Beyond the Partnership Rhetoric Reviewing Experiences and Policy Considerations for Implementing 'Genuine' Partnerships in North-South Cooperation

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List of Acronyms

ACP African, Caribbean and Pacific

CDF Comprehensive Development Framework DAC Development Assistance Committee

ECDPM European Centre for Development Policy Management ENDA Environnement et Développement du Tiers-Monde

EU European Union

MDP-ESA Municipal Development Programme – Eastern and Southern Africa

MOU Memorandum of Understanding NGO Non-Governmental Organisation PVO Private Voluntary Organisation T&D Towns and Development

UNDAF United Nations Development Assistance Framework

Introduction

In 1998, the ECDPM embarked on a new venture to engage in partnerships with selected African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) institutions. Spearheaded by the Centre's capacity-building programme, the partnership initiative sought to nurture regional networks of expertise, and facilitate Southern organisations to become recognised actors in policy dialogue in international cooperation. In this regard, emphasis was placed on the role of partnership in mobilising the capacities of regionally-based policy institutes and institutions engaged in research and learning, including development and funding organisations. From the outset, this initiative was recognised as experimental and likely to face numerous challenges in making the transition from theory to practice¹.

This discussion paper provides an initial 'stocktaking' of lessons of experience based on the first few years of operation and discusses the extent to which genuine partnership is a way forward towards the development of capacities. Recognising that the development and sustenance of partnerships requires time, the paper acknowledges that the conclusions drawn and lessons presented are only preliminary². We also note that the Centre's venture into partnership has taken place at a time when the concept and practice of partnership have gained widespread attention in international development cooperation, and have become subjects of regular debate and scrutiny. Those who champion the partnership concept see it as reflecting a deliberate policy choice which seeks to establish new roles and relationships between North and South that challenge structural inequalities and the inculcated mind-set of giver and taker in aid relationships. Partnership, in this sense, becomes a development objective and is closely linked to notions of capacity development, ownership and participation, which see the current distribution of roles and relationships between North and South as undermining sustainable development. Genuine partnership provides a framework for building greater equality, for identifying shared development objectives and for accommodating both 'Northern' accountability requirements and 'Southern' ownership.

Taking account of these positions, and reflecting on the points of view and lessons of experience at the ECDPM as well as the wider community dealing with partnership, this discussion paper tries to understand what it takes to make 'genuine' partnership work at an organisational level in North-South cooperation. In so doing, we hope to encourage policy-makers and practitioners to think about the terminology, concept and practice of partnership, the relationship between partnership and capacity-building, and the implications for development organisations of adopting the partnership approach.

Following a review of some of the issues currently on the table in connection with the policy and practice of North-South development partnerships³ (Part 1), the paper reflects on the Centre's own attempts at developing 'genuine' partnerships with organisations in the South, and presents some preliminary lessons of experience (Part 2). To conclude, the paper discusses the extent to which partnership contributes to meeting capacity-building objectives. It finally challenges organisations to reflect on their own abilities to address capacity-building through partnership and reflects more widely on the implications this holds for the aid industry in general (Part 3).

The terms 'capacity-building' and 'capacity development' are used interchangeably in this text and for the sake of convenience are taken to denote the same thing. Researchers and practitioners tend to use one or other of the terms. Capacity development, the more recent term, emphasises the notion of an 'on-going process' which takes account of existing capacities, rather than focusing solely on 'building' new capacities.

² The ECDPM's partnership experiences discussed here are based on an earlier paper presented to the Centre's Forum2000 meeting at which partner organisations (the Municipal Development Programme, East and Southern Africa, and ENDA-Ecopop) discussed and endorsed the key lessons of experience and conclusions drawn.

Issue 6, June 2000 of Capacity.Org highlighted aspects of the current debate on partnership and its role in institutional and capacity development. It can be accessed on www.capacity.org, via the archive section. Hard-copy versions of the newsletter may be ordered from the Centre.

Part 1: Partnership in International Cooperation: the Wider Context

The meaning of partnership

At a conceptual level, there appears to be general agreement as to what construes 'genuine' partnership. As suggested by Mohaddin (1998), partnership can be regarded as the '..highest stage of working relationship between different people brought together by commitment to common objectives, bonded by long experience of working together, and sustained by subscription to common visions.' Moreover, certain key principal characteristics distinguish partnership from other relationships, such as cooperation or collaboration, and present partnership as somehow of a higher order, more virtuous, more fundamental. Typically, partnership is associated with the following characteristics; long-term, shared responsibility, reciprocal obligation, equality, mutuality and balance of power (Fowler, 2000). Others also emphasise the elements of trust, respect, and ownership (Mohaddin, 1998). According to one commentator, equality of decision-making and mutual influence are the key characteristics distinguishing partnership from other types of relationship (Brinkerhoff, 1999).

Why partnership?

The partnership rhetoric has now been widely adopted by different parts of the Northern aid industry. It underwrites for instance the desired relationship between the European Union and the ACP group of countries (EU, 2000), and has been adopted by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) as an underlying vehicle for directing the fight against poverty in the 21st century (DAC, 1996). Northern nongovernmental organisations (NGO) have embraced the concept for perhaps a longer time, starting even as far back as the 1970s, while in more recent times, it has become a preferred mode of cooperation for Northern municipalities and local government associations. It has also been adopted by the university and research community (KPFE, 1998; Nwamuo, 2000) and by policy and training institutes (Helland, 1999).

Partnership has become a leading concept in international cooperation over the past decade. But why? As one commentator has remarked, '...what does partnership add that is so valuable that it outweighs the many constraints to its operationalisation, especially when other forms of collaboration are available?' (Brinkerhoff, 1999). Several explanations can be found to account for the widespread adoption of the partnership paradigm.

A panacea for the shortcomings of development cooperation

One explanation is that partnership has been presented by Northern donors as a panacea for improving aid effectiveness, and, in so doing, for salvaging the industry from the current wave of aid fatigue (Saxby, 1999). According to Fowler (2000), partnership represents a 'relational preference' which is 'politically correct' at a time when the overall aid system has come under fire for non-performance. But what is it precisely that partnership offers?

A key proposition is that partnership between the North and South helps to build local ownership of development initiatives, as well as to improve donor coordination and donor 'behaviour' more generally. Through a negotiated process based on dialogue and broad participation, external and internal stakeholders are better able to determine common goals and interests, based on a more complete understanding of the local context (Fowler, 2000).

As argued by the DAC, 'in a partnership, development cooperation does not do things for people but with people' (1996). In so doing, it provides a framework for a collaborative effort to build capacities so that local partners can do things for themselves on the basis of locally-defined development strategies formulated as a result of a dialogue embracing recognised development stakeholders. In this sense, partnership provides an attractive mode of cooperation to ensure that institutional and capacity development objectives can be achieved. It also implies the need to redress the power 'asymmetry' between developing countries and external funding agencies, and to progressively transfer responsibility and ownership to the former. Terminology such as 'donor' and 'recipient' has accordingly been replaced by terms like 'development partners', suggesting a more equitable relationship based on a shared agenda for change.

At the same time, a more critical perspective suggests that partnership primarily offers donors a mechanism to ensure greater cost-effectiveness in the delivery of aid, while facilitating accountability towards sceptical domestic electorates. While providing the basis for a negotiated framework in which rights, responsibilities and obligations are defined, partnership, in fact, enables funding organisations to re-impose their conditionalities within the framework of a set of contractual ground rules set by the North (Fowler, 2000).

Ascendancy of neo-liberal ideology

The language of partnership can also be traced to more fundamental global political and social trends. The 'mainstreaming' of neo-liberal ideology in the post-cold war era, and the concomitant reduction in ideological and geo-political differences has given rise to concepts of participatory governance and to the definition of new roles among development actors. With the rise of civil society, and the increasing importance of private capital, the notion of development partnerships between the public sector, the private sector and the 'third sector' has come to the fore. The Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) which the World Bank is promoting is, for instance, premised on this understanding, and places special emphasis on the role of civil society⁴. Terms such as 'Smart' partnerships, public-private partnerships, local joint-action partnerships are all premised on the argument that no single development actor can do it alone, and that there is a convergence of interest among internal and external development stakeholders to attack common agendas.

Crisis of confidence among Northern NGOs

Within the NGO context, it has been suggested that Northern NGOs have adopted partnership as a way of reasserting their relevance and credibility at a time of diminishing budgets and a growing assertiveness among Southern NGOs, who have begun to question the added value of their Northern counterparts. Southern NGOs, and increasingly Northern donors, too, argue that the intermediary role played by Northern NGOs is perhaps no longer required. Financial and technical assistance can be directly negotiated between the two, leaving little scope for the Northern NGO. Partnership between Northern and Southern NGOs is therefore presented as a response to jointly tackle global issues of concern, such as debt relief, the environment and globalisation, building on earlier North-South solidarity movements.

See background text on Partnering with Civil Society in the Development forum archives: www.worldbank.org/devforum/forum civsoc.html.

The reality of partnership

Unfortunately, as is so often the case, fashionable concepts become over-used and applied loosely, and critics wonder if, under the veneer of the new jargon, anything has really changed. Even where it has been applied with genuine intent, there are doubts as to whether partnership can be achieved in the context of North-South inequalities, and the pervading self-interest of stakeholders. All too often, a common understanding of what lies behind partnership is assumed, even though in reality the partners hold quite different expectations of the relationship they are investing in. As a result, partnership has all but become a '…something, nothing' word (quoted in Fowler, 2000).

Led primarily by the NGO community, a healthy debate on the realities of practising partnership has been taking place in recent years. From this debate, two principal areas of concern may be identified, which are relevant to the Centre's own emerging experience of partnering⁵. The first addresses issues of structural inequality which can undermine the realisation of equitable relationships, while the second addresses features of the aid system that work against the attainment of long-term capacity development objectives.

Structural inequalities

Perhaps the strongest and most consistent criticism of partnership is that it is predicated on the notion of common interest and a relationship among equals. However, such 'genuine' partnership is rarely if ever attained. Critics challenge the assumptions behind partnership as being naïve and unrealisable even if desirable, because of deep-rooted structural constraints. The partnership language does not therefore face up to reality, and in so doing raises false expectations. Few relationships amount to partnership in the strict sense (Saxby, 1999), with the term often being misused to represent a wide range of institutional relationships, which fall well short of partnership as defined above. The conclusion is that, while partnership may serve as an ideal relationship which one should strive towards, reality dictates the use of more pragmatic and adaptive relationships to meet diverse needs and circumstances.

Several commentators argue that 'genuine' partnership simply cannot be realised under conditions of structural inequality where the North (whether in the form of nations or organisations) retains a financial, technological and institutional advantage over the South (James, 2000, Mohaddin, 1998, Saxby, 1999). In the absence of a level playing field, the terms and conditions of partnership will be negotiated to the advantage of the stronger partner, who will also remain in the proverbial 'driver's seat' in terms of the day-to-day management of the relationship. In this context, traditional donor-recipient relations continue behind the veneer of partnership. Fowler (2000) and Saxby (1999) recommend dropping the blanket partnership terminology and instead acknowledging the diverse array of functional relationships that in fact are forged. Examples include terms like 'counterpart', 'collaborator', 'contractor', and 'ally' which it is argued carry less 'normative overload' and describe more accurately what exists on the ground, rather than what is 'politically correct' thinking (Fowler, 2000).

For others, this 'reality' only reaffirms the desirability of setting partnership as a standard to work towards. According to Ashman (2000), private voluntary organisations (PVOs) and NGOs in the United States have been looking at ways to make partnership more equitable and effective. Recent research comparing perceptions of Northern and Southern partners suggests that structural factors associated with

Opinions and experiences have been collected in two recent initiatives; an on-line discussion forum organised by the World bank's NGO department entitled: 'Partnering with Civil Society' which aimed to examine concepts and approaches to partnership based on practical experiences, and Volume 31, No. 3 issue of the IDS Bulletin entitled 'Questioning Partnership: The Reality of Aid and NGO Relations'.

power asymmetry are indeed perceived as affecting the influence that each side can bring to bear on the relationship. Accordingly, it is in these areas that remedial attention is needed.

One concern, expressed primarily by Southern partners, is that there is an absence of 'mutuality' in their relationship with Northern partners. This plays out in terms of the influence that can be exercised over policy issues and management decisions, and in relation to determining the lines of accountability. This is said to undermine the level of satisfaction with the relationship and can lead to 'pseudo-partnerships'.

Ambitious capacity-building expectations

Such power asymmetry can also challenge ostensible capacity development objectives and strategies by undermining the managerial autonomy and performance of the Southern partner (James, 2000). This reflects a broader contradiction between the pressure placed on donors to demonstrate quick results and the notion of partnership as supporting long-term capacity development processes. This tends to happen because efficiency and effectiveness are held to be the main criteria of success. In other words, partnership is treated essentially as a means to an end. In this regard, a contributor to the on-line discussion forum on partnering with civil society remarked that international agencies often continue to use a conventional project-oriented view of partnership and are less interested in the added value offered by such partnerships in the longer term.

The funding and reporting imperatives of donors have often been identified as being the root cause. These have been exacerbated by recent trends of shrinking aid budgets, and pressures for results. This is reflected in the emphasis given to upward accountability, and to the often rigid adherence to procedures which are not compatible with local circumstances. Strict time-frames and regulations pertaining to the utilisation of resources are often cited as examples of factors that can undermine local efforts to take charge of the process. The high staff turnover and the sheer size of a Northern partner's organisation are also cited as factors which make it difficult to sustain a close, long-term relationship.

These 'Southern' concerns are often not open to discussion and are treated as 'non-negotiables' from the point of view of the stronger Northern partner, even though they can set the tone of the relationship. A contributor to the forum, referring to the difficulties in realising partnership, pointed to '... the structural issues creating relational pathologies in and beyond the aid system. We have to get our structural house in order.' From another context, however, we learn that it is possible to redress the balance of power by purposefully empowering Southern partners in areas of decision-making and management (Helland, 2000). This can be part and parcel of a capacity development strategy, for instance. Meanwhile, according to Ashman (2000), Northerners prefer to focus on issues related to inter-organisational and inter-personal relations, which, while clearly important, as attested to in the on-line forum⁶, do little to redress more fundamental structural imbalances.

It is in the context of this wider debate that the ECDPM has taken up the challenge of engaging in partnership with Southern organisations. Part 2 provides a brief description of how the ECDPM has approached this challenge, by going beyond the rhetoric of partnership and seeking to practice what has been referred to as 'genuine' partnership.

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⁶ See summary for week 2 discussions.

Part 2: Learning to partner: the ECDPM's experience

This case study briefly describes the ECDPM's initial experience of engaging in partnership with the Municipal Development Programme of East and Southern Africa (MDP) and with ENDA – Ecopop⁷. The study reflects on the process of identifying and negotiating partnership agreements and implementing joint programmes of work. The outputs and outcomes of this joint work are reviewed, and consideration is given to the perceived added value of this mode of cooperation. The case provides a basis for presenting a set of lessons of experience and for drawing conclusions on the policy and practice of partnership in international cooperation.

The rationale: capacity mobilisation through partnership

Over the years, the Centre has worked to strengthen the institutional capacities of developing countries to engage effectively in policy management and international cooperation. Different implementation strategies have been used to assist public and non-governmental institutions in developing countries to engage in policy processes with their Northern partners. It has been noted that, while considerable expertise and knowledge exist in the South, the institutional mechanisms for their articulation and consolidation are relatively fragile. Increasingly, the Centre has seen its role as facilitating processes and bridging gaps by capacity development, policy dialogue and information activities. Particular emphasis has been placed on the notion of capacity mobilisation, which is understood to mean a process of linking and utilising the individual and organisational capacities of different stakeholders to participate in policy processes.

In 1998, following a process of strategic reflection, the Centre identified partnership between itself and comparable organisations in the South as a potentially valid mechanism for capacity mobilisation. In this regard, emphasis was placed on working with regionally-based policy institutes and institutions engaged in research and learning, including development and funding organisations. Together with the Centre, these would function as hubs for mobilising local capacities to address selected topics on a structured basis. With this in mind, the aims of partnership have been threefold:

- To strengthen the capacities of partners so as to facilitate policy dialogue processes in international cooperation;
- To jointly deliver with partners, relevant products and services to clients and stakeholders on relevant policy issues in international cooperation;
- As an innovation in international cooperation, to explore approaches to achieving equitable and sustainable relationships with Southern partners, and to determine the value and appropriateness of such partnerships in mobilising and strengthening capacities in the South.

The Centre was anxious to achieve what it understood to be 'genuine' partnerships, and made a distinction between this type of relationship and others, such as functional collaboration. Accordingly, the basis of partnership was the establishment of equitable working relationships informed by the following principles:

Although less successful partnership experiences are not presented here, they do inform the lessons learned presented in Part 3. Those partnerships experienced considerable delays in the implementation of work plans, or recorded poor results and outputs. Some of these partnership processes were terminated because of non-activity, despite – at times – substantial resource investments.

- Partnership is undertaken in a spirit of experimentation and mutual learning.
- It is characterised by common interest, joint decision-making and programme execution.
- Resources are contributed by all sides.
- The principle of building trust by 'doing what has been agreed' leads the process.
- The division of tasks is based on the comparative strengths of the organisations involved and shared responsibility guides implementation.

Nurturing partnership: the process

Identifying partner organisations, setting priorities and engaging in joint programming and implementing activities have all been guided by a conceptual framework. But the process has certainly not been straightforward. Space has had to be given to each partnership to develop in its own distinct way. There is no doubt that blueprint approaches for establishing equitable partnerships do not exist.

Identifying potential partners

Finding suitable partner organisations required time and careful consideration. The difficulties started with the question of whom to work with. Although the process was guided by broadly formulated selection criteria (see Box 1), a critical look both at the ECDPM and at potential partners resulted in many options having to be dropped because of the absence of a good mix. In a number of cases, our respective capacities could not match the expectations, whilst in others the mandates were too far apart or the thematic areas covered were too divergent. Nevertheless, contacts were made with organisations working on ACP-EU topics such as trade, governance, decentralised cooperation, and the role of 'new' actors in development. From here, discussions were held with a number of organisations. Among these, the most promising were those with the Municipal Development Programme, Eastern and Southern Africa (MDP-ESA), and their partner, Towns and Development (T&D)⁸, and, later, with ENDA Ecopop.

Box 1: Selection Criteria

- Common purpose: The partner should be geared towards enhancing policy management, through independent study and knowledge networking, and should have some standing among the various actors
- Regional orientation: Since the ECDPM is small, and cannot engage in all ACP countries, the partners should have a clear regional orientation and the potential to grow into a regional role.
- *Institutional strength:* The partner should be established and have adequate resources to enter into an equitable arrangement with the ECDPM.

⁸ Towns and Development is an international network of local authorities, NGOs, and community groups. It promotes joint action on sustainable development between local authorities and NGOs.

Defining areas of common interest

The processes with MDP-ESA and ENDA had to kick off with a period of mutual familiarisation. Meetings were subsequently organised during which the organisations' respective agendas were sketched out, but not pre-defined. Discussions were held in an atmosphere geared towards finding common ground and defining joint priorities. The processes led to the eventual formulation of joint work programmes (see below), which also meant making concessions, adapting to each other's priorities and recognising each other's respective strengths and weaknesses. It was particularly important to clarify areas of self-interest and to debate common interests and the added value represented by this type of approach to our respective organisations.

A common agenda was identified in relation to the themes of decentralisation, local governance and joint action partnerships. For the ECDPM, this was a priority topic which fitted into its wider programme of work on decentralised cooperation in the framework of EU-ACP cooperation.

For MDP, partnering with the ECDPM added value to its own operations, and to its work with T&D. It provided opportunities for joint institutional learning and exchange and for enhancing capacities in the area of development policy analysis and management with a regional outreach. ENDA Ecopop viewed the cooperation with the ECDPM as a means of intensifying its institutional learning process with regard to joint action practices, communicating its experiences to other regions in Africa and engaging in bottom-up decentralisation processes.

Box 2: Organisational profiles: MDP and ENDA Ecopop

MDP-ESA works in 25 countries and aims to support the process of decentralisation and to strengthen the capacity of local governments. It provides African institutions and researchers with information and resources for analysing, debating and advancing policies and practices aimed at fostering responsive, democratic, and transparent local government. Its projects are conceived and managed by African experts. With Towns and Development, MDP-ESA has been exploring ways of promoting partnership between local authorities and civil society in order to address local development needs.

ENDA Ecopop is one of several sub-organisations constituting the international development organisation ENDA Tier Monde, based in Dakar, Senegal. ENDA Ecopop is involved in implementing projects with a focus on establishing effective collaboration between municipal governments and civil society in the West African region.

Ontacts between the ECDPM, MDP-ESA and T&D had already existed for some years. These were reinforced by the Centre's participation in a regional workshop in November 1998, when views were first exchanged about the possibility of a more structured form of cooperation.

Joint programming and implementation

At times it was difficult to strike the right balance between holding back on the process, and moving into the driver's seat. The process had to be given space so that it could be nurtured from both sides. Adapting to the partner's working environment and choosing the waiting room rather than pushing the process were difficult decisions in view of high expectations on the part of the ECDPM's Board, which was looking for tangible results and outputs.

Once the conditions and inputs for joint work had been properly negotiated, the actual implementation of activities proved to be a more straightforward process and the up-front investment in time paid off. The agreements were formalised through Memoranda of Understanding and accompanied by work plans and budgets for a defined period. Ownership was ensured through the engagement of the respective directors in the process, which also helped to build trust and confidence. Activities were implemented on an almost 50/50 funding basis, including the sharing of human resources to manage preparations and perform activities along lines of divided tasks and responsibilities. Commitments in terms of resource-sharing were adhered to, once the – at times painstaking – preparatory phase of joint planning had passed.

With MDP-ESA and T&D, it was agreed to work around the theme of joint action between civil society and local government during a pilot phase, to find out whether there really was scope for developing a longer-term partnership. During this phase, a set of case studies from Eastern and Southern Africa on implementing local joint action programmes were commissioned and a regional consultative workshop was held to draw lessons of experience from the case studies. Assuming a positive outcome, a Memorandum of Understanding for intensifying the partnership was signed. It was agreed to pursue this partnership in the medium term on the basis of phased work plans. The writing up of the results of the consultative workshop and the presentation of the publication during the Africities Summit in Windhoek constituted the main activities. Following the successful implementation of the second phase, the partners agreed to enter into a third phase.

At the time when the contacts with ENDA Ecopop were first made, there was already a framework agreement for partnership between the ECDPM and ENDA TM. As a first familiarisation exercise, Ecopop was invited to participate in the consultative workshop with MDP-ESA. Here, it shared its experiences on joint action in West Africa. In follow-up discussions, it was agreed that a form of closer collaboration between the ECDPM and Ecopop should be established that would develop step by step and would be guided by a spirit of experimentation and mutual learning, based on equity and shared responsibility. For the initial period, the agreed joint work programme comprised:

- (i) the preparation of two case studies on *local partnerships*, based on the methodology used for the consultative workshop on joint action;
- (ii) the inclusion of one case study in the publication relating to the consultative workshop on joint action, and
- (iii) the co-organisation of a workshop on 'local partnerships between municipalities and civil society' during the Africities 2000 Summit.

Recording results

The achievements of partnership can be measured in relation to three kinds of results, which mirror the aims of partnership. First, the specific products and services generated through the work programmes implemented by the ECDPM and its partners. Second, the institutional capacities mobilised and strengthened through the partnership process. Third, the development of 'genuine' partnership relationships valued by both partners as a positive experience, and meriting continuation.

Products and services generated

In terms of informing policy-makers and practitioners about decentralised cooperation practices between local governments and civil society, the most tangible results to date have been:

- The organisation of a regional consultative workshop on Joint Action for Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Development, including the commissioning of ten case studies prepared by local experts for this event.
- A workshop on local partnerships hosted during the Africities 2000 Summit, and organised jointly by Ecopop and the ECDPM, with inputs from MDP-ESA. The workshop formulated recommendations, some of which were incorporated in the resolutions of the Summit. These inputs contributed to the decentralisation debate in Africa and sensitised decision-makers to the importance of local government and civil society working in partnership.
- The publication of a joint Policy Management Report written by MDP, T&D and the ECDPM, with inputs from Ecopop. The publication reflected the outcomes of the Mombasa workshop and was officially launched during the Africities Summit.
- The highlighting of the Mombasa workshop on www.capacity.org, a web site and a newsletter dedicated to capacity development in international cooperation, and an 'on-line' discussion forum on Joint Action between Local Government and Civil Society (with a synthesis report distributed during the Africities Summit.)

Capacities mobilised

As two years is hardly long enough to test the sustainability of a new way of working nor to identify sustainable capacity outcomes, only very provisional results can be recorded.

Experiences have shown that partnership, once established, provided a framework to systematically mobilise Southern capacities to participate in policy dialogue and contribute to policy formulation in international cooperation. For example, the transfer of experiences - gathered during the Mombasa workshop with stakeholders from the eastern and southern African region - to the major regional policy event on local government, the Africities 2000 Summit, was 'strategised' and realised through this structured institutional cooperation mechanism.

In this way, it provided opportunities for mobilising and bringing to bear the respective capacities and viewpoints of the Southern partners, allowing them to get involved in the policy dialogue and formulation process. The ECDPM benefited by gaining access to an extensive pool of local expertise from which it has been able to learn, testing assumptions and ideas. Based on this synergy, it allowed the Centre and its partners, MDP-ESA and ENDA Ecopop, to enhance the quality and character of its products and to communicate viewpoints, experiences and analysis back to Northern and Southern policy-makers. Crucially, a shared vision and a common agenda guided the whole process.

Towards 'genuine' partnership

Partnership has created a framework for mutual learning, influence and trust, creating conditions for longer-term cooperation. Aside from facilitating the mobilisation of existing institutional and individual capacities, partnership has influenced decision-making and priority-setting on both sides. More generally, it has contributed to a re-thinking of development cooperation modalities by providing an opportunity to

test out approaches for more balanced relationships between the North and the South. Can these 'process' dimensions be verified? For now, at this early stage in the relationship, we can offer a number of 'process' indicators of success:

- the successful negotiation of partnership agreements, reflected in MOUs and work plans, and reflecting a common interest;
- the implementation of activities defined in work plans, leading to concrete results;
- an 'equitable' contribution of financial resources;
- an 'equitable' division of tasks and a shared responsibility for results;
- the development of flexible management procedures to guide the partnership, respectful of the needs of both sides;
- the building of confidence and trust among partners, and recognition of respective comparative advantages;
- a clear expression of mutual interest in continuing the partnership relationship.

Lessons of experience

The case study suggests that there is potential in working through partnership and that a number of lessons of experience can be drawn. But the Centre also recognises the long time that is required to develop partnerships. In this regard, the lessons presented here are only preliminary.

As we have already stated, there is no blueprint approach to partnership. Lessons can only provide an indicative guide to how to approach, manage and proceed with such endeavours. The lessons also make clear that 'real' partnerships between organisations in the North and South, often characterised as they are by imbalances in power and resources, are very difficult to achieve and incur high opportunity costs on all sides. This should be a particular consideration for the Southern partner, having normally a much weaker resource base, although it may be of equal concern to Northern institutions which depend on short-term project funding. More generally, the lessons imply that a considerable organisational effort is required if the principles of 'genuine' partnership are to be respected.

The lessons presented in Box 3 are arranged in three clusters. The first cluster reviews issues that need to be considered when initiating partnerships. The second relates to the power relations and organisational considerations which have to be taken into account during the start-up phase and during implementation. The third provides lessons learned relating to the management of the partnership process.

Box 3: Lessons of experience

Getting the process started

Concepts, content & capacities. A partnership is most effective between organisations sharing a sufficiently strong value base and having similar conceptual orientations. Respective interests do not have to be identical, but should be sufficiently close as a base for identifying common interests and facilitating mutual cooperation. The comparative strengths each partner can bring into the process should be recognised and clarified. Subsequently formulated programmes of work should reflect these and divide responsibilities between the partners. As a general rule, the principle of 'not forcing an organisation into partnership work for the sake of partnership' should be applied.

Incentives for partnering. Partnerships between organisations are normally not entered into for idealistic reasons. Enlightened self-interest should be the starting point for discussion, which implies that respective motivations and self-interest for partnership need to be recognised and taken account of from the outset. The decision to go for partnership should be part and parcel of an organisation's strategic plan and should not be driven by the motivations of individuals. Partnerships working with hidden agendas are bound to be short-lived.

Formalising partnerships. The negotiation of partnerships should lead to the formulation of agreements, such as letters of intent or memoranda of understanding with attached work plans and budgets. But these agreements should not be too formal, since over-rigid formulations approximating to contracts will be counterproductive. These memoranda of understanding can surely not be taken as the ultimate indicators of successful organisational relationships. But one has to acknowledge their use in terms of giving expression to an intense inter-organisational process of exchange, serving as a starting-point from which further action can be taken. Such agreements should state the basic reason for partnering, and clarify the partners' respective viewpoints and approaches.

Envisioning the future but starting small. A long-term outlook combined with a shared vision on where the partnership could lead to will be needed from the beginning. But to get the process rolling, it is advisable to start small and progress in a step-by-step manner. Concrete cooperation on very selected topics, or around a fairly specific work agenda, combined with a phasing of activities based on realistic time frames and work plans, has proven to be an effective way of building up joint track-records. Building partnerships should be regarded as a gradual process, requiring a pilot period at the beginning to verify the respective understanding of the partnership concept and to test commitment and capacity on both sides.

Time. Working through a genuine partnership arrangement is more complex and time-consuming than engaging directly with a contracted partner for the execution of specific tasks. Time needs to be reserved for a proper initiation process during which informal individual contacts or ad-hoc collaborations can be nurtured into an organisation-wide partnership, built on trust and common interest. During the process, a relative high level of contact time is needed to keep the process alive. This time dimension is frequently a problem for those partners who are required to stick to rigid planning cycles, reporting procedures or monitoring criteria.

Power and responsibilities

Funding and power relations. In the context of North-South partnerships, the inequality in the distribution of resources has to be recognised and dealt with. Genuine partnerships can only be realised if both partners are able to bring resources to the process, or are able to influence the partnership process through other mechanisms. In the absence of opportunities for funding the process on an equitable basis, alternative ways of establishing mutuality and reciprocity are required. So-called 'power shifts' in favour of Southern organisations in order to keep relations more balanced, e.g. the control and management of budgets, should be considered as a viable option. Alternatively, attention should be given to mechanisms for joint fund-raising in which the Southern partner plays a leading role. Equally important, however, is a more flexible application of financial reporting and accountability procedures, which very often govern a relationship in favour of the North.

Responsibilities and leadership. A 'junior-partner' relationship in which the Southern organisation follows its Northern counterpart is no basis for partnering. Both organisations should be equally involved in the process, based on a division of tasks and responsibilities. In terms of empowering the weaker partner, the equity principle must be given concrete expression, in particular through the ability to control resources. As a consequence, leadership and task management of specific activities must be agreed upon. Sensitivity to organisational cultures and management styles is essential as a basis for making concessions and respecting organisational differences.

Organisational structures and hierarchies. Before a partnership is established, a careful analysis should be made of hierarchies, procedures and management systems of the respective organisations, as a basis for designing a system of programme management that is acceptable to all sides. Both sides should be responsible for performing this self-assessment, as well as analysing their counterpart. Special attention should be given to this aspect in situations in which organisational structures are not transparent – this might be the case with young organisations, or organisations trying to experiment with new forms of organisational structuring.

Build relations with organisations and not individuals. The process of establishing partnerships between organisations tend to lean on the motivation and initiative of individuals. Careful attention should be given to building individual contacts into organisation-wide support and to ensuring that individuals and their particular involvement in a partnership can be replaced by other staff. Thus, the respective organisations should be seen as the basis on which to build relations. This organisation-to-organisation approach, however, should not lead to an overload of work or an additional strain on resources. A careful balance needs to be sought in this regard.

Internals and tension. Partnership arrangements can have an impact on the organisational dynamics of the respective partners and may evolve into major change processes. The greater the intensity of the partnership, the more likely one partner is to become confronted with or involved in the other partner's internal affairs. Potential internal tensions, conflicts and power struggles within the partner's organisation need to be recognised and taken account of in managing the partnership.

Managing the process

Physical distance and communication. Physical distance between partners is in itself no reason for the success or failure of effective partnering provided that means of communication are found to compensate for the non-availability of personal interaction. If applied properly, new information technology can function as an asset in this regard. It is important that the partners should share a common understanding of effective ways of working, as well as an acceptance of each other's working culture, in particular towards the use of modern information tools for effective communication and information exchange.

Manage the partnership process carefully from both sides. Account should be taken of interpersonal relationships, individual attitudes and potential cultural differences. Do not underestimate small set-backs or misunderstandings caused by whatever reason – these can easily result in suspicion and mistrust and can break the process. Even considerable time inputs and other up-front investments cannot prevent such problems from occurring.

Matching rhetoric and deeds. The partnership concept and terminology is bound to create considerable expectations. 'Doing what has been agreed' is important and is valued as the guiding principle on which to build trust. Consequently, there should not be a long time span between discussing and formalising concepts, and the subsequent realisation of activities. Outputs and outcomes need to shown after a reasonable period, as the credibility of the approach will otherwise be called into question.

Creating transparency and openness. Partnerships advance best with a continuous flow and sharing of information between the partners without holding back essential facts and figures. This will provide a sound base for reporting on tangible and non-tangible results to the upper levels. In addition, transparency on what has been undertaken and realised should be shared with clients and stakeholders in order to facilitate their feed-back on the utility of products and services. Only through this downward accountability can the usefulness of the partnership be judged and decisions be taken on its continuation.

Sharing profits and failures equitably. In order to maintain the partnership process, the respective sides should share profits attributed to the partnerships, but should also take shared responsibility for failures. A potential imbalance in power between the partners should not be misused to shift either a negative result to the weaker side, or to pass on honours to the stronger partner. The setting up and administering of a joint monitoring and evaluation system, with agreed indicators and time frames, might be helpful in this regard.

Part 3: Making the case for 'genuine' partnership

This discussion paper has highlighted some of the conceptual and practical concerns of implementing partnership in international cooperation. Part 1 reviewed issues emerging from the current debate on partnership, which suggest that behind the rhetoric, there remain fundamental challenges for implementing the approach. Yet the discussion shows that efforts are being made by many different kinds of organisations to live up to the principles of 'genuine' partnership. The case study presented in Part 2 takes up some of the key issues in the debate from a practical 'lived' perspective. From the particular policy and organisational context of the ECDPM, the case illustrates how the Centre has sought to grapple with the inherent challenges of working in partnership. The case confirms the reality of many of these documented challenges, but also indicates that some of these can be overcome. The lessons learned focus on the 'how' of nurturing and managing a genuine partnership relationship – the so-called 'software' dimensions – but also reflect on the need to be absolutely clear at the outset on the motives for partnership.

To round off this discussion paper, we would like to return to what we perceive to be one of the more fundamental issues with regard to partnership, that is, the relationship between partnership and capacity development. The implications of this relationship are addressed from two perspectives. First, from the perspective of organisations which seek to enter into partnership, and second, from the perspective of the wider aid industry which sets the terms and conditions for international development cooperation more generally.

We hope that these reflections will encourage policy-makers and practitioners to think about the terminology, concept and practice of partnership and the implications for development organisations of adopting the partnership approach.

Partnership and capacity development

'Capacity-building ... is about changing the relationship between the donor and the recipient ... It means that donors are less benefactors and more like strategic partners in development'. (The Irish minister for overseas development assistance, quoted in IAAC 1999)

Partnership as a mode of development cooperation has gained popularity at a time when the concept of capacity development has been increasingly embraced by development agencies as a strategic priority even if not as a principal development goal of technical cooperation. The link between partnership and capacity development is no accident. The concept of capacity development has to a large extent emerged from the critique of the failure of technical cooperation over the past forty years in fostering sustainable development. An essential part of the critique points an accusing figure at the relationship between providers and recipients of development assistance and at the approaches used, most notably at supply-driven, expert-led, short-term and project-based technical cooperation. It is argued that these have combined to create dependency on external resources, have failed to be responsive to locally-driven agendas and have been unable to promote and sustain local capacities.

Yet if capacity development as an approach to development, privileging notions of participation, ownership, demand-driven agendas, and the process approach has come of age, its practice has been beset by difficulties in terms of identifying appropriate mechanisms, methodologies, tools and instruments. More fundamentally, there is concern that Northern agencies are unwilling to accept the full implications of adopting a capacity development approach and to make the necessary reforms within the aid system in order to facilitate its implementation.

Capacity-building cannot be easily achieved through classic modes of technical cooperation. It challenges Northern agencies to reform the way they do business, and in this regard, partnership emerges as an alternative framework. Accordingly, it may be argued that partnership and capacity development are inextricably intertwined. The debate on partnership needs to be seen in this light. It has been heralded as a new way of engaging in development between the North and the South, and as an approach which supports the renewed focus of the development community on capacity development. 'Genuine' partnership as discussed in this paper builds on the recognition that development efforts have failed in the past, being too much driven from the North and not recognising the needs of the South. It provides a potentially valid response to the critique of technical cooperation, offering a 'relational framework' for North-South organisational cooperation that can facilitate capacity development. The idea of 'joining' in order to create common understanding, realise synergies and profit from respective comparative advantages has gained ground, and is reflected in many policy and strategy statements emanating from development organisations.

Yet we have learned from this paper that the implementation of 'genuine' partnership is more probably the exception than the rule. Practice shows that partnership is applied in many cases without adequate reflection. So what does this mean for organisations seeking to enter into future engagements along the partnership principle? What are the critical questions policy-makers and practitioners need to ask?

Implications for organisational partners

Without doubt, building and sustaining partnerships between organisations in the North and the South is complex and challenging. It can require organisations to critically review their development priorities and modes of operation. As a guiding principle, policy-makers and practitioners should not force their organisation into partnership for the sake of partnership, unless the implications of doing so are fully taken on board. Otherwise, as Fowler (2000) suggests, it is likely that the partnership principle will become the stick that will be used to beat them for their apparent failure to deliver development outcomes. Fundamentally, it seems that any organisation thinking about partnership must ask itself two questions:

Why get involved in partnership?

What are the strategic objectives of the organisation, and in this regard, what kinds of relationship are most suited to meeting these objectives? Here in particular, an organisation must consider the extent to which capacity development is part of its mandate. Does partnership provide the most appropriate conceptual and operational framework for realising its capacity development mandate?

This requires a reflection on the inner meaning of partnership and capacity development, an assessment of one's mission and strategy and a willingness to take account of wider trends in development thinking and praxis, as discussed above. From the outset, the organisation's position on this point needs to be clearly articulated. As remarked by Mohaddin (1998), the onus is especially on the South, as the historically weaker partner, to negotiate its terms and to be explicit as to what it expects from the relationship so as to prevent the partnership from being supply-driven.

As we have already noted, 'genuine' partnership as defined in the introduction to this paper represents one of several types of inter-organisational relationship. It is the most involved, intense, and binding relationship, and carries many organisational consequences for the partners involved. As one author remarked, partnership challenges normal patterns of behaviour, and therefore calls for an extra special effort. As another commentator questions, given its inherent complexities, why get involved? And what

special added value does it bring to justify the necessary investment in the relationship? Contributing to capacity development may be the answer.

Reflecting on this question is especially pertinent at a time of widespread institutional innovation and rapid change in the development sector, within which different development actors from the North and South, and from the public, private and non-profit sectors are seeking new ways of working together. Partnership may be the appropriate mechanism, under the correct circumstances, but it may equally not be. Many commentators have argued in favour of less binding functional relations based on the principle that form should follow function, and not the other way around. In this regard, adaptability, flexibility and innovation are considered the order of the day where a whole spectrum of options is available.

Is partnership feasible?

Beyond subscribing to the partnership concept, the ultimate test is whether it can be implemented and sustained. Any organisation thinking about partnership has to take account of the full implications of engaging in partnership. It is not a casual relationship, but an intensive and long-term process. As has been pointed out in the 'Partnering with Civil society' on-line forum, '.. partnership is not a kind of task or work that can be accomplished once for ever. It is a long dynamic process of cultivation and evolution'. The associated costs of investing in partnership are thus only recovered over time in terms of sustainability and mutual success. The key meanwhile is to recognise that partnership is what is to be aimed for rather than something that one can expect to have in place from the start. In this sense, building partnerships is a process, and engagement in that process is critical to the success of the relationship. As noted in the forum discussions, the starting point should be to build a common vision providing a framework for embarking on the process.

This means that a careful and honest assessment of the capacities, strategic fit and characteristics of the wider enabling environment (i.e. aid system) is required to see if the organisation can live up to the challenges and dilemmas posed by partnership. Can, in particular, the demanding principles which characterise genuine partnership really be adhered to? Moreover, is the organisation willing to challenge structural as well as behavioural factors, which are present both in the organisation and in the wider aid system, and which may influence the achievement of equitable relationships?

Organisations must especially reflect on the extent to which partnership can achieve mutuality and equality. What deliberate action are Northern partners willing to take to address structural inequalities? In particular, careful consideration needs to be given to the question of transferring the management of financial resources as a mechanism for bringing about a so-called 'power shift' in favour of the South. In addition, as suggested by Yonekura (2000), a key test of partnership, where power is asymmetric, is the willingness and ability of power holders to accept constraints on their choices and behaviours, so as to achieve a relational balance. This is evidently a sensitive issue and has to be handled carefully, but in terms of letting rhetoric and practice meet, there is no way around addressing this topic.

Finally, stress has to be put on developing mutual trust based on transparency as well as respect for respective values and cultural norms. This has to be carefully nurtured and requires both time and patience. Trust-building places pressure on scarce human and financial resources, but also calls for a good deal of 'software', i.e. considerable abilities to create a framework for open and honest dialogue, as well as abilities to put oneself into another's position. Regular dialogue to facilitate communication, particularly with regard to ensuring that there is a common understanding of what the partnership seeks to achieve and how it will be achieved, is also emphasised. In this way, partnership can develop into a mutual capacity development exercise. It implies a change of roles on both sides, with Northern partners

performing the role of an enabler and facilitator, and the Southern partner moving away from being a recipient to a full-scale partner in the process.

An organisational self-assessment (see Box 4 below) addressing the above questions may be a useful tool for helping an organisation to consider the partnership option. We believe that such a self-assessment can help to close the gap between rhetoric and practice and also to avoid the careless application of the partnership principle and terminology.

Implications for the wider aid industry

What do the partnership experiences emerging from the organisational level signal for the wider aid industry? Perhaps a key conclusion is that the aid industry has to reform itself in ways that enable development organisations to address capacity development through partnership. Implementing partnership challenges the industry to reflect meaningfully on the extent to which it is both willing and able to make the necessary changes.

In terms of rhetoric, the vision and ambitions are in place, as is reflected for example by the DAC (1996), the United Nation's Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) and more recently by the World Bank's Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF). But the proof is in the pudding: only the true application and practical testing of these principles can demonstrate the extent to which the donor community can live up to the expectations it has set. What emerges from experiences so far is that further investments are needed to reform the structures, rules, procedures and mindset guiding the management of aid relations.

As indicated in the discussion above, this calls for a critical rethinking of existing approaches and procedures and a review of the skills and capacities needed. At the policy level, resource allocations and funding strategies have to be reconsidered; the need for allowing institutional processes to develop should be respected; and the need to generate intangible results alongside hard, measurable products, should be recognised. This raises the question of how one should define results, outputs and outcomes. It raises the question as to whether the quality of processes engaged in, and the capacities generated through those processes are legitimate measures of performance and impact for an aid agency.

The experiences of the ECDPM in this regard are subscribed to by outside commentators such as Pettit (2000), who stated that 'most conventional project, funding and evaluation systems will need to be radically changed to accommodate the process-oriented demands of local organisational development....the aid system must be transformed from a top-down chain to a more adaptable and mutually accountable system of relationships among key actors.'

Box 5: Checklist for assessing capacity for partnership¹⁰

An assessment of an organisation's capacity to engage in partnership might include the following kinds of question (which are applicable to both partners unless otherwise indicated). This assessment might be something that potential partners do separately before engaging in a relationship or it could be done as a joint exercise as part and parcel of building a relationship.

Aims and strategy:

- Are the notions of partnership and capacity development reflected in the organisation's core values and mandate?
- How does working through structured partnerships respond to the organisation's strategic objectives?
- What other forms of partnership, such as collaboration on an ad-hoc basis, networking and contracting, can address the organisation's needs?
- Are there any potential clashes between partnership and other operational modalities within the organisation, and can these be adequately reconciled?
- Is the organisation willing to open itself to influence (e.g. priority-setting) by a partner organisation?
- Is the organisation prepared to both defend and promote the partnership approach vis-à-vis funding agencies or other external stakeholders, and is the organisation's internal governance structure fully supportive, and aware of the implications?

Systems and procedures:

- Are planning, budgeting and reporting tools sufficiently flexible to accommodate the uncertainties and related characteristics of partnership?
- Is the organisation willing and able to take a long-term perspective on partnership development, and on the realisation of results?
- Under what conditions and to what extent is the organisation prepared to adapt implementation plans and prio-rities to the needs or preferences of the partner (i.e. taking the driver's seat versus a place in the waiting room)?
- Is the organisation willing to engage in a process of joint monitoring and evaluation, based on jointly conceived indicators?
- Does the organisation recognise and accept the validity of process indicators as legitimate measures of performance? Can it withstand external pressures to generate short-term results, and high disbursement rates?
- Is the organisation prepared to be transparent and to account openly for decision-making and budgeting to the partner?

Financial resources

- To what extent can the organisation make long-term financial commitments to the partnership?
- Is the organisation willing and able to finance the up-front costs of investing in partnership, in particular time and travel?
- Is the organisation willing to invest in the partner's overhead (i.e. institutional) costs and, if so, under what conditions? (Question for Northern partner)
- Is the organisation willing to jointly fund-raise with the partner?
- Is the organisation willing and able to entrust financial resources and to delegate certain financial management responsibilities to the partner as a mechanism to 'level the playing field'? (Question for Northern partner)

Human Resources

• Have provisions been made to train and sensitise staff to the cultural dimensions of partnering and in the skills of

- negotiation, confidence-building, facilitation and joint working?
 Do reward systems and performance assessments adequately acknowledge process-related factors and skills associated with developing institutional relationships?
- Is adequate time made available to staff to invest in partnership development?

The reader may also wish to consult a practical tool written for donors in making a 'self-assessment' of their progress in implementing partnership and capacity development principles. See: *Criteria for donor agencies' self-assessment in capacity development*. DAC/ OECD report. Feb. 1999. DCD/ DAC (99) 4. (www.oecd.org/dac/tcnet/pdf/checkeng.pdf).

Equally, the operational level should be placed under scrutiny. The entire 'software' of doing business, and initiating and implementing development programmes, needs careful consideration. Building joint projects requires a high level of 'cooperativity' – skills, attitudes and organisational culture – among the participants, and a willingness to learn, to compromise, and to see and understand the views and concerns of others. Moreover, adequate attention should be given to the webs of relationships which exist and which have to be taken into account in order to perform effectively.

Concluding comments

Taking seriously the notion of working through partnerships and acknowledging that development work is undertaken with 'partners' rather than 'clients' has implications for the way in which development initiatives in the South are assisted and supported from the North. The kinds of changes implied by the above present a major challenge to the aid industry. In terms of capacity development and partnership, the industry needs to send out the right signals to facilitate effective reform at the organisational level in order to be receptive to the needs as expressed by the South. The call is for development agencies to be willing to listen, to be able to reform themselves as necessary and to be in a position to function as strategic partners in their relationship with Southern counterparts.

The final word goes to policy-makers and practitioners from the North and South who have to draw their own conclusions from the messages presented in this paper. Engaging in genuine partnership is capable of facilitating the establishment of new roles and relationships between the North and the South, as the case study and the literature review have suggested. But there are serious hurdles to be overcome before such relationships can work. Moreover, policy recommendations should not be applied blindly. A pragmatic approach needs to be followed that is open to experimentation and innovation on both sides. Engaging in partnership must be recognised as an ongoing process which calls on the North to adopt the role of an enabler and facilitator and the South to move away from being a recipient to taking up a position in the driver's seat. Only the practising of partnerships can show us the way forward. The proof is in the pudding.

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