Journal of Social Mar

Redefining Partnership in Social Marketing

Journal:	*Journal of Social Marketing*
Manuscript ID	JSOCM-10-2025-0325.R3
Manuscript Type:	Conceptual Paper
Keywords:	Partnership, Social Marketing Theory, Partner

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the conceptualisation of partnership in the changing landscape of social marketing and provides a theoretically underpinned framework for partnership in the field.

Design/methodology/approach: This conceptual study integrates partnership insights from systems thinking, stakeholder theory, and social marketing literature to inform the proposed framework.

Findings: The findings underscore the significance of partnerships and the necessity for a shared understanding and clarity regarding the concepts of "partner" and "partnership" in social marketing. Within social marketing, there is no universally accepted definition for these terms, highlighting the need for more precise definitions. The findings distinguish between partnerships in social marketing orientations. Each orientation represents a unique partnership approach, reflecting varying scopes and focuses within the field.

Research limitations/implications: A clear definition and classification of partners and partnerships will support social marketers in driving behaviour change across interventions grounded in various social marketing orientations, thereby offering a theoretical and practical framework.

Practical implications: The proposed framework provides social marketers with a practical tool. Grounded in systems thinking and stakeholder theories, it equips social marketers with critical thinking about partners and partnerships, preparing them for the partnership tensions and other challenges that may arise from these relationships. The framework offers practical ways for social marketers to engage with intervention partners, potentially leading to improved outcomes.

Originality/value: The value lies in identifying the importance of partners and partnerships within social marketing, along with the related conceptualisation, including the proposal of definitions of partners and partnerships in social marketing orientations. This study advances existing models and responds to calls for future-focused solutions, aligning with the agenda of net-positive social impact by offering guidance on structuring partnerships for social change.

Keywords: Partner, Partnership, Downstream Partnership, Midstream Partnership, Upstream Partnership, Systems Partnership, Social Marketing

Introduction

Systemic change strategies in social marketing require partnerships to achieve meaningful social change (Kennedy *et al*., 2017; Duane *et al*., 2022). The importance of partnership is reinforced in the consensus definition of social marketing (iSMA *et al*., 2013), in calls for "Better Marketing for a Better World" (Chandy *et al*., 2021), and in stakeholder-driven approaches to social impact (Keeling & Marshall, 2022). Despite this emphasis, the theoretical treatment of partners and partnerships remains underdeveloped. There is no clear definition of who qualifies as a partner, how partnerships should be formed, or how their dynamics operate. Existing discussions (e.g., Duane & Domegan, 2019) acknowledge that partnerships evolve but do not offer precise definitions or typologies, nor do they pay attention to power, ethics, and dynamics. As a result, partnerships are often treated as functional add-ons, thereby undermining their strategic potential and limiting the broader impact of social marketing.

Clarifying partners and partnerships is also necessary, given social marketing's orientations (downstream, midstream, upstream, and systems), each of which requires different partners, resources, and relational mechanisms. Without an integrated framework, social marketers risk mismanaging relationships, leading to misaligned expectations, power imbalances, and potential intervention failure (Akbar *et al*., 2023). This lack of conceptual clarity constrains academic progress, as the literature often conflates stakeholders and partners or treats partnerships as static (Laczniak & Murphy, 2012; Domegan & McHugh, 2019). Although frameworks such as Co-create, Build and Engage (Rundle-Thiele *et al.*, 2021), the two-stage taxonomy (Akbar *et al.*, 2024a), and the pathway to social impact (Rundle-Thiele *et al.*, 2024) stress the importance of partnerships, they do not specify how, when, or why partnerships should be operationalised.

Conceptual Gaps in Social Marketing

Partnerships are often viewed as ambiguous processes characterised by trust deficits, power asymmetries, and competing agendas (Duane & Domegan, 2019). Such limitations are inevitable but can be carefully addressed through negotiation, leadership, and governance design (Shaw *et al.*, 2024). However, the management and strategy literature suggests that partnerships often create tensions between control and autonomy, formalisation and flexibility, and efficiency and equity (Lewis & Smith, 2014; Lewis, 2000). Such paradoxes are not design flaws; they are outcomes of partnerships (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the social marketing context, this is more complex, as some partners are expected to change their behaviour (e.g., individuals and communities) or policies (e.g., governments and decision-makers). To address such complexity, social marketers play a uniquely vital role in social marketing partnerships, as they are responsible for establishing partnerships and negotiating the interests, power, and balance among partners. Hence, they must adopt a reflective and reflexive approach (Millard & Akbar, 2024), assessing partnerships, partners' roles, and the expectations for intervention objectives. Therefore, a careful evaluation of who is involved (e.g. stakeholder composition) and how they are involved (e.g. mechanism), as well as the outcomes of the partnership (e.g. tensions between partners), should be situated within a broader systems and contextual analysis (e.g. political, cultural, social factors in which interventions take place).

This view of partnerships yields a more robust understanding of them as multi-level, dynamic structures within which social marketing operates. Thus, rather than treating partnerships as static "add-ons" to interventions, this view sees them as strategic infrastructures that both shape and are shaped by social marketing. This understanding provides a conceptual scaffold for examining partnership dynamics in social marketing. However, it still has some critical limitations that undermine its analytical robustness. First, without a clear typology of partnership composition, structure, and governance, it is challenging to apply systems thinking principles, such as nonlinearity, feedback loops, and interdependence (Midgley, 2000), to identify who qualifies as a stakeholder, their specific roles, and the partnership mechanisms. This can also limit the applicability of the salience framework of stakeholder theory in accurately identifying stakeholders' power (e.g., who holds power and authority to influence the intervention), legitimacy (e.g., who is considered legitimate to be involved in social change), and urgency (e.g., who offers urgency to be involved) (Mitchell *et al*., 1997). Second, this view lacks a clear definition of "partner" and does not distinguish between stakeholders and partners with sufficient precision, whether all stakeholders are considered partners or only a subset. This limits the application of social marketing, which requires clearly defined system partners and their interdependencies. This is a significant limitation from a social marketing perspective, which consistently refers to stakeholders as partners. Therefore, it is vital to clarify who qualifies as a partner and who as a stakeholder. Lastly, it does not fully incorporate social marketing orientations (i.e. downstream, midstream, upstream, and systems-level). Without situating partnerships within these orientations, this view cannot fully capture their implications in social marketing. Hence, further analysis is required.

To address these gaps, the study defines "partner" and "partnership" across social marketing orientations. Drawing on Chandy *et al.*'s (2021) argument to broaden marketing's scope through partnerships, the paper contributes by: 1) presenting a typology of partnerships across social marketing orientations; 2) integrating stakeholder salience with systems logic to theorise partnership dynamics; and 3) offering guidance on partnership composition and potential outcomes. The paper first discusses systems thinking and stakeholder theory to establish the theoretical grounding, then examines how partners and partnerships are conceptualised across social marketing orientations, leading to a framework for partnerships and an outline of the study's contributions and limitations.

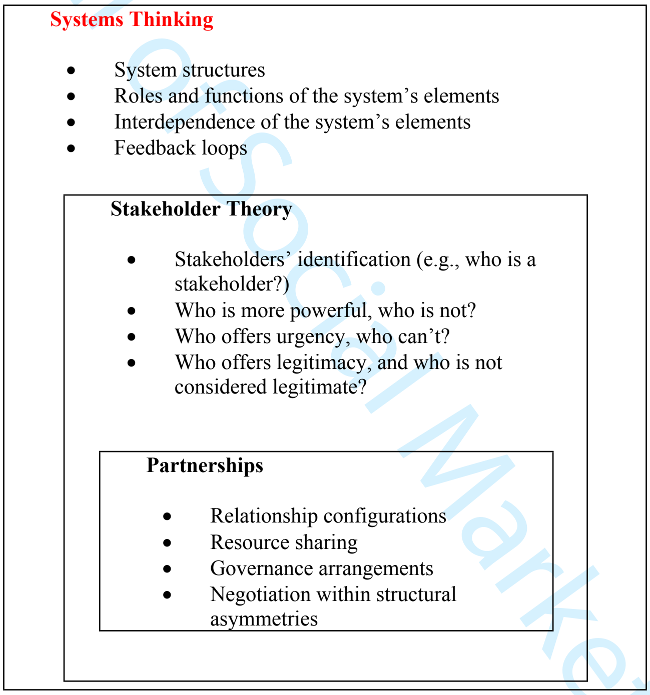
Theoretical Positioning

Systems thinking addresses complex societal issues by shifting attention from individual relationships to networked structures, feedback loops, and interdependence (Jackson, 2003; McHugh *et al*., 2018). This is central to social marketing, which operates within complex, adaptive systems where multiple stakeholders interact, causality is nonlinear, and change unfolds over time (Kennedy *et al*., 2017). In this context, systems thinking emphasises understanding the system as a whole (Domegan *et al*., 2016), including its structures, relationships, feedback loops, and ongoing interactions among its elements (Prell *et al*., 2008). However, ambiguity arises when the "system" is not clearly defined or when its boundaries remain unclear (McHugh *et al*., 2018; Truong *et al*., 2019). As a result, mapping feedback loops and interdependencies can become complex and difficult to manage, leading to analysis paralysis (Meadows, 2008; McLeroy *et al*., 1988), delaying decision-making in time-bound initiatives (Lefebvre, 2011; Dibb & Carrigan, 2013; Trochim *et al*., 2006), and making it more difficult to assign responsibility (Best *et al*., 2003). This reflects the nature of systems, which are characterised by structural differentiation, institutional hierarchies, and resource disparities. Power asymmetry, therefore, should be understood as a structural condition rather than an anomaly, as actors occupy distinct positions that shape how objectives are defined, negotiated, and implemented (Chan *et al*., 2025). More specifically, actors do not operate equally; instead, their positions influence their capacity to shape outcomes. This means that in such relationships, power differences should not be seen as inherently negative but depend on how actors exercise their power to influence the intervention. Despite these challenges, systems thinking remains critical, as it provides an overarching lens for understanding partnerships in social marketing by situating stakeholders within interdependent structures and differentiated roles.

From this systems lens, stakeholder theory clarifies the role of stakeholders as *"any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives"* (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). This is further specified through the salience framework (Mitchell *et al*., 1997), which evaluates stakeholders in terms of power, legitimacy, and urgency. Importantly, it does not assume a balanced distribution of these attributes; instead, it recognises that some actors hold greater institutional or resource-based influence. While this supports the identification and prioritisation of actors, it offers a limited explanation of how these positions are shaped by system-level interdependence or structural hierarchies. It also treats stakeholder categories as relatively fixed, providing limited insight into how relationships evolve over time (Reed *et al*., 2009; Lefebvre, 2013). In this sense, stakeholder theory complements systems thinking by identifying actors and assessing their relative influence, but it remains situated within the structural conditions defined by the system. Therefore, stakeholders should be understood not only through power, legitimacy, and urgency, but also through their positions within broader system structures in which interdependence and asymmetry are inherent.

We argue that systems thinking provides the overarching lens for conceptualising partnerships in social marketing by defining the system, its structures, roles, and feedback mechanisms, while stakeholder theory functions as an intermediary framework that identifies and prioritises actors operating within this system. This hierarchical positioning avoids assumptions of balanced power and instead recognises structural asymmetry as a normal condition of social marketing systems. In this context, Table 1 operationalises this positioning by structuring partnerships as embedded within systems and shaped through stakeholder dynamics: the outer layer (systems thinking) defines structural conditions such as interdependence, roles, and feedback loops; the middle layer (stakeholder theory) specifies how actors are identified and prioritised based on power, legitimacy, and urgency; and the inner layer (partnerships) translates these conditions into relational configurations, resource sharing, and governance arrangements. Accordingly, partnerships are not standalone arrangements, but relational configurations embedded within differentiated system structures, in which influence, roles, and negotiation emerge from underlying system-level conditions and stakeholder asymmetries.

Table 1: Hierarchical Theoretical Positioning (Source: Authors' own work)



This theoretical positioning provides the conceptual foundation for clarifying the nature, structure, and dynamics of partnerships in social marketing, enabling the development of the typology and associated propositions, discussed in the following sections.

Scope and Boundary Setting

We acknowledged that the concepts of power and inter-organisational relationships, the role of the private sector in partnership and power dynamics, and legitimacy have been extensively theorised in industrial marketing, supply chain management, and broader business research (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Cox, 2004; Freeman, 1984). However, this study only aims to clarify how partnerships are conceptualised in social marketing. Partnerships in social marketing are embedded in public, community, and behavioural change contexts characterised by ethical considerations, legitimacy concerns, and multi-level governance structures (French & Gordon, 2015; Hastings *et al*., 2000; Domegan *et al*., 2013; Kennedy *et al*., 2017). These conditions differ from commercial partnerships, where efficiency, value appropriation, and bargaining positions are often the central focus (Cox, 2004; Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Consequently, this study prioritises theoretical coherence within social marketing literature by clarifying definitions of partner and partnership, positioning stakeholder theory within a systems framework, and reframing power asymmetry as a structural condition of the social marketing system (McHugh *et al*., 2018; Domegan *et al*., 2016; Brennan *et al*., 2016). This boundary-setting acknowledges the valuable insights from other sectors as avenues in examining dynamic changes in power and the role of commercial actors in social marketing partnerships. It is understood that this conceptual clarity may not eliminate ambiguity regarding power, authority, or partners' roles. It can only help manage them. However, before extending the framework across disciplines, it is necessary to establish conceptual foundations in social marketing, where definitional ambiguity remains significant (Duane & Domegan, 2019; French, 2017). Therefore, this study focuses on a theoretically coherent foundation for understanding partnerships in social marketing, which may subsequently support interdisciplinary integration.

Proposition Development: Partners and Partnerships in Social Marketing

In social marketing, stakeholders are *"all of those groups and individuals that can affect or are affected by the social marketer's behaviour change proposal"* (Hastings & Domegan, 2017, p. 89). This definition shifts the partnership focus from organisational success to behavioural and social change, and positions stakeholders not only as assets but as collaborators or beneficiaries in interventions. This definition clarifies the role of a social marketer, who is responsible for identifying, understanding, and strategically engaging stakeholders who can influence (e.g. decision-makers and policymakers, government, funders) or be influenced (individuals and communities whose behaviours are questionable) by the behavioural and social change.

French (2017) differentiates between stakeholder and partner in social marketing: Stakeholders are *"people or organisations who have an interest in the issue that the social marketing programme is seeking to influence but who are not formally engaged in development and delivery of the programme"* (p. 198). While partners are *"people or organisations who have an interest in the issue that the social marketing programme is seeking to influence* [and who are] *formally engaged in development and delivery of the programme"* (p.198). This distinction is based on the commitment to social marketing activities; therefore, for stakeholders to become partners, they must be actively engaged in scoping, developing, delivering, and evaluating interventions, rather than passively supporting the change idea (McHugh *et al*., 2018; Domegan & McHugh, 2019). Furthermore, unlike stakeholders, partners typically commit to contributing actively through a written agreement, including resources, knowledge, expertise, skills, facilities, and financial support (Buyucek *et al*., 2016).

While this analysis addresses some of the criticism discussed in the previous sections, it overlooks several important factors. First, the definition of a partner is limited to the post-formation stage of the partnership. As a result, it fails to consider the pre-formation stage or the identification and involvement of potential partners during the initial development stages. Second, French's (2017) view may be criticised for being too exclusive or narrow, as it requires partners to be actively engaged in every stage of the social marketing process. However, this contrasts with the dynamic nature of partnerships in social marketing, in which partners can engage and shift roles over time (Domegan, 2021). New partners can emerge, and existing ones may lose interest or exit the partnership (Buyucek *et al*., 2016) due to cultural, religious, technological, political, or social issues (Domegan, 2021). This makes social marketing partnerships inherently flexible, adaptable, and ongoing. Given this nature, social marketing partnerships typically involve multiple partners at different stages of the process, contributing according to the intervention's evolving needs and their respective strengths. According to French (2017), participants who are not involved in every stage may not be considered true partners. However, the dynamic nature of social marketing partnerships suggests that a true partnership does not require constant involvement in all phases, but rather the ability to adapt, contribute, and collaborate meaningfully as circumstances change. Thus, we propose:

P1: Partners are individuals, groups, or organisations willing to contribute to achieving the objectives of social marketing intervention.

P2: Partners contribute meaningfully without requiring continuous involvement in all stages, reflecting the dynamic, adaptable, and ongoing nature of social marketing partnerships.

P3: Partnership is a collaborative process to achieve intervention objectives.

By defining partners primarily as those who contribute substantial resources (such as knowledge, facilities, or finance), French's (2017) view may overlook smaller organisations or community groups that can provide valuable insights or influence but lack the resources to commit extensively. Also, by emphasising resource contribution as a criterion for partnership, there is a possibility that resource-rich partners may hold greater influence within decision-making processes. As discussed in the theoretical positioning section, power itself is not inherently positive or negative; rather, its implications depend on how partners exercise and negotiate that influence within the partnership structure. In some contexts, such influence may help coordinate resources and enhance the effectiveness of interventions. However, if exercised disproportionately, it may marginalise smaller partners or those contributing non-material resources, such as community knowledge, lived experience, or social capital.

Emphasising formal engagement or agreement overlooks the nature of social marketing partnerships, in which, in some contexts, involvement occurs without formal agreements or through informal arrangements (Shaw *et al*., 2024). Furthermore, formal agreements may impede collaboration or deter potential partners who are hesitant to engage in legal or bureaucratic processes. Additionally, emphasising formal agreements may ignore the value of informal networks, which can be crucial in social marketing, especially in communities where trust and relationships are built informally over time (Shaw *et al*., 2024). In other words, it disregards the importance of informal agreements and the involvement of partners who contribute in less formal ways. Thus, we propose:

P4: Partners contribute to the intervention in a formal, informal, structured, or unstructured manner, depending on the context, to achieve its objectives.

P5: Partnership is based on commitment towards sharing resources to achieve intervention objectives.

French's (2017) definition focuses more on distinguishing between stakeholders and partners for external audiences than helping social marketers effectively identify and engage potential partners. The focus on interest and resource contributions as criteria for partnership potentially opens the door to including controversial industries (e.g., the private sector) as partners in social marketing initiatives. This is problematic because it raises significant ethical tensions (Dibb, 2014). When industries with questionable practices or conflicting agendas are considered partners, it can undermine the integrity and credibility of the social marketing effort, as their involvement may conflict with the intervention's social goals. This possibility underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to defining partners in social marketing, one that carefully considers the ethical implications of partnering with specific industries (Kubacki *et al*., 2023). Thus, we propose:

P6: Abiding by the ethical standards is the main principle of social marketing partnerships.

Terminology Paradox

The literature cites the term "partner" in various ways, for example, opinion leaders (Lefebvre, 2013), gatekeepers (MacFadyen *et al*., 2003), key stakeholders (McHugh *et al*., 2018), agencies (Andreasen, 2006), key influencers (Briggs *et al*., 2012), experts (Akbar *et al*., 2024c), key players (Kennedy, 2017), and actors (Akbar *et al*., 2024b). Similarly, several terms are employed for "partnerships", such as coalitions (Singer & Kayson, 2004), alliances (Temple *et al*., 2008), strategic alliances (Sowers *et al*., 2005), corporate and cross-sectoral alliances (Duane & Domegan, 2019), stakeholder engagement (McHugh *et al*., 2018), collaboration (Domegan & McHugh, 2019), and stakeholder involvement (Buyucek *et al*., 2016; Buyucek, 2017). These terms indicate active participation, empowerment, and direct engagement with partners, fostering dialogue, interaction, and mutual learning. The plethora of terms used to describe "partners" or their engagement style reflects the diversity of social marketing contexts (Duane & Domegan, 2019). This suggests that these terms are "nebulous" and mean different things to different people. This is important because the more intangible a phenomenon is, the more challenging it is to understand and evaluate (Zeithaml, 1981). This highlights the value of a clear definition of a partner and a partnership, thereby making intangibles more tangible. Thus, based on the proposed propositions (i.e., P1, P2, P4 and P6), we define the term "partner" as follows:

> *"A partner is an individual, group, organisation or any other stakeholder who has an interest (direct or indirect) in social marketing intervention. They must be willing to share resources (financial and non-financial), facilities, and expertise (skills and*

knowledge) through structured and unstructured, formal and informal collaborations, and to contribute at specific stages as the intervention's needs evolve. Such partners must consider the ethical principles as critical to maintaining the integrity of the partnership."

This definition encompasses individuals and organisations that can contribute, regardless of labels such as actors, shareholders, stakeholders, or key players. Therefore, from this point onward in the paper, the term "partner" is used, for consistency, to encompass all these roles.

Based on this, and P3 and P5, and to keep within the scope of the definition of partner, we define partnerships in social marketing as:

"Social marketing partnership is a collaborative process that requires a purpose, shared goals, benefits, risks, ethics, and commitment to social marketing intervention, bringing together different skills and resources."

This definition acknowledges the considerable diversity that social marketing encompasses while addressing social and behavioural issues. However, this may vary across social marketing orientations, because of changing partner roles over time, which are discussed below:

Downstream Partnership

Downstream partnership is a simplistic, rational, deductive approach with an operational perspective (French & Gordon, 2015), in which significant attention is paid to one partner, i.e., individuals whose behaviours require change (Brace-Govan, 2015). Little attention is paid to other partners that may influence the structural conditions shaping behaviour and social change (Gurrieri *et al*., 2018; Gordon *et al*., 2016). Therefore, social marketers employ individual-focused models focusing on internal determinants of individual behaviour (Lefebvre, 2013). However, this approach is criticised for overlooking broader partners who are not involved in the process, i.e., their capacity to intervene in the social exchange between the individual and the intervention (Brace-Govan, 2015). For instance, fast food companies play a significant role in shaping people's consumption decisions and practices (Parkinson *et al*., 2017) through advertising, product packaging, and placement, with most of these decisions occurring with little cognitive effort or awareness. These strategies can effectively nudge consumption behaviours by making fast food more salient to individuals and normalising consumption outside regular mealtimes (Parkinson *et al*., 2017). This hinders the understanding of the connection between the behaviour and its context. It also subjects social marketing to ethical and intellectual scrutiny (Hastings *et al*., 2000; Dibb, 2014), thereby undermining its credibility. Therefore, downstream social marketing is seen as a positivist, neoliberal approach (Tadajewski *et al*., 2014) that places responsibility for social problems on individuals while neglecting the effects of other partners.

Downstream partnerships are typically described as cooperative activities established between two or more parties to increase the volume of behavioural change transactions to individuals through existing networks (Duane & Domegan, 2019). These partners facilitating implementation are often referred to as intermediaries (Donovan & Henley, 2010), including employers, parents, community groups, doctors, and others, who are selected for their pre-existing networks for promotion and distribution. They can facilitate change in line with the target group's specific needs. Establishing relationships with existing intermediaries is desirable because building new networks and platforms to coordinate behaviour change activities is costly. Thus, we proposed:

P7: Intermediaries are significant partners in downstream partnerships.

Intermediaries are often hard to persuade to cooperate as they have their own views regarding how the social marketing's message should be communicated (Donovan & Henley, 2010) and may have separate agendas, which could lead to conflicts (e.g. religious scholars' views on the use of contraceptives in family planning or safe sex interventions). Such challenges limit the role of intermediaries during implementation. Reducing voices in the early stages of the intervention could lead to tensions with intermediaries and limit their ability to share resources. Such omissions decrease the credibility and relevance of messages, materials, and the medium used to communicate with target audiences, including partnership-related aims and motivations, resources and capabilities, cultures and relationships, governance and leadership, and external context. These factors overlap, interrelate, and sometimes come into conflict. Therefore, the role of intermediaries and the ability to share resources and promote competing behaviours must be evaluated and engaged prior to the intervention delivery. Their early involvement is crucial, as it ensures that their perspectives are considered, making intermediaries feel included and valued. Thus, we propose:

P8: Intermediaries' involvement in the early stages of interventions is vital for leveraging their power to achieve behavioural change.

The downstream approach places responsibility on social marketers to plan and deliver interventions. There is little emphasis on involving the target audience beyond understanding their needs, values, and behavioural patterns. Such exclusion may lead to additional challenges. For example, Cancer Research UK's obesity campaign drew criticism for its perceived fat-shaming tone, despite using a message style previously successful in anti-smoking initiatives (BBC, 2019; Plummer, 2019). This backlash, centred around stigma, fat phobia, and weight bias, exemplified a failure to anticipate how rational, fact-based messaging could provoke emotionally charged reactions (McGonagle, 2019). This reinforces the need to include the target audiences as core partners (with context-dependent roles such as participants and co-creators). Therefore, reflexivity should be embedded to acknowledge the role of the target audience, to justify the logic of individual behaviour change, and to reiterate the focus on ethical standards (Millard & Akbar, 2024) as stated in our definition of partnership. Thus, we proposed:

P9: The target audience of social marketing interventions is the primary partner and must be involved in the co-creation process.

Thus, based on P7, P8 and P9, we define downstream partnership as:

> *"Downstream partnership is a collaborative process between social marketers and the target audience to understand social issues from their point of view, and intermediaries to focus on delivering intervention to the target audience through existing distribution channels and networks, emphasising behaviour change."*

Midstream Partnership

Midstream partnerships emphasise the importance of community knowledge and expertise regarding social issues and community needs (Morgan & Ziglio, 2007), fostering ownership and engagement. Through these partnerships, communities become the face of the interventions by conducting essential on-the-ground work. The involvement of local partners is crucial for engendering community acceptance of the project, ensuring efficient fulfilment, maintaining a local presence at events, and facilitating communication with target audiences (Stead *et al*., 2013; Buyucek *et al*., 2016). To broaden its application, midstream social marketing promotes co-creation (Domegan *et al*., 2013), citizen-oriented social service delivery (Russell-Bennett *et al*., 2019), and coordination through the creation of value, effective resource management, and provision of support (Luca *et al*., 2016). This provides additional insight into the social context, configurational fit, and resource integration in addressing it and targeting change. However, the diversity of the agendas and community network dynamics may make it challenging to reach reciprocal value propositions, potentially leading to partner conflicts (Luca *et al*., 2016). Challenges may also arise from the representation of the community, which may or may not accurately reflect broader community viewpoints, practices, and culture (Lefebvre, 2013), potentially leading to further conflict between partners. This suggests that some partners may not wish to assume the role assigned to them, especially when voluntary exchanges (e.g., resources, knowledge, skills) are expected. Some may have different preferences for sharing resources (e.g., communication channels). Therefore, we define midstream partnership in social marketing as:

> *"Midstream partnership is a collaborative process between communities and local partners to address social issues at a community level. These partnerships focus on mobilising communities by integrating their knowledge, expertise, and resources to promote social change rather than individual change."*

Upstream Partnership

Upstream social marketing broadens the partnership beyond individuals and communities by focusing on structural and environmental conditions within society, regulatory authorities, and politicians to facilitate behavioural change (Gordon, 2011). It involves policymakers, trade groups, industry lobbyists, and associations to achieve greater impact (Kennedy *et al*., 2017). The individuals' problematic behaviours remain at the centre; the structural and environmental factors that contribute to these behaviours are also addressed. Hence, upstream social marketing is suitable for problems that are costly to society and aims to alter the institutions that form the social system within which the individual operates by shaping the environmental context of behaviour through influencing policy and regulation (Hastings *et al*., 2000; Kennedy *et al*., 2017). Influencing upstream partners does not equate to system change, as these individuals have distinct goals, limitations, and behaviours that must be understood in their context (Gordon *et al*., 2018). Thus, we define upstream partnership as:

> *"Upstream partnership is a collaborative process with influential partners, such as policymakers, regulatory authorities, trade groups, industry associations, lobbyists,*

and advocacy bodies, aiming to influence decision-makers to shape structural and environmental conditions that facilitate individual behaviour/social change."

Systems Partnership

Social marketing shifts to more sophisticated change strategies by widening the focus beyond downstream, midstream, and upstream approaches (Brennan *et al*., 2016), adopting a systems orientation and integrating partners across society's ecosystem to build long-term, sustainable relationships (Gordon *et al*., 2018; Kennedy, 2017). Systems social marketing compensates for the limitations of the traditional, linear approach to understanding social issues by employing reductionist methods that decompose issues into their constituent components for individual study (Brennan *et al*., 2016). It employs nonlinear causality to understand partners' engagement in the public interest (Domegan & McHugh, 2019), thereby enhancing the capacity to develop shared visions. This addresses social issues by recognising them as part of the whole system (Domegan *et al*., 2016) and by considering the ongoing interactions and the system's behaviour in their entirety (French & Gordon, 2015). This allows social marketers to examine not just each component of the problem (e.g., individuals, organisations, and regulations), but also how these constituent elements interact to create a complex system. This whole-systems-in-the-room change approach (Domegan *et al*., 2016) emphasises the simultaneous interconnections between the top-down and bottom-up aspects of the system, thereby supporting co-creation and interlocking values among multi-level partners. Thus, we proposed:

P10: Systems partnership advocates for systemic change, integrating partners across all levels of society.

P11: Systems partnership recognises the interconnections between system elements and fosters collaboration by using multiple channels to build sustainable relationships and tackle problems in a nonlinear, comprehensive way.

However, social marketing systems highlight both the strategic potential and the operational tensions inherent in multi-level collaboration (Dibb, 2014). While such initiatives benefit from the combined strengths of upstream, midstream, and downstream partners, they also face significant coordination and communication challenges (Domegan *et al*., 2016). For example, temporal misalignment may occur when partners' planning and budgeting cycles do not align. Public- and private-sector partners often require long-term visibility to allocate resources effectively, yet governmental constraints, such as quarterly marketing approvals, create uncertainty, thereby limiting partners' ability to commit early. This not only delays implementation but may also weaken trust and strategic alignment across the partnership. Another critical tension concerns data governance and data access asymmetries, which may create dependencies and reinforce hierarchical structures within systems partnerships. As identified in the theoretical positioning section, such power asymmetries are not inherently problematic; their implications depend on how influence, control, and access to data are exercised and negotiated among partners. For example, in some contexts, centralised data governance may improve coordination, consistency, and accountability across large-scale interventions. However, where data access becomes disproportionately controlled, it may hinder localised engagement, shared learning, and evaluation capacity. These tensions highlight broader structural issues related to ownership, accountability, transparency, and governance within system partnerships (Dibb, 2014). Thus, we propose:

P12: Systems partnership may lead to partnership tensions.

Thus, based on P10-P12, we define systems partnership in social marketing as:

> *"Systems partnership is a collaborative process that integrates partners across the entire social marketing ecosystem (downstream, midstream, and upstream), aiming to create long-term, sustainable change. It emphasises long-term relationships and shared visions through multi-level engagement to address complex social issues."*

Framework for Partnerships in Social Marketing

This study enhances the conceptual clarity of partnerships in social marketing by presenting a typology in Table 2 that provides theoretically grounded definitions of partners, partnerships, and partnerships across social marketing orientations. Previous literature has often used the terms "partner" and "partnership" interchangeably and treated partnerships as self-evident goods, without acknowledging their dynamic, multi-level, and politically embedded nature. By distinguishing between partners and stakeholders, the study positions partners as actively engaged entities that contribute at specific stages, both formally and informally, and are committed to sharing resources in accordance with ethical principles. This broadens inclusion beyond resource-rich partners to any partners capable of making meaningful contributions and adding value to the intervention. While some partners may hold greater influence due to their access to resources, expertise, or institutional position, such influence is not inherently problematic; its implications depend on how power is exercised, negotiated, and balanced within the partnership structure to support collaborative and ethical social change objectives. Similarly, the proposed partnership definition shifts from static, dyadic conceptions to a collaborative process characterised by shared goals, mutual benefits, and risk sharing. It recognises the evolving and flexible nature of partnership as a form of contextual adaptation, thereby integrating the fluidity identified in systems thinking with the prioritisation logic of stakeholder salience.

Table 2: Typology of Partnerships in Social Marketing (Source: Authors' own work)				
Term	**Definition (Summary)**	**Relevance to Stakeholder Theory**	**Relevance to Systems Thinking**	**Importance**
Partner	Any individual/group/organisation contributing resources, expertise, or facilities at any stage, formally/informally, under ethical principles.	Builds on stakeholder salience to identify relevant partners.	Recognises interdependence and dynamic role over time.	Emphasises active engagement, commitment, and trust as core elements for partnership.
Partnership	Collaboration with shared goals, mutual benefits/risks, and resource sharing for intervention objectives.	Aligns the interests of diverse partners toward intervention goals.	Sees partnerships as adaptive processes within complex systems.	Reflects negotiated collaboration beyond transactional ties.
Downstream Partnership	Collaboration with target audiences and intermediaries for individual-level change.	Identifies high-priority partners (target audience, delivery agents).	Accounts for the influence of structural partners on individual behaviour.	Operationalises cooperative activities.
Midstream Partnership	Collaboration with communities to mobilise resources for community-level change.	Prioritises local partners with legitimacy and contextual insight.	Recognises local systems and social norms shaping change.	Supports co-creation and shared ownership in community partnerships.
Upstream Partnership	Collaboration with policymakers/regulators/and advocacy groups to shape structural conditions.	Target influential partners to influence policy agendas.	Positions structural change within wider system interdependencies.	Strategic alliances are designed to drive long-term societal change.
Systems Partnership	Multi-level integration of all orientations for sustainable change.	Expands partner identification to all system-relevant partnerships.	Emphasises non-linear causality, feedback loops, and whole-system engagement.	Manages tensions, governance, and shared visions in complex partnerships.

This typology acknowledges that different orientations require distinct partner compositions, mechanisms, and goals, and establishes a practical framework for selecting, governing, and evaluating partners. This challenges the orthodox functionalist view of partnership as an implementation mechanism by presenting a systemic view that recognises partnerships as evolving, strategically aligned collaborations, negotiated, and inherently tension-laden processes shaped by social marketing orientations, partners' salience, power dynamics, and contextual contingencies, as illustrated in Figure 1. This framework suggests that the degree of partnership revolves around the collaborative nature of partnership, building on co-existence of partners (e.g. who does what, when and with whom?), co-operation (e.g. pooling operand and operant resources, and offering support whenever necessary), co-ordination (e.g. planning and sharing roles and responsibilities to avoid overlap), and co-ownership (e.g. commitment to the intervention and shared ownership of what is done and how it is done).

However, such collaboration requires an understanding of each partner's level of participation. This is only possible when partners are informed of the planned activities, involved in gathering ideas and feedback, and participate in the decision-making process, all of which require a robust partnership management strategy. Understanding the nature of partnerships that promote collaboration and participation, and how such partnerships are developed across various social marketing orientations, would support the success of interventions and help overcome the challenges they face. Many partnership-related challenges stem from ambiguity regarding partners' roles, power, authority, and approaches. Consequently, clearly defining the partner and the partnership, along with a well-evaluated partnership management strategy, would eliminate such concerns by enabling partners to understand their roles and contributions from the outset. Additionally, the study provides a theoretically grounded explanation of partnership tensions, moving beyond the views to encompass the dialectical nature of collaboration (Smith & Lewis, 2011). For example, tensions between control and autonomy, structure and emergence; the framework shows how partnerships simultaneously enable and constrain social change efforts. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for future investigations into how such tensions can be managed, then resolved.

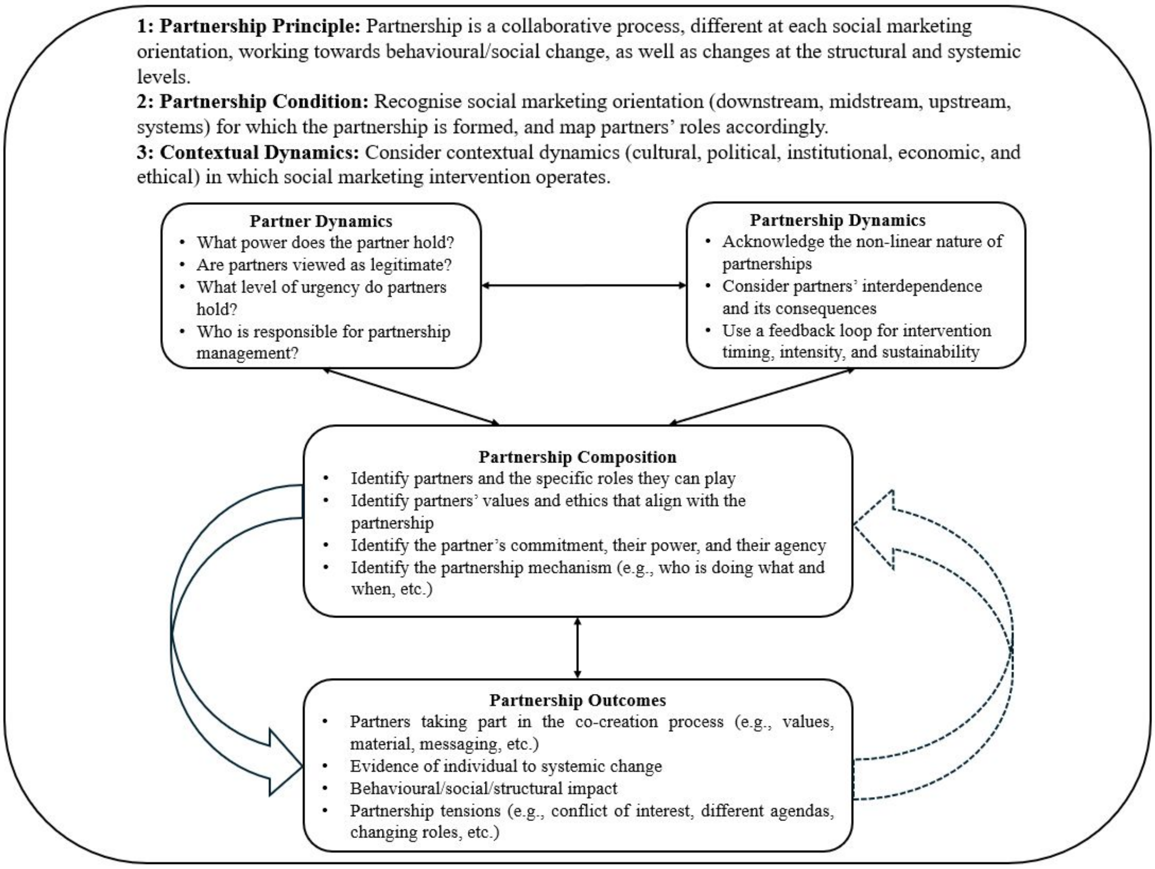


Figure 1: Framework for Partnership in Social Marketing (Authors' own work)

This study extends stakeholder salience by embedding power, legitimacy, and urgency within the typology of partnerships across social marketing orientations. Unlike the traditional organisational view that categorises stakeholders as static partners, our study emphasises fluidity, in which partners shift in salience over time and across contexts. This establishes salience within adaptive, multi-level partnerships, rather than fixed hierarchies, foregrounding ethical standards, resource sharing, and reflexivity. By distinguishing stakeholders from partners and clarifying their evolving roles, the typology addresses conceptual vagueness and provides a framework for prioritising and managing partnerships in social marketing. It advances the applications of systems thinking in social marketing by operationalising interdependence, feedback loops, and non-linearity through clearly defined partner roles across social marketing orientations. It recognises partnerships as adaptive infrastructures that evolve in response to tensions, resource dynamics, and political and cultural environments, thus ensuring that systems thinking translates into a practical tool for structuring partnerships and interventions. It moves beyond rhetoric by defining what constitutes a partner, how partnerships function across different orientations, and how partnership composition and outcomes are collaboratively linked through feedback loops, thereby clarifying and highlighting the significance of partnerships.

Although grounded in extensive literature and supported by illustrative propositions, the framework has not been tested for practical applicability. Future empirical research is needed to validate and refine the framework. The proposed definitions build on previous work to extend the literature and contribute to social marketing practice, but do not specifically focus on partnership conflicts. Conflicts and tensions within partners and partnerships warrant a more thorough investigation, which is beyond the scope of this study. Similarly, an empirical investigation into the conceptualisation of partners and partnerships in social marketing is recommended.

Implication for Practitioners

We propose two key implications for social marketing practice.

First, the proposed typology can be used as a practical partnership design tool, enabling practitioners to diagnose the nature of the social issue and identify the most appropriate partnership configuration. For example, downstream interventions targeting individual behaviour change, such as obesity, smoking cessation, or safe-sex interventions, require partnerships centred on target audiences and intermediaries, including parents, employers, doctors, community groups, and religious leaders, who already possess trusted distribution networks and influence over behavioural decisions. In contrast, upstream interventions aimed at regulating junk food marketing, changing public policy, or addressing structural barriers require partnerships with policymakers, advocacy groups, trade associations, and regulatory authorities. Likewise, systems-level challenges, characterised by interconnected causes and nonlinear effects, necessitate broader ecosystem partnerships that integrate downstream, midstream, and upstream partners simultaneously. This provides practitioners with clearer decision logic regarding who should be involved, when, what role they should play, and how resources, influence, and responsibilities should be coordinated across the intervention lifecycle, thereby reducing ambiguity and misalignment.

Second, the typology, alongside the partnership framework (Figure 1), highlights that partnerships evolve as social marketing interventions progress and the issue's complexity becomes more evident. For example, practitioners may initially adopt a downstream partnership approach focused on message delivery and behavioural change through intermediaries. However, as deeper structural barriers emerge, such as policy constraints, commercial influence, social norms, or data governance issues, interventions may require expansion towards midstream, upstream, or systems partnerships. This evolution may involve incorporating community organisations, advocacy groups, policymakers, or regulatory partners to address broader systemic conditions shaping behaviour. This alters partner composition, governance structures, resource-sharing arrangements, and power relationships, while increasing the likelihood of tensions related to coordination, accountability, legitimacy, and data access. Recognising this dynamic nature of partnerships enables practitioners to anticipate changing partnership requirements, strategically manage partner entry and exit, adapt governance mechanisms, and respond reflexively to emerging tensions throughout the intervention process.

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Dear Editors and Reviewers,

Thank you for the feedback and the opportunity to further revise the manuscript.

All changes are highlighted in red in the manuscript.

This document also presents additional details of the amendments, signposts how suggested comments are addressed, and indicates where the amendments are presented in the manuscript.

Reviewer comments

The manuscript has improved clearly in this revision and thanks to the Authors for their effort. The theoretical positioning is now more coherent, especially the use of systems thinking as the broader lens and stakeholder theory as a supporting framework. The treatment of power asymmetry is also better balanced.

Thank you for your comments and for supporting the manuscript to reach its full potential.

I have only a few minor comments before publication. Some claims are still too strong. For example, conceptual clarity cannot “eliminate” problems related to power, authority or role ambiguity. It can reduce or help manage them. I suggest softening such wording.

Thank you for raising this point – we added the following sentence on page 8 to highlight this.

“It is understood that this conceptual clarity may not eliminate ambiguity regarding power, authority, or partners' roles. It can only help manage them.”

The final definitions of “partner” and “partnership” should be checked for consistency with the propositions, especially regarding ethics, informal engagement and changing partner roles over time.

Thank you for raising this point. In response, we have incorporated "ethics" into the proposed definition of partnership on page 13. We have also acknowledged the changing role of partners before discussing downstream partnerships to emphasise their importance in the partnership process.

However, this aspect is not explicitly stated in the partnership definition itself, as it was developed directly from the proposed propositions. Instead, the changing role of partners is discussed in greater depth on page 25 as part of the explanation of the proposed partnership typology, where its significance and implications are fully articulated.

The idea that the target audience is the primary partner in downstream partnerships is interesting, but it needs a little more precision. In some cases, target audiences are co-creators or participants rather than partners in the full sense.

Thank you for raising this point – it is now clarified on page 15 with the addition of the following text.

“This reinforces the need to include the target audiences as core partners (with context-dependent roles such as participants and co-creators). Therefore, reflexivity should be embedded to acknowledge the role of the target audience, to justify the logic of individual behaviour change, and to reiterate the focus on ethical standards (Millard & Akbar, 2024) as stated in our definition of partnership.”

Besides above, the manuscript needs a careful language check. There are small consistency issues, including “system thinking/systems thinking”, repeated use of “therefore”, and minor wording problems.

- The paper is now carefully proofread.
- We reduced the use of the word “therefore”; previously, it was used 24 times, now it is used only 12 times.
- Systems thinking is now consistently used throughout the paper.

Overall, I support publication after these minor revisions.

Thank you for your support