

For APT Development Initiatives

By Diana Fernández

Exploring Empowerment in Partnership

Abstract

The objective of development organisations is to maximise and sustain its impact on the lives of the poor. This is done through various means including, project planning and monitoring, coordination, research, and partnership. In addition to poverty reduction goals, development organisations seek to help strengthen their southern partners. This work will focus specifically on partnership, as it is an important tool for development. The term ‘partnership’ is frequently used to describe the relationship between International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) in the North, and local NGOs in the South (SNGOs). North-South partnerships are increasing as INGOs have moved away from a project-implementation focus to a partner focus (Brehm, 2001). An expected outcome of partnership, in addition to increasing impact and sustainability on the lives of the poor, is the empowerment of the southern partner (Fowler, 1998). Empowerment entails helping a partner to become stronger and more capable. This paper argues that although many INGOs have moved away from a service delivery focus to a partner focus, this shift does not always ‘empower’ southern partners as intended. This work seeks to explore the issues surrounding ‘empowerment through partnership’ by using case studies from Tanzania and Uganda. This paper will examine APT Enterprise Development’s approaches to partnership in comparison to World Vision and Action Aid, as they are INGOs that are in the process of becoming more ‘partner-oriented’.

Partnership

Most NGOs working to combat poverty seek to maximise the impact of projects in order to make them both effective and sustainable. This is done through various means:

encouraging community participation, strategic long-term planning, conducting research, and setting up systems of appraisal. Another important tool for poverty reduction, and the focus of this work, is partnership with local community groups and NGOs. Currently, many INGOs have included partner development and empowerment along side their primary goal of poverty reduction.

The term 'partnership' became frequently used amongst NGOs in the 1970's to demonstrate solidarity amongst development practitioners in the fight against poverty (Fowler, 1997). Since then, partnership has come to describe any sort of development relationship. Despite the over-use of the word, true partnership, described as: "the exhibition of full mutual support for the identity and all aspects of the work and well being of each organisation" (Fowler, 2000), has an important role to play in development.

Partnership is a means of managing relationships amongst stakeholders through inclusiveness, dialogue, and responsibility (Ibid). This is especially true of partnerships between northern and southern NGOs working together to accomplish tasks. Many INGOs are utilising partnerships to become more effective in the fight against poverty: "by combining our skills, knowledge and resources with those of our local partners, we are able to achieve so much more than we are able to alone"(Action Aid, 2004). Therefore, partnerships with local organisations bring INGOs closer to the realities of the local situation making projects more sustainable and effective.

North-South partnership also has benefits in terms of 'comparative advantage' (Brehm, 2001). By combining each organisation's abilities there can be a greater impact. "Our local partners assume day-to-day responsibility for implementing the projects, with APT providing technical support and problem solving during planning and implementation" (APT, 2007). INGOs tend to be involved in the spheres of funding, advocacy, and policy advice, whereas local SNGOs have a knowledge base about their constituencies, including social, economic, and political issues (Brehm, 2001). Additionally, true partnerships can be economically beneficial to the participating parties. If two NGOs share trust, similar values and goals, tasks can be achieved more effectively and efficiently as coordinated action is achieved more readily (Ibid). Also, inter-personal and inter-organisational relationships are recognised as essential in the learning process. By unifying their efforts INGOs can increase their knowledge base by sharing and learning

from their partners and can also increase legitimacy for their work in a specific area. Additionally, SNGOs can potentially increase funding and learn about new development approaches, thereby increasing their capacity (Wallace, T. Kaplan, A., 2003).

In any development project aided by North-South partnership, it is important to consider the empowerment and autonomy of the southern partner. Partnership should include “a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and a willingness to negotiate” (Lister, 2000) in order to be more effective. Therefore, this work will focus on the potential empowerment and increased capacity of the southern NGO. Empowerment means engaging in a learning process in which the partner “creates, appropriates, and shares knowledge, tools and techniques in order to improve the quality of their own lives and societies” (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2000). Increasing capacity in this case refers to the “provision of technical or material assistance designed to strengthen organisational effectiveness including management capacity, financial resources, service delivery, external relations and sustainability” (African Youth Association (AYA), 2006).

Amongst many development practitioners, there is a lack of practical analysis of both empowerment and capacity building. This is because it is easier to measure service delivery in the end than to measure impact of partnership policy dialogue (Tandon, R. and Bandyopadhyay, K.K 2003, p.16). However, many INGOs are increasingly aware of the importance of leaving behind a stronger and more capable partner after projects have finished. This has meant that some INGOs are now trying to incorporate empowerment and capacity building as focal points of their development agendas. The following section examines issues in partnership by utilising case studies from World Vision Tanzania and Action Aid Uganda and APT Development Initiatives in both Uganda and Tanzania.

Approaches to Partnership

Action Aid and World Vision were chosen as case studies because they are amongst the largest INGOs in operation. Moreover, their programmes have been documented and analysed by external observers and academics. Each INGO in this work has a different

method of achieving organisational goals and aims. However, they all share one fundamental aim: to combat poverty and its causes (World Vision, 2002, Action Aid, 2006, APT Enterprise Development, 2007). Also, each of these organizations utilises partnerships with other organizations or community leaders in the south in order to facilitate projects. In addition, these organisations aim to implement projects that “support their southern partner’s development of their own structures knowledge and expertise...and to recognise their southern partners’ own identities” (British Overseas NGOs for Development (BOND), 2007). This demonstrates that all the organisations examined acknowledge that the empowerment and increased capacity of the partner is important.

Many of the larger NGOs such as Action Aid and World Vision use country offices to carry out their operations. A perceived benefit of having country offices includes keeping in touch with the local situation and improved programme formulation (Fowler, 1992). World Vision has “partner offices” both in northern and southern cities, each having an equal say in the governance of the organisation as a whole (World Vision, 2002). World Vision utilises these country offices to manage local partnerships.

Action Aid also utilises country offices in order to implement projects. It manages partnerships through country offices in over 40 countries. They have also recently moved their headquarters to Johannesburg, with future plan to give autonomy to its country programmes (Shifirin, 2006). Richard Miller, the director of Action Aid has noted that the move was made in order to enable people living in the south to have greater leadership role in development activities (Ibid).

APT supports the efforts and plans of local organisations from a UK office. APT’s staff numbers are small and a country office is not an option for such a small organisation. However, APT sees this as a benefit as they play a supportive, not leading role in partnership. APT participates in the planning and development of the projects, and in reviews and evaluations. Also, at the partner’s request APT will participate in addressing any problems by identifying possible solutions. Furthermore, APT arranges South-to-South exchanges whenever possible to facilitate learning, and to build the capacity of all the organisations involved.

Working with Partners

In all North-South partnerships it is important to note that there can be some fundamental pitfalls. The first pitfall is that some development programmes may actually *empower* some groups while *disempowering* others. This can occur when a development project favours elite by allowing them to establish all the rules, which inhibits entry for others (Kelsall and Mercer, 2003). The second pitfall is the notion that empowerment, autonomy, and development desires need to come from an external northern source (Ibid). This is exacerbated if a Northern partner is dominant as it can “erode local confidence in home-grown ideas about poverty and how to combat it, especially in poor countries where the NGO sector is young and almost entirely dependent on overseas funding sources” (Porter, 2003). Therefore, some partnership support programmes are overriding the local knowledge that supposedly gives local NGOs ‘legitimacy’ in partnership (Ibid). These issues inhibit local empowerment and are an unfortunate reality in many partnerships.

The following section utilises the findings from Action Aid’s country office in Uganda and World Vision’s work in Tanzania in order to illustrate some of the problems of empowerment through partnership. These two organisations are increasing emphasis on working through partners and have been open to critical examinations of their partnership structures. The following section does not aim to critique any organisation as a whole, nor does it seek to analyse whether or not a project was ‘successful’ in terms of achieving poverty reduction benchmarks. The work will focus on what has been observed in practice in terms of empowerment for both local partners and communities.

Action Aid Uganda: Issues in country offices.

This issue of domination has been addressed by some large INGOs through decentralisation, a process of administration and management that distributes decision-making capabilities amongst country offices, or local community groups (Fowler, 1992). However, country offices may exacerbate the northern domination of the development network. If they are utilised to impose strategies from above, local NGOs and community groups are actually being *disempowered*.

Action Aid is addressing the issue of empowerment by moving away from service delivery to working through partners. Action Aid manages its partnerships through country offices and has been exploring how to best manage these offices to help empower the partners and communities in which they work. One of these critical analyses was carried out in Action Aid Uganda's country offices. After Action Aid decentralised and changed to a more partner-inclusive focus, it had to coordinate its country offices. This includes the Uganda Country office. Action Aid Uganda is in partnership with over 200 organisations ranging from fragile community organisations, to large national networks (Wallace and Kaplan, 2003). It labels all of them partnerships. Action Aid's aim in Uganda is to find ways to listen to its partners, to learn from them, and to make the relationships genuinely reciprocal. The organisation aims to accomplish this through one on one meetings, by inviting partners to key training events, running partnership forums, and by building strong national networks (Ibid).

However, there were some problems encountered when trying to implement partnership reforms. Firstly, there was a lack of coherence amongst the staff as to what was or wasn't undertaken with partners, this may be attributed to the fact that local staff didn't have a clear understanding of what was meant by empowerment and partnership. Secondly, it was noted that office staff was not responding sensitively or humbly to what they heard from communities or partners, but "continued to see their perspective and analysis as the right one to be promoted" (Ibid, p.29). This was a cause of concern for Action aid as staff needs to be able to "work as facilitators rather than as top down teachers" (Ibid). However, the problems faced in the Uganda Office are not unique to Action Aid. Most field workers employed in country offices tend to be university educated to and may not always be in touch with the realities of the rural poor (Porter, 2003). Although Action aid is taking huge steps in trying to move away from the top-down management structure to more inclusive, equal, and empowering relationships with its partners, the Uganda case demonstrates how difficult it can be to change organisational focus amongst country offices.

Although a country office can have various benefits, they may experience problems beyond coordination. Southern NGOs can see themselves in direct competition to attract these northern NGOS as 'partners' who they view as essential to secure funding, which limits information sharing. This in turn negatively impacts poverty alleviation, as

organisations aren't working together to tackle problems (Porter, 2003). Furthermore, field staff may jump from one issue to another based on popularity and funding, not sufficiently addressing each problem, this makes poverty reduction tactics less effective (Ibid). As field offices are directed by the head office, they may feel downward pressure to support these 'popular' issues. Also, smaller NGOs may be overlooked, as resources and funds are channelled through a small group of well-established SNGOS who are now arguably overworked. Their organisation is therefore limited in terms of poverty alleviation, and new NGOs don't get the same chance to increase their capacity to join the fight against poverty (Ibid). Therefore, INGOs need to be aware how their offices impact local NGOs and the larger community.

World Vision Tanzania: Issues in Empowerment

World Vision, like Action Aid, has become more partner-focused in recent years and has sought to empower local communities through local programmes. World Vision in Tanzania has created one such programme, the Area Development Project (ADP), in order to facilitate the creation of local development organisations (Kelsall and T. Mercer, C., 2003). ADP is a form of development administration that runs parallel to the local government structure. The goal of the project is to mobilise communities in development projects, while aiming to develop them into autonomous NGOs later on. These projects are meant to mobilise and empower communities and individuals (Ibid). The groups are meant to raise their own funds and coordinate action, while World Vision provides any additional funding needed, and project coordination. These projects have been successful terms of providing a simpler and faster means of implementing projects than local government. However, several community members felt that the projects implemented were not their homegrown projects, but World Vision's projects; therefore there was no real sense of ownership. Additionally, the development projects were hijacked by the village elites, who imposed fines and punishments to those community members who did not actively participate in the projects (Ibid).

Projects such as those implemented by large, well-established NGOs have an excellent capability for resource and community mobilisation. They tend to have good reputations, connections, and access to resources. However, there needs to be a critical examination

of how their presence will effect and influence the community. In the case of the World Vision projects in Tanzania, the projects were completed, but at what cost? Some community members may have been worse off because of heavy fines, or increased elite control, thereby *disempowering* the local community. One of the main goals of the ADPs is to foster new local NGO development. However, as the projects have fallen under elite control, any NGOs that are created as a result of ADPs should be carefully analysed. Also, the lack of a sense of ownership of the ADPs amongst the community demonstrates that trying to facilitate 'empowerment' from above is tricky if not impossible. Therefore, the main problem of the project is that it cannot truly empower because: "the meaning of 'development' is still externally determined and that the idea of 'development' as 'empowerment' is no different in this respect" (Ibid).

Both World Vision and Action Aid have made partnership and empowerment a focus of their development approach and are learning through trial and error what works and what doesn't. Both of these organisations have good reputations and have implemented various effective development programmes. Yet, the problems faced by these organisations serve as important lessons for empowerment through partnership.

APT s Approach

As an NGO that is smaller than its partners, APT manages its partnerships differently than larger NGOs with country offices. This is due to both necessity and cost effectiveness. To achieve results, APT forms alliances and working arrangements with various companies, individuals and specialist institutions including commercial firms, NGOs, business service providers, training centres, and regulatory authorities amongst others (APT, 2007). As noted earlier, the relationship with an overseas partner involves specific technical inputs by APT to enhance the capacity of the local partner in mutually agreed areas. APT also maintains projects in both Tanzania and Uganda. In both cases, the established partner organisations have been larger than APT. APT has taken a consultant role in these countries.

Tanzania

In Tanzania APT works with KWEICO, a human rights organisation managed for and by women. KWEICO works together with community groups and village leaders, as well as at district levels and beyond (Ibid). APT has worked together with KWEICO in order to help local women access markets through solar drying of fruits and vegetables. KWEICO was begun by local women, and now employs more people than APT. This makes the partnership much different than that of World Vision, which was trying to foster a local NGO movement in Tanzania. This approach may avoid some of the problems encountered by World Vision in their project.

APT does not initiate projects or reject ideas but provides assistance to projects presented to them by the partner. In the first step of project planning the partner presents APT with possible project ideas. Together with APT, the local organisation will analyse the viability of the project, assessing whether it can produce the results that they want. Once a project idea is decided upon, both parties discuss how and where to find funding. APT, attempts to take the lead from the partner in all stages of developing a project. As the local partner develops, APT takes on a different role by helping the partner to reduce their reliance on donors and to become more self-reliant. APT attempts to aid this process by facilitating South-South exchanges, putting SNGOs in contact with each other in order to better accomplish tasks at no extra cost and to aid the long-term development of the partner, not just the project. Working with SNGOs that are locally established in order to develop their *own* project ideas fosters a sense of local ownership. Providing assistance through a partner-led focus avoids the ‘big idea’ trap where development ideas are brought down to local NGOs from the north, which creates a danger of “subtle paternalism” (Porter, 2003).

Uganda

In Uganda, APT, together with their local partner, the National Union of Disabled People of Uganda (NUDIPU), has implemented a project to help disabled men and women to address their own severe levels of poverty by earning their own income. The project aims to empower the beneficiaries by helping them to become productive members of their communities through skills training through small enterprises as apprentices and training workshops (APT, 2007).

As APT has focused on increasing the partner's capacity as a main focal point of its development practices, it may have a relative advantage over larger organisations such as Action Aid that seeks to re-work its organisational focus to be more partner-friendly. Action Aid has had to restructure, re-organise, and decentralise, in order to help achieve this. However, since APT's focus has always primarily been to empower partners and the community in order to combat poverty, APT has not had to alter its focus. It could be argued that working through partners is a necessity rather than a choice for APT due to size and cost effectiveness. However, by playing a supporting role APT may have an advantage as they have experience in taking a step-back and letting the partner take the lead.

However, these advantages do not mean that APT may not run into some of the same partnership problems as other organisations. APT is a U.K based organisation, which like any other INGO, walks the line between northern expectations and the realities that exist in-country. Therefore, each partnership should be analysed not only by the results on the ground, but also in terms of empowerment.

Conclusions

Modern development discourse has increasingly focused on ideas of 'empowerment' and 'partnership' and most INGOs have sought to embrace these concepts in their work. NGOs both North and South are becoming ever more conscious that the empowerment of local groups is one of the most effective means of sustainable poverty alleviation. However aiding empowerment through partnership is not easy and empowerment is not something that can be externally imposed (Kelsall and Mercer, 2003). This is demonstrated by the problems faced by Action Aid and World Vision. Even though these organisations are taking positive steps by trying to become partner-focused by analysing their own organisational structure, vestiges of top-down development ideas remain.

Although APT has had a relative advantage in terms of 'empowering' partners because it has always been partner led, the organisation must continuously ask critical questions of itself and its partners. APT ought to question whether its partners truly represent the interests of the local communities. As demonstrated by the case of World Vision, an elite minority may hijack development interests. Also, concepts such as empowerment and

capacity building can be confusing and vague to partners. If APT seeks to empower and capacitate local communities as well as its partners, it must define terms in ways that are understood by everyone, not just the partner. The confusion amongst Action Aid Uganda office staff demonstrates the need for a clear understanding of key terms. In all APT projects, there should be a sense of ownership amongst *both* community members and partners. APT should also seek to ensure that these projects are supported by, and in the interest of, the local community and the intended beneficiaries, and be willing to blow the whistle if the project has negative impacts. In the case of World Vision, the ADP was well planned out and supported by local community leaders, and did achieve many development goals. Yet in the process, some community members were negatively affected. These are just a few issues to consider when pursuing projects through partnership. As demonstrated by Action Aid and World Vision, even with the best intentions, unforeseen negative outcomes may occur. Constant questioning and continual learning are both essential components of true partnership.

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