LOCALISATION: Partnership Chronicles.

4 December 2016

"The fact that we are not money-hungry confuses people."

"*Partnership*" is one of the most abused words in the international cooperation jargon. It stands for any and all collaborations, whatever their nature and quality. Donor governments are 'development partners', national and local non-governmental actors are invariably 'partners' of international aid agencies.

While the quantity (rather than the quality) of funding to national organisations is the attention area in the post-World Humanitarian Summit '*localisation*' agenda, aid-recipient organisations have long argued that they also want a profound change in the quality of relationship. They want to be treated as 'partners' and not as 'sub-contractors'.

In this blog, the first of two, I explore some of the practical aspects of collaborative relations between international and national agencies. The orientation is mostly towards civil society organisations, but similar issues exist in inter-governmental relations, as can be seen from the declarations resulting from the successive 'High Level Panel' meetings, particularly since Paris 2005.

EPISODE 1: Domestic Workers?

Not so long ago I was listening to the director of an African NGO talking about the attitudes and practices from international agency staff, he and his organisation had repeatedly been confronted with:

- Occasionally they would find themselves suddenly approached with the request to immediately sign up to a project, that the international agency needed to get going quickly. Pressured to decide very fast and not convinced by the project design, he often had said 'no'. He typically explaining the negative response as a l'ack of spare capacity' so as not to offend the international agency. Then silence would ensue. When subsequently encountering those who had so urgently approached him, generally they would not even acknowledge that the exchange had happened. The interaction had been purely instrumental.
- Similarly, they were occasionally also asked to quickly sign up to a 'bid' for a tender. Since the deadline to submit the bid was invariably around the corner, there was no time to discuss details and terms of the collaboration. He was simply told that 'could be worked out later', when the funding was secured. It was obvious they were simply approached because the donor agency wanted to see international agencies bidding together with national 'partners'.
- With some other international agencies, there was a joint project. The *terms of inequality* were clear: The international agency determined how many staff the national agency needed for the project as well as their salaries. Money transfers were made only monthly, typically delayed because his NGO had to produce the expenses reports which then had to be first approved by the international agency. Though he is the director of his agency, he would always deal with mid-level programme staff from

the international agency – their director always had other priorities. Many of the international agency staff would know all the salaries and benefits of the national agency, whereas they knew nothing about those of the international agency. All contracts invariably had a clause specifying that any litigation would be under the laws and in the courts of the international agency's headquarters.

- Though there was a joint project, the national agency was only offered 'direct project implementation costs'. None of their core support costs were covered, though they knew that the international agency itself took an (undisclosed) 'management fee'.
- When he questioned the unfavourable terms of cooperation, he was told that unfortunately the rules were made by the international agencies' headquarters, or came from the governmental back donors. So nothing could be changed, no scope for negotiation.
- When he asked for some dedicated capacity-development support, he was told that they would 'learn by doing' in the cooperation.

Experiences similar to the ones of this African NGO, have also been described repeatedly for the interaction between Syrian and international agencies (both also have better collaboration experiences!).

They are confirmed by the prevailing understanding of 'partner' as an '*implementing partner*' – not a (joint) '*decision-making partner*' or 'learning partner'.

They are not radically different from that of many 'domestic workers', often people that have come from another country, and women: the rules are set exclusively by the 'employer', who has more or less the power to change them unilaterally.

EPISODE 2: A Forgotten 'Great Charter'?

Such unpleasant relationship should surprise, given that in 2007 the Global Humanitarian Platform agreed on following Principles of Partnership (PoP): *Equality, Transparency, Results-Oriented Approach, Responsibility, Complementarity.*

Its explanatory paragraph for 'complementarity' is particularly interesting here: "*The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other's contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, humanitarian organizations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.*"

It also issued a companion document: "*Ten Practical Ways to Use the PoP*" and how to monitor and report on them. Strangely enough, the guidance does <u>not</u> suggest a periodic, reciprocal, assessment of the quality of the relationship. Surely this is a situation that calls for such, using score cards or another such tool, as basis for a constructive dialogue?

I am not the betting type, but in this case I am prepared to stake some money that few people know about the PoP, let alone use them.

EPISODE 3: The 'Deal Breaker' Song.

Also not so long ago, I was listening to the director of a South Asian NGO describing why they had recently said '*no*' -three times- to offers of project work from international agencies.

<u>'Coffee first'</u>: Not surprisingly, she was emphasising the necessity to first build relationship, and to explore the challenges in the environment and whether there was a common vision about what to try and address, and how: "*We don't want to start the conversation with 'the*

project', we may end the conversation with that. We first need to build relationship and can talk about what the issues are, only later can the money question come in. Our ultimate goal is positive change, not the delivery of projects, or maintaining an office or keeping our cash flow going…our even own institutional survival."

'Unlearning': She was also talking about how difficult this seemed to be for many staff of international organisations: "*it is hard for an international organisation to land on a local one that doesn't seek to play the game; people need time to unlearn old habits.*"

'Relation before negotiation': As she put it eloquently: "*partnership is a conversation about how together we can affect positive change, not a negotiation over resources.*"

With the rest of her colleagues, they had set minimum requirements with regard to behaviours and terms of collaboration, and decided no longer to waste time or look for collaboration opportunities where it quickly became clear that the international agency was not meeting those: the 'deal breakers'.

Her being a musical person, we started playing around with phrases and musical lines to compose what might become a real hit: "*The Deal Breaker Song.*" (Please compose your own, post on YouTube and circulate the link!).

EPISODE 4: Reverse Risk and Capacity Assessments.

Hollow Crowns in all Realms? There are widespread problems among national and local agencies, governmental or not. Positions are obtained through political patronage; NGOs and governmental 'initiatives' are created to exploit the 'aid market'; many CSOs suffer from the founder-director syndrome, failing to institutionalise and democratise. Several are 'family businesses'. The accounting can become indeed 'too creative'. They need to get their house in order.

At the same time, we can often see 'wastage' of public funds by international aid agencies (multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental). Some of them also have directors who have been in place for longer than the two terms Presidents normally are constitutionally allowed. And there definitely are more cases of fraud or misuse of funds than are allowed to become known publicly.

Reciprocal Risk Assessments: National agencies considering partnering with international ones, are also running potentially significant risks. Here are some:

- Losing control over its direction, by beginning to implement the strategies, programmes and projects of the international agency;
- Losing the connection to its own constituency, as the international actor becomes a stronger influence;
- Investing less in collaborative efforts with other national actors as the collaborative energies are oriented towards the international one;
- Counterproductive speeding up of 'project' design and implementation because the international aid machinery is geared towards 'fast food' and has no tolerance for 'slowly cooked dishes';
- Being left alone for 'post-project care', when the international partner has disappeared because its funding ended;
- Dependency on continued foreign funding, also because less effort is invested in developing domestic sources of funding;
- Vulnerability to volatile funding, with sometimes too fast scaling up, followed by a need to rapidly scale down;

- Shift in fundamental staff motivation, from service to their own society to predominantly career and salary considerations;
- Decreased visibility as the international agency takes credit for the work achieved, and innovations made;
- Reputational risk of being seen or being portrayed as an agent of foreign interests (also because of the back-donors to the international agency);
- Security risk when communications of the international actor displease certain domestic actors, who might direct the backlash at the national one.

National organisations are well advised to conduct reciprocal 'risk assessments'!

Capacity-development for international actors: There are also 'capacities' that can be found in national/local organisations, that international ones could learn from. For example:

- 'People driven' and 'community-responsive' programming
- Programming with a strong cultural and social fit
- Political capabilities: navigating the political space(s)
- Making a dollar go far
- Finding creative, innovative solutions in complex and resource-scarce situations
- Managing disruptive change.

This is not totally extravagant: In the early 90s, 13 Dutch development CSOs invited 'southern' consultants to assess their performance. During 2011-2012 two Dutch development CSOs also asked 'southern' partners to participate in their own organisational assessment.[i] But it is certainly not the prevailing practice.

Beyond Money: There are some international agencies, both faith-based and secular, whose mission is simply to strengthen and support national/local capacities. Their ties with 'partners' can persist even when there is no money. That is admirable.

Yet even then questions can be asked about transparency and equitability: Some years ago, I came across a case of a national organisation running on the volunteerism of its staff for more than 18 months already. Though the long-standing political instability had not been resolved, there hadn't been a major crisis for two years, and foreign donors had gone elsewhere than this country of low strategic interest. The long-standing international partner maintained an active relationship. But it did not reveal that its director was earning a salary roughly twice that of the Prime Minister of the Netherlands. And that it had moved into more prestigious and far more expensive headquarter premises. The question of whether it could reduce some of its expenditure and share the savings with the national partner was not raised.

Giovanni Bisignani said: "*If one of the partners in a partnership is losing his shirt while the other is counting his money, it is no longer a partnership*." What do you think?

EPISODE 5: Alice in Wonderland?

So what might a really 'equitable' relationship look like? Well, national agencies might

- Conduct risk- and capacity-assessments of the international agency;
- Demand details of its organigram, staffing numbers and salary scales;
- Check the depth of commitment and possible conflicts of interest in its governance structure;
- Question how long the director has been in position and whether leadership is sufficiently institutionalised;
- Request specifics about its current and future business model(s);
- Commission an audit or an inquiry when there is a founded concern over wastage or financial mismanagement;

- Vet its potential donors for programing in their country or region, in light of political risk management;
- Have a full say in every strategic decision related to the work in this country or region;
- Check every public communication about the joint programme before it goes out;
- Provide the international agency with capacity-development support;
- Expect to be present at every donor meeting; and expect their senior staff to give fair priority to its meeting requests.

What else?

Nothing of this should sound outrageous as it is what international agencies typically request and expect from national agencies. Yet it is far from common practice. We can go two ways: We significantly limit our use of the word 'partnership' and/or we step up to practice more equitable relationships. Both are options, but let's start by being clearer of what we want and where we are.

Koenraad Van Brabant is co-director of Global Mentoring Initiative. GMI's core mission is to play supportive and enabling roles for collaborative action and organisational strengthening. Localisation and a participation revolution is one theme of work within this core mission. Other themes of work are team building, effective change processes, collaboration and partnering between organisations. We draw on decades of practical experience and reflection, and use techniques and competencies from Partnership Brokering, Organisational and Relational Systems Coaching and Being at Full Potential. www.gmentor.org

---

[i] It Takes Two to Tango. PSO & INTRAC Praxis Note 62, 2012