

Autonomy or Dependence? North–South NGO Partnerships

This Briefing Paper presents a summary of INTRAC's research on North–South NGO partnerships and draws out the implications for NGOs and other practitioners.

Introduction

Partnership is a contested concept. Within international development, partnership has been the subject of intense debate: an ideal which promises so much and yet fails to meet expectations in practice. Is it time to move on from the notion of partnership, relegating it to the category of yet another development fad? Or is understanding the nature and dynamics of these changing relationships in fact critical to understanding the international aid chain itself: where it has come from and where it is heading?

There is an assumption that North–South partnerships should lead to 'a more autonomous, empowered and sustainable local NGO sector, which will have the additional effect (in current thinking) of strengthening "civil society".' (Mawdsley et al. 2002). INTRAC's research has set out to analyse and test the assumption that partnership between different actors necessarily leads to a strengthened civil society in general and to strengthened, more autonomous civil society organisations (CSOs) in particular, with a focus on NGOs. For the purpose of the study, **autonomy** is seen as an organisation's freedom to determine its own strategic direction and development without undue pressure from external actors, particularly donors. Autonomy is also defined relationally in the context of North–South relations of power: an autonomous organisation is able to maintain horizontal relations with other actors as equals. A dependent organisation, by contrast, becomes locked into vertical relations, often with a donor, in which its freedom to determine its own strategic direction is constrained.

The study was undertaken as part of INTRAC's NGO Research Programme, which is run with the active participation of a group of European NGOs. The NGOs taking part in the Programme, which at the time consisted of ten European-based NGOs in Ireland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom, agreed to take part in the research for Phase One. The research analysed and compared the views and operational practices of these European NGOs and addressed the following questions:

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

Phase Two of the research went on to assess the concept of partnership from a Southern perspective, with case studies in three contrasting countries: Brazil, Cambodia and Tanzania. It set out to address the following research questions:

- How have Southern CSOs experienced partnerships with their Northern counterparts in practice? In what ways are these partnerships distinct?
- To what extent do North–South partnerships contribute to strengthening civil society by enhancing **horizontal linkages** and interaction between autonomous civil society actors? Or do partnerships in fact create **vertical (top-down) relations of dependence** between the Southern CSO and its Northern partner?
- What new and innovative forms of partnership are emerging as an alternative to the conventional ‘donor–recipient’, funding-based models of partnership between Northern NGOs and Southern CSOs?

Perspectives on Partnership

European NGO Approaches to Partnership

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

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

European NGOs vary in the degree to which they adopt a functional or solidarity approach to partnership, and this is evident in the nature of their relationships with Southern partners. Given the general trend in recent years for European NGOs to depend more on official donor funding than on public fundraising, the functional approach has generally been ascendant with an emphasis on **management** and **results**.

It is also worth noting that some Northern NGOs have an explicit goal of strengthening civil society through the capacity building of their partners. Others, particularly those who take a more **functional** approach to partnership, focus on achieving certain development goals and do not explicitly concern themselves with the long-term impact they have on their partners’ autonomy. The findings from the research show that it is important for Northern NGOs to take seriously the long-term impact of their partnerships on the overall development of the Southern partner organisation, and always to consider how all decisions – particularly those related to funding – will affect the Southern partner’s relative autonomy.

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.

There was 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 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 grass-roots 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 itself are also a constraining factor. The number and depths of partnerships, lack of co-ordination between Northern NGOs and high staff turnover are all limits to effective partnerships.

Southern Perspectives

The definition of autonomy taken in the research study was borne out in the field case studies. For example, the Brazilian NGO partners saw autonomy in terms of having a **diversified range of funding**. For them, this applies equally to the Northern NGO as to its Southern partner. The Cambodian partners spoke of autonomy both in terms of the diversification of income and in terms of **organisational confidence**. Similarly, the Tanzanian partners saw autonomy as '**the ability to say no to certain forms of funding**'. Amongst the organisations who took part in the study, working towards the diversification of their income has been a key factor in increasing their sense of autonomy and enabling them to have a greater freedom of choice.

Southern partners see that the **solidarity** approach of European NGOs has been increasingly undermined as questions are raised over their role within development co-operation. They expressed a desire for Northern NGOs to move away from narrow, project-based partnerships towards broader inter-organisational co-operation over a longer time frame. Southern partners wish to have a partnership based on genuine dialogue, where their own expertise is recognised and where Northern NGOs are more transparent about their decision-making processes.

Case Studies

Brazil

In the Brazilian context, relationships between Brazilian and Northern NGOs did originally have a strong element of solidarity under the military dictatorship. Northern NGOs, particularly European NGOs, played a role in strengthening civil society and particularly in supporting a development agenda based on addressing poverty and injustice. Nevertheless, funding has distorted the power dynamics in the relationships between Brazilian and Northern NGOs. Brazilian NGOs now see their relationships with Northern NGOs as '**moving towards partnership**', and identify the scope for genuine dialogue and joint action as Brazilian civil society is becoming mature.

Cambodia

The Cambodian NGO sector, by contrast, has emerged in the mirror image of international NGOs since the opening up of the country in 1991. In a context where the state was the sole actor in development over many decades, NGOs are now filling the gaps which are emerging after decades of conflict. Cambodian NGOs are very much seen as a foreign import dependent on external technical assistance, although other CSOs – particularly community-based organisations – are seen to have a more genuine rooting in Cambodian society. The Cambodian CSOs define partnership in terms of communication, and not transaction; in practice, with some Northern NGOs they have a '**relational monologue**'. Their relationships with some Northern NGOs are based on short-term project funding; because these relationships are not based on a broader objective of organisational capacity building the Cambodian CSOs do not consider them as partnership.

Tanzania

The Tanzanian experience of North–South NGO partnerships is different again. Like Cambodia, Tanzania has a relatively undeveloped economy and a high dependence on foreign aid. Unlike Cambodia however, relationships with Northern NGOs have a much longer history within Tanzania. The Tanzanian CSOs in the study showed perhaps the greatest scepticism towards the possibility of achieving partnership in funding-based relationships, or indeed in technical assistance co-operation. Furthermore, despite the long history of Northern NGO engagement, unlike the Brazilian context there is little evidence of vibrant links amongst Tanzania civil society actors. Partnerships have led to a dependence on Northern NGO funding and thus reinforced **vertical North–South relations**.

Key Themes

Organisations or Individuals?

The field research in all countries highlighted the importance of the relational dimension of partnerships: do partnerships focus on individuals, groups or organisations as **agents of change**? In fact the findings suggest a high level of ambiguity in this area. Partnerships tend to be concentrated in a few individuals and departments within organisations, and are often not truly inter-organisational in nature. The power dynamics in the relationship do not just operate between the Northern NGO and its Southern partners, but in fact relationships can reinforce organisational hierarchies and patterns of exclusion. It is, however, harder for organisations to overcome the unpredictable dynamic of relationships based on individual contacts and personalities. This **over-reliance on individuals** represents the vulnerability of the partnership model.

Relationships or Results?

The research highlighted the contrasting definitions of effective partnership. For the European NGOs, effective partnership relates to clarity about the purpose of the relationship and the quality of the work carried out. This results-oriented definition contrasts with the Southern partners' perspective, where the definition of effectiveness is actually based on the quality of the relationship itself rather than the work. The Southern partners placed a higher value on personal contact and the quality of their relationships with Northern NGOs.

The Aid Chain: Autonomy or Dependence?

The research suggests that North–South partnerships can in fact lead to increased autonomy for some Southern partner organisations, depending on the approach of the Northern partner. The factors affecting this are outlined below (see Recommendations). At the level of civil society, impact of North–South partnerships is very much influenced by the particular country context. Partnerships thus reflect the level of relative dependence on external aid. The prospects for promoting autonomy are therefore greatest where overall aid dependence is lowest.

Furthermore, the question of organisational autonomy was thrown back at Northern NGOs by their Southern partners, who highlight the potential risks as Northern NGOs become too dependent on official funding, and lose their rooting in their own public constituencies.

Recommendations

Based on the research, the following recommendations can be made to **Northern NGOs** in relation to their partnerships:

Developmental Approaches to Funding

- Adopt realistic, long time horizons with consistency and commitment.
- Capacity building for autonomy and resource mobilisation: plan for phasing out and support resource mobilisation and the diversification of funding from the beginning.
- Where possible ensure consistency in the staff relating to partners.
- Develop closer co-operation with other funders and allow greater flexibility and creativity in terms of reporting formats (for example visits and visual reports).
- Take on board the role of a facilitator: be more responsive to Southern partners' agendas and the agendas of ultimate 'target groups'.
- Include assessment of the partnership process itself.

Moving Beyond Funding

The research illustrates the fact that accountability still flows primarily from South to North. Southern partners want more transparency from Northern NGOs in how decisions are made and agenda setting, and are interested in exploring the possibilities for greater dialogue and mutual learning. Thus, Northern NGOs should aim to:

- Explore creative ways of using the knowledge and expertise of Southern partners.
- Develop partnerships that are genuinely inter-organisational, not just between individuals or departments. Broaden the inter-organisational dialogue.
- Develop the concept of post-funding and other non-funding-based partnerships, particularly in relation to policy dialogue and advocacy.
- Assess the overall country context, bearing in mind that the Northern NGO is only one actor amongst many.

Likewise, based on the research findings **Southern CSOs** would be well placed to plan for increasing organisational autonomy through diversifying sources of funding and mobilising local resources wherever possible. In order to ensure maximum benefit from the exchange of inter-organisational dialogue and expertise, there is also a challenge for leaders within Southern CSOs to ensure that a broader range of staff take part in processes of relating to Northern NGOs.

INTRAC Publications

The research findings have been published by INTRAC:

Brehm, V. M. et al. (2004) *Autonomy or Dependence? Case Studies of North–South NGO Partnerships*. Oxford: INTRAC.

Brehm, V.M. (2001) *Promoting Effective North–South NGO Partnerships*. OPS 35. Oxford: INTRAC.

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