

# THE MATHEMATICS OF PARTNERSHIP IN THE ASSOCIATION WORLD

IF WE CONSIDER THE NATURE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN THE ASSOCIATION WORLD, IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMIND OURSELVES THAT THE ASSOCIATIONAL PROCESS ITSELF IS AN EXERCISE IN PARTNERSHIP. FOR WHAT IS AN 'ASSOCIATION' IN ITS MOST BASIC FORM THAN A 'PARTNERSHIP' OF 2 AND MORE INDIVIDUALS (OR ENTITIES)? AND THIS PARTNERSHIP IS A COMING TOGETHER FOR COMMON PURPOSE, MUTUAL INTEREST AND BENEFIT (AVOIDING ACTIONS WHICH WOULD BE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE OR INJURIOUS TO THE INTERESTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL PARTIES). **TEXT JOEL FISHER - HEAD, UIA CONGRESS DEPT AND CO-EDITOR OF THE YEARBOOK OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

There is a saying in English that in some circumstances the *'whole is greater than the sum of its parts'*. A well crafted automobile is more than a chassis, seats and an engine; a championship caliber football team is more than 11 people on the field; and so too for a healthy association.

But no association exists in a vacuum, some may be fairly self-contained or solitary, but all operate within certain contexts. And it is here, within issue areas and operating environments that the partnerships become clear. Partnership, or cooperation, between an association and other external bodies shares

the same aims as the general associational impulse: mutual benefit, furthering of causes, mutual support in the face of challenges or dangers. Because, again, the whole may well be stronger than the combined parts.

## OPERATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Some cities are magnets for association headquarters because they are the seats of decision-making and governance or are home to significant intergovernmental bodies. Washington DC, New York, Brussels, Geneva, Paris, Bangkok etc. are all examples of this. But other cities have taken the industrial promotion model and applied it to

the international organization world. They actively advance the headquartering of international bodies through facilitation and assistance schemes. Montréal International ([www.montrealinternational.com](http://www.montrealinternational.com)) is one of the best known cases of host support & services and other cities, like Singapore, are making similar initiatives.

In other cities, cooperative office space is developed to house associations or trade unions. Brussels is home to two such partnership schemes: the Maison des Associations Internationales ([www.mai.be](http://www.mai.be)) and the International Trade Union House (ITUH). Similar operations providing affordable office space and common services for tenants are found in other cities. Subsidies / subventions offered by conference host cities, or those hoping to be the host city, are a form of partnership which clearly has an impact on association and delegate financial bottom-lines, but which are also causing concern in the meetings industry in relation to 'competing on merit' and a level playing field. Whether it is 100 delegates or 2,000 destinations are attuned to the financial benefits of

attracting foreign visitors through conference business and are working with their own partners to make the best possible approach to the association planners.

Partnerships like the Best Cities Alliance ([www.bestcities.net](http://www.bestcities.net)) allow convention bureaus to promote the strength of their group across five continents. In the hotel industry similar alliances (Luxury Hotels of the World, Global Hotels Alliance, Great Hotels of the World, etc.) allow smaller or independent operations to benefit from a larger profile and business structure while maintaining their unique individuality.

In the recent UIA global survey of international associations one question was asked: *'Have you partnered with other distinctly separate international associations to organise a major event?'*

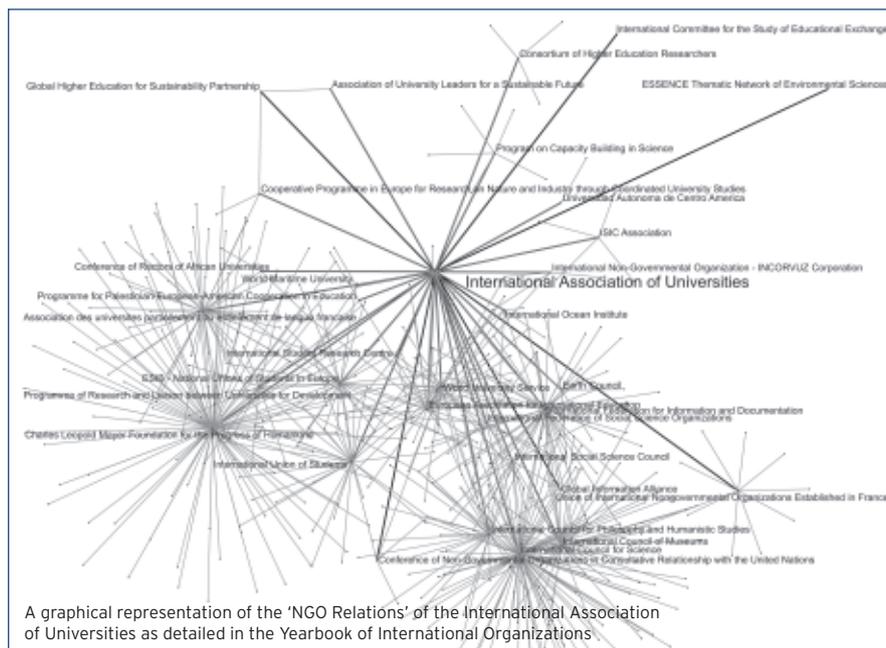
- + 26% answered: Yes, on a unique occasion
- + 26% answered: Yes, this is or will be a regular occurrence

Elsewhere in the survey a number of respondents had indicated their concern with the proliferation of meetings in their disciplines and an ever-tighter calendar. In light of these concerns, partnering on an event has its clear initial advantages as well as those that are logical conclusions from bringing larger groups of like-interested people together - both from the meeting planner / host associations' side of things and from the delegate and content perspectives.

One would expect further innovative partnerships among associations, and among their commercial partners, as people continue to seek the best return on their investment of time and money in the current financial climate. Partnership always had inherent benefits, the current business and operational environments might make it more of a necessity.

## STRENGTH AND FLEXIBILITY OF PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS

Diversity in the type members in a partnership can add strength and increase efficacy significantly. The United Nations Global Compact ([www.unglobalcompact.org](http://www.unglobalcompact.org)) and the UN's Millennium Development Goals



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project(s) are good examples of how a broad partnership base can achieve significant success that would be well beyond the reach of the individual partners.

A look at the some 36,000 active international bodies profiled in **The Yearbook of International Organizations** gives us a unique and intense picture of partnerships at work. These linkages may be formal - such as Consultative Status granted by an intergovernmental body to an international association, membership in another organization or a Memorandum of Understanding signed between two associations with similar or complimentary interests - or they be more temporary - such as a time or issue specific coalition which dissolves when its work is complete.

With average linkages across the database running between 5 to 8 per entry, and the total number of links in the many hundreds of thousands, complex webs and networks of interests and action become visible. The simple map of the nongovernmental connections of the International Association of Universi-

ties is a good illustration of this universe of partnerships (see image above).

These links and networks cover every imaginable element of partnership in association life: sharing the responsibility for a journal; jointly organizing a congress; accreditation and certification programmes; financial and secretariat support; etc. The list goes on and on because the practical needs and operational or programmatic actions of an association are many and quite varied.

Sharing costs, information, and workloads enables a partnership to do more than a single association might do on its own. Establishing fruitful relations with suppliers and commercial partners insures positive outcomes and long-term returns for all parties. Partnerships, whether formal and rigid or fleeting and flexible, provide strong foundations for association success and critical strength to achieve goals and complete projects - an exponential compliment to the core associational process.

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