



NGOS AND PARTNERSHIP

This Policy Briefing Paper presents the findings from the first phase of INTRAC's research 'Promoting Effective North-South NGO Partnerships' and draws out the implications for NGOs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Partnerships between NGOs based in the 'North' and the 'South' have become a key part of international development processes. Whilst NGOs are drawn to the **concept of partnership** as an expression of solidarity that goes beyond financial aid, few development concepts have been the subject of such heated debate.

Partnerships between NGOs in the North and the South can bring benefits based on their **comparative advantages**. These are in turn related to their proximity to their respective constituencies (Kazibwe 2000). Northern NGOs are well placed to engage with the donor public and to undertake policy influencing and advocacy, whilst Southern NGOs have the benefit of local knowledge and presence. In working together, Northern and Southern NGOs combine their strengths and act as a link between their respective constituencies, strengthening their legitimacy. Thus, the sum of the whole partnership has the potential to be greater than the sum of the parts.

A further benefit is that partnerships go beyond time-bound and discrete interventions such as the classic development project. It is the complex combination of the **organisational nature** of partnership with its intrinsically **relational dimension** that lies at the heart of the advantages of partnerships.

On the other hand, 'partnership' has undoubtedly become the victim of its own success; the term has been overused and applied to a whole range of inter-organisational relationships. Furthermore, the debate on partnership has concentrated on the **failure** of NGOs – particularly in the North – to live up to aspirations for **ideal** partnership based on solidarity and mutuality.

However, there has been little empirical research on what NGOs actually mean by partnership, how they implement it in practice and the challenges they face in developing and managing effective partnerships. In order to bridge this gap, INTRAC is carrying out research on **North-South NGO partnerships**. The first phase of the research, from August to November 2000, analysed and compared the views and practices of ten European NGOs in the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. These are the NGOs who take part in INTRAC's NGO Sector Analysis Research Programme.

The research addressed the following questions:

- How do Northern NGOs **define** partnership with respect to their relationships with Southern NGOs?
- How do Northern NGOs develop and manage partnerships with Southern NGOs in **practice**?
- What have been the main challenges and what **lessons** have been learned?

The research findings illustrate the complex and varied nature of partnerships between NGOs. The NGO staff interviewed held a generally realistic view of partnerships, and were aware of the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural, inter-organisational relationships. It is important for both (or all parties) to be clear about the **purpose** of the partnership, the mutual expectations and responsibilities. Furthermore, given the tendency of funding processes to dominate North-South partnerships, it is critical for Northern NGOs to develop a more systematic approach to **'good practice'** in partnerships.

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2. NGO APPROACHES TO PARTNERSHIP

The ten European NGOs in the study see the practice of working with Southern Partners as a key pillar of a **developmental approach**. The benefits are seen in terms of improving local ownership, sustainability and poverty reach, as well as the mutual exchange of resources and ideas between the North and the South. This is intrinsically related to the question of **legitimacy** and the importance of being rooted in their respective **constituencies**. There is some debate over the use of the **term** partnership; some NGOs see this as too idealistic, and prefer to talk of **partner co-operation**. A difference between the NGOs is the extent to which they take a **functional** view of working with Partners as a means to achieving their own organisational aims. Some of the NGOs see the development of long-term relationships with Southern Partners as an end in itself, based around notions of **solidarity** and the **strengthening civil society organisations** in the South. Nevertheless, funding processes tend to dominate the role of the NGOs in the study, and this has influenced the nature of their partnerships.

Policies on Partnership

The NGOs' policies on partnership are relatively recent and reflect the following trends:

- the shift away from being operational to working with Southern Partners;
- the trend towards developing systematic policies and a strategic focus;
- the move away from a **project** focus to a **partner** focus. This has been part of the process of moving from discrete, piecemeal interventions towards strategic, result-oriented ways of working.

Different Types of Partnerships

All of the NGOs have a diverse range of relationships with their Southern Partners, and value that diversity. Furthermore, relationships are dynamic and change over time. Few NGOs have formal classifications of types of relationships with Partners, but recognise the diversity of partnerships based on the following:

- **Funding-based differences:** a funding-only relationship at one end of the spectrum and a partnership based on policy dialogue with no funding at the other end.

- **Capacity-based differences:** a Partner with limited capacity requiring support from the Northern Partner; contrasted with a partnership with a strong, autonomous organisation that contributes from its own experience.
- **Trust-based differences:** control of the Southern Partner at one extreme and unconditional trust at the other.

Principles of Effective Partnerships

In general, there are few formalised principles for partnerships within the NGOs studied. Principles of relating to Partners tend to be part of organisational culture and values. In general, effective partnerships are based on:

- the **effectiveness of the work** on both sides;
- the **quality** of the relationship;
- **clarity about the purpose** of the relationship.

The Limits to Partnerships

As with the principles for effective partnerships, there is a degree of consensus amongst those interviewed concerning the main limits to partnership:

- **The role of the Northern NGO as donor:** this is a major obstacle to achieving equality. The imbalance in the relationship created by the Northern NGO's control of over resources skews the power balance.
- **Funding processes and distorted accountability:** whilst in theory accountability to local constituencies is important, in practice the funding processes 'hijack' the accountability mechanisms and re-orient them towards Northern donors. Northern NGOs assume a control function, whilst Southern NGOs risk becoming donor-driven and distanced from their grassroots constituencies.
- **Organisational capacity limits:** capacity mismatch often occurs between Partners of different sizes; partnership dialogue is more feasible between organisations of a similar size and capacity. The **capacity limits of the Northern NGO** themselves are also a constraining fact. The number and depths of partnerships, lack of co-ordination between Northern NGOs and high staff turnover are all limits to effective partnerships.

3. PROCESSES OF PARTNERSHIPS IN PRACTICE

Organisational Structures and Country Offices

There are many similarities in the staffing structures of the ten NGOs. The management of partnerships is generally located within a clearly defined Regional and Country Programme structure, closely aligned to **funding processes**. The main difference between the NGOs relates to **where** partnerships are managed from:

- NGOs that have always worked through partners tend to manage partnerships from the head office;
- NGOs that were operational in the past tend to manage partnerships from field offices.

For both, a balance has to be maintained between proximity for close contact and interference.

Starting, Maintaining and Ending Partnerships

There was a very varied practice concerning the processes of starting, maintaining and ending partnerships. A few important points emerged:

- It is important to recognising distinct **phases** in the development of a partnership.
- The **'getting to know you'** process is often imbalanced, with the Southern Partner having less access to information about the Northern NGO than vice versa.
- A number of NGOs are introducing standard **partnership agreements**; however, the tendency is to focus on the framework of the agreement rather than maintaining the partnership itself.
- **Ending a partnership**: having clearly defined objectives from the beginning of the partnership helps in identifying when the objectives have been achieved and the partnership can be ended.

Accountability and the Degree of Shared Governance

South to North accountability clearly centres on **funding**. The control-orientation of funding systems is thought to be somewhat excessive, even amongst the NGO staff themselves. Moreover, the control orientation of the system contradicts the principle of **local accountability** to local constituencies. More work needs to be done in terms of developing systematic ways of strengthening local accountability structures.

North to South accountability is **weak** overall, and Northern NGOs are not as transparent as they expect Southern Partners to be. Some organisations have introduced formal processes for Partners to give feedback on their performance. This is an important step to take, and is a critical area to be further developed over the next few years.

The degree of **shared governance** in partnerships between Southern Partners and Northern NGOs is perhaps the area that is most limited by funding processes. Northern NGOs exert a considerable degree of **indirect power** and **implicit influence** because of their control over funding, irrespective of whether they are committed to the principle of equal partnerships. In the study, there were no real examples of mutual, shared decision-making. However, there has been a considerable level of experimentation with Southern Partner **consultation**, particularly in relation to country or regional strategies and thematic policies.

There are also various examples of formal Partner consultation **mechanisms**, particularly at Country Programme level or in an advisory role to the European NGO's Board. The formal consultation of Southern Partners raises some very practical problems, given the sheer **numbers** of Partners involved; having only selected Partners involved in consultation can be divisive. A second problem which emerged concerns the **identity** of the European NGO; most see themselves as rooted in their national context and directly accountable to their own constituencies and governments.

4. KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR NGOS

There are areas within the practice of partnerships between Northern and Southern NGOs that need to be developed further. Northern NGOs need to develop a more **systematic** and **consistent** approach to **feedback** mechanisms concerning individual Partner relationships, as well as greater **mutuality** in the negotiation of partnership agreements. Similarly, processes of Partner consultation need to be strengthened and integrated into policy and planning processes. Northern NGOs thus face a number of **key issues** in the development and management of their partnerships with Southern Partners, as illustrated overleaf.

Key Implications for NGOs

- **Being realistic about partnerships:** 'authentic', mutual partnership depends on the Partner organisations being similar in their size and organisational capacity. Northern NGOs need to develop greater clarity in identifying different types and phases of relationships with Southern Partners.
- **Agenda setting:** given their power as funders, Northern NGOs should guard against the tendency to impose agendas on Southern Partners. This could be achieved through more equitable negotiation processes.
- **Developing consistency in practice:** processes related to the partnership relationship are less formalised and systematic than funding processes. Northern NGOs need to maximise their considerable experience of working with Southern Partners by developing a more systematic approach to 'good practice' in partnerships.
- **Assessments of partnerships:** there is a need for mutual assessment of the partnership relationship to be built into Northern NGO systems and procedures in order to facilitate reflection and learning from experience.
- **Strengthening policy dialogue:** systematic, structured consultation of Southern Partners in the strategy and policy processes of Northern NGOs should be strengthened and consolidated, given that policy dialogue between Northern and Southern NGOs is a key strength of the partnership model.

Partnerships and the Changing Role of Northern NGOs

The role of Northern NGOs is changing and there are increasing questions over the security of their funding. Northern NGOs are therefore under pressure to demonstrate their contribution beyond the channelling of funds, for example in terms of their professional expertise. Many NGO staff foresee a continued trend away from service delivery to concentrating on **advocacy** and **policy influencing**. This is seen positively in terms of the prospects for partnership, as it offers scope to move towards greater **solidarity** and **mutuality**. The old or traditional model of partnership, revolving around discrete project funding, is giving way to new types of partnerships. The distinction between **partnerships**, **networks** and **alliances** is becoming increasingly blurred, particularly for NGOs that are part of an international alliance. The implications for Northern NGOs are to develop greater **clarity** in terms of the **purpose** and **nature** of individual partnerships and of their overall approach to partnerships in practice. Partnerships can become more balanced as Southern Partners become stronger in articulating their needs and what they can offer, with partnerships based on **policy dialogue** between **strong, autonomous** organisations.

Next Steps

This study represents Phase One of INTRAC's INTRAC's NGO Partnerships Research from a Northern NGO perspective. Phase Two, looking at partnerships from a Southern perspective, is currently being developed.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES

The research findings from Phase One will be published shortly by INTRAC:

Brehm, V. M. (2001) *Promoting Effective North-South NGO Partnerships*. Occasional Papers Series No. 35. Oxford: INTRAC.

A summary of the research with links to articles on the subject of NGO partnerships is also available on INTRAC's website: <http://www.intrac.org/r-secan.htm>

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