

Nurturing Partnership: A Southern African Continuum of Flexible Stages in Partnership Development

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Introduction

Partnership is becoming an ever more present component of educational reform. As a term with a substantial cross-disciplinary history, it represents a significant step beyond cooperation and collaboration. Still, we have a tendency to use the term loosely, to avoid defining it, or to define it to mean whatever suits our immediate needs. Yet when clearly understood and ethically employed in each of its various developmental forms and stages, it is a powerful tool with great potential. Partnership strategies are being increasingly imbedded in the practice of international, bilateral and multilateral agencies. Hence, the question that arises is how can a clearer understanding of the partnership development process assist us to support and nurture such partnerships?

This paper shares lessons learned over years of working to create effective partnerships for development. It focuses on the relationship between international Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and local NGOs. It consolidates these lessons in the form of a model represented as a continuum of partnership relationships. The model of partnership development shared emerges from five years of experience grounded in the Southern African context and based on World Education's practical experience working in a variety of partnership arrangements with over 120 NGOs in various parts of Africa. Following the relationships across a phased continuum from pre-partnership through emergent partnership to full Partnership, clear differentiable indicators were identified for each of nine proposed dimensions of the relationship (Focus of Interaction, Activities/ Projects/ Programs, Time and Orientation, Benefit, Trust and Respect, Organizational Structures, Organizational Strategies and Information Access, Locus of Influence, and Written Agreements or Contracts). In tracing the origins of this model, the paper reflects on the importance of fostering partnership as a tool for promoting meaningful development and education policy and increased understanding on local, national and international levels. The paper concludes by sharing composite case constructs of partnerships that illustrate the interplay between the dimensions and phases of the partnership continuum model and the realities of NGO needs.

Partnership--A Transdisciplinary Concept

Whether in the arena of international development, educational reform and development or grassroots community development, it is generally accepted that long-term impact and successful reform require the coordinated efforts of many people. As a concept common to many disciplines, partnership holds the promise of emerging as a cross-disciplinary theme of distinction. Education, social services, medicine and business, the public and private sectors are all contributing to the dialogue regarding the importance of partnership for achieving goals and expanding impact (Stevens, 1999; Day, 1998; Goodlad, 1994; Osguthorpe et al. 1995; Eisler, 1990; Caplan, 1976; McKnight, 1994; Poole, 1995). Poole (1995) defines partnership as:

an association between two or more persons, groups, or organizations who join together to achieve a common goal that neither one alone can accomplish. This association is characterized by joint membership rights, by democratic participation, and by shared responsibility. Each member agrees to contribute resources to the partnership with the understanding that the possession or enjoyment of the benefits will be shared by all. Partners work hard to strengthen each other and to endure conflict and change, because they recognize that their shared goal extends beyond the reach of any one member. (p.2)

This definition goes far beyond the standard legal and economic definitions associated with business partnerships (Winicur, 1993). It begins to venture into what organizational theorists define as social partnerships; Waddock (1991) identifies social partnerships as an increasingly popular form of collaborative action in which organizations from multiple sectors interact to achieve common goals. As such, she views them as specialized versions of what various scholars have termed collective strategies (Astley, 1984), problem-solving networks (Austrom & Lad, 1986), or action sets (Aldrich & Whetten, 1981; Whetten, 1987).

In its broadest use, there seems to be an agreement across disciplines as to the core definition and purpose of partnership. While various disciplines seem to explore the details of this concept in different ways, there are many examples of how partnership is seen as a viable structural mechanism for increasing the sustainability and impact of development and reform efforts. Working from a counseling and family/community support perspective, Caplan (1976) used the concept of partnership to shift operational paradigms from paternalism to empowerment, and from individual to family/community centered interventions. Saleebey (1992) in social work and McKnight (1994) in health helped colleagues to recognize the benefits of focusing on strength and capacity rather than deficiency and weakness as well as the problem-solving capacities latent in communities and partnership approaches.

Whether nation-wide, systemic or school-based, the challenges of education reform are so large and complex that the importance of partnership strategies are increasingly acknowledged (Lauglo, 2001; Cloete et al, 1999; National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983). Within education, the past decade has witnessed growing numbers of classroom teachers and teacher educators organizing school-university partnerships intended to promote professional development, improve the preparation of teachers and increase children's learning (Goodlad 1994; Osguthorpe et al., 1995). Although these new learning communities promise to contribute to educational reform, personal growth and professional development (Birrell et al., 1995, 1998), few U.S. studies have provided clear, conceptual models for initiating and sustaining collaborative change within such partnerships. Indeed, the challenges encountered often overshadow steps made towards true reform, while complications associated with merging divergent organizational cultures and traditions form seemingly insurmountable barriers (Day, 1998).

There is at least one source of critical reflection on the challenges of school-university partnerships within the United States that begins to outline indicators and inform understanding of effective partnerships. In *Centers of Pedagogy: New Structures for Educational Renewal*, Patterson, Machelli and Pacheco (1999) identify six key elements of effective collaboration (or partnership): mutual trust, honest communication, common

goals, flexible governance, positive tensions and a culture of inquiry. The authors also identify structural characteristics that support partnership: projects, new roles, realistic expectations and perspectives; significant and equivalent reward structures; and opportunities for sharing and discussion. The majority of these elements are reflected in the model of partnership presented herein.

Of the remaining perspectives, Riane Eisler (1990) provides a particularly interesting sociological interpretation. She clearly differentiates between partnership and dominator cultures, injecting a critical culture and gender analysis previously absent from the discussion of partnership. In *The Chalice and the Blade* (1990), Eisler makes a clear distinction between two cultural models: the partnership culture, which she symbolizes with a chalice, and the dominator culture, which she symbolizes with the blade. In a partnership culture, cooperation is based on trust, diversity is celebrated, and all people and groups are valued. Differences are resolved peacefully and no single individual or group controls another. Women and men are equal partners and nurturance and caring are honored. In a dominator culture, cooperation is enforced by fear, differences are crushed, and conflicts are resolved through conquest. Select people are considered to be natural superiors and the stereotypical view equating masculinity with aggression is accepted (Eisler & Loye, 1990).

The spirit behind the partnership culture described above is particularly helpful in understanding the approach World Education that was used in Namibia and the context from which the model emerges. To overcome an historical legacy of dominator cultures, partnership was the most appropriate approach for educational reform.

The Context and Origins of the Partnership Continuum

In 1994, World Education began providing a range of capacity building services to enable Namibian Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) to better address the needs of a population historically disadvantaged by colonialism, apartheid structures and years of struggle for independence. Titled "Reaching out with Education to Adults in Development" (READ), this five year project represented a substantial investment on the part of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the NGO community in Namibia. World Education's operational approach emphasized participatory, nonformal adult education and training programs that seemed well suited to Namibia's current transition and challenges. By helping to develop skills and systems through training, study tours, and technical assistance and by providing financial support through grants, World Education was able to slowly build trusting relationships and help NGOs grow. Central to determining the most effective mix of services was the development of explicit partnerships between World Education and the NGOs. This strategy was not new to World Education, which has made the support of networking and the exchange of southern expertise among NGOs (in the region and on the continent) a hallmark of its practice.

The experience in Namibia served as a practical and collaborative base to deepen and clarify the understanding of partnership and how to nurture it. World Education had over five years to explore these multiple definitions of partnership with their Namibian NGO colleagues. The READ Project had inherent limitations; it was a USAID funded project, focused on grant distribution and capacity building for NGOs and slated to end

in December 1998. As such, it was automatically directed towards certain types of relationships and confined time-bound partnerships. It had to work with organizations that understood and accepted this reality and struggle with the inherent displaced equality that comes from donor relationships. Thus it became necessary to explicitly work towards replacing the concept of monetary value (funding) with a broader concept of value (resource contributions) that each partner could provide (Maude, 1998).

Over the five year project period, READ worked directly through various stages of partnership with over 100 organizations. The concept of a partnership continuum provided the project staff with a framework that offered a variety of models for partnering with Namibian NGOs and a way to move beyond initial project constraints. These models allowed READ to partner with local NGOs based on their needs at a particular stage and time in their organizational development.

The Partnership Continuum

Pre- partnership	partnership	Partnership
Getting to Know Each Other	Working to Achieve Mutually Valued Objectives	Developing and Implementing Programs Together

Most organizations that work towards effective and sustainable development realize the advantages and necessity of coordinating efforts and resources in order to attain their goals and will often work to strategically maximize the use of resources and expertise from local and international organizations. In the early years of the project, READ staff realized that they were experiencing a strategic movement along a partnership continuum. Paced according to organizational needs and local realities, this movement resulted in the development of strong and effective partnerships. On reflection, it became clear that the partnerships which we were developing represented not only important development interventions but also, on occasion, the first steps towards developing a more broad-based and integrated relationship with selected Partners. Thus, the optimal relationship in any partnership process is one that encourages NGOs to maintain a relationship with the partner organization that best suits their needs at a particular stage and time in their organizational development. The emphasis and value is not on the outcome, but rather on the ability to utilize this model in order to maximize the benefits to the collaborating organizations, and have an impact on their development goals. With this concept of a continuum in place, we began to identify critical indicators that would help us to determine which type of partnership we were undertaking. Recognizing that the majority of organizations concluded their relationship at the partner level, we strove to clarify the levels of relationship and allow the NGOs a clear choice of how and when to proceed from pre-partnership to partnership or beyond to Partnership. This exploration allowed us to identify nine dimensions of partnership relations that varied across this three-phased continuum. They included:

- (1) Focus of Interaction- the primary purpose behind the partnership;
- (2) Activities/ Projects/ Programs - the work undertaken during the course of the partnership;

- (3) Time and Orientation -the length of time and orientation of the association;
- (4) Benefit - the benefits accrued to partners;
- (5) Trust and Respect-the development, extent and locus of trust and respect between partner organizations;
- (6) Organizational Structures - the degree to which organizational structures are autonomous or integrated;
- (7) Organizational Strategies and Information Access - the degree to which partners coordinate their organizations strategies and share information;
- (8) Locus of Influence- how organizations utilize and conceptualize their locus of influence to promote individual or partner-based interests;
- (9) Written Agreements or Contracts-the existence and/or focus of written agreements between partners.

These dimensions map clearly across the partnership continuum and form a fluid matrix that can be used to guide NGOs through creating mutually supportive partnerships.

All partnerships exist within a context, and the Namibian NGO community was no exception. With over 23 years of active armed struggle and, decades of resistance or forced submission to oppressive and racist structures imposed by colonial or minority powers, a natural and deep seated suspicion and resentment of outside intervention exists within the intended target population (NGOs and local communities alike). Since independence, many NGOs have struggled for transition from their origins as resistance organizations to emerging development organizations, while maintaining their integrity and ethics and remaining true to their historical roots. For many, the association with nations, organizations, and money that had not previously supported their struggle was not appropriate. As the United States and USAID fell directly into this category, the READ Project represented a challenging situation that required that World Education prove itself as open, flexible, understanding, supportive, and trustworthy before it could expect to be accepted into the NGO community. This was a major hurdle to be overcome the first year.

The project was launched in 1993. The first year was devoted to developing relationships with the NGO community, understanding their particular needs, and providing initial support in the form of small grants and short-term training workshops. In year two, these relationships expanded and a new stream of activities specifically tailored to HIV/AIDS concerns was added along with longer-term training series and grant procedures. In year three World Education, recognizing increased characteristics of sustainability and growth among NGOs who participated in multiple project offerings, decided to focus 80 percent of its support and capacity-building efforts on a smaller group of partner NGOs. To formalize these relationships, World Education created a process that involved conducting a Joint Institutional Assessment ("JIA") with the NGO and the development of partnership agreements that outlined organizational

objectives and a balanced mix of support services for a specified period of time. NGOs selected from three types of support: grants, training, and technical assistance (Mullinix, 1998). Many partnership agreements included grants to carry out the mission and service delivery activities of the organizations. While subgrants and financial support had previously been available from READ, they had been tied to discrete deliverables identified in approved proposals with strict budgetary and line item constraints. The flexible nature of the grant component developed through this partnership process allowed NGOs to monitor, actively reflect on and respond better and more efficiently to the needs of their clientele.

Almost all partner NGOs chose to have staff participate in the well-established Training of Trainers (ToT) Workshop Series. Designed collaboratively by experienced Namibian NGO and World Education trainers, this 10-month experiential and contextually-grounded training effectively prepared participating trainers to design, analyze, implement, and document quality participatory training tailored to the NGO's clients' needs (Mullinix, Aipinge, et al, 1998). For NGOs with specific management or content consultation needs, on-site or off-site technical assistance support was designed into the agreement. READ Project staff might assist with financial training or analysis, strategic planning or board training. Where it was necessary to find specialized expertise elsewhere, World Education drew on its broader Partnership network and tapped expertise from related southern organizations, demonstrating its trademark commitment to south-south exchange (Mullinix & Long, 1997).

Despite the donor's decision to cut over a quarter of the project's operating budget during this final phase, the fourth and fifth years of the project managed to maintain this successful strategic approach, enabling the partners to explore joint ventures and activities. The focus on institutionalizing services and identifying exit strategies for the project and NGOs enabled READ to ensure that many of its services in greatest demand would be woven into the fabric of the Namibian NGO community. One example of this was World Education's support of the development of a cadre of Master Trainers and NGO Partners who would continue to offer the ToT Workshop Series and other participatory training and nonformal education courses in Namibia (Mullinix, 1999; Kalunduka, 1999; Garb, 2000; Kondombolo, 2001). This and other explorations into fuller and more reciprocal Partnerships arrangements helped to ensure that the project's impact would continue beyond World Education's presence.

Partnership Development Continuum

Dimensions	pre-partnership	partnership	Partnership
Focus of Interaction	Getting to Know Each Other	Working to Achieve Mutually Valued Objectives	Developing and Implementing Programs Together
Activities/ Projects/ Programs	Limited - specifically defined relationships which allow organizations to become acquainted with each other	Opportunistic - organizations work together because it is convenient and appropriate (a good match)	Integral - organizations develop joint programs or activities that grow directly out of common skills and interests
Time and Orientation	short-term, non-specific	Specified/longer-term, objective/activity oriented	Open-ended goal/mission oriented
Benefit	Increased Networking - Organizations develop relationships and skills	Increased Capacity - Organizations are able to do more and/or access more resources than they could alone.	Increased Status - Organizations are able to become more than what they would be alone .
Trust and respect	Building trust and earning respect	Trust and respect exist among a limited number of key staff members	Mutual trust and respect throughout partner organizations
Organizational Structures	Completely autonomous	Separate but coordinated	Appropriately integrated (e.g. exchange of staff/board)
Organizational Strategies and Information Access	Separate strategies Public information shared	Separate but coordinated development and pursuit of strategies Proprietary information exchanged	Proprietary information and strategies developed and marketed together
Locus of Influence	Separate	Shared or differentiated according to expertise and capacity	Integrated, with acknowledgment of expertise and capacity
Written Agreements or Contracts	None	Written agreements or contracts focusing on the specific roles of each organization in the implementation of a given project/activity	Written agreements or contracts highlighting broad areas of mutual interest and commitment to work together.

Model developed through collaborative consultation between Bonnie Mullinix, Leslie Long and Martin Tjituka with input from other local NGO staff, African NGOs and World Education staff.

Reflections on Partnership

As the previous exploration confirms, the word " partnership " conveys has different meanings to different people. For many, it implies equality of resources - financial, human, and network. Where it is perceived that equality does not exist, the question remains as to whether there can be a true Partnership. To many, there is a notion of commitment over time. When organizations enter into a Partnership, the expectations are that the Partnership will exist for a number of years with a commitment of support through difficult times. The challenge of understanding and nurturing the development of partnerships over time is central to the current discussion.

As the READ project wound down, World Education continued to reflect on project experience in building capacity and relationships with local organizations through partnership. While many insights emerged, two were identified as particularly critical to project success: project responsiveness and a critical and deep understanding of the possible forms of partnership.

Project approach and responsiveness

NGOs in Namibia --as in many parts of the world--are mission-driven but resource poor. They have limited financial resources, small staffs, and they aspire to meet urgent and pressing needs. Setting aside time to systematically take stock of their organizations and to comprehensively identify organizational needs can be seen at times as burdensome or undoable. Further, the process of critically examining one's own organization and sharing the information with another organization can be a threatening prospect.

To respond to these realities and concerns, READ offered a variety of options for entry activities that would begin to build trust, understanding and respect between the organizations and their respective staff. With important groundwork laid through such initial activities, the Joint Institutional Assessment was generally an appropriate next step. However, READ did not make the completion of a JIA a prerequisite for assisting NGOs. Nor did it require all NGOs to go through all steps in the partnership process sequentially. By encouraging responsiveness to NGO contexts and needs, and given the flexible application of the partnership process, READ was able to initiate relationships that led to increased sharing of information and goals, a formal joint institutional assessment, the identification of appropriate types and levels of support and involvement, and the construction of appropriate and responsive partnership agreements.

Forms and advantages of partnership

Through partnership between Namibian Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and an American Private Voluntary Organization (PVO), both organizations found that they could do more than they would have on their own. Ideally, the Partnerships World Education has established will continue to help the organizations 'become more', expanding our collective horizons and impacting positively on development. Central to the concept of partnership at all levels is empowerment. For World Education/Namibia,

the partnerships embarked on are only truly meaningful when they result in the empowerment of communities and individuals. World Education considers itself lucky to have had sufficient time to build and expand upon such relationships to not only see organizations grow through different stages of partnership, but to hear the stories of their work and see its effects on the people and communities who, as partners in development, we are all dedicated to reach.

Visioning Partnerships

Movement along a continuum of partnership relations exposes various dimensions of the relationships as it develops. The following case constructs illustrate partnership relationships between local NGOs (fictitious, but based on true composites) and international NGO (for our purposes, World Education) at three characteristic points along the continuum model. The nine dimensions identified in the model are also embedded in these scenarios. They serve as indicators of the phase of partnership in which each organization profiled finds itself. These cases are meant to highlight the nature of partnership as one constantly in flux, with movement along the continuum neither a linear nor solely progressive process. That said, the following cases if read alongside the Partnership Development Continuum exemplify relationships that are characteristically descriptive of each of the Partnership Development Continuum phases they represent.

Pre-partnership

The Environmental Action League (EAL) was involved in promoting responsible eco-tourism in an area rich in culture and scenic beauty but traditionally poor in economic resources. They had a long history of working with local people; long enough to see that even development efforts in the region that started up with the best intentions often mismanaged the natural resources and the people. They needed funds to carry out their plans and would occasionally explore new donors who came on the scene. They would pick a well-established community project (one not likely in danger of failing or being too disturbed by outside intervention) and invite the donor to visit and consider funding its expansion. This would give them an opportunity to see what the donor/organization could offer and how they could work with them without jeopardizing any existing projects or community relationships.

partnership

The Aids Action Network (AAN) formed in response to the growing health crisis in the country. The members of this NGO feel strongly that they must promote local education and help stem the tide of HIV/AIDS that is rapidly extending over their region. While they have little in the way of funds or even knowledge of how to approach this, they have a firm base in the communities and the more they learn, the more they identify strategies that will help in reaching those at risk. World Education, an international NGO with both the experience and the funds for such a project, recently arrived in Namibia. The AAN and World Education enter into a partnership: with the local knowledge and contacts of the AAN and the skills and expertise of World Education, they are able to build an effective program.

Partnership

The Income Equity Foundation (IEF) began their work as a locally funded initiative working in the poor sections of the capital city. Over the years they have expanded to cover the country, offering small loans and training and support to women's income generating groups and small business people. As they expanded, they benefited from the technical assistance of World Education, an International NGO working in the region. As they built trust and relationships grew tighter they embarked on new projects together, accessing funding through joint projects and sharing the contacts and connections they each had freely with the others. IEF would regularly include World Education as technical advisors in their projects and World Education would actively seek out opportunities for IEF staff to consult on projects elsewhere in the world, or bring other organizations on visits, fostering South-South exchanges between IEF and other World Education Partners in the region. Now, the Board of each organization has representation from the other Partner. Recently, the two organizations drafted and signed a memorandum of agreement that outlined their strategic plan for future joint ventures.

Nurturing Partnerships-A Work in Progress

As the wealth and depth of our experiences with partnership increase, so do the variety of partnerships exhibited. Like new and emerging species of plants, they are unique and complex. As with plants, careful examination of colors, features, and characteristics provide clues that help us to categorize them according to origins, influences, complexity, maturity, etc. As with plants, we can learn from our experience and analyses how to nurture them so they may thrive and grow into more intricate and elegant versions over time. It is experience and deep practical knowledge of the species and approaches to nurturing them which that produces strong, healthy plants. So too is the process of nurturing partnership. Deep, grounded understanding of the organizations coupled with flexible and appropriate strategies and respect for the influences all inform the establishment of strong and successful partnerships. While partnerships may represent the perennial "work in progress," the more experience we have in working with them, the better chance we have of appreciating the nuances of their complexity and understanding how to effectively nurture them.

Notes

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