

## 1 Introduction

In today's official aid system, only one type of relationship seems to count. It is called 'partnership'. This issue of the *IDS Bulletin*, prepared by alumni, takes a critical look at this relational preference. It does so from the perspective of non-governmental organisations involved in third world development (NGDOs) that are directly or indirectly related to aid thinking, policy, practice and financing.<sup>1</sup>

This introduction concentrates on the question: why has 'partnership' come to the fore now and does it make sense in terms of effective development work? The answer, in terms of both theory and the practice illustrated in the articles to follow, suggests that adopting partnership as a dominant concept may be doing more harm than good in improving system credibility and performance.

In brief, the story of partnership as pre-eminent model for relationships in the current aid system is one of convergence. This dynamic results from the spill-over into the aid arena of prevailing donor domestic policies – variations on the theme of a reformed 'social contract'. This conceptual underpinning, allied to the post-Cold War impact of globalisation on the international political economy, is creating insecurity in the continuation of official aid. A consequence of this interplay is the promotion of 'partnership' as the 'politically correct' mode of relating. It also reflects a defensive institutional strategy against decline in aid levels (Hudock in this volume) and its post-Cold War political and instrumental importance, with the eventual replacement of international concessional finance by foreign direct investment (FDI). In addition, it signals the probability of deeper and wider external penetration into the internal processes of developing countries.

## 2 Relations and Partnership in Development: A Brief History

Since the seventies, 'partnership' has been a guiding idea for the quality of relationships that many NGDOs were looking for. In its original expression, partnership was understood as a code word reflecting humanitarian, moral, political, ideological or spiritual *solidarity* between NGDOs in the North and South that joined together to pursue a common cause of social change.<sup>2</sup> It signalled an alliance

# Introduction Beyond Partnership

*Getting Real about  
NGO Relationships  
in the Aid System*

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between NGOs of the North and South in favour of a *dependecia* analysis of underdevelopment (Lehmann 1986), set against the subsequently disproven modernisation, 'lift-off and trickle-down' approach adopted by official aid at this time.

This era was characterised by a strong emphasis on government as the principle actor and engine of growth and development. The task of 'nation-building' was governmental, as was the nature of international aid. Hence, inter-governmental relations were paramount. As far as non-governmental organisations were involved in development work, they were tolerated as marginal contributors but were not embraced by the official system. Moreover, in the seventies the NGO universe, especially in the South, was not densely populated. However, it was gaining ground. One cause of growth was an influx of northern NGOs (as role models) in ex-colonies. Another was their emergence as a domestic refuge for intellectuals or others of the political left where military or civilian dictatorships prevailed, as in much of Latin America. The task of business was to contract for aid projects, little more. The role of the private sector as the source of growth was yet to be prioritised. Typically, NGOs saw (transnational) corporations as part of the problem of exploitation. Consequently, mutual mistrust was a typical stance. In short, until the late seventies, the relational world of international development was essentially split into self-contained corridors between North and South, each inhabited by government, NGOs or businesses with little respect or interaction between them.

This situation was set to change in the early eighties, which marked a rightwards shift in Northern politics – the Reagan-Thatcher era. The domestic policies of these two moved attention from government to the market as the engine of growth and progress. In addition to freeing business from restrictive shackles, a push for 'less government' also meant more responsibility to citizens and their organisations. Hence, the start of the rise in official finance to, and number of, NGOs that continues today. The spill-over of a market perspective into international aid was spearheaded by the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs): the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and its sister regional development banks.

The instrumental framework for a translation of domestic into international policy became known as 'structural adjustment'. It was the start, through more stringent and similar loan conditions, of a growing domination of these institutions in terms of overly uniform development policy and thinking. Over one hundred countries have been subject to donor-led adjustment. In effect, the dominant role of the BWIs in shaping development agendas has stifled choice, a search for situation-specific alternatives and local ownership of development processes.<sup>3</sup> Redefining the motor of development away from government to markets, however, said nothing about the relationship between them. Other events and forces were needed to push towards adoption of partnership as the desired mode.

A second impetus to relational change arose from the implosion of the Soviet Union and the rise of the concept of civil society as a legitimate and necessary actor in society. Consequently, the third sector came into its own as a recognised player that must be associated with development goals, both as means and ends.<sup>4</sup> For the aid system, greater interaction with and dedicated efforts to enhance the growth of civil society were necessary for two reasons. One, discussed in more detail below, is to help deal with the institutional reconfiguration required by 'privatisation' of supposedly over-extended government (social) services. Another is to accelerate the consolidation of democracy as the political agenda of aid, especially in transition economies, i.e., those formerly constituting the Soviet Union, that are now implementing capitalist, free market economic systems.

A third cause of expanded relationships with government came from NGOs themselves. Experience of having their local development efforts undermined by ill-conceived policies and often poor, corrupt national public management, caused them to shift their horizons to policy formulation and its actors at home and abroad. The result has been growing and active NGO pressure on and engagement with governments, not just about policy implementation, but about policy choices themselves and the right of citizen participation and of rights-based development more generally (Nelson 1995; van Tuijl 1999). Substantial citizen presence and lobbying at the Rio summit on the environment

and demonstrations at the recent meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle are examples of how far things have come.

Finally, alongside this aid picture, as a fourth force, is the growth in relations between NGOs and market actors. Originally spearheaded by the environmental movement, this enhanced interaction is occurring, amongst others, under the rubrics of developing corporate citizenship and socially responsible business (Murphy and Bendell 1997). Where corporations are transnational, they face growing interaction with both Northern and Southern NGOs working, thanks to the internet, more closely together than ever before. One example of such collaboration was (boycott) pressure on US company Nike to treat its foreign suppliers more fairly, leading to it adopting an international code of conduct, compliance with which is independently monitored. There are increasing examples of these and other forms of NGO–business collaboration (Bendell 2000).

The forces sketched above have all contributed to thirty years of relational convergence. Gone are the separate North–South sectoral corridors of the seventies. They have given way to complex relational arenas of intensive and extensive interaction between governments, business and civic institutions in the North and South around development agendas, where the rules of the game are being made up on the spot. The processes are far from transparent or stable. Also unclear is how interests are played out for whose benefit. Particularly, what does it all mean for people and groups that are poor and marginalised? This issue of the bulletin concentrates on answers related to NGOs and other parts of the aid system, not with businesses.

To capture this emerging relational complexity, exemplified by policy pronouncements from the development assistance committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) the official aid system has resorted to the term ‘partnership’. In fact, partnership is now a cornerstone of the new agenda for international aid (OECD 1996). But what it means, how relations are negotiated, and who wins and who loses, when the nature of power and of power difference between parties is so divergent, is far from clear. Today’s rule of thumb in international development is

that everybody wants to be a partner with everyone else on everything, everywhere. This is so patently and transparently illogical, that it requires a critical analysis typical of development studies, which is to ask: who gains, who loses and why?

Inevitably, and to its detriment, multiple and diverse users mean that the original idea and premise of partnership has been stretched in many directions and interpreted in many ways. In this respect it has become a ‘something nothing’ word (Malhotra 1997). Authentic partnership implies, *inter alia*, a joint commitment to long-term interaction, shared responsibility for achievement, reciprocal obligation, equality, mutuality and balance of power (Fowler 1998). This is not a common relational condition in any walk of life. Just why, then, is ‘partnership’ selected as the appropriate language and modality for bringing together disparate actors under vastly different (national) preconditions and historical trajectories? Why not – depending on the parties, the purpose and the nature of power truly involved (Lister 2000) – employ terms like counterpart, collaborator, contractor, ally, associate, supporter, backer, benefactor, sponsor, client or patron (Fowler 2000b)?

Illogical as it may seem at first sight, there are ‘good’ reasons why this single term has gained currency, if not credibility, in the ‘new’ aid system. The following section therefore sets out what is probably going on. Drawing on other articles in this bulletin, the final section offers an assessment of partnership as a real relationship for NGOs.

### **3 Why Partnership for Everyone, Everything and Everywhere?**

The adoption of partnership as the relational mode of choice in aid thinking and agenda can be understood from at least three perspectives. The first is a deep-lying theory of state–society relations as social contracts. The second is partnership as a practical solution to inadequate aid performance. The third is a self-serving mystification of power asymmetry allied to a co-optation of opposing forces in a system of concessional resource provision that penetrates deeper into recipient society, at the cost of a sovereignly chosen speed of change, or of development alternatives. This section deals with each in turn.

### 3.1 Partnership as social contract

From times of Greek and Roman cultural and political prominence, philosophers such as Plato have been concerned about the origin and nature of political power and of its obligations towards citizens. The latter part of the sixteenth century saw this enquiry framed (by Locke, Hobbes and others) and later refined (Rousseau, Mill), into the liberal democratic doctrine in terms of a 'social contract' between rulers and the ruled. Here the initial argument was that people would accept a common superior power to protect themselves from their own baser instincts and enable them to fulfill human needs and desires. But, it was subsequently argued that a necessary legitimising condition of a social contract was that state power derived from a sovereign citizenry, for which the state acted as trustee, and could be legitimately overthrown if it failed to discharge its function to the people. This formulation underpins the theory and principles of liberal democracy to be found in, and now globally propagated by, many donor countries.

Over the past two hundred years or so in continental Europe, struggles between contending religious, social, political, economic and other groups led to sophisticated configurations in terms of how a social contract would be defined and enforced. Germany's workers' representation in business governance; a national Social Economic Council in the Netherlands, with a statutory role in public policy formulation and decision-making; joint management by trade unions and employers of social security funds in France; the tight interlocking of political parties, government, banks and industry in Japan; the appointment of Ombudsmen and women to adjudicate on transactions between citizen and state in many countries; are but some examples of the evolution of social contract theory into the complex institutional structures, norms and practices of non-Anglo Saxon industrialised societies.<sup>5</sup>

These arrangements reflect the fact that interests can, indeed, be aligned as a 'partnership' between contending groups and the power differences they manifest. In other words, power realignment is possible, even in a zero sum game, because more powerful parties see that it is in their overall interest to accommodate others or face prolonged conflict requiring ongoing repression that is inherently

politically unstable and economically costly. Framed another way, such configurations are a positive product of an apparent paradox that 'social conflict may be necessary for the stability of a democratic society, and it is a vehicle for oppressed groups to stimulate social change and to ensure long-term social stability' (Gidron *et al.* 1999:276).

However, it must be remembered that this Western evolution occurred in an era of closed markets and limited cross-border investment. In other words, a nation-state was a relatively self-contained entity where stability required negotiation and accommodation of enclosed diverse interests for the good of everyone. This condition holds less and less true today. For example, capital can now move more freely and quickly than labour. Government sole control over domestic economic policy is being eroded. Enhanced communication is allowing citizens to see alternative ways of doing things and organising for their common interests across borders. Sub-national ethnic groups are asserting their identity, prevailing against the old consensus about state formation and state-society relations. Together, these and other forces are conspiring against the continuation of 'old style' social contracts – beyond individual rights in a democracy – as the basis of relationship between European states and their citizens. One obvious consequence for effective development work is to question the sense of propagating such a theoretical foundation in the South under very different global conditions.

Put another way, Western experience indicates that partnership as social contract is the product – under a specific set of historical conditions – of internal, iterative processes involving social assertion, contention and resolution that eventually match and balance forces and capacities leading to negotiated, collaborative and stable power arrangements. It is not something to be 'given' by existing power-holders or externally constructed by foreign finance.

Despite progress in economic liberalisation that often differentially benefits transnational over local corporations (Korten 1995), a predisposition towards redistribution of political power away from existing holders cannot be seen in many developing countries – China being a foremost example, Zimbabwe another. Without this precondition, to establish effective partnerships, aid must generate

positive sum outcomes in power redistribution. This is a stringent requirement that aid itself has so far been unable to deliver, even by financing the costs of 'empowerment', i.e., inducing and ameliorating a structural power transition from more to less powerful groups, especially the poor and marginalised. Instead, aid is often used to retrench, refine and solidify existing power relationships and structures that maintain poverty and do not foster economic growth (Mosley 1997, quoted in Abugre 1999:3; World Bank 1998).

In other words, the emphasis on partnership across the aid system rests on a questionable axiom that wilfully ignores donor countries' own history and current conditions. Nevertheless, this eroding paradigm is consciously chosen to inform today's official development goals, priorities and methods. The partnership idea applied to international aid envisages establishing in the South a social contract model of development previously prevailing in many northern countries. In the model being propagated, state, market and third sector actors can apparently be persuaded or induced to perform in consort. This is considered to be the best way of overcoming the social and environmental dysfunctions created by the limits to competition in a globally expanding capitalist market economy (Lisbon Group 1995). The validity of this model rests on the dubious assumption that the long, differentiated evolutionary processes and struggles between contending forces, which the North has undergone to reach contemporary social contract arrangements, can be circumvented by judicious application of foreign funds within a uniform framework and in a different era. Historical analysis of development anywhere offers no confirmation that this assumption holds true. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case: namely, that development models, policies and approaches need to be tailored 'to a country's moment in history. Situational relativism must be accepted by academic development economists as well as by policy makers, both within developing countries and in the inter-national development policy community' (Adleman and Morris 1997:840).

In other words, employing partnership to create social contract arrangements everywhere will not be the most appropriate way of bringing about structural change from the perspective of poverty reduction. Contention is needed just as often as

cooperation, if those who are poor and marginalised are to have any hope of being heard and really listened to outside of aid inducement. Relying on social contract theory to inform social change is just too simplistic and ahistorical to be useful. In fact, as we will see later, it can be a blinking impediment to effective and sustainable attainment of aid's overt goals.

### **3.2 Partnership as a practical solution to aid's failings**

Charles Abugre provides a succinct summary of the intended role of partnership in redressing the problems and pathologies (Fowler 2000b) of the aid system.

The purpose of the 'partnership' framework is to address what recent diagnoses of the aid industry conclude are the critical gaps which accounted in the past for the ineffectiveness of aid. These are identified as: (1) the lack of local 'ownership' of policies and programmes, perceived as the key to good management; (2) inappropriate donor behaviour, including [insufficient] aid co-ordination and the ineffectiveness of conditionality as a surveillance and quality control mechanism and; (3) the underlying environment, including the nature of policies, institutions and the political system. Consequently, partnership seeks to address inclusiveness, complementarity, dialogue and shared responsibility as the basis of managing the multiple relationships among stakeholders in the aid industry. (Abugre 1999:2)

The role for partnership spelled out above is, to say the least, daunting. As Abugre goes on to point out, 'it is an overstated ascription of what is possible with the best of intentions' (Abugre 1999:2). This is even more the case in the light of necessary preconditions that are unlikely to exist in many countries. But one example, common to sub-Saharan Africa, is the lack of trust between rulers of (previously) prebendal and rapacious states (Joseph 1983) and the weak notions of citizenship and political identity beyond ethnic affiliation (Ayode 1988). Another example is the closed and tightly (corruptly) interlocking economic and political power in many developing countries.

In terms of promoting *inclusiveness*, partnership fostered or forced though aid conditions must deal with an important internal contradiction. On the one hand, aid must respect the sovereignty of the government it is dealing with, i.e., its right to determine its own process of public engagement, negotiation and division of roles. On the other hand, the aid system must push, pull, cajole, enable and induce to the negotiating table (disempowered) actors who might otherwise be excluded, potentially undermining sovereign choice, organic political processes and regime mandate. In other words, it will weaken rather than reinforce local ownership of and commitment to development action, which is now considered to be a *sine qua non* for aid effectiveness and sustainability of change (Wolfensohn 1999; World Bank 1998; Hudock in this volume). Moreover, not all parties will have equal competence to engage, which often calls for prior 'capacity-building' investment. This requires many years and may be beyond the repertoire of aid tools available.<sup>6</sup>

Lack of caution in dealing with this contradiction by, for example, imposing inclusive conditions for non-governmental, civic or business actors can invite a government 'backlash', explained and foreseen by Aziz Ali Mohammed (1997) and examined by Michael Bond (2000).<sup>7</sup> For example, government 'partnership backlash' in Africa is a reasonable interpretation of the fact that in April 2000, civic groups were not allowed to congregate in Cairo alongside the meeting between African heads of state and ministers from countries of the European Union. Despite some donor backing for a Cairo venue, NGOs had to hold their meeting in Lisbon, seat of the country holding the EU chairmanship. This illustrates that requiring or demanding 'partnership' can, in fact, be counterproductive.

Partnership as a path to greater *complementarity* presumes an optimum division of roles, responsibilities and labour between different types of actors for economic progress and social problem solving. The legalistic 'tri-sectoral' view of institutional types (Brown and Korten 1989; Salamon and Anheier 1999; Defourny and Delvetere 2000) posits that northern configurations are closer to the optimum than in the South. Partnership can supposedly help move the South in the desired direction. Crudely speaking, the typical assertion from the three-sector

liberal economic and democratic theory and practice is that: (i) the for-profit sector innovates and generates wealth and economic growth; (ii) governments set enabling conditions for business, police the public good, regulate behaviour and maintain stability, security and the value of money; (iii) the third sector deals with and makes good state and market failure experienced by different social groups. However, this implicitly denies that the third sector has intrinsic values, origins and functions that have nothing to do with failure of states or markets. For example, religion and spiritual values are not the province of state or market, nor are identity-reinforcing ethnic or cultural associations and their sustaining norms, myths and practices. Put another way, the 'compensatory' sector is, in fact, the repository of values and norms, some of which society allows to be expressed through their historically evolved expectations about and tolerance of state and market roles and behaviour. Other non-economic or regulatory values, associations and processes remain expressed by and within the sector itself. The limitation of a three-sector view becomes even clearer if the political concept of civil society is employed instead.<sup>8</sup>

Civil society in its narrow Western theoretical grounding is inherently about power relations between state and citizens (van Rooy 1998). In liberal interpretations, a fundamental task of civil society is to constrain the natural tendency of government to expand its sphere of influence, resorting to civil disobedience in extreme cases. It is stretching the point to call this complementarity a 'partnership'. The relationship is essentially adversarial, based amongst others on assertion of civic rights and other forms of claim-making. Hence, the aid system creates yet another contradiction by putting much effort into building civil society while expecting it to be a 'harmony model' social contract partner at the same time. A more practical approach is to recognise that there are areas and times for collaboration and for an adversarial position that depend on the historical moment, issue and trajectory of the society in question. It is simply wrong to think that 'partnership as complementarity' applies everywhere and always.

Finally, to make aid more effective, there is the intention that partnership will foster *dialogue and shared responsibility*. From the above arguments, this

may or may not be true. As with so much in development, it depends. An important aspect of what it depends on are known and trusted rules of the game, institutions and places for dialogue and transmittal of alternative ideas that seek public support. Here, the media, and access to information more generally, are particularly important. From this perspective, what is needed for greater dialogue and allocating responsibility are not potentially co-opting and homogenising partnerships but greater pluralism in the sources and propagation of information and ideas. This is not to deny that many developing countries would benefit from the evolution of more places and conventions enabling different interests and groups to communicate and exchange with each other. With care, international aid can certainly help in this development. However, whether the result of better dialogue is partnership and shared responsibility or something else, like more firmly entrenched positions and better rights-based claim-making, remains open to question.

### 3.3 Partnership as an aid to foreign penetration

A third way of looking at the preference for partnership as the modality for pursuing the new aid agenda is as an instrument for deeper, wider and more effective penetration into a country's development choices and path. In other words, 'partnership' is a terminological Trojan Horse. There are two aspects to this perspective. One is a response to learning about the complexity of change. The other, as a way to prop up an aid system under threat in the North and the South, is to co-opt or sideline potentially opposing ideas and forces that express and propagate alternative views.

Thirty years of experience in international aid has taught us just how complex and indeterminate the process of change can be. No one party can be relied on to make growth or poverty reduction a reality. Moreover, aid is just one – sometimes small (India), sometimes large (Mozambique) – component of the process. More humility, realism and reflection on inadequate performance has led the aid system to the reasonable conclusion that as many actors and forces as possible must be brought to bear on making a country more liveable for the population as a whole and viable in a rapidly

evolving world order. Hence the attraction of partnership. The core problem is that the structural nature of poverty is not particularly amenable to change using what aid has mainly had to offer: time-bound programmes and projects. This reality is one reason for the current attention to policy-based assistance and comprehensive aid frameworks.<sup>9</sup>

What such frameworks intend to do is supply and apply a common format through which aid can engage with almost every facet of change and potential development actor simultaneously at multiple levels of social organisation. Partnership is a necessary rubric to make this appear both inevitable because of past experience and innocuous in its intent. But is it? The answer is probably not. Why? Because the supposed inclusiveness of the term hides the shadow side of excluding other ideas about change.<sup>10</sup> It is a more subtle form of external power imposition, less amenable to resistance (Lukes 1974). By appearing to be benign, inclusive, open, all-embracing and harmonious, partnership intrinsically precludes other interpretations of reality, options and choices without overtly doing so. In sum, the selection and universal application of partnership is a mystification and distraction that not only conditions the development debate at the cost of alternatives, but legitimises deep penetration of foreign concerns into domestic processes, inviting perverse and negative reactions. For example, one potential consequence is to:

turn government accountability on its head. Governments have a duty to account to their people first and foremost through their parliaments and other mechanisms, quite independently of their obligations to external parties. Participation of external actors in this process ought to be secondary and incidental as is obviously the case in the domestic policymaking process of the donors themselves. (Abugre 1999:18)

A secondary, but still strong, effect is to more comprehensively either bring in and co-opt, or push away and negate, the agendas and concerns of other actors. Actors may have different views on how, for example, poverty can best be reduced and society made more equitable and stable and change made sustainable over what time scale and through which

path. Co-optation is a particularly important element of today's official 'partnership' strategy because aid is under threat.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, as many constituencies as possible must be mobilised for its continuation. This is a special concern for the Bretton Woods Institutions that, because of their governmental ownership and governance, have no direct public constituency to support their case and therefore existence.<sup>12</sup> Hence the active engagement with NGOs and religious organisations in 'partnership' (see Hudock in this volume).

All in all, a case can be made for choosing a different way of looking at the relationships needed to make aid work better. What might they be?

### 3.4 Alternatives to partnership: what are they and why are they necessary?

At least two alternatives offer themselves as a guiding idea about preferred relationships in the aid system. One is cooperation, the other is solidarity. However, both must be based on the premise of interdependence.

The old way of looking at aid was in terms of *co-operation* (hence the 'C' in OECD). It has none of the normative overload of partnership. There are many, many ways of co-operating. The most appropriate way depends on the issue and interests at hand, the capacity and power of actors involved and the context. The fact that development cooperation has turned out to be a condition of northern dominance and patrimony has to do with pathologies introduced by its interpretation (Fowler 2000a), not with the concept as such. There is every reason to retain cooperation but to make it actually work in terms of the interest of the South, which is in the interest of a globally interdependent North (Edwards 1999). Whether the institutional reforms required will actually make this happen before it is too late is, however, open to doubt.

Another alternative is *solidarity* – in other words, a recognition of the inevitability of the need for mutual understanding, empathy and shared action in an increasingly interdependent and complicated world. While more emotive and politically loaded than 'co-operation', solidarity gets us closer to and clearer about the moral underpinning that is supposed to reflect international aid. It is a term that

has motivated significant social reform and progressive relationships between people. It is less ambiguous in terms of what needs to be done relationally to bring about change (Abugre 1999:19).

What has been working against both of these choices is the fact that the aid system does not actually behave as an interdependent system but as a chain of dependency-inducing relationships (SIDA 1996). Each link in the chain may be connected to, but is protected from, the next by a sort of firewall, which stops the heat of inadequate performance from rising upwards and burning the real power holders. Contracting out, projects externalised from organisations that implement them, and lack of real mutuality and shared accountability protect at each link.<sup>13</sup> In other words, there is too little interdependency in terms of the consequences of aid built into the rules of the game and practices flowing from them. Unfortunately, the overall outcome is a loss of the credibility of aid as a solution to problems of poverty and injustice.

Consequently, a vital reason why we must seriously reconsider the use of 'partnership' is that, as the articles in this bulletin show, it can create a new stick with which the aid system will be beaten. For all the reasons given above, setting partnership and all that it implies as the relational standard will, in many instances, backfire. Non-delivery on the aspirations of partnership will create even more dissatisfaction with aid as an effective means of making the world work better for those who are losing out on 'progress'. So, let us get real and honest about what sort of relationships are desirable and possible. Business, government and organisations of civil society do not pretend to be in partnership with all those they relate to. There is no reason why the aid system should make itself even more vulnerable by doing so.

## 4 Development Partnership in Practice: NGDO Experience

To be effective, NGOs must make and maintain a wide array of relationships and accountabilities (Edwards and Hulme 1996). As intermediaries, three are particularly significant. The first is the relationship with those in whose name NGOs claim legitimacy and serve: people who are poor, marginalised and suffering from injustice. The



second is accountability to the public, predominantly through the government, understood as the regime in power and the bureaucracy it controls. The third are the supporters and private and public funders of the work of NGOs. The articles in this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* describe this array of relational combinations NGOs find themselves in.

#### 4.1 The articles

First, Ann Hudock offers a broad-brush view of NGO interactions with official aid. Carmen Malena details NGO relations with the World Bank, differentiating NGO type and behaviour on the basis of their purpose for wanting to engage with this institution. Yonekura Yukiko provides a country-specific comparison of NGO relations with a bilateral aid agency and between two international NGOs, local NGOs and grassroots organisations in Cambodia. With post-Soviet Georgia as the setting, Kate Hamilton analyses the evolution of a new breed of domestic NGOs and their relationships with local people, official donors, international NGOs and the Georgian Government. She identifies a paradox in a common donor approach to partnership in transition economies where early withdrawal is the explicit strategy. Finally, using four cases, Jethro Pettit describes the lessons learnt by one international NGO in its efforts to strengthen (and partner with) grassroots organisations as a core programme objective, rather than as a means to implement projects.

In terms of NGO relations with *official* donors, no case approaching real partnership can be found. However, as the contributions from Yonekura Yukiko and Jethro Pettit show, the situation appears more hopeful where the donor to an NGO is an NGO itself. Ann Hudock's analysis points to three quite deep reforms required in donor behaviour if partnership is to become a real relational prospect. Carmen Malena consciously chooses not to use the term partnership in her analysis of NGO relations with the World Bank. While 'missionary' NGOs may be able to get closer to negotiating a partnership-type relationship, Bank procedures, differences in institutional culture and the fact that the borrower government must be involved, all act as impediments to making this happen. Contracting becomes the most usual

World Bank relationship with NGOs and participation of beneficiaries in loan-based projects too often lacks sufficient depth in terms of their ownership and control to gain some degree of mutuality. Bilateral aid from Japan exhibits similar and additional constraints through overly centralised decision making, allied to an aversion to financing greater local capacity that could create a more level playing field in terms of capability to negotiate. Moreover, in both cases donors are not inclined to see the (local) organisation as opposed to the project as a legitimate currency for discourse and intervention (Holloway 1997).

The Georgia case shows the difficulty with, but essential importance of, creating public credibility and trust for a new type of non-profit organisation. Difficulty in gaining such positive public recognition and understanding requires NGOs not to behave 'top-down' like the previous Soviet government. Unfortunately, this too often occurs because funding agendas and priorities – be they official or INGDO – predominate local NGOs' forms and choices, impeding real popular participation. Kate Hamilton's analysis goes deeper into the way in which external actors acculturate newly established NGOs in such a way as to preclude them even thinking about a different way of being a non-profit, civic organisation. She also highlights the fact that an intention to leave as soon as possible works against funder's own objective of creating a sustainable third sector which requires a long-term commitment.

The situation between international and local NGOs and communities looks brighter in partnership terms, if (a) there is a sufficiently strong shared value base, (b) the international NGO is prepared to have its behaviour validated by its local counterparts, (c) is in for the long term and (d) sees the organisation as where a relationship has to be built, using projects as a means to this end. To different degrees, these preconditions are exhibited in the Cambodian case and in three of World Neighbours – Nepal, Mali and Haiti – described by Jethro Pettit. What all these cases show is also a conscious investment in the funders' own organisational capacity to be a partner not just a project financier. This commonly involves a change in human skills, internal procedures and measures for achievement, and greater agility and flexibility to act.

In all cases, these requirements are enabled by strategic thinking and a sufficient degree of decision-making authority accorded to the staff on the ground. Delegation of authority is vital if substantial organisation-to-organisation relations are to be built up as the necessary foundation to get anywhere near authentic partnership as described above (Fowler 2000c). The professional skill required is to do this in such a way that dependency is not a bi-product. This implies thinking in situation-specific and systemic terms.

In addition to the more detailed findings presented in the following articles, what broader lessons can be drawn from NGDO experience and practice?

## 4.2 The lessons

The following features contribute to forming something akin to authentic partnership for NGDOs.

*Be clear about why?* Only start a relationship if you are clear about why you want it and what you realistically can and cannot put into it. Not achieving a partnership is no failure. As in any other field of life, to be effective the aid system requires a variety of relationships tailored to the actors and their interests, capabilities and purposes. Clarity means honesty about how you can relate. It prevents later accusations of failing to be a partner, with the frustration and loss of credibility that this can engender. In short, do not provide the stick with which you will be beaten.

*Apply the principle of interdependence.* To be authentic, partnership cannot be an 'add-on'. It must be an intrinsic feature of organisational perspective and behaviour, premised on interdependence with others in a complex, dynamic world. If, as a donor and more powerful party, you are not *really dependent* on the behaviour of your counterpart for your own credibility and viability, you have probably not moved from dependency and patronage.

*Adopt a contextual, systems approach and perspective.* Do not look at your relationship(s) in isolation from others that you and your counterpart have now and will need to have to be sustainable in the future. Strive for a systemic view of change and the place of your relationship within it.

*Adopt an organisational not project focus.* Partnership is about gaining a deep organisational relationship, which is not a 'project'. Look at a project as a vehicle to explore relationships, not as the basis of them. In doing this, the longer term perspective is to help both parties develop the capability to analyse effectively and address unforeseen problems that will arise in the future, not just in the immediate context of a project<sup>4</sup> – in other words, a case where 'partnership' makes each organisation more agile and adaptive.

*Create a process for local validation and shared control.* Work against the power asymmetry inherent in aid relationships by establishing joint processes and structures that do produce mutuality and shared control.

*Invest in your own reform.* Partnership is a two-way, not a one-way process. For donors, it calls for prior investment to set up the internal conditions required to share rather than retain control and to aid the weaker party to become strong enough to move from (inevitable) initial dependency through independence to self-chosen interdependence (Kaplan 1996).

*Employ the achievement of downward accountability as proxy for partnership.* Increasing the amount of official or tax-based aid to NGDOs brings a relational problem in terms of gaining or retaining 'downward accountability', to those legitimising the organisation's existence. If you cannot demonstrate the ways in which you are held accountable from below for what you do and say, then authentic partnership is unlikely to be present. Downward accountability is a fair proxy for evaluating progress in creating partnership-type relationships.

The quest for partnership can be interpreted as part of a struggle to change the way the aid system operates in order to regain its credibility. However, this type of relationship is not always appropriate, desirable or realistically possible. Consequently, far more care needs to be exercised in the use of the term to prevent abuse creating greater mistrust. The primary abuse lies in 'partnership', disguising the fact that power differences exist and that the poverty and injustice this causes are unlikely to be harmoniously eradicated.

## Notes

- 1 There is no commonly accepted definition of NGOs. For the purpose of this bulletin, they can be regarded as third-party serving, non-profit based, legally constituted non-state organisations, directly or indirectly reliant on the system of international aid. In most cases, they function as intermediaries to promote poverty eradication, sustainable development, social justice and enduring improvement in the circumstances of poor and excluded groups. In fewer cases, they concentrate on advocacy work for policy reform. They number in the tens of thousands worldwide. In this volume, the acronyms NGO and NGDO are equivalent and simply reflect authors' preferences.
- 2 The North is understood as those countries donating aid, the South as those countries receiving aid.
- 3 I am grateful to Dorothy Gordon for this observation.
- 4 The other two sectors in society sectors are government and for-profit business. As predominantly defined (Salamon and Anheier 1997) the non-profit third sector does not equate with civil society because, amongst others, it does not include non-formal associational life, giving preference to bodies with a legal personality. In this article, the more inclusive concept of civil society is employed.
- 5 The United States and Great Britain (after the fall of the Labour Party in the seventies) have been less disposed to embrace social contracts in the form of sophisticated institutional arrangements for multi-stakeholder negotiation and dialogue. A speculation would be that the nature of two-party as opposed to coalition politics common in continental Europe has mitigated against this type of consensual evolution.
- 6 Institutional development and capacity building are now significant elements of the new aid agenda. However, the system is finding it particularly difficult to achieve this, in part because it requires reforms within itself to give more power away to more competent local actors.
- 7 Part of the 'backlash' stems from an overstated but not completely illegitimate concern about the legitimacy, mandate and accountability of NGDO activists who lobby for policy change (Jordan and van Tuijl 1997). This criticism often comes from regimes whose own legitimacy can be questioned.
- 8 In terms of explaining the existence of a third sector, the latest contender is more historical, relying on diversity in social history (Salamon and Anheier 1998).
- 9 For example, the World Bank is championing a Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF), while the United Nations System is relying on Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAF).
- 10 Noam Chomsky has demonstrated how control over language controls thought and interpretation of reality. This holds true in the aid system as well, to be seen, for example, in official definitions of development, needs, participation, empowerment, sustainability, etc. (Sachs 1992).
- 11 The counter argument is that, in accepting engagement, NGOs seek to co-opt government. The weakness of this argument increases as NGOs become more and more dependent on official aid. It is more difficult to alter the behaviour of those who feed you and NGOs are not renowned for hunger strikes. In this light, non-aid related social movements might be a better bet in terms of changing the system.
- 12 For example, it is particularly interesting to learn that the IMF is, in fact, an anti-poverty institution, albeit full to the brim with macro-economists. I, and many others, have lived with the 'obvious' misapprehension that the IMF's role was to ensure global economic stability and efficiency! A not implausible interpretation is that the IMF is adopting anti-poverty clothing and language as a defensive response against threat from, for example, the US Congress. The Meltzer Committee recently argued for a significant reduction in the scope of IMF engagement and concentration on financial stability (*The Economist*, March 18, 2000: 88). The Overseas Development Council (ODC 2000) acknowledges the impact of IMF behaviour on poverty but also argues that the Fund's role be restricted and that the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) be transferred to the World Bank.
- 13 For example, how can the World Bank make good erroneous policy 'advice' that generates enormous social costs, such as unemployment and collapse of whole industry (Hanlon 1997).
- 14 I am grateful to Jethro Pettit for this observation.

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