‘Dreaming about partnership building’

Moses Isooba (Uganda National NGO forum) and
Siri Lijfering (Wageningen University)

The foundational preposition of this paper is that true partnership is primed on a relationship of equals. It’s a relationship anchored on trust. It’s a relationship of shared results and outcomes (both negative and positive). Such a relationship is purposively nurtured and any downfalls quickly attended to so as to restore the relationship on its rails. By highlighting key values, roles, and pathways for change for a new development system, this paper aims to provide opportunities for reflection, inspiration and motivation to ‘do development differently’. We invite you to embark on this journey together and dream of a different future. This dream paper seeks to stimulate and strengthen the “demand-side” of systems change and articulate a collective vision of a “re-imagined southern civil society” towards “the civil society we want.”)

Background

On 10 September, 2021 a group of Development Practitioners (see below) embarked on a journey together to dream what partnership building in a new system could look like. With abundance of caution and aware of the fact that as we dream, we should dream as in humanitarian planning where “a disaster actively imagined is a disaster mitigated”. Our dream is intended to mitigate unequal power relations and grow towards partnership building based on equity.

This paper takes as its point of departure that partnerships are built around Northern initiated policy frameworks, which constitute the main source of funding, strategic priorities are primarily based on Northern and international agenda setting, and far less on agenda setting in the South, or in consultation with actors in the South. Strategies have been largely and consistently determined before Southern CSOs arrive at the negotiation table. The global North are the “Decision Makers” while their Southern counterparts (“partners”) are relegated to “decision takers”. Furthermore, Southern CSOs depend too much on donor funding which puts them in a weak negotiation position. Strategic priorities, legitimacy and knowledge of Southern partners are subordinate to strategic priorities of Northern donors and CSOs. In essence what is supposed to be a partnership is often limited to a funding relationship with money being the blood in the veins and arteries of the relationship.

This paper aims to provide an opportunity to rethink and reshape civil society through disruption, innovation and systematic thinking that will contribute to a better and healthy partnership between partners in the Global North and the Global South. In particular, this paper will elaborate on what this means when it comes to new roles in development partnerships based on the following elements:

- Partner selection
- Risk assessment
- Governance mechanisms
- Initial agenda setting at various levels and other partnership building aspects
Core values a new system should be built upon:

The group defined a number of key values a new system should be built upon. The first being that there is a strong need to adhere to the **subsidiarity principle**: “Those closest to the problem are the ones that have the solution”. A new system should therefore create space for **ownership** and **leadership** of local actors, so that they are in the driver’s seat when it comes to partnership building. This would also encourage **legitimacy** and **downward accountability** in development partnerships.

The nature of civil society as a key sector of the modern state raises pressing questions with regard to the "legitimacy" of CSOs since they often mobilize people and resources through commitment to social values for the sake of a greater cause. Accordingly, the reputation of these organizations and the extent of their earned legitimacy could be at stake as a result of being key players in social missions and values. This matter is considered especially critical owing to their ability to attract and appoint cadres and mobilize allies and supporters to their various causes.

The new partnership should adopt an approach towards "legitimacy strengthening" as opposed to "capacity building"?

When it comes to partnership building, we consequently need partnerships that **move beyond consultation to representation** and **participation** whereby a conscious effort is made into amplifying voices of partners in the South.

We need to urgently search for new and innovative ways of effective participation in the COVID-19 world. The transition to virtual platforms has laid bare a hierarchy of participants’ rights that favors businesses, industry groups, and those in the Global North, often to the exclusion of civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities. As planners design and implement virtual-only or hybrid meetings, they must rethink how to design meaningful public participation going forward to ensure principles of equity and examine the impact of technical decisions on different stakeholders. For long the North has occupied the space of decision making and the South, the space of decision taking. How can this be reversed in the virtual world?

**Listening** to partners and creating safe spaces for discussion are in this regard crucial when it comes to creating equitable partnerships, creating platforms where partners can share their visions and ideas. This also requires **transparency** and **openness** in communication between partners, values and practices that need to be based on **trust**. This also includes being **honest** about when something in the partnership is not working or when certain expectations cannot be met or should be adjusted.

There is consequently also a need for **flexibility** in partnerships and programmes, giving space to different ideas, timelines and planning approaches. Giving **space for local agency** and **respecting autonomy** of partners is as such crucial when it comes to building partnerships and programmes.

Finally, it was recognized that partnership building is a process that is always evolving. Allowing **space for growth** within development partnerships is therefore key.
Roles in Partnership Building

This paper addresses 2 core questions: What are the roles when it comes to partnership building that we need to shift the power in development? And what other roles do we need in the system?

Shifting the power in partnerships requires a concerted effort both to change what we do now and at the same time to build something new. In this regard when it comes to new roles we need in partnership building there are quick wins and long-term investments. This paper makes a dichotomy of roles: the power shifting roles which are largely intended to change the current system. The other cluster of roles are the long term investments for molding a new system – the one we desire.

Changing the current system (quick wins) – power shifting roles:

This paper is written at a time when there is an appetite for change as evidenced by the multiple conversations taking place on the subject of shifting the power (#ShiftThePower). The partnership building dream is riding on this #ShiftThePower wave. Whether the shift the power debate is occasioned by an existential threat if the Northern NGOs or a push from their Southern counterparts without any doubt lends credence to this re-imagining of partnership.

On the one hand, there are low-hanging fruits like northern NGOs letting go of some of the things which their southern counterparts are able to do and build on the capacities of their Southern partners, regarding programmatic capacity, contextual competence and allow Southern partners to take a leading role in decision-making processes. The north can then be responsible for shaping funding policies in the north, and also sharing learning across board - given their closeness to places where theories are generated. These shifting roles and responsibilities can be agreed upon by NGOs among themselves, before tackling the larger question of donor architecture.

The north can shape funding policies and modalities in the West (e.g. what ActionAid International is doing in UK, shifting the narrative around funding from negative portrayal of Africans to actually stating Africa's poverty problem as being systemic) and also be a sort of convenor of learning by harnessing development theories from some of the top institutions in the West. The South on the other hand should be the repository of contextual knowledge, programmatic capacity and course correction. To be a primary actor and the fulcrum in the crafting of sustainable (long term and comprehensive) funding models that go beyond short-lived projects.

Creation of learning and linkage loops: The anticipated role here is that there should be a connecting thread linking the knowledge in the North to the residual knowledge in the South

Civil society in the global South citizen should contribute to the conceptualization of grant making and intermediary donor models, facilitating networking, partnership development and engagements with community actors (activists, movements and organizations.

On the side of programmatic choices and governance structures, civil society organisations in the Global South should have the opportunity to lead, coordinate and nurture the co-construction and co-implementation of global civil society interventions, programs and initiatives.

Implementing these changes to ‘shift the power’ in the current system will take time and concerted effort from both sides of the isle. Shifting the power is in this regard not just an end-goal, it is a
process that requires navigating and negotiating power based on collaboration and confrontation at the same time. As a partnership facilitator aptly put it:

“As a global partnership facilitator my role is to ensure equal participation of all partners in the partnership development and programmatic choices. Also, my role (representing the lead organization) is to “educate” our donor – the ministry – to become even more flexible, and less demanding so as to allow for more Shift the Power. Also, my role is to actively seek dissenting views – in particular from local partners. It is therefore needed that I create a safe space for dialogue and dissent in the partnership, and always accept different views and feedback in a constructive and non-violent way”.

Building a new system (long-term investments) – power building roles:

In building a new system, we desire a partnership that seeks to transform global civil society to respond to today’s global challenges. This will involve being disruptors and innovators in equal measure. The disruption and innovation should be engineers by those who occupy the current INGO industrial complex (including some southern partners, donors and INGO leaders domiciled in the North) to rapidly develop prototypes (alternative operational models) for the reimagined partnerships. The anticipated roles are inter alia, questioning the purpose, structures, power and positioning of INGOs on which the current partnership is anchored.

The new partnership system requires disruptive innovation. The nature of change has evolved drastically. These ‘disruptive changes’ are characterized by their speed, scale and abruptness (ICSC, 2013). The rise in political, technological and planetary disruptions threatened civil society organizations: the model for change is different and if organizations are to remain, they too must change (ICSC, 2015).

There is need to facilitating learning and adoption of new operational models within the Global civil society ecosystem and supporting the resilience and sustainability of new ways of working within the Global civil society ecosystem.

There is a distinct role of having in place knowledge brokers (brokering knowledge systems to allow for and bridge epistemic diversity between the North and South. These knowledge brokers will support the documentation, adoption and adaptation of alternative operational models, community philanthropy infrastructure and community-led development approaches.

In the dreamt partnership, key role will be disruptor of the status quo – the disruption involves dreaming what a “re-imagined development ecosystem” might look like from the perspective of Global South civil society and the communities they serve, and perhaps offering recommendations and practical pathways for transformational change.

The new and imagined partnership system will arbiters and mediators, this require mediative institutions that offer peer moderation, mediation, skills development, arbitration in cases of disagreements between the Global North and global South “partners”.”
Dreaming of a new future: pathways for change and reflection

Building on the key values we defined in the first part of the session the group started dreaming about what a different system/alternative approach to partnership building could look like. The inputs from the discussion seemed to centre around 5 key themes and pathways for change.

1. Acknowledging and embracing diversity of partners

The first key issue related to partnership building is recognizing each other’s strengths and input and building on those together. As one of the participants mentioned: “We all live in one village and have the same goals and dreams. To realize those dreams we need each other”.

In development partnerships, Northern NGOs tend to look at capacities of the Global South from a deficit perspective- there being a lack of capacity with Southern partners that needs to be build- but there are many valuable and unique capacities that organizations from the Global South have and can offer to development partnership and these should be recognized and acknowledged as such. Partnership building should therefore be about complementarity - building mutuality while also respecting autonomy of different partners and respecting divergent views and ideas - rather than steering towards a consensus. This includes the need to build on local values and cultural systems and not trying to ‘Westernize’ approaches when it comes to partnership building.

As one participant shared, we have already seen a shift in awareness of the different approaches and realities of partners in the Global North and the Global South; partners in the Global North are increasingly aware of the needs, challenges and aspirations of those in the Global South while those in the Global South have become more aware and appreciate the dynamics in the Global North. However, as she recognized, we are not quite there yet and a conscious effort needs to be made to make partnerships more inclusive.

A concrete way of doing this could be to do away with tight donor deadlines that do not allow for proper consultation with partners and instigate co-creation sessions to come up with programme proposals and strategies. There is need for shared results and outcomes and a departure from the traditional logframes which are only fit for the traditional service delivery NGOs.

To enable this, we need to make a conscious and deliberate departure from log frames as this has led to the birth of the foreign-funded, proposal writing NGOs, which are almost exclusively run by careerists, this has a debilitating effect on the rooted, authentic, and interest-based fraternity of civil society formations in the Global South which successfully championed workers’ rights, land rights, negotiated agricultural produce prices, and ultimately won independence through citizen-led struggles and causes.

2. Deconstructing knowledge: building on local knowledge systems and expertise

A second important facet of partnership building in a new system is that it should deconstruct power and knowledge in development. Development partnerships are currently built on a Eurocentric idea of what knowledge and expertise is, whereby the knowledge of Northern NGOs is generally valued more than those of their Southern counterparts. As one participant rhetorically asked: ‘When it comes to development: whose expertise counts and whose expertise is paid for?’

A new system would need to address the current epistemic injustice- the silencing or ignoring of alternative knowledge systems- in the development discourse. This requires a fundamental shift in our thinking of what knowledge is and which evidence counts. As one participant succinctly put it: “We need to move away from an ivory tower of research towards an ebony tower of knowledge.”
To do this, partnerships should create space for alternative knowledge systems such as the Ubuntu philosophy in (South) Africa or other relevant knowledge systems in Asia and South America. This requires the instigation of a conversation between partners in the Global South and the Global North on their perspectives when it comes to knowledge and evidence creation in development programmes.

Fundamentally, it also requires a shift in our education system to address issues like identity and the relation with culture and language and re-examine the concept of “de-colonization”.

There is a need for an education that can challenge the colonial stereotypes; this education cannot be limited to formal education, but also include informal education. University degrees in the Global South and the nature of learning need to be reviewed. The education system needs to introduce questioning and more questioning, a critical reading of Western texts. A critical examination of their context, who the author is, the intention of the author and its relevance or irrelevance to students. To make critical thinking an essential element of any discipline.

3. Building on existing civil society networks in the Global South

There is an urgent need for honest Dialogue with Development Partners (bilateral donors, multilateral donors and INGOs). Global South NGOs are sometimes involved in what could pass as a kick-boxing game in which both civil society and donors have serious doubts of the other but prefer to remain politically correct on the dialogue table, including occasions such as donor conferences organized by a number of civil society organizations but suspicious of each other in the corridors.

Another key pathway for change that was brought forth in the discussion was the need to rethink partner selection in the partnership building process. Rather than engaging in what has been called ‘the mating dance of NGOs’ whereby Northern NGOs go on a mission to select Southern partners that fit their programme proposals, Southern partners should be able to choose those partners that are most suited to address the needs of the communities they are working in.

Building on local civil society networks that are strongly embedded in the communities which they serve and supporting Southern alliance building, local leadership and ownership of programmes should be built into a new partnering system. This requires more flexible funding systems and tendering processes that allow for Southern leadership. Consequently, instead of hampering Southern ownership with stringent funding criteria, donors need to encourage Southern alliance building and make it easier for Southern partners to become the lead in strategic partnerships.

An innovative idea could be to organize NGO Market places whereby civil society actors from the North and the South can present/showcase what they can offer and what they need and partners can subsequently find each other and negotiate on a more equal footing.

Another concrete suggestion was for Northern NGOs to use the self-assessment tool that was developed by the Global Fund for Community Foundations and Global Giving that is designed to help non-profits and other change agents reflect on the extent to which their organization is working for, with, or led by the people they intend to serve in the selection of partners.

There are several examples of effective CSOs that draw a vivid picture of the concept of relying on the CSO’s "legitimacy" within its local environment rather than on its institutional capacities which is often the main attention of the Global North Partners. Legitimacy is linked to accountability, for "whomever is not held accountable would not have legitimacy," or in other words, "legitimacy is established so long as accountability is established."
4. Creating lasting connections through dialogue and inclusive language

Another strong aspect of partnership building that was mentioned was that there needs to be space created for open dialogue between partners about ambitions and expectations that go beyond funding aspects of the partnership. As one participant put it: “The human aspect is crucial when it comes to partnership building”. In order to build partnerships, it is essential to also build a personal connection with your partners. This entails listening to partners’ needs and concerns and being open about challenges and dilemmas; “No hidden agendas!” There is need for joint ownership of the outcomes – both the positive and negative.

One concrete way of doing this would be to establish inclusive partnering agreements that include organizations’ expectations and responsibilities. This can help to build organizations’ commitment to the partnership and can help to go beyond personal interests to a common goal and shared vision. Having regular meetings between partners to share what you are working on and how you can work together can help this effort.

5. Learning from the past while planning for the future

The final point to take in consideration concerns learning from the past in order to plan for the future. This entails both learning from what went wrong and sharing best practices and inspiring examples. As one of the participants suggested; “We need to be the morticians of the development sector: seeing what went wrong and why certain partnerships die and what we can learn from that”. On the other hand, we also need to appreciate what there is and see how we can build on that. Learning, unlearning and re-learning should be the new mantra.

In order to avoid reinventing the wheel and a duplication or even clash of efforts we need to connect with and build on what is already happening; movements like #ShiftthePower that started in 2016 and the more recent RINGO initiative could provide new thinking and help strengthen our efforts when it comes to thinking about partnership building in a new system.

Conclusion

When it comes to partnership building, the most crucial thing is that we need to start walking the talk: as one participant acknowledged: “Everyone has a role to play when it comes to shifting the power and we better get started”. We therefore invite everyone working in the development sector to be part of this journey of reimagining partnerships and shifting the power so that future partnerships are anchored in trust and built on local ownership and leadership to make a change.

Participants in the session on the 10th of September 2021

- Lenie Hoegen Dijkhof (Association Burkinabè de Fundraising)
- Esther Vreede (Simavi)
- Thandiwe Chikomo (WWF)
- David Betge (ZOA)
- Kees Schilder (Mensen met een missie)
- Karolien Molenaar (VSO Netherlands)
- Abebaw Abebe (African Disability Forum)
- Jouwert van Geene (The Hunger Project) (Technical support)
- Moses Isooba (Uganda National NGO forum) co-author
- Siri Lijfering (Wageningen University) (Facilitator & co-author)