



## ▶ 'Engineering consultants wish to make the concept of innovation partnership work'

'Our firms are used to apply knowledge to the big societal challenges we face', says EFCA President Flemming Pedersen, 'but the way they do it is changing. Public and private clients want us from the start to work in a project team, together with the investor, builder, manager and operator, in order to deliver the results that meet the needs of the end user.'

A partnership approach that enables mutually beneficial co-operation and interaction for the development of innovative solutions is therefore welcomed by our industry'.



In 2010 the EU launched a strategy for sustainable growth, "Europe 2020", encouraging all sectors to innovate, educate, and make full use of modern technologies, and urging Member States to create the conditions for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Innovation Partnerships offer a good opportunity for stimulation of innovation towards sustainable economic growth.



## Innovation partnerships can deliver – if the soft skills are there to support them



Niels van Amstel

*A little more trust and a lot more listening will go a long way to helping innovation partnerships deliver what they are promising in the way of growth, jobs and sustainable living in Europe. Innovation is being hailed as a primary driver for reviving the flagging economies of Europe and, according to Niels van Amstel, Managing Director of the Dutch firm Megaborn, consulting engineers are centrally placed to join, and often lead, the development of these pioneering partnerships.*

The public-private partnerships (PPPs) of the 1990s started to deliver public services when authorities sought to share risk and gain access to more commercial funds. More recent pressures – austerity, climate change and resource scarcity, as well as a growing demand for more 'sustainable' performance – are forcing the relationships to change again. The solution seems to lie, at least in part, in innovation but how is that captured? And is it working?

Innovation is traditionally linked to technology, products and services. Mr van Amstel is one of many now calling for innovation also in working relationships. "We need an expanded view of projects," he says, when referring to the goals of improved efficiency and long-term sustainability, especially in construction and infrastructure projects. "We are talking about a process not a product," he adds, and goes on to talk about the evolution of PPPs into 'innovation partnerships'.

### More integrated approach

Consulting engineers have long been seeking earlier involvement in projects and to work more closely with public clients. They are already adept at looking into the future and costing lifecycles, and at creating added value through bringing different sectors together. These are now being viewed in a more formalised 'Sustainable Infrastructure Approach'. Complex design and management systems must be integrated with softer, non-technical skills to bring harmony to an often non-harmonious set of attitudes, views and opinions. Part of the glue for the new 'partnerships' is in clarity in communication, deep listening, trust and even empathy. "We might not share the same goals," says Mr van Amstel, "but we must share the same perspective."

**We need an expanded view of projects.**

Megaborn has been involved in some pioneering collaborations in the Netherlands with both private and public clients. "We have been part of the initial appraisal work asking 'what is the context?', 'what do people really need?' And sometimes there is no need for innovation:



Our industry is an industry of people. Our firms foster the cross-fertilization of knowledge, innovation and ideas within and between sectors and disciplines. They present new ideas from an independent perspective. They also help clients and project stakeholders to look at the broader scope and explore how things could be done differently.

According to Flemming Pedersen 'Innovation Partnerships are certainly intriguing and it will be interesting to see them in use'.

## European Innovation Partnerships

The European Commission (EC) has been pushing the concept of innovation partnerships as part of its strategy for growth and jobs, towards the creation of an 'Innovation Union'.

There are five European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs) based on the priority areas of ageing, climate change, education, water and cities. The EC believes innovations in these large and complex areas should leverage the type and scale of change required. They talk about a new 'ecosystem of innovation' where official frameworks support a more collaborative and risk-taking culture, pushing innovation from ideas into commercialisation.

The EIPs are shaping policy and signalling opportunities for new markets and new regulations. They appear to have achieved the first hurdle – to get everyone round the same table discussing the same issues.

But getting the new, collaborative way of working into regulations is more difficult.



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EFCA has member associations in 25 countries, and is the sole European federation lobbying on behalf of engineering consultancy and related services, a sector that employs around one million staff in Europe. EFCA contributes with a strong and cohesive input to legislative actions of its national associations on issues affecting market conditions. Furthermore, the organisation works as a Europe-wide platform for national associations and their member firms to gather relevant facts and discuss issues with their counterparts.

innovation itself is not the goal. The partnerships are not the solution either; they are the way to finding an efficient, long-term solution," he says. Public authorities have to adapt too but partners must be willing to take on more responsibility, to jointly talk about risk and respond collaboratively.

"The engineers we need these days are alert to the changing context," says Mr van Amstel, "they have to assess needs more broadly and communicate well. We need Engineer 2.0."

### Systems supporting sustainable infrastructure

Consulting engineers in the Netherlands are finding roadmaps and frameworks essential for progress with their Sustainable Infrastructure Approach. They have also developed a series of systems to help in its implementation: the Context Appraiser assists initial analysis and exploration of the situation; Innovation Partnerships develop closer relationships, effectively integrating stakeholders and their diverse needs; and Ambition Web translates the broad scope of a project into clear ambitions within a set of sustainability 'themes'. These are all helping to keep a project on track for people, planet and profit – though Mr van Amstel argues the addition of psychology to the mix.

"There are parts of the Netherlands where land is very slowly sinking," says Mr van Amstel providing a practical example of what he means. "So for this business park we have to make everything light – light roads, light bridges – which all require very light composites. There are now companies working on producing these light composites. There are other ideas too that we can use for lighter roads which the authorities had not known about before."

Although Megaborn works predominantly with the Dutch government, it is at the European level that Innovation Partnerships have received the most attention.

### Non-competitive dialogue – practical benefits

Innovation partnerships are a new concept in EU procurement law.

According to Mr van Amstel, the public procurement process still leads to a winner and a loser. "The winning parties make some very nice gains," he points out, "but we must widen our view and not only focus on the gains. At the moment a contractor cannot suggest 'we should do this' or 'we should do that' so with competitive dialogue it is still the contracting authorities calling the shots."

"If needs are not 100% clear you must get a dialogue with the contractor. Better dialogue leads to more sustainable infrastructure, and leads to 20% lower energy, 20% less time spent, 20% lower costs. And that can lead to 10% more employees. It is the same with the 'circular economy'; you have to think in a more integral way."

**The next step is for partners to work more equally.**

### Equality in partnerships

The next step, says Mr van Amstel, is for the partners to work more equally. "There is still an imbalance with the contracting authority and this needs to move," he says, "we want to see a 50:50 balance from the start." Ironically, this sort of collaboration is against the competition rules.

"What they are saying about partnerships is very useful," admits Mr van Amstel, "but they are using language not everyone understands. It's still not clear in the regions if 'innovation partnerships' are for local governments too. People think new models are just meant for use at the national level but that's not true, they are for everyone."