Development in Practice

ISSN: 0961-4524 (Print) 1364-9213 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdip20

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To cite this article: Vandra Harris (2008) Mediators or partners? Practitioner perspectives on partnership, Development in Practice, 18:6, 701-712, DOI: 10.1080/09614520802386330

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520802386330

Development in Practice, Volume 18, Number 6, November 2008

Mediators or partners? Practitioner perspectives on partnership

Vandra Harris

Partnership has become a key word in the jargon of international development. This article presents the results of research into the perspectives of Cambodian and Filipino NGO workers on their funding relationships. Largely confirming the negative literature about partnership, practitioners generally expressed a view that their relationships with funders are not consistent with the rhetoric of power sharing and collaboration that often accompanies discussions of the subject. In spite of this, practitioners articulated a desire for collaborative relationships with Northern organisations, ideally with a greater focus on the local context and personal relationships. Practitioners believe that an important part of their role is mediating development in order to make it more relevant and responsive.

KEY WORDS: Aid; Civil Society; East Asia

A quick scan of the policies of national development agencies reveals that the principles of partnership have been widely adopted, yet descriptions of partnership in practice are scarce. The partnership approach is understood by these agencies to be based on a more even balance of power, in which 'the 'power of the purse' is reduced in favour of the 'power of the owner' (Sida 2005: 20). They see partnership as being 'based on a quid pro quo approach, where the rich countries pledge increased assistance and better trading opportunities while the developing countries pledge to practice good governance and fight poverty' (Danida 2005:7). How such policies are to be achieved is less clear. Organisations have little guidance on how they can realistically transform existing relationships and practices. As a result, local practitioners are devising their own strategies to meet local development goals, acting as unacknowledged mediators so long as there is not open communication and mutual respect within development relationships.

Practitioners interviewed in this study are dissatisfied with development relationships and are using their position as border-crossers to mediate and re-shape development projects. Trust, personal relationships, and consistency of values and goals between funding and implementing organisations are seen as important factors shaping actual and potential development relationships. Development workers perceive existing funding relationships as somewhat one-sided. They desire a deeper relationship with those who fund their work and influence its parameters.

ISSN 0961-4524 Print/ISSN 1364-9213 Online 060701-12 © *2008 Oxfam GB*
Routledge Publishing DOI: 10.1080/09614520802386330

They also want funders to gain a better understanding of the country, its people, local situations, and local development priorities. These results are consistent with Harrison's claim (2002: 587) that the new terminology and processes of partnership have obscured rather than remedied inequitable power relations.

Local development practitioners occupy a distinctive location that places them in relationship with local communities, implementing organisations, and funders. Practitioners are integral to each party's experience of development, since they translate and reinterpret each to the other. This study engages primarily with people from the South working in their own countries as development workers, in particular those practitioners working with community-focused NGOs in Cambodia and the Philippines. This group have been selected because they are actively engaged with and invested in development, they have a proximity to the grassroots as well as a familiarity with outsiders, they have unusual insight into the exercise of power within development practice, and they are in continual communication with local people in ways that a foreign researcher could never be. In my view, since development workers are complex actors who engage with and transform development processes, the benefits of their location outweigh the possible risk that their commitment to development might prevent them from being critical.

This study focuses on practitioners working with NGOs, which have a reputation for being more participatory, flexible, and relevant to the needs of development's 'target groups' than state or multilateral actors (Hudock 1999: 8). This perception stems in part from NGOs' claim to a proximity to the grassroots that is consistent with calls from both post-development and participation to re-orient the development paradigm to bring grassroots people to the forefront. Although governments are the key funders of development, they are increasingly using NGOs to channel that funding, and the past three decades have seen NGOs establish a key role for themselves within the development arena (Silliman and Noble 1998: 7).

In this context, the research builds on informal interviews and focus groups with NGO development workers in Cambodia and the Philippines, countries that differ greatly in terms of history, dominant religion, Human Development Index (HDI) rating, and experience of development intervention. The 50 practitioners interviewed for this study work with NGOs in rural and regional areas of the two countries, and they hold positions ranging from unpaid community development officer to director. Twenty-nine practitioners were Filipinos, 17 were Cambodians, and four were expatriates working in Cambodia.

A snowballing approach was used for contacting practitioners, starting with personal contacts in each country and then asking these people to identify other practitioners who might be interested in contributing to this research. Most of the practitioners in both countries work in an organisation with secure core funding from Northern or international NGOs (which in turn usually receive significant funds from governments). However, Filipino respondents described greater difficulty in gaining either on-going or intermittent funding. There was a surprising level of consistency in responses both within and between the two nations; however, I have attempted to present a balance of contributions from both nations, and to acknowledge diverse opinions within nations where they were evident. Pseudonyms are used when referring to practitioners.

Perceptions of funding relationships

The concept of partnership began to gain traction in development in the 1970s. A strategic response to power inequalities in relations between funders and implementing NGOs, it aims 'to de-emphasise Northern dominance, [and] help people in the South become the architects and engineers of their own development' (Hoksbergen 2005: 18). Partnership's popularity

stems not only from the ideals of equity and relationship on which it was founded, but also from perceptions that it can reduce costs, increase legitimacy, and improve compliance (Hilhorst 2003: 211). Although the rhetoric of partnership has been widely adopted, its implementation ranges from instrumental arrangements that perpetuate unequal power relationships and change little in practice, to 'authentic' relationships based on mutuality and trust (Fowler 1998: 147). Failure to achieve authentic partnership does not necessarily reflect a lack of willpower among Northern organisations, since the complex environment of development practice makes equality hard to realise in practice (see Hoksbergen 2005).

Practitioners in this research did not use the term 'partnership' when they discussed their relationships with funders, a fact which is consistent with Lister's (2000) reflection that it is primarily a Northern concept. Instead practitioners talked about a desire to be in respectful, open, and equitable relationships with a funder who shares their goals and their interest in the local context. In this sense they did not express a desire to work with specific *forms* of organisation (for example, NGOs as opposed to governments), but rather stated a wish to be in relationship with organisations with particular values, resisting any suggestion that those values could be expected in specific organisational forms. Kayizzi-Mugerwa (1998: 20) proposes that it is necessary for partnership to be 'based on a set of minimum or shared values' in order for it to be effective; however, practitioners in this study reported that their funding bodies do not generally appear to be interested in discovering local values. As a result, they are also open to negotiating a way forward that accounts for a lack of shared values.

Where funders do consider the context, practitioners believe that their assessments are often inaccurate, and that they do not listen when their local counterpart attempts to discuss it. A small number of practitioners stated that they would rather work without funds than under unreasonable conditions, while a handful reported that they had been able to establish constructive and communicative relationships in which they can resolve such conflicts. Most often, development workers state that funders are very powerful in development relationships, primarily because they control resources. This creates a situation in which practitioners feel forced to accept conditions that have a negative impact, because local people's needs are so great.

In the Philippines, Harry (who trains development workers and uses media for development advocacy and education) asserted that this need means that funding bodies can choose '*what they want [to do], what they are capable of doing*' (interview 38, Visayas). Although this means that funders can focus on areas of their own expertise, it also means that local priorities may be overlooked if they are not consistent with funders' interests. Members of a focus group in the same region of the Philippines agreed that '*we cannot do otherwise than to accept these funding agencies because we do not have the money to help people [so] the workers are having problems*' (interview 32, Visayas).

The sense that financial need forces local NGOs to accept unreasonable conditions was weaker in Cambodia, but Cambodian practitioners expressed a strong sense that local NGOs do many things simply because funders demand them, rather than because the community would benefit. They also noted that the apparent sharing of values can be deceptive, as in the example that while most funders demand participation, few allow sufficient time for its genuine implementation (interview 19, Phnom Penh).

Attention to the local context

Generally, funders were perceived as uninterested in the local context. Examples that were given to illustrate this often referred to practitioners' face-to-face contact with funding representatives, particularly at times of project initiation or evaluation. Vichet has worked in

development in Cambodia for almost a decade and is director of a regional NGO that has dealt with a variety of funders. He captured many of these comments in the following statement:

> *[S]ometimes [funders] come for just a short term, just a few weeks or whatever, and one: they don't understand the language, and two: [they don't understand] the ways of Cambodians … so they maybe just come in and judge them and say, 'I understand Cambodian culture'.* (Interview 4, Battambang)

He believed that this approach leads to a vastly inadequate understanding of Cambodia and its culture, especially where funders do not already know much about this nation or region. This opinion was echoed by several Cambodian practitioners, including Sophal, a development consultant with a variety of organisations, who has studied overseas. He said that '*many [funders] don't consult, they just come and sit down and write a proposal, so the initiative comes from the [funding] NGO – there's no process of people's participation*' (interview 7, Battambang).

Practitioners in the Philippines shared this negative assessment of funder interest. Bonifacio and Anita (who both have diverse NGO experience and now work for urban NGOs with secure funding arrangements) simply laughed when asked whether funders value local culture, indicating that they thought the question was rhetorical. They subsequently clarified that 'not all but many' funders work towards their own goals (interview 33, Visayas).

Development workers consistently expressed a desire for funders to pay more attention to both national and local contexts. Describing a strategy that results from this increased attention, Brandon said that '*our approach is based more on the grassroots approach: it depends on the situation, so you don't have to follow a certain rule*' (interview 25, Mindanao). Norman (the urban-based Director of a Filipino NGO with on-going funding) pointed out the necessity of being aware that even within the Philippines '*there are different cultures. Certain provinces have different cultures, so it may be that your strategies in certain provinces may not be applied here*' (interview 35, Visayas). These concerns indicate an awareness among development workers that the context of every project they work on is unique and requires a carefully tailored approach.

Cambodian development workers also described their own work to tailor projects to context. The director of a very small regional NGO with project-specific funding explained that people are an important aspect of context, '*because I believe that individuals have a lot of impact on the process of development, of making change*' (Bunna, interview 1, Phnom Penh). This recognises the agency of individual community members, reflecting the notion that 'intervention interacts with people's experience' (Long 1992: 20). Adding a human dynamic fundamentally affects the ability of a project to reach its planned outcomes, since truly participatory projects will be influenced and changed by all who participate, just as the participants themselves will be transformed.

Working to different time frames

A particular problem reported by Cambodian development workers concerned time frames. Rith (a regional worker employed by the Cambodian arm of a securely funded international NGO) explained that NGOs are often faced with a '*donor [who] always complains, "you are very slow and have no activity [to show for it]", so we have to explain – even to [our] headquarters in Phnom Penh*' that community development takes time (interview 8, Battambang). Cambodian practitioners described their work in villages as being based on relationship building, which necessarily involves a significant commitment of time to effect real attitudinal and behavioural change. They also revealed an emerging recognition that demanding instant responses from a community is harmful to development processes. For example, Lida is the

director of a women's NGO set up by an international organisation, now receiving regular funding from another organisation. She described how participating in a study of Cambodian development workers' values and practices (see O'Leary and Meas 2001) taught workers in her organisation the negative '*effect of pushing [participants] when we're frustrated*' (interview 12, Phnom Penh). As a result they now attempt to adopt a more time-rich approach, but this is not necessarily compatible with funders' demands.

Lida felt that funders have quite narrow interests, and as long as the budget is spent on schedule they 'don't care' what else happens. She described the impact of mismatched priorities on her ability to meet communities' needs, explaining that

> *[S]ometimes I can secure money for projects on violence against women before [projects on] food security – so people can't eat . . . Also we do not have many HIV patients here and we want to do prevention, but the donor wants to do home-based care, so that is all we can get funding for . . . I think the donor understands our needs but has the money already allocated for this kind of project so has to spend it on that.* (Interview 12, Phnom Penh)

Practitioners in the Philippines reported similar issues. Rowena, a practitioner with a rural NGO with secure funding, acknowledged that time is critical to the participatory approach, and while this may frustrate development workers at times, funders' apparent failure to understand or prioritise this need increases practitioners' irritation (interview 32, Visayas). Like other Filipino practitioners, Rowena believed that funders' priorities are not consistent with local priorities, and that funders are not interested in bridging that gap. A different aspect of this problem was described by Enrique, assistant director of a regional NGO network that works with indigenous groups and seeks project-specific funding. He explained that funders' short time frames represent a clear double standard, as his organisation had been waiting for more than a year for approval of a project application that they were given little time to prepare (interview 23, Mindanao).

Political and structural issues are central to development, and effectively transforming them requires a critical and in-depth understanding of context, as well as sufficient time to effect real change. Practitioners were articulate about these issues and critical of the work of local NGOs in this respect, denouncing organisations that were focused more on personal enrichment than on transformation. Few practitioners specifically addressed these political and structural issues in the context of their funding relationships, perhaps because of the perception that funders are distant and uninterested. If practitioners feel that they have to be cautious about what they say to funders, or that they are not heard anyway, it is hardly surprising that political issues assume a higher profile in their actions than their discussions with funders.

Practitioners' solutions

In the light of these reflections on their relations with funders, development workers might be expected to agree with the post-development solution of rejecting external relationships and seeking to continue this work on their own (see Escobar 1995). Although many practitioners stated that they would rather do without funding than be locked into undesirable conditions, there was no support for the idea of complete dependence on grassroots organisations as a way to meet the on-going needs of communities and to develop an exclusively indigenous path as an alternative to development. Various reasons were given for this, including recognition that not all grassroots organisations are effective, and that partnership with indigenous organisations does not automatically correspond with better results.

Practitioners in both countries felt that funders' power to drive projects and their lack of interest in the local context made it almost impossible for local organisations to meet both donor expectations and local needs, although several reported strategies for satisfying – or appearing to satisfy – both. Yoyong has worked in development for almost ten years and is an unpaid assistant director of a Filipino People's Organisation network receiving project-specific funding. He asserted that funders should trust their local counterparts implicitly – to the point of supporting violent action if that was judged appropriate by the implementing organisation – and explained that when funders are not open to discussion about conflicts over different assessments of needs, this can lead to '*creative reporting just to satisfy the funding organisation*' (interview 26, Mindanao).

Other Filipino practitioners were more pragmatic, suggesting that practitioners could hope to find an organisation with shared values, but were more likely to need to find ways to balance competing needs. Many Cambodian practitioners said that their own experience was of value harmony, but then described other less harmonious cases and the actions taken by practitioners to manage this conflict. Believing that people are at risk of serious consequences due to the lack of effective communication between funder and implementer, practitioners try to protect communities. Lida's solution is to '*keep the main focus [the funders] want, and have the [local priorities] in as well*', attempting to include community priorities within the funder-defined project (interview 12, Phnom Penh). She gave an example of home-based care programmes for HIV and AIDS patients in which she incorporates a health component that allows her to work with the whole community on nutrition and food security. Although expressed in a more palatable form, this unacknowledged adaptation of the programme may be perceived by some as similar to Yoyong's 'creative reporting'.

A small group of practitioners in both countries stated that their organisations had chosen to end relationships with funders when demands became unreasonable. In the Philippines, Brandon recounted a time when

> *[w]e had one visitor [from our funding organisation] before and had a very heated discussion, because as a funding agency they have particular interests and you have to abide by what they want, rather than our alternative frameworks or what the need is in the community. I was hurt and I even told that representative that if you will insist on only giving [funding] not based on the needs of the communities, you'd better take your finances back to your country. Where is the partnership along that line? It seems that you need to comply because 'this is our [the funders'] choice.' They tell you what you should do, rather than asking, 'where can we help?'* (Interview 25, Mindanao)

This is an example of instrumental partnership. Several Filipino practitioners shared Brandon's confidence in their ability to practise development unaided, including Huwan (a volunteer with a People's Organisation with grassroots origins and secure funding), who judged that '*foreign partners cannot support us for so long . . . and it is better for the people to be self-reliant*' (interview 34, Visayas).

In spite of this, Filipino practitioners expressed a strong desire to work with foreigners and overseas organisations. Rosetta, a volunteer with a women's organisation and employee of an NGO, both without on-going funding, explained that the Philippines is not dependent on foreigners '*in the sense that we can't live without them . . . but that doesn't mean that we really don't need them*' (interview 30, Visayas). She clarified that working in collaboration with others who have experience and finances makes a positive contribution to development workers' ability to meet the needs of the poor and marginalised. There was a feeling that this should be on Filipino terms and that foreigners have a role '*as long as they look at the situation and don't project too much of their own agenda on the people*' (interview 31, Visayas).

Cambodian development workers were less confident that they could work equally effectively without external support. Two practitioners (neither from organisations with long-term funding) said that they would only accept funding from organisations whose conditions they deemed to be appropriate or consistent with their own organisation's goals and assessment. It was more common for Cambodian responses to imply that practitioners accept some conditionality as a necessary but temporary part of development relationships. Many organisations in Cambodia are working to 'localise' as soon as practical, yet Ek (whose organisation is partner to an international NGO) was one of several development workers who felt that '*it is not the right time now*' to work without foreign support, but that '*maybe in five or ten years we can reduce the numbers*', because by then Cambodians will have consolidated their skills (interview 11, Takeo). Ratana (a practitioner with the Cambodian arm of an international NGO) was confident about this transition, but shared the view that the time frame should not be too short, saying

> *[Y]es there really is [a role for foreigners] but not too much. They have to teach the Cambodians, but shouldn't be hoping to stay for ever and ever . . . Even now I am deputy director, and I think one day I will be executive director. One day we will not depend on assistance from outsiders [because] we can do it ourselves.* (Interview 8, Battambang)

An important reason for this was explained by Sok (who has worked for many years with a rural health-related NGO), who said that '*foreign NGOs play an important role in the development of Cambodian people, because they not only bring the money but also the knowledge and new skills*' (interview 5, Battambang).

Practitioners also recognised that foreign organisations do not necessarily have the same level of commitment that local people and organisations have. Edgar is a volunteer with a grassroots rural NGO in the Philippines which has recently secured multi-year funding. He observed that '*some [international] NGOs do their interventions and when their funds run out they just leave, but whatever happens, we have to live here . . . so we feel responsible for the developments*' (interview 27, Mindanao). Echoing this, Ruth (an expatriate consultant in Cambodia) reflected that Cambodians are also concerned that foreigners might not have a long-term commitment to them, and questioned '*who will walk with them, for a longer journey, and not just come when the crisis is here and it's all glamorous and lovely, and disappear when the "fun" is over*' (interview 22, Phnom Penh). In contrast, local organisations have enduring connections with people and place, and therefore know that they will have on-going responsibility for the work that they do. These comments reveal suspicion that foreign organisations or staff will not stay long enough to take responsibility for any negative effects.

Small steps towards change

Interview responses indicated that it would be easy for foreigners to change practitioners' perceptions of their interest. Development workers were very receptive to quite small gestures, exemplified by Samnang (a development worker with a range of organisations over two decades), who said '*if you speak the language, even one or two words, that makes their hearts happy*' (interview 6, Battambang). Ruth reflected that '*Cambodian people are very laid back and good humoured people, so when a foreigner does come along they accommodate a lot, so they can actually fit in a lot more easily, and they get away with a lot more than they might if they were somewhere else*' (interview 22, Phnom Penh). With Ruth, Samnang, and several other practitioners reflecting that even the smallest effort makes a big difference, this implies that foreigners are doing very little that is obvious in this respect, but that small steps by funders will be embraced.

Cambodian development workers suggested that a key strategy for improving relationships was to increase the number and quantity of in-country visits by funders, including visits to the villages. Vinet suggested that the situation would improve if donors '*come more often and that they listen to the people in the fields, not just visit the offices*' (interview 13, Phnom Penh). When asked whether this was sufficiently important to justify spending funds that would otherwise go to communities, she stated that the initial outlay would be justified by the long-term improvement in understanding, eventually leading to a reduction in costs.

It is interesting that Vinet wants visiting donors to spend more time out of the office, because in Cambodia and in other countries a desk job denotes higher status than fieldwork (O'Leary and Meas 2001: 88). Given the general level of respect for Westerners and foreign development workers, it is surprising that they are asking these people to adopt behaviour that appears to be a demotion in the traditional hierarchy. This is further complicated by Ruth's comment that in Cambodia people who try to reject the behaviour dictated by the hierarchy can lose respect in the eyes of those 'below' them, which inhibits their ability to achieve their aims (interview 22, Phnom Penh). Increasing this in-country contact with practitioners and communities as well as NGO leaders will 'help enhance the effectiveness of both Northern and Southern NGOs by fostering more open dialogue between partners; improving upward and downward accountability; and by making monitoring and accountability more rigorous and meaningful' (Mawdsley *et al.* 2005: 77).

Disempowerment and the importance of trust

An interesting point raised in this research was the danger of development practitioners being disempowered by the process, in direct conflict with the philosophy of partnership. Such disempowerment was reported by Mila, a full-time volunteer with a rural Filipino NGO focused on an indigenous group. She is sometimes able to secure small amounts of overseas funding for particular projects, but finds the process humiliating. Mila spoke of her angst when seeking funding each time she was to implement a project, illustrating this by saying:

> *In 1999 I went to Germany with a funding proposal. Because I was ashamed [to ask for money], I didn't give them my proposal. So [the community has] no money for projects because I took the proposal . . . The woman from Germany who invited me said after, 'Why did you not give us your proposal?' so I gave it to her, but . . . she wrote to me and said 'It's too late now because somebody [has been given the funding], it's too late' so I said never mind . . .* (Interview 28, Mindanao)

Rather than giving her a sense of being a partner working towards shared development goals, such experiences have caused Mila shame and anguish, and as a result she chose a path that avoids relating to overseas funders. Mila now works unpaid and primarily seeks money from friends and neighbours in her own poor community to pay for small projects. It is positive that the community is supporting this work, but it is difficult for Mila and her organisation to make long-term plans or to implement projects more ambitious than training conducted by Mila herself. Furthermore, where development workers are humiliated by their experience of trying to attain funding and are hampered in their attempts to meet the needs expressed by communities with whom they work, it will surely be difficult for them to empower others. This aspect of the development experience can be addressed by entering into authentic partnerships; however, as Mila's experience demonstrates, it will be very difficult to establish and negotiate such relationships.

There was an undercurrent throughout the responses that practitioners sense that funders do not trust their local counterparts to administer funds and implement projects effectively.

In Cambodia, Vichet stated quite clearly that there appears to be a '*lack of trust among national and international donors, that local NGOs are not strong enough, are not honest, or whatever*' (interview 4, Battambang). Ek, another Cambodian practitioner, suggested that this lack of trust was a good reason for keeping expatriates working with local NGOs, since '*I think it is easier for the foreigner to find funds than the Cambodian, because if you are Australian, you can ask Australians for funds. This is the culture. I think the Australians would believe you but not me*' (interview 11, Takeo). This perception was shared by the expatriates in Cambodia, with Ruth saying that '*I do think there's a place where we have to trust more that Cambodian people know what they're doing and can run their own country*' (interview 22, Phnom Penh).

Responses also indicated that that Cambodian and Filipino NGOs base their relationships of trust on personal contact with funders, in contrast with a Northern NGO focus on contractual agreements. Although the importance of personal relationships to development relationships has been recognised within some development circles, 'formal development discourses and institutions tend to be anxious, silent, or even hostile on the subject' (Mawdsley *et al.* 2005: 77). This not only impedes the ability of both funders and NGOs to meet their goals efficiently and effectively, it also damages the relationship between two parties who need each other to be able to meet their goals. This research suggests that funding organisations are not doing the relational work necessary to ensure compliance with the contract that they believe they have secured, and that the local counterparts are disengaging from the relationship, feeling that they are not bound to comply with a contract when they believe that the funder is not behaving appropriately.

Significantly, it appears that there is no shared moral framework to cement trust between the funding and implementing organisations, a factor which would help these organisations to overcome the apparent incompatibility between their approaches. Exploring ways to build or agree on such a framework should be a matter of priority for both funders and implementers, since it would enable both to express and achieve their goals, and to engage with challenges constructively. This is in the funders' interest, because it better enables them to build trusting relationships with their partners, establishing conditions conducive to honesty and collaboration – which if nothing else is likely to produce better financial outcomes for funders, in the sense that money is being spent on agreed projects in an agreed fashion.

Mediating organisational compatibility

Practitioners' desire for improved funding relationships brings to mind the notion of 'fit', as Korten (1980) described nearly three decades ago in relation to development collaboration. While a blue-print approach emphasises prior planning and preparation, and assumes that the project is the only active input to the situation, this model of fit expects that each component adds to and influences the development experience, consistent with Long's assertion that intervention is 'an ongoing, socially constructed and negotiated process' (1992: 35). Korten compared five development 'success stories' and concluded that '[a]pparently the determinants of success cannot be found in an easily replicable program variable' (1980: 496). The common element between the projects that Korten addressed was that there was a strong compatibility between three important interactive factors, namely the implementing NGO's strengths, the community's needs, and the programme itself.

In his study, Korten found that 'each project was successful because it had worked out a program model responsive to the beneficiary needs at a particular time and place and each had built a strong organisation capable of making the program work' (1980: 496). The programme was thus tailored to the specific characteristics of its context, including organisation and community. The Cambodian and Filipino development workers interviewed in this research

described working in a participatory manner to ensure this fit between their organisation, their focus community, and the project. They reflected that their relationships with their funders could either aid or inhibit these attempts.

In this way, it appears that funders exist parallel to the context in which development workers function (rather than in direct relationship with it). I therefore extend Korten's model to encompass what might be described as a 'funding fit' between the values and strategies of the funders and local (implementing) NGOs, who are an interface between funder and community. This recognises that the funder also interacts with its own context, and the funding fit thus becomes the nexus between the two contexts. The effectiveness of the nexus between these two contexts has a very important impact on the outcomes for all parties, and this is where the development workers play a pivotal role.

The development workers in this study strove to improve fit between their own NGO, the community, and the programme, managing the relationship so that all parties feel satisfied with the outcome. Practitioners in both countries discussed foundations on which effective and supportive relationships would be built, including consistency of values and compatibility of context, while Northern funders tend towards contractual components of the partnership model as a basis for relationship. Achieving successful partnerships without funding fit would be almost impossible in the context of the poor communication and the power imbalance described by practitioners in this study.

The reality that practitioners described is that this fit is not often found, and that funders appear disinclined to explore it. As a result, practitioners create a 'false fit' by mediating between funder and community, and adjusting the programme and reports to reflect the needs and desire of each party. Thus practitioners in developing countries are sometimes successful in securing supportive funding relationships and helping to shape them into authentic partnerships that reflect a good funding fit. More often, according to the contributors to this research, practitioners interpret, translate, and shape development flows in order to achieve a compromise between divergent goals. Either way, they are acting as mediators of development processes, performing a vital transformative function.

Conclusion

The development workers who contributed to this research are not grumbling about their relationships with funders; they are working to adapt the development strategies and projects of external funders to the needs and desires of the communities where they work. In some cases, the outcome is a compromise that attempts to meet the key priorities of both parties, while in other cases it may involve disguising an action so that it appears to meet funders' expectations. Feeling dependent on the funds and unable to influence funders successfully, practitioners attempt to meet the demands of both parties in a covert manner, adopting a variety of strategies to prevent the domination, appropriation, or (at best) lack of interest that they fear if they communicate openly with funders, who have demonstrated that their plans and goals are predetermined and non-negotiable. This enables them to respond to the local context even in the absence of an authentic partnership or a good funding fit.

Effective development partnerships require a high level of collaboration, built on an investment by funders in face-to-face meetings which development workers would like to see extended, even if that means less money initially for projects. Building personal connections at the outset of a funder–implementer relationship is seen as fundamental to on-going communication and collaboration, and important to improving understanding and trust between partners.

Attempting to understand local culture(s) demonstrates to practitioners that a funder is committed to the country, as well as enabling funders to understand more about the drivers and priorities of local NGOs. A component of understanding local cultures needs to be an increased appreciation for time factors, specifically why projects take longer than funders would like, if goals are to be met effectively. Increased trust is also likely to lead to improved communication from local NGOs, as they will start to believe that they can be honest without compromising their funding possibilities. Of course this also requires funders to be more committed to listening and responding to local input – and this could perhaps be described as an increase in genuine respect, not just the outward appearance of it. This could also lead to a greater ability to collaborate on priority areas for funding, from the starting point of a sound relationship.

The strategy promoted by development workers in both countries advocated grassroots organisations working in tandem with foreign organisations, in order to achieve greater effectiveness, sharing expertise, practical strategies, and funds. This is not a transitional component of a process aimed at ending relationships with the North, but rather a continuing model that embodies practitioners' belief that local groups should be in control, working in close collaboration with Northern partners.

This research demonstrates that NGO practitioners in Cambodia and the Philippines are keen to work towards authentic partnerships with Northern funders. They demonstrate a strong understanding of the principles underlying partnership, although they admit that they may resort to tactics that do not support partnership, if they feel that the communities' needs are being compromised. Practitioners have suggested several ways in which funding bodies could demonstrate a greater preparedness to enter into authentic partnerships with local NGOs. It would seem that the ball is in the funders' court.

Acknowledgement

Thanks are due to Jørgen Delman of the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies for his helpful reflections on an earlier draft of this paper.

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