



Discussion summary

Topic: What is a boundary partner?

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INITIAL QUESTION FROM ANDREW LAWDAY (UK): Can anyone tell me why the term 'Boundary Partners' is used in Outcome Mapping? What does it really mean? Why does OM conceive of 'boundary partners' and not 'stakeholders'?

KEY POINTS:

- Boundary partners (BPs) are a subset of stakeholders, which is a general term for anyone holding a stake in a particular situation (influenced by or seeking to influence a change)
- The OM manual defines BPs as "... those individuals, groups, or organisations with whom the programme interacts directly and with whom the programme can anticipate opportunities for influence"
- The boundary language comes from systems thinking. Your BP exists on the boundary of your influence – they are outside of your control but they are within your sphere of influence and have agency within and outside of your influence through their existing societal roles and responsibilities
- BPs are often companions on a journey "reaching their hands across the boundary and agreeing to work together explicitly and systematically"
- But this is not always the case: BPs can also be opposed to what you are doing and don't always see themselves as part of the journey, nevertheless you seek to influence them and rely on them for your success (in this scenario people often change the language to 'boundary actor' to avoid the confusing language of partner)
- BP relationships are not static but change over time as your relationship with them develops
- The identification of BPs depends on who you are, i.e. what is the reference point? Are you a person, an organisation, a project, a collaboration, a network etc?
- The trick is to understand the concept and then choose the language that works best for you – don't be wedded to the terminology

RESPONSES:

SIMON HEARN (UK): I understand stakeholders as everyone who is affected by or wants to affect a change process. BPs are then a subset of stakeholders. Part of intentional design is choosing which stakeholders are boundary partners and which are not (drawing boundaries). See [here](#) for a previous discussion on this topic, and [here](#) for a relevant summary of another discussion.

CLAUDIA ROMERO (US): Here's a useful paper by Mollinga (2009): [Boundary Work and the Complexity of Natural Resources Management](#), which describes a model for 'boundary work' which may be useful in this discussion. It describes three types of boundary work that can help when working in complex settings: developing boundary concepts, configuration of boundary objects and shaping of conducive boundary settings in which these concepts, devices, and methods can be fruitfully developed and effectively put to work.

SELEMANI ZEPHIRIN (DR Congo): The Outcome Mapping (OM) manual defines boundary partners as "... those individuals, groups, or organisations with whom the programme interacts directly and with whom the programme can anticipate opportunities for influence". They can be stakeholders.

RICARDO WILSON-GRAU (Brazil): Boundary partners are outside the boundary of what an intervention can control and within the boundary of what an intervention seeks to influence. BPs can be indirectly influenced – does not only have to be directly affected by an intervention. BUT use the definition that is useful for you.

CHARLES DHEWA: Are we then assuming that the Boundary Partner remains on the boundary or can they become mainstream partners?

STEVE POWELL: I had understood a nice, concrete connotation of "boundary partner" is that they are at your boundary - concretely, you touch them with your hands. How does indirect influence come under this? If you influence through a third party then that third party becomes your boundary partner?

RICARDO WILSON-GRAU: The bottom line is: Can you make a plausible, verifiable case for having influenced in some way a change in another social actor? If yes, that change is your outcome and the social actor who changed is (or was), in effect, your boundary partner. In my experience the essence of what is or is not a "boundary partner" is that it is some actor you aim to influence, or influenced, to change and therefore, there are cases - for donors almost all cases - where your influence will be indirect.

RICK DAVIES: We need to ask whose boundary partner are we talking about? If mine, then that's straight forward – it's those I am directly in contact with. But if we are talking "the project" then that's much more fuzzy. There needs to be a clear reference point first then the question of who is the BP will become clearer.

DAD HAMDARD (Afghanistan): BP analysis helps focusing and identifying strengths and areas of improvement between partners who are directly responsible to each other for successful implementation of the program.

SCOTT NINE: We use "partners in change" to make it easier for the grassroots organisations we work with to understand.

FRED CARDEN: It's not so much the language but the concepts. Choose the language that you are most comfortable with.

KEVIN MURRAY (US): Language can be difficult to understand but the concepts are what really matter. People struggle with the word partner even before considering the boundaries. Partner implies "working with" which often isn't always the case, e.g. the School Department is neither partner nor ally but still a social actor that needs to change.

PATRICIA ROGERS (Australia): The term 'boundary partners' is useful because it emphasises the boundary where your control ends and your influence begins. Whenever I use the term 'boundary partner' I have the image of these two organisations reaching their hands across the boundary and agreeing to work together explicitly and systematically - and to evaluate how this is going.

SARAH EARL: This image gets at the reciprocal and voluntary dimensions of the relationship that the term boundary partner was trying to convey.

TIM LARSON: Yes, but sometimes you influence your BPs without their explicit consent – it's not always mutual.

TERRY SMUTYLO (Canada): three points:

1. BP applies to the interrelationship you have with an actor (stakeholder) - not to the actor alone. Actors can move in and out of being BPs. It also applies when you are trying to influence the actor's ongoing roles, responsibilities, etc. - influence intended to last beyond your intervention.
2. BPs can operate **within** the interventions sphere of influence as well as **outside** (where the actor has its ongoing societal roles, responsibilities, etc).
3. A contract could be a strategy used to influence a BP but the outcome is what the actor does after the contract ends - not the compliance with the contract terms while the contract is in force.

LAXMI PRASAD PANT (Canada): The BP concept and the whole OM logic emerged from complexity and innovation of the development sector regarding PME.

DANIEL BUCKLES (Canada): BPs must be direct users of the evaluation process. Otherwise they are being "done to" rather than engaged and "working with" the intervention and the intervention evaluation process.

JULIUS NYANGAGA (Kenya): In OM, projects should plan for and track outcomes defined as changes in behaviour, relationship, actions, policies or practices of boundary partners. But often this is not enough for organisations who need to justify results beyond boundary partners. It is tempting therefore for projects to define beneficiaries as BPs which is ok in many situations as long as they are defined such that the BP is within the sphere of influence of the projects (e.g. village committees rather than whole villages, student reps rather than students, farmer group rather than farmers, extension worker rather than government department). Also, many find Most Significant Change and Outcome Harvesting useful in exploring changes beyond the level of boundary partners.

BILL BROWN (Australia): I have found the BP concept useful to find out who might contribute/control in complex community contexts at the local, national and global levels. Four dimensions are important for me for determining BPs:

1. Values congruence: do they hold similar values?
2. Ends and means agreement: are they aligned to intended outcome – the crucial issue?
3. Action capability: can they work with you on an agreed strategy and have the required resources?
4. Time & timing: are they willing to contribute within an agreed timeframe?

BARBARA KLUGMAN (South Africa): The notion of BP 'boundary partners' did not work well for advocacy because you cannot always invite in those you wish to influence.

HEIDI SCHAEFFER (Canada): BPs do not always see themselves as "part of the journey". They are on their own emergent journey. Building shared ownership with BPs can occur over time through aligning visions and seeding awareness over time (enabling pre-conditions in theory of change, outcome challenges in OM).

FLETCHER TEMBO (UK): I share Heidi view regarding BPs – that more often than not BPs don't start with the same mind-set. Some of them are in their own transformative journey themselves. The [Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix](#) tool is useful to understand the extent to which a BP is aligned with your thinking.

ANDRE LING (India): Map the system. Identify roles, capacities and relationships of different actors and what need to change to move the system towards your vision. Your BPs are those you choose to influence directly to achieve change. Explain any action required in order to engage with BPs and why. Alternatively, expecting that BPs track changes and learn from those findings may be useful to improve your strategy or practice while supporting others' learning as well.

MARTIN MYER (South Africa): Getting a co-operative 'buy-in' from role players is not trivial. I support Heidi's point of view that BPs are influenced by their own journey experiences, which can be opposed to the desired outcome of a shared 'collective' vision.

YUTI ARIANI (Indonesia): How do you evaluate the impact of a partnership with a BP? It is too easy for a project to claim too much credit for partners' work and difficult therefore to separate the projects' outcomes from the partners.

HAL WALKER (US): At the US Environmental Protection Agency, we use our research results to inform policy adjustments of various actors. Rather than influencing we 'inform the decisions' of our BPs. As a research institution, they want to be recognised as purveyors of "unbiased information" that can be used by a variety of decision makers – in combination with other information outside of our expertise – therefore it's essential to understand whether they have the authority and capacity to use the data, information and knowledge we serve up.

MELINDA MACDONALD: I have observed how much more "animated" boundary partners are when discussing OM versus traditional RBM alone...They seem to feel much more like it's a partnership because the tools and the terminology used to evaluate the project actually reflect this

DANIEL BUCKLES (Canada): This discussion invites us to think more deeply about the actors who are affected or have influence in a situation, the relationship with the intervention (e.g. active partner within the team), and the role in the evaluation process. The [Stakeholder Analysis CLIP](#) examines the history of collaboration and conflict between different stakeholders, and their relative levels of power, interests and legitimacy. It is an open-source application using Adobe Air software in English, French and Spanish.

FINAL RESPONSE FROM ANDREW LAWDAY:

- **Response:** I appreciated the strong response to the question, the liveliness of the discussion, and the diversity of contributors. I learned a lot from the various reflections on stakeholders, partners, boundaries, influence, control, willingness, language, and utility, and the links to resources. It seems the question 'touched a nerve', perhaps because the OM community is concerned with people (BPs) and relationships, as much as systems and structures.
- **Meanings:** When referring to actors we wish to influence, the term 'boundary partners' seems more useful than 'influence targets', which evokes hard persuasion. In international development, influence is more often done through collaboration, dialogue, and provision of credible evidence, to organizations that may be defined as partners in a broad and formal sense, if not a strategic sense. Importantly, the term BP refers to actors that work within an organization's sphere of influence, and, most likely, with whom a relationship already exists.
- **Evaluation:** I asked the question because I was conducting an evaluation of activities aimed at changing one aspect of the international system. At first, it was difficult to divide the stakeholders into three groups (implementers, partners, and influence targets), as partners and targets could not be so easily divided. Later, I found that BP was primarily a way of understanding 'influence targets', that S. Earl et al (2001) [<http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Resources/Publications/Pages/IDRCBookDetails.aspx?PublicationID=121>] distinguished BPs from 'strategic partners', and that all the stakeholders could be categorized as 'strategic partners' or 'boundary partners'.
- **Management:** I recommended that the evaluation's client consider using OM to manage its continued efforts to change the international system, and to help manage its multiple relationships in a more coherent manner. But it was important to distinguish between strategic partners and BPs.