
20 Years On: Reflections on Partnerships



By Vicky Mancuso Brehm, July 2023

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2024 will mark the 20th anniversary of the publication of INTRAC's research study on partnerships 'Autonomy or Dependence? Case Studies of North – South NGO Partnerships' (Brehm et al 2004). The publication presented the findings of research exploring the relationships between European development NGOs and their civil society partners around the world. Twenty years later, what has changed?

Background: research on North – South NGO partnerships

The research itself was the fruit of a unique partnership of ten European NGOs from Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. In retrospect, what is perhaps most remarkable is how the research itself was commissioned and designed. Staff from these ten very different organisations would gather twice a year in Oxford – in person – for the NGO Research Forum. The idea of research on the complex topic of partnerships was first discussed at the NGO Forum in November 1999, and the research itself was carried out by INTRAC between 2001 and 2004.

Over the course of the four-year study, the research gathered together the perspectives of the staff of European NGOs and compared these with the experiences of a selection of their partners in Brazil, Cambodia and Tanzania. It captured how partnerships were changing as networks and alliances of Northern and Southern civil society organisations were increasingly joining together to work on common issues. It also explored the complexities of funding dynamics within the international aid system, at a time when international NGOs were engaged in processes of localisation.

The research process was conducted mainly through in-person seminars, workshops and one-to-one interviews, involving a team of researchers travelling to and within nine countries. The process involved collaboration with in-country researchers, particularly in Brazil. The research process captured a snapshot in time of relations between a cross-section of European development NGOs and their partners in a range of country contexts. Research findings were disseminated widely through 'conventional' methods such as workshops, presentations and publications, both online and in print, and through a number of translations in a variety of countries.

The context of partnerships continues to change...

Fast forward to 2024.... and the world has certainly changed. You can now order the book around the world on Amazon and receive it within 7 to 8 days. INTRAC no longer has an office in Oxford, and the idea of travelling to an in-person Forum sounds distinctly quaint and pre-pandemic.

In 2004 the digital revolution was just beginning, and was mainly limited to desk-based email and internet. The research talked of horizontal and vertical relations, with international NGO acting as the filter between local civil society organisations in a relatively well-defined aid chain. In some ways the digital revolution has led to the democratisation and opening up of partnerships, with direct funding routes exploding through digital technology in ways unimaginable twenty years ago. The European NGOs who took part in the study now have home supporters who have unlimited access to information about global poverty, inequality, injustice and the effects of climate change. Civil society organisations in the global South generally also have much greater access to networks and information thanks to the international online world; the advent of mobile phone and smartphone technology has generally increased communications in remote areas (although this is by no means the case everywhere).

The UK development funding context has also changed beyond recognition, with dramatic cuts to the aid budget, sweeping changes to DfID and a shaking up of the international development NGO sector. It is hard to imagine such a close research co-operation between NGOs taking place now, and certainly not in the UK, in the current post-Brexit climate. International NGOs across Europe are much more likely to engage directly with academic organisations, located both 'North' and 'South', or have their own in-house research capabilities.



...and yet the research findings remain relevant

The original research recommendations however remain strikingly relevant, despite the changing times and contexts. The language of development debates has changed, however the underlying issues remain strangely similar. For example, INTRAC's current debate on 'Modelling progressive funding' - now in blog form – echoes the original research recommendations, as can be seen by looking back in time:

Recommendations for International NGOs (2004):

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.

Contextual analysis is critical in determining whether interventions by Northern NGOs are appropriate.'

Recommendations for Southern Civil Society (2004):

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.'

A further unforeseen consequence of the digital revolution was highlighted in research into the role of languages in development processes (Hayman et al. 2018). The dominance of the English language within international NGO has often been exaggerated by the move to online working. This can lead to the exclusion of non-English speakers, and as a result engagement with so-called target communities becomes less effective. The research into languages and communication in development recommends that international NGOs:

‘Ensure that policies and guidance are made available and/or communicated in local languages, taking into account contextual factors and sensibilities.’ (2018)

Whilst welcoming the opportunities that digital technology brings, this suggests there is the risk of a new, English-speaking ‘digital elite’ emerging within development partnerships, echoing the earlier 2004 research themes in a newer guise. It also confirms the timeless importance of understanding context, particularly of the particular people and place of the development intervention.

Conclusion

In many ways the world has become increasingly unstable over the past twenty years, and perhaps development NGO funding has become even more driven by responding to immediate crises and conflict. Whilst the digital revolution has led to a welcome opening up of development partnerships beyond a narrow range of international NGO actors, if anything fund-raising in a world influenced by social media is more short-term and focused on attending to the latest emergency in the news. Long-term, participatory development processes that respect local communities and address root causes of poverty remain elusive. The current debates on addressing and funding the impact of climate change on the poorest and most vulnerable are a stark example of this lack of long-term vision.

The critique that funding processes tend to distort development agendas towards donors’ priorities and away from intended beneficiaries remains as prescient today as twenty years ago. Humanitarian response to disasters remains particularly beset by the same problems of how to reach the most vulnerable, whilst building up local actors and civil society rather than bypassing them.

The ingredients of effective partnership remain the same: trust, mutual understanding, effective, inclusive communication and, most importantly, a vision for long-term capacity strengthening. The digital revolution presents many opportunities, but there are also some risks inherent to collaborating from a distance; sometimes there is no substitute for well-planned, in-person visits in order to really understand the context. The challenges remain for partnerships to remain rooted: giving voice to those who are ignored on the international stage and having a long-term perspective to address the underlying causes of poverty and injustice.

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