avoid further confusion in the PPP field, we need to recognize the existence of these dissimilar research traditions. Rather than dismissing the PPP concept altogether as being merely an empirical concept this paper argues that *within* each PPP approach there are some common definitional denominators. Instead of searching for some critical core of PPP, we need to settle with the notion that in fact, *multiple cores exist*. By adopting the solution offered here, research can be advanced and cumulative knowledge enabled.

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