

NN41, December 2008

The New Politics of Partnership: Peril or Promise?

Editorial: The Promise and Peril of Partnership

By Kenneth King, University of Edinburgh, and NORRAG

Email: Kenneth.King@ed.ac.uk

Who created the global partnership agenda?

In the original quotation from the Pearson Commission in the outline of this special issue, the discourse of 'aid-providers', 'donors' and 'recipients' was being used as well as 'partners'. Nowadays, however, the term, 'development partners', has been widely adopted by the funding agencies to refer to themselves alone. This is a rather bizarre usage, and not least when the development partners meet separately from national government, as is still very often the case. The term, development partner, is seldom used to refer to national governments or sector ministries. This first asymmetry suggests that one side is planning development and the other side is being developed.

The idea that the donor community is fixing up development was given a great boost by the very honestly entitled OECD DAC report *Shaping the 21st Century: the Role of Development Cooperation* (OECD, 1996). That's a straightforward message! The report itself is actually full of the rhetoric of country ownership, and of countries driving the action. Countries are to set their own targets and strategies:

'As a basic principle, locally-owned country development strategies and targets should emerge from an open and collaborative dialogue by local authorities with civil society and with external partners, about their shared objectives and their respective contributions to the common enterprise'. (OECD, 1996, p. 14)

Despite the pervasive discourse of country ownership, with external aid only being a complement to country action, it is clearly from this particular Report that the new global agenda and architecture emerges in the form of the Six International Development Targets (IDTs), the same global goals for all developing countries [1]. The 'external partners' have certain responsibilities and the 'developing partner countries' others, but in the manner of such reports, the only elements which are remembered are those which became the 6 IDTs. All 6 targets apply principally to developing partner countries and only 1 of the 6 (on environment) to OECD countries. There is a great deal of excellent surrounding text, just as there would be in the Jomtien and Dakar statements and in the New York Millennium Declaration. But it was the targets and goals which became the 'sacred text'. These were the key message, and they were developed at a key meeting of the OECD DAC where developing countries were not even present. The world's aid agenda was thus constructed in Paris. The role of external partners would be to help strengthen capacities in developing partner countries, - 'to help them increase their capacities to do things for themselves', -- things which had already been decided for them (OECD DAC 1996:12).

It was the IDTs which would substantially be turned into the Millennium Development Goals four years later. There were two more MDGs than there were IDTs, and one of these made into a Goal what was already there in 1996, the idea of a 'global development partnership'. This became MDG Goal 8: 'Develop the global partnership for development'. And it was full of really serious matters, such as tariff and quota free access for LDCs, access to essential drugs, the benefits of new technologies, and more generous aid flows. But this partnership goal was the only one of the eight which did not have quantitative targets. The precise phrasing of the MDGs was in fact carried out after world leaders had left New York. As one UN official commented critically at the time: 'eight for them and one for us!' This was a further asymmetry in what is often claimed to be the global aid architecture. (For what happens to the 'terms of the development partnership' eight years on, see Gore in this special issue.)

Enhancing country ownership of development is inseparable from the production of development knowledge. Yet as Gore and the Least Developed Countries Report 2008 argue, local knowledge is marginalised by the way development knowledge is currently produced. This development knowledge production is at the heart of most of the

contributions in this special issue, and research partnerships between North and South are currently the preferred modality for creating this knowledge. Preferred, that is to say, by most development partners, on whose funding a good deal of this partnership enterprise depends.

Knowledge for Development via Research Partnerships?

Before we turn to look at North-South research partnerships, it is salutary to remind ourselves that the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), meeting in Jomtien in 1990, felt that the most important expansion of partnerships for educational development should be in the developing world itself. This would imply partnerships amongst all sub-sectors and forms of education, partnerships between education and other governmental departments, and partnerships between government and non-governmental organisations, NGOs, the private sector, communities and families (WCEFA 1990: article 7). Jomtien did not prioritise or even mention North-South partnerships. It argued that 'Ultimate responsibility rests within each nation to design and manage its own programmes to meet the learning needs of all its population'. A 'strengthened knowledge base nourished by research findings and the lessons of experiments and innovations' will be essential (WCEFA 1990: 16,19).

Partnerships with the North are not the only way to build that essential development knowledge base. For years from the early 1970s, the then unique, Canadian bilateral research agency, IDRC, made grants directly to developing country research centres, in government and in academia. It did not see Canadian partnerships as a precondition for building research capacity in the South.

If the key challenge is policy learning and knowledge sharing in the South (see Grootings in NN 38) rather than policy borrowing, policy replication and policy internalization from the North, then research partnerships or development partnerships more generally need to be organized around this goal. Too often, aid partnerships have been about policy borrowing and replication, from PRSPs, to NQFs, to CBTs [2] and many, many more Northern fads and acronyms. This perhaps should not be surprising given the mission and mandate behind the massive globalization of development knowledge through multilateral and bilateral agencies, and their often changing certainties about their own aid priorities for the South.

Of course, the Accra Agenda for Action (August 2008), itself another indirect product from Paris, might be thought to temper that Northern agenda-setting; after all 'Country ownership is key'. 'We agreed in Paris that this would be our first priority' (AAA 2008: 1, 2). But paradoxically achieving this new ownership ambition seems to involve donors in a much more invasive engagement with all the 'development actors' than the now much maligned project mode:

'Donors will support efforts to increase the capacity of all development actors?parliaments, central and local governments, CSOs, research institutes, media and the private sector?to take an active role in dialogue on development policy and on the role of aid in contributing to countries? development objectives'. (Ibid.2)

Although the Accra Agenda for Action states that the key is country ownership, it turns out equally to be about partnership: 'Aid is about building partnerships for development' (Ibid. 3). But just as donor ambitions are now to engage with all the above national development actors, the donor constituency now itself turns out to be a large and much more inclusive partnership:

'Such partnerships are most effective when they fully harness the energy, skills and experience of all development actors?bilateral and multilateral donors, global funds, CSOs, and the private sector'. (Ibid. 3)

How these more comprehensive ambitions of the development partners will work out in practice remains to be seen. But unlike Jomtien where partnership was exclusively used for the country level, Accra sees aid partnerships as being at the heart of development:

'We are committed to eradicating poverty and promoting peace and prosperity by building stronger, more effective partnerships that enable developing countries to realise their development goals'. (Ibid.1)

Partners in Research?

When we turn from development partnerships to research collaboration, a large number of highly relevant issues are touched upon in the articles that follow, from both Northern and Southern perspectives, and also from South-South angles. But what makes an academic partnership work at 3000 miles distance between the institutions? Some of the answers are scattered across these articles.

Clearly ethics and values are critical. Trusting the other partner on commitment, effort, sources & evidence, and deadlines is vital. But these are more likely to be there if the partners have spent significant amounts of time in each other's institutions, countries and company. But too often, both in the large-scale multi-institutional projects and in the much smaller bilateral arrangements, the typical stay in a so-called partner country, often not in the partner institution, is a week to ten days. The visitors stay in hotels or boarding houses; they don't have an office in the partner institution, and get to know how it actually works. Time is too short for that. The partners come together to tackle reviews, coordination, data collection & analysis challenges, and future schedules. There is no time to get a feel for the research and consultancy environment in the wider institution. There is often no time to do research together; and hence there is more time spent on commenting on the others' work than on joint writing.

A new division of research labour is associated with some of these research partnerships, whether large or small. Capacity building for Southern partners is an assumption built into the agency justification for many of these partnership schemes, and hence the Northern partners are often associated with planning, design, review of draft material, advice on literature and on research publication. They become research advisors or research managers. But the Northern partners often don't actually do any substantial research in the South. Or if they do, it may just be for a week or ten days of policy interviews in the Southern capital.

Fieldwork for three months, six months or a year in the Southern partner country by the Northern partner is extremely rare nowadays. And conversely the only Southern partners who spend any real length of time in the North are those younger partners doing their doctorates, under the capacity building rubric. Yet without spending substantial joint research time in the South where the fieldwork sites normally are, there is little chance of understanding the crucial importance of the research culture in the partner institution. The constraints of time in the Northern institution mean that the Northern research visits are not very different from the time that Northern consultants spend in the South. The difference is that Northern consultants actually do both research and writing, very intensively.

A very great deal of my recent research and writing has been done jointly with masters students who then got PhDs, and then post-doctoral awards or research associateships. They were then self-standing colleagues. Their partnership status clearly changed over the 6-7 years of this 'research apprenticeship'. But joint publication was taking place even at the masters' stage. The intensity of these kinds of partnership interactions is almost impossible to replicate with the 3000 mile collaborations. For one thing, these latter are almost entirely dependent on external funding; so that at the end of the 1,2, or 3 years of funding, the relationship unfortunately ends.

The really big challenge is to assess whether and how these many different kinds of research partnerships really contribute to a more vibrant knowledge system in the South. How do they encourage development knowledge and knowledge sharing in the partner university, think tank or research institute? Like development partnerships, research partnerships may have too much expected of them. The partnership may end up operating in a silo protected for a few years from the deteriorating research environments in so many Southern university systems. This might suggest that a realistic starting point for any ambitious partnership would be to review realistically the research environments on both sides of the proposed marriage, paying particular attention to the incentive systems for particular kinds of academic work.

Footnotes

[1] The sixth target on environmental sustainability is the only one that could refer to developed and developing countries. Interestingly, it is the only one that doesn't have quantitative targets, just deadlines.

[2] Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, National Qualification Frameworks, Competency Based Training