

LEARNING IN PARTNERSHIPS



Improving Learning Between North and South

Learning is integral to a meaningful understanding of 'partnership' in international development today. Yet it is easy to divorce the concept of learning from the reality of partner relationships and to feel overwhelmed by overly ambitious aims.

All partnerships and learning challenges differ. Among Northern Non-Government Organisations (NNGOs) and Southern Non-Government Organisations (SNGOs) there are significant differences in terms of capacity, engagement with development issues, experience, commitment to learning and commitment to genuine partnership.

Although there is no single best practice when it comes to learning and partnership, it is hoped that by highlighting some fundamental issues, this paper can help to demystify the 'learning organisation', enabling development practitioners to feel more confident about taking simple and practical steps towards becoming better learners, as organisations and in partnerships. This paper is useful for anyone working in development who wants to explore the dynamic of partnership relations and their influence on learning.

The Context

It is important to locate discussions of learning and partnership in the context of wider trends in international development, to avoid the danger of downplaying the impact of external and contextual factors that affect the work and ability of SNGOs and NNGOs to engage with their partners (*Lister; 2002a*). Developments in the NGO landscape include:

- Shifts in funding patterns.
- A rise in strategic planning.
- Increased competition for funding.
- Geographical relocation.

- Calls for greater 'professionalism'.
- Demand for stronger accountability (up & downward).
- Issues of recording and demonstration of impact.

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Why Now?

Current trends in international development have seen a supposed shift towards stronger partnership working. This has been, in part, an effort to get unheard voices onto the agenda and to address power differentials. At the same time there are calls for development work to have a greater impact, and to facilitate reflection and learning to enhance effectiveness. Though these concerns are far from new, they have recently become more explicit and now involve more diverse stakeholders.

Additional impetus has come from a current emphasis on capacity development in Northern and Southern NGOs. Learning lies at the heart of capacity development, since it entails a conscious approach to change.

Recent decades have witnessed a growing questioning of development as a linear process and there is increasing recognition of development as non-linear and unpredictable, demanding appreciation of complex systems and diversity. The significance of this for learning and partnerships remains to be seen.

**‘the need for understanding how organisations learn and accelerating that learning is greater today than ever before.’
(Senge; 1990: 487)**

A Private Sector Toolbox?

In this dynamic context, NGOs need to learn how to cope with change. In the context of ongoing power differences, however, questions have been raised about how much the learning agenda is a ‘borrowed toolbox’ from the corporate sector (*Kelleher; 2002*). Many call for caution when importing concepts from a private sector that works from a different values base. The ‘new managerialism’ that has spread throughout public policy arenas in the North brings with it an ‘audit culture’ of imposed tools, frameworks and reporting procedures. The ‘logical framework’ is a notable example, the value of which in promoting learning is contested (*Strathern; 2000 & ActionAid; 2003*).

**‘UK NGOs and donors are working in a wider context that reinforces the culture of bureaucratic control, measurement of concepts and change, proving effectiveness to auditors, managers and potential critics... This undermines concepts of partnership which require two-way negotiation, listening, and downward accountability. Yet much of the rhetoric... focuses on learning and... listening to the voices of those on the ground, working bottom-up and participatively, working in a process and not a blueprint way.’
(Wallace and Chapman; 2003:10)**

Conforming to such systems and procedures may reduce the diversity offered by civil societies in different cultures and contexts (*ibid*), with the result that project cycles and the focus of donors become seen as out-of-sync with realities on the ground (*Green; 2003*).

Traditionally in the development sphere, technical and managerial learning have tended to be valued whilst more organic and non-linear learning has often been neglected (*Drew; 2002*). Certain technical procedures, particular types of evaluation and upward accountability demands tend to be imposed, or SNGOs are indirectly pressured to conform to these ways of working, to connect with global sources of power and finance (*Poudyal; 2001*).

Using such measurement-focused frameworks can often increase the pressure to show everything that has been done in a positive light, and therefore hinder the possibility of learning from practice (*Taylor & Soal; 2003*). It is important to focus on how such tools and procedures are actually used in NGO contexts, and look for ways to enhance learning within these constraints. However, there is also a need to revisit the rational behind dominant measurement demands and related practice.

**‘all this emphasis on log frames, accountability and managing risks, simply means that we have learned to talk like you.’
(Kazibwe, cited in Drew; 2003: 15)**

PART A: LEARNING

An opportunity and a challenge

Recent research and international fora on issues relating to learning are a sign that NGOs are looking seriously at opportunities for learning in their work¹. However, behind the stated commitment to learning, a multitude of factors continue to impact significantly on the degree of learning that occurs, what kinds of learning are valued, by whom, and what types of learning are legitimised and funded.

A learning agenda has long been at the heart of much progressive development practice. Historically, learning has underlain much community

development work and been an explicit focus of adult and non-formal education drawing on the work of Paulo Freire; and recently promoted in approaches like REFLECT (Archer and Cottingham; 1996) and PRA/PLA (R. Chambers; 1997, et al). Such participatory approaches have made learning dimensions more explicit. They build on the important tradition of consciously engaging with fundamental power

differentials and their impact on practice. Growing emphasis on capacity development has inspired a richer and wider engagement with issues surrounding learning. Increasingly, as part of the desire to work more effectively, NGOs aspire to meet some of the challenges of becoming a learning organisation.

Despite concerns about the learning agenda being a 'borrowed toolbox', it largely fits with the values and principles to which NGOs aspire. These include the appreciation of different perceptions and experiences, of power inequalities, and of the need to create space for silenced, disempowered or

marginalised voices. Such values imply less hierarchical relationships and more people-centred processes, giving NGOs a particular responsibility to learn and promote learning (S. Soal; undated).

At the same time, learning is increasingly recognised as an active and ongoing process that is fundamental to any development. This contrasts with traditional notions of teaching that emphasise the 'transfer' of technology or knowledge. The shift from training to capacity development also recognises the need for deeper and wider processes of ongoing learning and support.

The implications for development practitioners include a need for facilitation expertise, being flexible rather than working to standardised procedures, and creating opportunities to reflect and transform experience - that is, learning how to learn from experience.

Drawing on the literature and issues raised at a

BOND/Exchange workshop on 'Learning in North-South Partnerships', we suggest in this section eight initial steps that help to move us along this path.



'the learning organisation builds and improves its own practice by consciously and continually devising and developing the means to draw learning from its own (and other's) experience.'
(Taylor; 1998:1)

1. Fund Learning as a Core Activity

For learning to become embedded in working practice, core funding needs to be made available to facilitate learning and support a greater sharing of lessons learned (BOND; 2003). Learning, unlearning and re-learning demand time and energy, at individual and collective levels, and deeper, organisational learning cannot be expected to occur in the absence of adequate supporting resources (Reeler; 2001). There is a growing consensus among donors and NGOs that learning has value and 'practical importance in development work' (BOND; 2003: 2). The main difference between the two constituencies relates to resourcing learning (*ibid*: 2). While some donors do fund learning as a conscious activity in projects, most feel constrained by their funding criteria from providing explicit support for learning (*ibid*: 2).

Despite some recent declarations of donor commitment to make funds available to 'institutionalise learning' (OECD/DAC; 2001), there is rarely a clear policy framework that identifies learning, justifies its integration into organisational strategy and ensures the availability of necessary financial and other resources (BOND; 2003: 2). Consequently, NGO experiences illustrate that finding resources to support learning remains 'difficult or impossible' (*ibid*: 1). This situation is worsened by the ever-decreasing core funding available to NNGOs.

2. Design Projects to Explicitly Facilitate Learning

In order to make learning an explicit part of the 'real work', NGOs need greater clarity in terms of learning-related objectives as part of their project work, and need to better communicate this to donors (BOND; 2003). There is a need to clearly distinguish different kinds of learning: skills, learning to be supportive practitioners, and learning processes at the level of organisations, which also means being clear about the motivations and values of those organisations involved (BOND/Exchange; 2003). It is important to recognise that technical input and support are often needed to facilitate learning, as are learning opportunities, such as 'exchange visits' and reflection spaces to help 'mainstream' learning (*ibid*). However, the commitments of time and resources that this involves should not be underestimated.

There needs to be clarity about who any particular learning objective is for, how it will be appropriately documented, and with whom it will be shared. Learning currently remains predominantly Northern-

driven and extractive (Drew; 2002). It is important to redress this by consciously building different priorities into the learning objectives of development work. In addition to such 'intended' learning, organisations also need to find ways of being open to fortuitous learning, in recognition of the non-linear unfolding of events that may make up the context of a particular development effort (BOND/Exchange; 2003).

3. Build on Existing Opportunities for Learning

Learning may already be taking place within and between the organisations concerned, and there may be opportunities to build reflection and learning into existing practice. Given that so much (informal) learning happens 'on the job', it is important to look at how learning from experience might be maximised. Many NGOs already actively share lessons internally and externally, at project (operational) and organisational (corporate) levels. However, there is scope to be more systematic, and to make use of the opportunities for learning and reflection provided by Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) processes. There is a need to take time to critically reflect on practice, in an ongoing manner. Organisations increasingly make good use of models such as the 'after action review' or 'action learning sets' to ensure they are reflecting on their practice². It is important to keep asking questions of current practice. Are mistakes analysed and learned from? Are lessons learned, beyond

'Learning can only become a habit or a pattern if it is given its own quality time, not as something fitted into the odd off-beat of an organisation's working rhythm. We need to unlearn the notion that learning is a luxury.'
(Reeler; 2001: 6)

individual levels? Is there scope to question current practice and procedures relating to evaluation and learning? Does the organisation use learning from experience to develop both individuals and the organisation? Is learning recorded and shared? What types of learning are recognised? What is the responsibility of different stakeholders in relation to learning?

4. Create Safe Spaces for Learning

In addition to building on existing opportunities for learning within an organisation, it is also important to be proactive in facilitating learning. Creating environments that foster learning involves changing organisational behaviour, for which individual learning is necessary but not sufficient (A. Mayo & E. Lank; 1994). Experience suggests that the level at which you can have most impact on capacity is your own

and that of your own organisation. This demands shifting attention to how organisational cultures facilitate or inhibit capacity development, at all levels in the chain of organisations involved in development. Spaces that encourage learning within an organisation have a crucial role, for example, the 'home week' of the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) in South Africa, where all staff together actively reflect on, and share learning from, their work (Soal; 2001).

It is important to acknowledge that organisational change processes are inevitably fraught with complications and sensitivities. Deeper change is potentially threatening and happens over time. People typically feel vulnerable and there is real fear about what information is fed back to donors and how this might be used. In NGO contexts, insecurities are further fuelled by profound changes in the external environment, including growing competition and increased financial insecurity, often resulting in high staff turnover and what are often perceived to be impossible expectations and demands. The learning agenda has been criticised more generally as an attempt to promote a 'flexible' workforce, where people are encouraged to take responsibility for a climate of job-insecurity that is not of their own making (Gledhill; 2001). On the other hand, embracing learning promises a consistent approach, linking participation and shared decision-making. Sadly this potential is rarely fully realised in practice (Brehm; 2001).

5. Develop Appropriate Systems of Measurement and Accountability

For NGO work that emphasises participation, empowerment and capacity development, appropriate measurement and assessment frameworks continue to pose a challenge. Valuing the realities, experiences, expertise and perceptions of those 'lower down the chain', including intended beneficiaries, is vital if learning is to be enhanced. This implies being explicit

'Measurement must contribute towards shifting relationships through learning. Developmental measurement must promote consciousness, openness, honesty and depth. It must be experienced first as contributing to on-going learning, and secondly as a means of holding oneself accountable.'
(Taylor & Soal; 2003:9)

about mechanisms for accountability downwards and adopting genuinely participatory approaches towards evaluation and the development of indicators. The idea of clarifying the purpose of particular

evaluations, and distinguishing evaluation for learning purposes from that for accountability upwards (to donors), is increasingly gaining currency (Wallace & Chapman; 2003, Earle; 2002, OECD/DAC; 2001). There is also a growing concern to make learning a key focus of evaluation, and to adapt evaluation practice in ways that promote active reflection and learning from experience, to enhance impact. The 'self-assessment' approach of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) provides one example (Carden; 2000). Another concern is to develop appropriate 'process' indicators to track the facilitation of learning, such as the greater flow of information and dialogue (Vincent; 2001). Learning from evaluation to find appropriate ways to build organisational memory is also key (Britton; 1998). Ultimately, we need to consider who evaluation is for. This reflection is likely to strengthen the learning component of evaluation.

'To learn one needs a safe space in which you are challenged to achieve your potential, can risk making mistakes, be supported in drawing learning from successes and failures, and in which you are joined in celebrating achievements.'
(Mayo & Lank; 1994)

6. Build trust and Look Longer Term

Trust is increasingly recognised as central to creating an environment that is conducive to learning. In more open, trusting and honest environments, mistakes are learned from rather than buried (Earle; 2002). Where learning is concerned, ongoing communication and dialogue in the context of relationships of trust built up over time, can be as important as the 'right' evaluation procedure (Vincent; 2001). Some argue that accountability demands of donors should be made more flexible and be based on trust, particularly in relation to those who know and understand situations on the ground (Earle; 2002). Thus once a project is underway, 'levels of accountability should begin to drop, as the opportunity for learning increases' (*ibid*: 12).

Underlying these trends are issues of flexibility, appreciation of diversity and openness, to facilitate the development of honest relationships grounded in mutual trust and respect. Interestingly, trust has also been shown to be key to the building of successful networks (Karl et al; 1999, Church et al; 2003), successful 'communities of practice' (Wenger; 2002), and to significantly impact on partnerships. However, building trust and respect takes time. There is growing recognition that the short-term nature of projects does not typically allow enough time for the impact of particular interventions to be demonstrated (Carden; 2000), and a welcome shift in emphasis from

short-term outputs to longer-term outcomes in the development sector. This also means focusing more on process issues, rather than merely short-term 'outputs', which is vital if learning is to be enhanced. Given that learning is a long-term process, often not directly attributable to specific project activities, commitment has to be made to long-term support to achieve the desired impact.

7. Address Internal Factors of Organisational Culture

Although opportunities for learning are inevitably influenced by donor priorities and practice, analysis of the internal factors that hinder learning and learning in partnership rapidly focuses attention on dimensions of organisational culture.

Organisational culture includes dimensions of shared language, habits, customs and traditions, group 'norms' developed over time, espoused values, skills and shared meanings. Behind all of these lie assumptions, some of which 'we hold unconsciously and which live deeply hidden in our will' (Reeler; 2001:4). Where these assumptions remain unchallenged as embedded patterns that are (unconsciously) reproduced, there are implications for the possibilities of promoting learning (Reeler; 2001).

'As a stabilising force in human systems, culture is one of the most difficult aspects to manage in a climate of perpetual change. The challenge lies in conceptualising a culture of innovation in which learning, adaptation, innovation and perpetual change are the stable elements.'
(Schein; 1992:xiv)

Dimensions of organisational culture that impact on learning are daunting and complex in any institutional environment. In international development and partnerships, the coming together of at least two organisational and bureaucratic cultures, socio-cultural contexts, languages and modes of operation, present an even greater challenge. NGO staff are typically well aware of difficulties inherent in cross-cultural, inter-organisational relationships (INTRAC; 2001), but often feel ill-equipped to progress within given constraints.

Aspects of organisational culture that predominate in NGOs and impact on learning include: an activist tradition which relegates learning to a secondary role (albeit often unconsciously); heavy workloads and assumed priorities (Solomon and Chowdhury; 2002), attitudes towards learning as an 'unnecessary luxury'

(Roper and Petit; 2002); a tradition of elevating formal education and professional 'expertise' over lived experience; levels of capacity and resistance to change. Seriously addressing such issues involves: 'a re-thinking of the amount and quality of time allocated to a whole variety of activities, a paradigm shift from training-centred growth to learning-centred development, a real valuing of experience rather than a dependence on external expertise, and an understanding that development practitioners need to grow their practice out of themselves and their experience' (Reeler; 2001:1).

8. Recognise and Attempt to Address Power Differentials

In addition to considering what habits, assumptions and forces currently stifle learning in any organisational setting, there are a number of barriers to learning that are equally part of the wider landscape of development. These are intimately bound up with the power relations that permeate most aspects of development and organisational practice, and which impact on the possibilities both for learning, and for developing effective partnerships.

Gender relations are a key part of the landscape of power relations in any organisation. This is often reflected in organisational culture. The way gender is engaged has implications for the possibilities of learning (MacDonald et al; 1997, Ahmed; 2002). This topic is conspicuously absent from much of the literature on organisational learning (Kelleher et al; 2002).

Additional key 'mechanisms' through which power is exercised are: the dominance of English in interactions between partners, the dominance of written media and the power that comes from holding the 'purse strings' and being a gateway to funds (Wallace; 2002 cited in Drew; 2003: 7). Participants at the 'Learning in North-South Partnerships' workshop added: historical/colonial baggage which engrains the dominance of Northern power in much thinking; levels of technology and capacity which are seen as more advanced in the North; and a 'modernisation paradigm' that casts 'traditional' things in a negative light (Drew; 2003).

Given the centrality of power issues, participants also suggested that a clearer understanding and analysis of power that provided practical solutions was urgently needed³ (BOND/Exchange; 2003). The ambiguous and double-edged nature of 'participation' in development contexts has similarly highlighted the need for a more subtle understanding of power (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). We should not expect partnership and learning to be any different.

PART B: PARTNERSHIP

Potentials and promises?

Partnership is perceived by some as 'a Northern-imposed idea which is deeply tied-up with the need for Northern aid agencies and NGOs to establish a legitimacy for operations in the South' (Lister; 2002a:4). Many Southern 'partner organisations' remain uncomfortable about considerable pressure to take on the identity and follow the agendas of international NGOs (ActionAid; 2003), and heated debates continue to call for power shifts in the direction of Southern partners (Fowler; 2000).

For others, partnership implies participation, and in its ideal form equal participation. This sense of partnership goes far beyond a functional, project-based approach, to emphasise the development of long-term relationships as an end in itself, based around solidarity and strengthening civil society organisations (INTRAC; 2001). In NGO contexts, the partnership idea is also closely inter-linked to notions of capacity building, ownership and participation (Hauck & Land; 2000 in Lister; 2002a).



Is 'Partnership' Meaningless?

Partnerships differ in terms of both depth (degree of power exercised, information exchanged, consultation, influence or control) and breadth (type of relationship such as ally, funder, supporter, etc.) It is increasingly argued that we need a better vocabulary to describe partnerships in order to be honest about power differences, perhaps dispensing with the term partnership altogether (Taylor; 2002).

Arguably, the term partnership has been diluted and overused to the point of being meaningless, having been applied to a broad range of organisational relationships between different actors including official agencies, NGOs and businesses (Brehm; 2000). The continuing lack of conceptual clarity about 'partnership' is unhelpful; is it a descriptive term, an evaluative term, a development goal as an end in itself, or primarily a 'partnering' process? (Lister; 2002a:12).

At the 'Learning in North-South Partnerships' workshop, the range of relationship depths was illustrated by Health Action Information Network (HAIN) in the Philippines. HAIN's relationships with organisations were described in terms of therapy, manipulation, placation, and consultation. They ranged from occasional contact for instrumental reasons to close engagement, sometimes changing over time, but only a small proportion had the mutuality to make them true partnerships (Drew; 2003).

Participants at the BOND/Exchange 'Learning in North-South Partnerships' workshop noted the 'chain of inequality' stretching from bilateral donors to beneficiaries (Lister 'partnership chains'; 2002a:13). Thus bilateral agencies regard NNGOs as partners, with NNGOs viewing them as donors. Similarly, NNGOs see SNGOs as partners, while SNGOs often regard them as donors (Drew; 2002). There is a notable gap between rhetoric and expectations of ideals concerning equality, respect and mutuality, and the reality of partnerships between Northern and



Southern NGOs. Many NNGOs have difficulty letting go and genuinely sharing decision-making with partners, leaving 'partnerships' generally imbalanced in favour of the North (Brehm; 2000). Underlying this gap is an apparent contradiction with the essence of developmental practice itself, which to many implies engaging with and changing power dynamics. NNGOs, however, are often reluctant to openly discuss imbalances of power in their relations with Southern partners and play down power resulting from control over resources (James; 2000).

While it is important to be explicit about the kinds of relationship being engaged in, it is also important to consider the impact of powerful external forces that appear to work against meaningful partnerships and achieving sustainable development, in particular the dominant global ethic of competition.

In a context of changing roles for NNGOs and increased funding insecurities, partnerships are seen to bring advantages relating to proximity to respective constituencies. For example, NNGOs are close to donors, policy and advocacy work whilst

SNGOs are close to local knowledge (*INTRAC; 2001*). By creating links between the respective constituencies, the whole [partnership] is seen as greater than the sum of its parts (*ibid*).

**‘...in a situation where the more inclusive language of relationship is becoming standard rhetoric amongst the 'powerful' - the majority in the world continue to experience many relationships as unjust, abusive and exploitative. To achieve sustainable development the ultimate challenge is to shift the nature and quality of relationships over time.’
(Taylor; 2002:2).**

The BOND/Exchange workshop on ‘Learning in North-South Partnerships’ and wider literature highlights five ways of working that begin to address some of the challenges of partnership:

- 1) The purposes and principles of 'partnership' need to be explicit and negotiated.
- 2) Clearly define expectations, rights and responsibilities.
- 3) Be clear about the range of accountability demands and how they will be met.
- 4) There is a need for long-term engagement processes with partners, so that trust can be built and learning nourished.
- 5) Look beyond partnerships to networks and communities of practice.

1. The Purposes and Principles of ‘Partnership’ Need to be Explicit and Negotiated

Clear statements of what is meant by partnership and principles of good partnership remain the exception rather than the rule. Some notable examples include: Christian Aid (*Lister; 2002a*); BOND (*2002c*); Southern Africa AIDS Training Programme (SAT). Healthlink Worldwide have a range of detailed partner agreements with their SNGO partners, which lay out the principles of partnership. These are negotiated by both partners, ensuring the agreement fits the culture of both organisations (*Healthlink Worldwide; 2003*).

The negotiation process is important in itself, since it starts to build trust. More often, partnership principles remain implicit or, worse still, they are perceived as beyond criticism (*Lister; 2002a*). There needs to be greater clarity about the purpose of individual partnerships and more equitable negotiation and agenda-setting processes, allowing Southern partners to articulate their needs and what they can offer (*INTRAC; 2001*). At the same time, developing a more consistent and systematic approach to ‘good practice’ in partnerships, holds the potential to strengthen them (*ibid*).

As every partnership develops in a different context and circumstances, it is impossible and indeed undesirable to expect a blueprint for a ‘perfect

partnership’. NNGOs typically have a range of dynamic and changing relationships with Southern partners, the diversity of which is valued (*INTRAC; 2001*). For many, working with Southern partners remains key to a developmental approach that emphasises local ownership, sustainability, a focus on the poor and a mutual exchange of resources and ideas between the North and South.

2. Clearly Define Expectations, Rights and Responsibilities

In addition to clarity about the general principles of partnership, it is useful to formalise a partnership and outline the primary

objectives of any relationship being established (*Goold & Ogara; 2000*). Flexibility, honesty, transparency, trust and openness about needs and material differences between NNGOs and SNGOs are important, as is the need for learning about the relationship itself and for any learning to be reflected in revised objectives (*ibid*). Acknowledgement that relationships may change over time is vital if organisations are able not just to ‘survive’ but to deal flexibly with changing circumstances and to actively realise their ‘vision’ (*Hakim cited in Drew; 2003*).

**‘Relationships need to be negotiated outright with open dialogue and agreement on mutual rights and obligations.’
(Fowler; 2000:2)**

3. Be Clear about the Range of Accountability Demands and How They Will be Met

One of the key factors seen to inhibit partnerships is dominant funding processes (*INTRAC; 2001:2*). These are seen to 'skew the accountability process for Southern organisations' and to frustrate attempts to be accountable to particular constituencies (*Brehm; 2001*). As we saw in the learning section, when looking at appropriate evaluation, there is a danger that inter-linked systems of accountability, governance and funding fuel a control orientation that contradicts the principle of local accountability to which many NGOs aspire (*INTRAC; 2001:3*). By making commitments to explicit systems of 'downwards accountability', it is possible to begin to counterbalance donor demands and transform 'what gets measured' and thus valued.

One example of this is ActionAid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS), which replaces traditional indicators with period reflection and reviews (*Scott-Villiers; 2002*). Another example is the Effectiveness Initiative in early childhood development, where partners in diverse local settings have explored their own elements of effective working, while maintaining a cross-site and international dialogue (*Early Childhood Matters; 2002*). However, it has been noted that NNGOs exert considerable indirect power and implicit influence on partnership work because of their relative control over funding, which occurs 'irrespective of whether they [the NNGOs] are committed to the principle of equal partnerships' (*INTRAC; 2001:3*). Interestingly, recent research has suggested there are no 'real examples of mutual, shared decision-making', despite experimentation with consultation (*Brehm; 2001:3*).

4. There is a Need for Long-Term Engagement Processes With Partners, So That Trust Can Be Built and Mutual Learning Nourished

In negotiating the terms and detail of partnership, developing trust through personal interaction, participative decision-making and shared learning are important, as are mutuality, accountability and transparency (*Lister; 2002a*). This takes time and long-term commitment (*Brehm; 2000*). A humorous comparison with marriage was developed by some participants at the 'Learning in North-South Partnerships' workshop to outline some important aspects of developing long-term partnerships⁴: relationships involve much more than just a project, so agreements should be broader than just a project

contract; it is important to take time to celebrate successes, not just day to day problems; consider whether the visions of partners are compatible and be clear about where they differ and, stand by each other (*BOND/Exchange; 2003*). Similarly, it has been suggested that donors that put time into building a relationship with partners are seen as preferable to funders with a 'form filling mentality', for whom money is their only real link to NGOs (*ActionAid; 2003:13*). Partnership needs to be seen as an interactive process involving 'a continued space for interaction between parties which allows for learning, adaptation and innovation' (*Robinson et al; 2000 in Lister; 2002a:16*).

5. Look Beyond Partnerships to Networks and Communities of Practice

There have been growing calls to shift from a focus on 'partnerships' to consider wider sets of relationships, and to think in terms of networks rather than dyads of relationships (individual relationships between two organisations) (*Davies; 2003*). This partly reflects growing recognition of the way that social and economic life is increasingly organised through global flows of information, financial resources, and power, in a 'network society' (*Appadurai; 1996, Castells; 2000*). The old model of partnership, revolving around discrete project funding, is giving way to new types of more dynamic relationship, and 'the distinction between partnerships, networks and alliances is becoming increasingly blurred, particularly for NGOs that are part of an international alliance' (*INTRAC; 2001:4*). Attention then shifts to the character of relationships: 'the dynamics that connect these groups and networks...and the conditions that are needed to facilitate their development' (*Marsden; 2003:4*).

Such concerns have also fuelled an interest in the dynamics of relationships that link people beyond the boundaries of particular organisations in 'communities of practice: groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (*Wenger; 2002, cited in Marsden; 2003:5*). Equally, there is growing interest in the informal networks that often inhabit formal organisational structures and how the two interact (*Capra; 2002, Marsden; 2003*).

If changes in networks of relationships assume focus, we significantly move beyond discrete, time-bound interventions and projects and present crucial longer-term opportunities for collective learning (*Davies; 2003*). At the same time, when more than one donor is involved, the complexity of relationships increases (*Lister; 2002a*). This is increasingly true of development in general (*Rihani; 2002*).

CONCLUSION

There are close links between learning and partnership, and learning is central to the development process itself, particularly when it is built on genuine participation. However, progress is necessary in a range of areas, if learning in partnership is to be enhanced. In addition to the practical steps outlined in this paper:

- Methods of sharing best practice in partnership working, learning, and learning in partnership, need to be developed (*Lister; 2002a:16*).
- Given that much learning is recognised to be experiential, there needs to be further exploration of the limits of documenting and sharing 'lessons learned'.
- Further research is needed to identify what 'using learning from projects to inform future work' means in practice.
- There is a need to foster environments that are conducive to more honest and open debate.
- We need to develop a language appropriate to the shift towards 'partners', programmes and processes.

“Partnership” and other words like it are vitally important terms to serious development practitioners. They are important because they describe the nature and quality of relationships. And development is ultimately about relationships and how they evolve over time.
(Taylor; 2002:1)

There are growing calls in the development sector to formalise learning and partnerships. Yet if NNGOs increasingly assume a role as funding channels, this may be creating a more distinct

and identifiable layer between donors and SNGOs. We have to ask what the impact of this on the potential for learning in partnerships will be. Such shifts are occurring not out of choice but, rather, as a result of wider contextual changes. However, if they are perceived to enhance power differentials between NNGOs and SNGOs, this has major implications for learning in partnerships. We seem increasingly to witness deepening frustrations fuelled by such trends (*ActionAid; 2003*).

“We need to develop the language and the ability to make conscious and articulate the essential nature of the existing relationships as a part of the contracting process. We need to be open and honest about the power relations that exist. Both parties must recognise when dominance and dependency characterises the relationship and we must create situations where both parties can share how they ‘feel’ in the relationship.”
(Taylor; 2002:4)

Learning in partnership presents both major challenges and exciting opportunities. However we must recognise the influence that power dynamics in ongoing relationships have on the potential for learning and on wider development practice.

Action is necessary at all levels, with all stakeholders needing to share responsibility for making institutional and partnership environments more conducive to learning. This, inevitably, will remain a long-term challenge, requiring sustained engagement, resources, support, and working out the dynamics of partnership, in an increasingly complex global arena. Ultimately, the practical responses that NGOs bring to this challenge will determine the shape of development as a whole in the future.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 INTRAC research assessed the challenges of effective partnerships for 10 Northern NGOs: see Brehm (2001a). Phase II will focus on Southern NGO perspectives. BOND (2003) conducted research into the perspectives of NGOs and donors on the concept & practice of learning. International forums have included: ECDPM/Exchange 2002, Bellanet 2000-03, CDRA 2003-04, ActionAid 2003 and BOND/Exchange 2003.
- 2 More details of these approaches can be found at www.bond.org.uk/lte/ol.htm
- 3 One practical suggestion made at the workshop for strengthening the position of SNGOs and NNGOs alike was to diversify their funding base.
- 4 Although how far this metaphor of monogamous marriage could stretch was, of course, contested.

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Find out more about the
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This briefing paper builds on the experiences and issues shared at a BOND/Exchange workshop on Learning in North-South Partnerships, held in March 2003. It complements the Pre and Post workshop discussion papers (Drew 2002) and workshop report (BOND/Exchange 2003), and draws on a rapid desk-based analysis of recent developments in learning in partnerships, including the work of BOND and INTRAC in this area. The briefing is informed by the practical experience of Exchange, Healthlink Worldwide and the authors, Ailish Byrne and Robin Vincent. A longer version of this paper has been submitted to 'Development in Practice' for publication.

ABOUT EXCHANGE

Exchange is a networking and learning programme that promotes effective



health communication for development. Exchange works to improve the health and quality of life of people living in poverty by encouraging the exchange of relevant knowledge, information and experience. Exchange has a unique focus on learning and the process of communication, rather than simply concentrating on outcomes.

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ABOUT BOND

BOND is the network of over 280 UK-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in international development and development education.



BOND aims to improve the quality of UK-based civil society's contribution to development by: enabling the exchange of experience and learning between civil society organisations; managing training programmes and, by improving the quality of exchanges between civil society organisations, the UK Government and the European Union.

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