This meeting, as part of the Partnership and Security research project, explored the practical workings of an important global public-private partnership, bringing first-hand experience of the project together with academic researchers in the field. It was organised as an opportunity for discussion with Calli Webber, who is currently seconded from BP to the World Bank to work on the ‘Global gas flare reduction public-private partnership’. Participants included UN officials and representatives (Will Day, a Special Advisor to UNDP and also a senior associate of the Cambridge Programme for Industry, and Kaveh Zahedi, acting director of the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre); partnership practitioners (Jeremy Baskin of the Cambridge Programme for Industry); academics with experience of and research interests in partnerships and corporate social responsibility (Jude Browne of Downing College; Anne Oswalt, an MBA student at the Judge Institute of Management; and David Levin, a Pembroke College student closely associated with the Global Compact; and academics interested in the political theory of partnerships (Andrea Sangiovanni and Melissa Lane).

Calli Webber presented the background to the gas flare partnership which formally began on 1 January 2003, linking a number of countries and energy companies with the World Bank. She located it in the context of the World Bank’s concern with access to energy considered partly as a public good and partly as a private good. She explained the peculiar features of developing gas markets, including the monetarization of gas and the need for infrastructure to exploit small amounts of gas in lieu of flaring; with support, gas can become an additional revenue stream while avoiding the environmental degradation caused by flaring. She noted that the alternative of simply banning flaring would eliminate the valuable possible incentive of carbon credits, so the partnership instead has opted for voluntary standards with help to achieve the aspiration to best practice. She also observed the paradox that state-owned companies in some countries are relatively free from public pressure to reduce flaring, whereas publicly traded private sector companies are under increasing civil society and investor pressure to do so.

Discussion explored some of the questions and tensions associated with this partnership and with public-private partnerships in general, framing partnership as potentially an active risk-reduction strategy but also pressing the question of what specifically a partnership brings to an issue that could not have been achieved in some other way. In the case of the gas flare partnership, the aim is that the private sector brings standards and technology, while the participation of countries gives access to ministries and governments.