Truer, Wider Partnership: an ABM reflection on new directions in international aid

Today the international aid landscape is experiencing rapid change, including change in the nature of partnership. This paper examines new features of ‘partnership’ – growing equality between nations and diversifying sources of partnership for NGOs. This paper also examines ways that NGOs can adapt to new features of ‘partnership’.

Growing equality between nations

For national governments, ‘Partnership’ is more equal today. China, Indonesia and many other formerly ‘developing’ countries have found their own path to prosperity. With new prosperity, they have become more assertive in their relationships with the West. Scholars like Singapore’s Danny Quah have argued that the western democratic model is being outperformed by the authoritarian capitalism model of East Asia. Western countries’ social model has also been questioned. Western society is, some have observed, beset by soaring suicide rates, addiction to anti-depressants, rampant individualism, emptying churches and disintegrating families. The declining influence of the West is reflected in Philippines President Duterte’s assertive response, upon hearing that Europe and the US might cut aid to the Philippines. He said, ‘Go ahead!’ The equalisation between nations was reflected in 2015 when the Millennium Development Goals, which provided targets to be met only by developing countries, expired. They were replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which provided targets to be met by all countries. This change was summed up by the catchcry, ‘we are all developing nations now.’

The Anglican Church has been moving in this direction theologically since at least the 1960s. In 1963, the Archbishop of Canterbury observed, “There was first the change from a church in the British Isles to a family of churches all over the world. There is now a change in the character of the family as we cease to think of some of our Anglican Churches as ‘Mother Churches’ (ie. England and U.S.A) and of others as ‘missionary’ or ‘dependent’ or ‘younger’ and come to think of them all as equal in authority and responsibility.” In the 1970s, some theologians noted that true partnership between churches was constrained by inequalities in power relationships, including the one-way flow of knowledge, personnel and resources. The challenge remains, not just among Anglicans but amongst supporters of international development in general, to translate the theory of equal partnership into the way we think and act.

Today ‘Partnership’ between nations is not just bilateral and multi-lateral. It’s global. It’s increasingly global because problems like climate disruption, financial market crashes and migration require global solutions. According to UN estimates, the number of displaced people topped 50 million globally in 2014 [for the global breadth of displacement, see photos]. Much of the violence and poverty that displaced them may only be solved through global cooperation to curb climate change, to end proxy warfare in the Middle East, to protect workers’ rights as globalised trade forces down wages, and to detect and act on early warning signs of financial or natural catastrophe.

Diversifying sources of partnership for NGOs

For NGOs, ‘Partnership’ now means wider networking. The networking is not just with other aid providers but also with individuals and organisations that can help NGOs adapt to the rapidly changing landscape of new technological opportunities, new ways of funding and doing aid work, and rapidly evolving political contexts. The rising importance of networking with the private sector is a worldwide phenomenon. The SDGs require a global partnership between the UN and the private sector as a way of securing necessary investment to bridge the estimated $2.5 trillion annual funding shortfall. And the role of the private sector is not just limited to financing development. DFAT more broadly urges NGOs ‘to embrace the benefits of private sector partnerships in bringing value to communities’. These benefits include generating growth and jobs and forming partnerships that can drive innovative approaches.’
How should NGOs adapt to the changing nature of partnerships?

1. **The changing nature of partnership between national governments means international development practice must become less paternalistic.** Former Deputy Director General of AusAID Richard Moore has challenged Australian AID to move away from its ‘expat-heavy’ approach and ‘planning tools and multiple layers of management that are designed to minimise obvious failure, rather than maximise success.’ This suggestion can equally apply to NGO practice. NGOs need to have fewer expat staff or satellite offices in-country, leaving program management to local implementers. International Policy Manager Aarathi Krishnan notes this is already happening. There is a ‘shift towards programs significantly led by local actors.’ This shift is happening not only in development but also in humanitarian response. The World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016 committed humanitarian actors to a ‘Grand Bargain’ that included an increased share of global humanitarian funding going to local and national responders by 2020 and to increased investment in the capacity and leadership of local organisations.

2. **International development practice must become less paternalistic in its language.** Actually this is not a new notion. Way back in 1963, an Anglican Congress declared, “It is no longer relevant to talk of ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’ churches. The keynotes of our time are equality, interdependence, mutual responsibility.’ In 2016, Richard Moore similarly argues that the word ‘aid’ is outdated because it suggests one-sidedness instead of team work or exchange. Others add that the term ‘beneficiaries’ is also one-sided and should be replaced by the term ‘consumer.’ Similarly, one giant Bangladesh-based international NGO, BRAC, is now ‘changing people from the status of beneficiaries to customers.’ BRAC sells products to one segment of the population (those whose incomes are on the rise) to generate funds to finance other products for poorer segments. So BRAC is not only changing the language but also the role. Of course some NGOs are averse to corporatisation of language and fear that corporatisation of human exchange may marginalise those who can’t afford to pay. But even these NGOs need to move away from the patronising dichotomy of ‘aid providers’ and ‘aid beneficiaries’. After all, NGO personnel also gain an income and widen their own horizons while those currently labelled ‘beneficiaries’ are often providing extensive volunteer services to their communities. We need to encourage more balanced terminology like ‘local/ international development workers’ and ‘project participants’ and we need to use this terminology to move away from a mindset of ‘providers’ and ‘beneficiaries’.

3. **The changing nature of partnership between national governments also means international development practice must become more focused on global solutions.** An example of a global solution is the COP 22 climate conference in Marrakech in November 2016. Representatives from 200 member countries came together to curb climate change and its impacts through mechanisms like renewable energy targets, InsuResilience (providing insurance to up to 400 million of the most vulnerable people), and climate finance. Another example of a global solution is the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, which asks countries to voluntarily sign up to a set of rules about transparently reporting how they spend money gained from oil, gas and mining. NGOs need to devote more resources to raising awareness about the global nature of many problems and to promoting global cooperation to find solutions.

4. For NGOs, many new sources of partnership are beckoning.

   a. **Partnership with the private sector** need not just be for funding. NGOs can explore new avenues for partnership through carbon credit schemes, SocialFinance (also known as impact bonds), product licensing and certification, introducing new technologies and linking with fair trade and other marketing outlets. Some are sceptical about the intentions of the private sector, noting a proliferation of corporate social responsibility initiatives and non-binding standards but questioning who monitors whether these pledges actually lead to change in poor communities. Others are cynical about NGOs’ intentions, deeming them ‘self-interested’. Where elements of the private sector and the not-for-profit sector are unable to trust each other,
perhaps they can agree to monitor each other. Or perhaps NGOs and the private sector need to accept that a program is more sustainable if all the participants, including the private sector, ‘are getting something’. The possibilities for cooperation between NGOs and the private sector are unlimited.

b. **Internet-based mass communication tools have helped widen networks.** Aid agencies were quick to adopt these tools to network with charitable individuals and organisations, but are now also using these tools to seek innovative individuals and organisations. Through initiatives such as USAID ‘Development Innovation Ventures’ and the Gates Foundation’s Grand Challenges, organisations are bringing individuals and organisations into their network as sources of ideas. And as aid agencies become more aware of the global nature of problems, they are increasingly linking with umbrella groups that promote global standards like International Aid Transparency Initiative and the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil. Internet technology facilitates networking with innovative individuals and organisations and with groups that promote global standards.

c. Besides partnership with the private sector, innovators and groups that promote global standards, NGOs are widening their engagement with other segments of civil society. For example, NGOs and other aid agencies have only just begun to appreciate the powerful role that diaspora-led organisations might play in development efforts. Such organisations have high levels of contextual knowledge, access to vulnerable populations and capacity to implement innovative, small-scale, low-cost projects that are potentially replicable and scalable. As the world urbanises, NGOs need to increasingly engage with groups representing the urban poor, through such activities as participatory budgeting, citizen-based monitoring, and co-planning. DFAT has identified many more civil society groups that offer new networks, expertise and ideas: community and village based groups, labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organisations, cooperatives, women’s organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, chambers of commerce, independent research institutes and the not-for-profit media.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, some of the new notions of partnership that NGOs can explore are:

1. Shifting towards programs significantly led by local actors.
2. Replacing artificial distinctions between ‘aid providers’ and ‘aid beneficiaries’ with less patronising terminology like ‘local/ international development workers’ and ‘project participants’.
3. Devoting more resources to raising awareness about the global nature of many problems and to promoting global cooperation to find solutions.
4. Widening networks by:
   - Engaging more with the private sector, for funding or other types of partnership.
   - Using IT to connect with innovative individuals and with groups promoting global standards.
   - Exploring new avenues for partnership with diaspora-led organisations, the urban poor and other segments of civil society.

New notions of partnership like these can help NGOs adapt to the rapidly changing landscape of new technological opportunities, new ways of funding and doing aid work, and rapidly evolving political contexts.

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