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Aagaard, Peter; Eberhard Trykker, Signe

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The road to partnerships in practice

Peter Aagaard¹ and Signe Eberhard Trykker²

Abstract

The article presents a case study of a partnership between a Northern NGO (NNGO) and a Southern NGO (SNGO), which is designed to enhance capacity development. We draw implications for partnerships at the level of organisational praxis. Partnerships in international development have been roundly criticised for their inability to create ownership and capacity changes in practice. Taking this critique into account, the article shows how an alternative approach to managerialism can reveal the potential for capacity development in partnerships, providing an opportunity for the constructive rearrangement of power and ownership. The proposed alternative combines notions of complexity and practical wisdom.

Keywords: partnerships, complexity, practical wisdom, capacity development

1 Introduction

“[...] we are almost nothing”, explained a representative of the Southern NGO (SNGO), describing what the SNGO would be without its partners (i.e. the donors). This paper looks at the relationship between the SNGO and one of its donors from the Northern hemisphere.³ The Northern NGO (NNGO) is one of the SNGO’s oldest partners. The aim of the partnership is to achieve capacity development, but despite the good relations between the two organisations, the existence of an equal balance of power between the partners is debatable. The partnership is not a unique case, but rather an example of a well-known challenge in the world of development.

The idea of partnerships in development originated in the 1970s (Fowler, 1998, p. 140, 2000, p. 1). For years, the development community discussed how to create partnerships in practice, i.e. at the organisational level involving operational staff. Partnerships became a buzzword in the aid community, and in 2005, the idea of partnerships was canonised in the idealistic rhetoric of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. The Declaration emphasised, among other things, national ownership and a set of guidelines for cooperation (Hyden, 2008; Monye et al., 2010, p. 755). At the policy level, partnerships continue to be seen as vital for efficient development.

¹ Department of Social Sciences & Business, Roskilde University, Denmark. Corresponding author. Email: peteraa@ruc.dk

² Management board consultant, Department of Secretariat and Development, Bispebjerg and Frederiksberg Hospital, Email: signeet@hotmail.com

³ The two organisations, the SNGO and the NNGO are anonyms, but the two organisations’ identities are known to the authors.

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However, there is still a considerable gap between policy ambitions and practice (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2004; Contu & Girei, 2014; Hyden, 2008, p. 261; Lister, 2000; Manji, 1997; Mommers & Wessel, 2009; Monye et al., 2010, p. 769). Despite the idealistic approach, partnerships in praxis are consistently criticised for reproducing the North-South hierarchy in development relations. According to this critique, the field of development seems to be trapped in a paradigm that is underpinned by a profound belief in standard modalities, instrumentalism and managerialism (Eyben, 2010; Monye et al., 2010; Mowles, 2010; Mowles et al., 2008).

We find this critique to be justified, and if we take it seriously then an obvious and important question emerges: how is the development community to move forward? The radical approach would be to reject the whole idea of partnerships. But that would also mean rejecting the endeavour, enshrined in the Paris Declaration, namely to reach a compromise between criticisms rooted in political economy and criticisms based on good governance practices that are generally raised by result-oriented actors (Monye et al., 2010). In this article, we align ourselves with a third school, the 'pragmatic' approach, which takes to heart existing critiques of partnerships but maintains an idealistic belief that they can actually work in practice.

We ask: how can a praxis-informed analysis of the SNGO-NNGO partnership create a basis for capacity development?

The pragmatic tradition goes back to Rondinelli (1983), whose alternative approach to development was rooted in the familiar concept of incrementalism. Our theoretical point of departure is Ralph D. Stacey's approach to change in contingent organisations. This approach has inspired a new direction in development management (Mowles, 2012; Mowles et al., 2008), but a screening of the literature on partnerships in development shows that the complexity approach has not yet been thoroughly explored empirically. We link the complexity approach to the Aristotelian concept of 'practical wisdom', which has attracted renewed interest in organisational management (Küpers & Pauleen, 2015; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011).

Based on a case study of the partnership between the SNGO and the NNGO, we argue that the potential for capacity development through partnerships can be enhanced using a pragmatically oriented approach that renders visible power relations and values differences between donors and recipients. Our case study does not explore the implementation of such a praxis-oriented approach; instead, we use the case to illustrate how a managerialist notion of capacity development conflicts with ambitions to achieve capacity development in practice.

Our paper is structured as follows. First, we present the background of our study, namely how partnerships are linked to capacity development in the field of development, and have been heavily influenced by managerialism. Second, we present our theoretical framework. Third, we clarify the methodology and operationalisation; and fourth, we present the results of our analysis. In the final section, we conclude and discuss the implications of the paper for the organisation of partnerships.

2 Background

There is no single definition of 'partnership' in the development literature, but the term usually refers to inter-organisational relations "beyond the usual contractual and hierarchical agreements" that are characterised by reciprocity, shared objectives, mutuality and dialogue (Contu & Girei 2014, pp. 206, 215). The idea behind partnerships is to give partner governments a greater say in (i.e. ownership over) how development funding is spent and prioritised, which presupposes a high level of trust between partners and donor governments (Hyden 2008, p. 260). According to the Paris Declaration, donors have to "respect partner country leadership and help strengthen their capacity to exercise it" (Monye et al. 2010, p. 763). The point of partnerships is, thus, to redefine the relationship between development actors from the global North and South.

The concept of partnership is linked to the notions of 'ownership' and 'capacity development'. There is no authoritative, unambiguous definition of capacity development, but several studies (e.g. Datta et al., 2012; Ubels et al., 2010) refer to Allan Kaplan's 'hierarchy' of interlinked and interdependent elements of organisational life. The hierarchy spans from quantifiable, visible aspects at the bottom of the hierarchy (material and financial resources, skills, organisational structure) to more qualitative and sometimes less visible dimensions at the top (mindset, vision, strategy and values) that need to be addressed in order to develop an organisation's capacity (Kaplan, 2000, p. 523). These elements are interrelated. Thus, for instance, an organisation needs a vision to steer its course, otherwise new skills will not lead to organisational change. Values, norms and visions are considered to be powerful, and can potentially either generate or impede capacity development (Datta et al., 2012).

2.1 Managerialism

One of these norms is managerialism, which dominated the field of development in the past (Rondinelli, 1983, p. 1) and has continued to do so in recent years. Managerialism is borrowed from the private sector and "present[s] management as a technical, rational discipline based on scientific principles" (Mowles, 2010, p. 152). Inherent in managerialism is the idea that change can be instrumentally controlled and that purposive actors can make linear changes to the system without changing themselves.

Seen from this perspective, knowledge and expertise are understood as 'episteme' in Aristotelian terms: that is, as generalised and applicable regardless of the context. 'Episteme', in turn, is related to the quantifiable and more tangible elements in Kaplan's hierarchy of elements in organisational life. Thus, knowledge is regarded in terms of elements that can be stored and moved around, regardless of context and previous experience. This perspective enables Northern organisations to claim that they possess the necessary expertise, and to offer capacity transfer to their Southern partners (Mowles, 2010, p. 154). Meanwhile, Southern NGOs are positioned "as lacking in relation to what is the given right way of managing" (Contu & Girei, 2014, p. 221).

In general, there is a quest for causal predictability inherent in managerialism that favours general modalities which - Northern donor organisations presume - can be effectively applied to local circumstances. This approach favours best practices and the application of standardised procedures such as financial control systems (Ashman, 2001), making it relatively easy to compare and identify organisations that do not live up to the set standards.

Managerialism is criticised for being power-blind due to its preference for "the abstract and the idealised" which conceals "the inherently conflictual nature of negotiating with others about how to go on together" (Mowles et al. 2008, p. 809; see also Ashman, 2001, p. 75). Its technical character overlooks the fact that power is present in every relationship. As Hyden (2008, p. 260) points out, donor partners must understand that development is not just a question of policy, but also a political process in which they must participate.

The issue of power asymmetry between development partners is a recurrent theme in the literature (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2004; Fowler, 1998, p. 144, 2000, p. 3; Lister, 2000; Morse & Mcnamara, 2012), and probably the most criticised. This power asymmetry is usually attributed to the fact that Northern NGOs are usually in control of the finances while Southern NGOs lack financing. Also, studies of partnerships in practice illustrate how managerial procedures limit the potential of partnerships between development actors (e.g. Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2004; Contu & Girei, 2014; Mommers & Wessel, 2009), reproducing the gap between policy and practice.

Furthermore, the linear understanding of change in managerialism does not reflect the complexity that operational staff experience (Mowles, 2010; Mowles et al., 2008; Stacey, 2000; Rondinelli, 1983).

Managerialism directs our attention to results at the expense of processes, simplifying reality and ignoring

the need for greater reflexivity and “constant interaction between experience and strategy” (Gulrajani, 2010, p. 143).

Overall, there is a growing consensus that the complex context of the developing country in question matters, including its local institutions; that development interventions should always be based on ‘what is there to build on’; and that capacity development should focus more on ‘invisible’ aspects. In other words, capacity development is not just about technical skills, it is about relations, meanings and identities (Baser & Morgan, 2008; Cairns et al., 2005; Fowler & Ubels, 2010; Jan; Ubels et al., 2010). Kaplan thus proposes a paradigm shift towards greater emphasis on the invisible and intangible dimensions of capacity development, understood in terms of organisational changes. As Booth (2011, p. 23) puts it, operational staff must drop “formulaic ‘best practice’ interventions and think more actively about how to build on what exists.” The key question is: how can operational staff actually do that? We seek to answer this question in the next section, which presents our praxis-based research approach.

3 Theory

Earlier contributions have addressed the dominance of managerialism. Rondinelli (1983) argued for greater focus on incrementalism and criticised the dominance of instrumental planning and managerial standards. Several scholars have followed similar or alternative paths. Malhotra focused on “ethical behaviour” (1997, p. 43). Fowler argued for authentic partnerships, reciprocity, distributed authority, “trusting people to explore, make mistakes and learn” (1998, pp. 144, 154) and later on context and shared control (Fowler, 2000, p. 10). Ashman argued for collective negotiated forms of accountability, relations and responsiveness, and the need for managers “to be flexible and responsive rather than strict and controlling” (Ashman, 2001, p. 89). Newer contributions also call for a greater focus on relational, political and contextual aspects (Copestake & Williams, 2012; Gulrajani, 2010; Mowles, 2010; Ramalingam, Jones, Reba, & Young, 2008). These contributions advocate a pragmatic approach that considers power and looks at more intangible elements like trust and ethics.

However, partnerships in development continue to be dominated by managerialism, despite the fact that organisational and managerial research continues to evolve - also in the field of leadership in praxis (Parry & Bryman, 2006), where the concept of ‘practical wisdom’ has now become mainstream (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011). Like Ashman (2001), we do not seek a new, holistic paradigm, but there still is a need for alternative practical guidelines that concrete actors in development can use to open up the ‘iron cage’ of managerialism. Standing on the shoulders of the pragmatic tradition, our approach involves two

dimensions: first, complex responsive processes; and second, the Aristotelian concept of 'practical wisdom'.

Ramalingam et al. (2008, p. 60) argue that there is a growing interest in complexity sciences within the field of international development, because this approach offers a new way to understand and solve problems related to partnerships. Complexity scholars question commonplace understandings of planning and implementation, as well as formal leadership, which is essential to managerialism (Bovaird, 2008; Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg et al., 2005; Stacey, 1995). Capacity development is seen as an evolving, incremental learning process combined with rapid radical change, which has no obvious connection to the amount of resources put into planning (Bovaird, 2008, p. 322). Leadership emerges from social processes based on reciprocity and distributed decision-making (Paarlberg & Bielefeld, 2009, p. 250). While managerialism assumes that powerful leaders exist, complexity scholars argue that the impact of leaders is limited, but not irrelevant (Byrne, 2005; Klijn, 2008, p. 314; Thompson, 2004, p. 416). What matters are the daily interactions between organisational members, and changes arising from these interactions.

The complexity perspective redirects our attention from the idealised goals of managerialism. Instead, it places relations between actors, and what those relations actually contain in praxis, at the centre of the analysis. Organisations are not defined as systems with fixed boundaries, but rather as continuous interactions – or complex responsive processes – among people. Seen from this perspective, organisations are patterns of interaction over which no one has full control (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006, p. 331; Stacey, 2007, p. 298).

The focus on concrete relations brings praxis to the forefront in complex responsive processes. That is why we link complex responsive processes to the Aristotelian idea of knowledge as practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which is "[...] that intellectual activity most relevant to praxis. It focuses on what is variable, on that which cannot be encapsulated by universal rules, on specific cases." (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 372). Practical wisdom takes account of contextual circumstances, including the distribution of power. Complex responsive processes can be either good or bad, but practical wisdom is not an objective form of knowledge. It is a value-based form of knowledge which comes to life as a habitual disposition, i.e. when an actor tries "to do the right thing, at the right time and for the right reason" (Küpers & Pauleen, 2015, p. 494). Practical wisdom thus attributes central importance to the experiences of operational staff (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 371; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011, p. 59).

Vision, strategy and values are the key to capacity development, but these elements are only brought to life when actors who are aware of the value differences and power relations in a given context confront them in a concrete process. In other words, practical wisdom is crucial. The approach is rooted in a phenomenology orientation in management research, which regards the actors involved as reflective practitioners (Küpers & Pauleen, 2015, p. 495).

The notions of practical wisdom and complexity offer an alternative framework to the linear understanding of change that dominates the field of international development. They offer a means to explore partnerships, capacity development and power relations and to study how these can be changed by drawing on the experiences of the operational staff who deal with these issues every day. Differences in beliefs, in particular, can represent instances of new capacity development. These differences, or profound paradoxes pertaining to norms and beliefs, evolve in patterns of interaction among the actors engaged in the partnerships.

Table 1: The praxis approach compared to managerialism

Concepts and principles	The praxis approach	Managerialism
Prevailing principle	What is good, right, and just for everyone in this context?	<i>What do we know scientifically about being effective?</i>
Knowledge	Practical wisdom (<i>phronesis</i>)	<i>Science, theories, modalities (episteme)</i>
Organisation	Complex responsive processes	<i>Formal, instrumental system</i>
Capacity development	Non-linear organisational change	<i>Linear organisational change</i>
Elements that need to be addressed to create capacity development	Norm paradoxes, differences in invisible, qualitative values, vision and realised strategic interaction	<i>Visible and quantifiable skills, structures, material and financial resources</i>
Concept of leadership	Distributive, based on emergence and experience	<i>Formal, top-down</i>

Table 1 summarises our approach to capacity development and compares it with the managerialist approach. While we take our point of departure in complex responsive processes and practical wisdom, managerialism takes its point of departure in a highly idealised world. Both approaches can underpin partnerships, but in very different ways.

4 Methodology

Our aim is, firstly, to show how partnership in praxis develops over time as a complex process of capacity development, where there is no obvious connection between managerial efforts and emerging learning opportunities such as dilemmas and paradoxes. Secondly, we seek to understand why partners have

responded the way they have historically, which compels us to pose questions about value and norm differences, power relations, capacity development and organisational change. The following two concepts are important when we study the norms and notions behind organisational change and thus also capacity development.

Organising themes are patterns of communicative interaction that arise in relationships between humans (Stacey, 2007, p. 300). Organisational members do not agree upon these themes, but rather talk about and respond to them. People continually reproduce and transform these themes through conversations (Stacey, 2000, p. 371). Themes organise what people can – and cannot – talk about openly (Stacey, 2000, p. 376). Stacey distinguishes between *legitimate themes* that organise what people feel free to talk about openly, and *shadow themes* that organise what organisational members do not feel they can talk about openly. Shadow themes are particularly important because they hold the potential to challenge and disturb what is taken for granted. In our case study, one of the respondents (named SNGO: A, below) asked to remain anonymous, which suggests the existence of a shadow theme.

Ideologies are organising themes that either underpin power relations or justify undermining them. Organising themes create – and constitute – power relations, since they impose limits, and limits are power (Stacey 2000: 356). The science of complexity thus draws attention to the quality of relationships and “lets us understand power as fluid and relational, embedded in relationships and behaviours, rather than static and ‘positional’” (Eyben, Kidder, Rowlands, & Bronstein, 2008, p. 204). People are usually unaware of how ideology polarises experiences and makes differences seem natural, thus maintaining existing power relations.

4.1 Operationalisation

To detect organising themes and explore how organisational members make sense of themes, we use the theory of sense-making. Sense-making is a social process that also depends on our identity. Thus, depending on how we see ourselves, our perception of the world around us changes, reflecting back on how we see ourselves. Weick (1995, p. 133) emphasises that sense-making is about magnifying smaller cues drawn from a whole. The cues that are selected, and the way they are interpreted, depend on the person and the context.

Sense-making may be understood as a kind of filtering process whereby beliefs, values and norms serve to simplify reality and draw our attention towards certain aspects rather than others (Weick, 1995, p. 133). Theories about action, as well as assumptions and traditions, influence our sense-making.

A central concept in Weick's theory is that of enactment. When we act, we make sense, and through our actions we create our surroundings which simultaneously limit us and make things possible (Weick, 1995, p. 31). One implication of the enactment perspective is that we can liberate ourselves from situations and construct something else instead (Hatch, 2001, p. 112). This is also the case in learning activities: "Because people have some control over words, meanings, and actions, they can exert some control over the ways they organise themselves, the opportunities they discover, and the projects they pursue." (Weick, 1995, p. 181).

4.2 The case study

The case study was selected because the NNGO has a direct strategic ambition to strengthen its international partners through capacity development. Qualitative empirical data was collected during a three-week field trip in November-December 2014. 10 semi-structured interviews (three with NNGO members and seven with SNGO members, conducted in English) provide the basis for the analysis. The interviewer carried out additional interviews with local volunteers, but these were not used directly in the analysis. Although English was the secondary language of the SNGO members, no significant meaning was lost.⁴ The NNGO acted as 'gate-keeper', as its staff established contact with SNGO members based on our suggestions for possible respondents. The interviewees were selected because of their relationship with the organisations and the partnership. It was possible to interview most of the suggested persons, barring a few who were travelling at the time of the research. The NNGO thus opened doors for us in the sense of facilitating the interviews – however, it may also have closed doors in the sense that the interviewer may have been identified with the NNGO, being white and from the Northern hemisphere. In order to minimise this bias, the interviewer began each interview by introducing herself and the background of the study. However, by being present and asking questions, the interviewer could not avoid influencing the interviewees' sense-making. That said, it is not the interviewer's impression that the interviewees were searching for the 'correct' answers. The interviews were carried out in an informal and open-minded tone.

Additionally, the analysis draws on formal documents from the NGOs in question, government reports, and unstructured observations of some members of both organisations.

⁴ After careful consideration to preserve the meaning some quotes have been slightly changed to promote the readability. Furthermore, the names of the NGOs have been replaced by either "SNGO" or "NNGO" in the quotes.

5. Analysis

The first part of the analysis focuses on a story about the partnership's expanding health programme from 1997 to 2014. We will argue that although complexity increased and new opportunities for learning emerged, the partners attempted to solve new dilemmas by sticking to highly tangible, standard solutions, even in situations where less tangible, when and practical solutions were needed. In the second part of the analysis, we will analyse the underlying organising themes related to capacity development and views about the partnership.

5.1. The story of the health programme

The case study takes place in sub-Saharan Africa, in a country troubled by diseases like HIV/AIDS, flood disasters and high maternal mortality rates. The context therefore poses enormous challenges in terms of health, but government efforts are inadequate to address this (Programme Report, 2012, p. 2). According to the SNGO website, the government supported the SNGO in the past, but withdrew its support in the mid-1990s. Since then, the SNGO has depended on donors for the running of its core activities. The SNGO still does not have its own resource base.

Based on a development contract, the SNGO and NNGO have been working together for more than two decades, implementing health care projects. In general, the partners expressed trust and respect towards each other. SNGO staff generally regard the NNGO as one of the 'good' donors. Both organisations are engaged in other partnerships within the same organisational 'family' and are thus familiar with this type of organisational relationship. The NNGO has stationed two employees with the SNGO to assist and monitor programme implementation. The partnership is more than just an informal network involving simple coordination, but neither is it a highly formalised organisation with a sophisticated strategic management function or its own distinctive culture (Jacobs, 1998, p. 87).

5.1.1 Four phases

The health care projects in question are organised in a programme with a budget of more than 3 million Euros. The funds come partly from the government of the NNGO's home country, and partly from the NNGO itself. The history of the programme can be divided into four five-year phases. Each phase involved capacity changes, due to new insights and learning.

The *first phase* started in 1997. The strategic focus was on general health matters, and the geographic focus was mainly on one rural district. In the *second phase*, which began in 2002, the target population was increased and more districts were included. Focus areas were defined, and HIV was included for the first time. A government report from the NNGO home country shows that in this period, the NNGO supported

management consultancy for the SNGO with the aim of strengthening the organisation (Government Aid Fund report, 2004). By the end of the phase, in 2007, the partners agreed that the programme was an outstanding example of the SNGO's ability to collaborate (Programme Report, 2012, p. 6).

The *third phase* started in 2007. The target population was increased, and five “implementation components” were defined. The largest budget posts were funds for improving hygienic sanitation and families’ capacity to protect children, manifested e.g. by increasing the number of girls completing secondary school. A midterm evaluation showed that there was a need for improvement. The 2012 Programme report states: “[...] although [SNGO] had greatly improved its capacity and implementing structure, there still remain key elements that are in the need of improvements, such as programme integration, coordination and management of activities, and standardised financial and narrative reporting formats were still under development [...]” (ibid., p. 6). This illustrates the difficulties experienced by the SNGO in handling the increased complexity that arose due to the expansion of the focus areas, strategic targets and population, which called for increased coordination and integration capacity. To address this situation, the partnership deployed tangible, standard approaches: increase of financial controls and reduction of the number of districts from four to two in the future to cut back on administration and staffing costs. As early as 2010, the SNGO had already agreed to allow full oversight over its spending of funds from its partner (Government report, 2010).

By the end of the third phase in 2010, an evaluation showed that some interventions lacked sustainability and local ownership. The programme needed an exit strategy. Clearly, the programme needed to develop a stronger volunteer culture (Programme report, 2012, p. 16). The local volunteers mainly worked for their own communities, so the SNGO brand was not present in their minds or on the ground (ibid., p.19). Again, the solution chosen was tangible. One of the evaluation report recommendations for the next phase was to earmark funds for regular training and supervision of volunteers, in order to improve their communication skills.

In 2012, the partnership entered into a new, four-year health care programme. The programme report cast the SNGO as the implementing partner and the NNGO as the funding and monitoring partner. The focus was clearly on standard, financial control: “Programme reporting will include quarterly and annual progress reports from [SNGO] to [NNGO]” (ibid., p. 21). The quarterly reports reflected implementation according to the budget and plan, status reports from the two districts, and outlined deviations from the plans, problems encountered and lessons learned. An annual external audit and external evaluation were carried out at the end of programme. An assigned NNGO-delegate participated in monitoring visits and all regular team meetings and workshops. Furthermore, the annual plan and budget were prepared jointly by the two

partners for approval by the NNGO before the beginning of each calendar year (Ibid., p. 24). This control was accepted by the SNGO, and did not lead to open conflict, but as we show below the highly asymmetrical relationship clearly determines whether the themes identified in the analysis are enacted as legitimate or as shadow themes.

At the time of the research in 2014, the SNGO faced calls for new capacities at all levels, from community volunteers to top management, according to NNGO representatives. The programme helped to fund functions carried out at the SNGO's headquarters, in order to support capacity building in finance management. At this point, the human resource (HR) department had also been identified as a weakness, which is why the NNGO decided to provide capacity development for this as well (NNGO, 1: 2). Local volunteers' involvement also remained a challenge. Members of both the NNGO and the SNGO mentioned that volunteers still expected to benefit personally, e.g. by receiving a bicycle or cash (NNGO 1:1, NNGO 2: 4, SNGO 3: 3). This indicated a need to change the mindset of the volunteers, which could not be achieved through "traditional" capacity development activities such as training. Overall, the two partners' response to these challenges was to approach them as a symptom that the right policies, and their correct implementation, were lacking. In other words, these challenges were dealt with as technical, managerial issues rather than as a question of values and mindsets.

5.2 Organising themes

Why did the partners react to these emerging dilemmas by mobilising tangible methods and managerial understanding? Here, we turn to the organising themes evoked by the partners. The themes presented were identified empirically through an exploratory coding of the interviews, which focused on how SNGO and NNGO members understood capacity development, on the relationship between the two organisations, and on their organisational identity. Overall, five significant themes can be identified across the interviews. The themes are summarised in table 2.

Table 2: The organising themes of the partnership

Themes	Partner	Legitimate or shadow theme
'A marriage'	NNGO	Legitimate
'Change as planning'	NNGO	Legitimate
'The implementing partner'	SNGO	Legitimate
'Capacity development is based on gaps'	SNGO	Legitimate
'The SNGO is not capable'	SNGO	Shadow

Firstly, we will focus on the NNGO's experience and views of the partnership with the SNGO.

5.2.1 A marriage

Despite the obvious asymmetry, NNGO organisational members described their relationship with the SNGO using metaphors like “It’s like an old marriage, for good and bad.” (NNGO 1: 2) and “(...) we walk hand in hand. We walk next to each other (...)” (NNGO 3: 5). The “marriage” epithet expresses their experience of a good and close partnership with the SNGO. The respondents attempt to enact values like equality and trust through daily conversations that sustain a positive view of their partnership with the SNGO. “Marriage” is thus a legitimate theme in the NNGO, which is necessary to sustain the partnership despite the highly asymmetrical relationship between the partners.

Power asymmetries were overshadowed by values like equality, which were rhetorically promoted by NNGO representatives. As a NNGO representative put it: “In my experience, things go wrong with delegates if they think they are better than the others or can order them around or... that is not how we work. We are equal partners.” (NNGO 1: 3) Here, the respondent constructs a dichotomy between “ordering around” and “equal partners” – where the NNGO falls within the latter category. The respondent goes on to explain why the partnership is equal: “There is a recognition that yes, we are here to build capacity and yes, we know, sometimes you think ‘oh my god, is this where we are’, but as someone coming in from the outside you have to know, you have to be very humble, because we don’t understand a thing about what is going on in the country. And that is why it is an equal relationship, because we need each other. They need us for technical and planning matters. And that is where we can build capacity. But we need them to give us knowledge, so that we can give them as much as we can in the best way possible. So it’s about mutuality, equality and respect.” (NNGO 1: 3f)

The representative paints a picture of NNGO actors as outsiders who do not understand the context, which makes the partners appear much more equal than they really are when looking at e.g. lines of reporting and control of finances. Although the representative recognises the importance of context, the NNGO is also portrayed as an outsider who does not play a direct role in the local context. Instead, the respondent indicates that something has to be “given” by the NNGO to the SNGO. So despite acknowledging that context matters, the respondent still reproduces an asymmetrical relationship based on an epistemic notion of capacity development.

NNGO representatives were aware that they needed to engage with the partnership, at least to some extent. One of the more experienced NNGO representatives spoke of the contextual difficulties this entailed: “It takes time to win trust. You can’t - you don’t just come in and then six months later you are their preferred communication partner. People have to see who you are and figure out what you want. The

NNGO has a - for example here in [country], we have been here a long time, and there has always been this openness and open door policy. The old delegate, he had a coffee machine in his office, there always was coffee, and that meant that people came in and had coffee” (NNGO 3: 3). Here, on the one hand, the NNGO representative talks with a fairly high degree of insight about the context of the partnership, where the story about the coffee machine communicates an image of the NNGO as an open and accessible organisation where NNGO representatives want to interact closely and informally with SNGO representatives. NNGO representatives seem very aware of the importance of such daily interactions, which is clearly in line with the praxis approach. On the other hand, it is highly unlikely that the occasional coffee machine conversation can create an overall culture of reciprocity and equality in the light of the profoundly asymmetrical power relations between the partners.

5.2.2 Change as planning

Change, brought about through planning, was another organising theme in the NNGO. Discussions about the ability to analyse, set goals and document results dominated, sustaining the ‘change as planning’ theme. This theme originates in managerialism, which views capabilities as instrumental and rational. When asked about how the NNGO could contribute to capacity development, the respondents mentioned “technical things”, “planning matters”, “planning skills”, “time plans”, “milestones”, “donor requirements”, “how to monitor”, “how to plan”. This indicates that the organisational members’ understanding of capacity development is mainly linked to an epistemic notion of knowledge in which projects are the unquestioned standard for how to work, which creates expectations about what the SNGO should be capable of. It also supports an approach to capacity development that focuses on deficiencies.

Although the epistemic notion of capacity development dominated, the respondents also experienced difficulties maintaining this notion in practice. Asked about challenges related to capacity development, one of the respondents replied: “I think the challenge has been that we sometimes do a lot without really knowing (...) Maybe we’re doing well, maybe not, because we didn’t really set any goals. Maybe it’s also hard to measure. So I think it is difficult when, because I might think after four years that we’ve done an amazing job. But how can I measure it? That I think is difficult.” (NNGO 1: 4).

The quote shows how, on the one hand, the instrumental notion of change capacity shapes the respondent’s sense-making; and on the other, the respondent acknowledges, in line with the praxis approach, that change capacity is not always visible and cannot be steered or measured. Another NNGO member also expressed a fairly high degree of value awareness: “A lot of it is intangible. Because a lot of it, how can I put it, is also about values. It is the dialogues you have with different people. And that you can’t,

that you can't measure the change" (NNGO 3: 6). A third responded: "But yes it's difficult, because of course there can be anything from, it can be very concrete things, but it can also be very - like subtle and almost invisible measures." (NNGO 2: 4) However, these reflections never become an actual organising theme that would denote a different approach to capacity development.

Observations show that NNGO members have few opportunities to gain insight into the SNGO context through daily, unofficial, informal conversations with SNGO members. One opportunity involves the joint monitoring trips, where staff from the NNGO and the SNGO visit the field together. These trips can serve as a platform for unofficial, informal conversations. However, the SNGO headquarters does not have a shared office space where members of both organisations can meet and talk informally. The NNGO members and the SNGO management are located in the same building, while the SNGO staff and the NNGO members occupy two different buildings. There is no physical space for unplanned, informal interaction between the NNGO and SNGO, such as e.g. a common lunchroom. That inhibits the development of new themes and a more distributive approach to leadership in the daily work.

Next, we will focus on the SNGO's experience and view of the partnership with the NNGO.

5.2.3 The implementing partner

A strong organising theme in the SNGO is its identity as implementing partner. A good partnership is associated with respect for the SNGO's decision-making and role as an implementing partner, which SNGO staff generally consider that the NNGO displays. An SNGO respondent explained: "But some partners [other than this NNGO] they send delegates who want to implement the project themselves. That creates conflict. The end result is that you see that maybe the [SNGO-] programme manager, who is accountable for this delegate, who has come to work in [country], there is not a good relationship, just because this delegate wants to go and implement activities on the ground. But good partnership, there has to be kind of - just provide technical support. 'Maybe we can do it this way, or that's how you're doing things'. Rather than the partner coming in and saying 'I'll do it like this. And I'm here to do it this way.' It means this person is now taking over the responsibility of the implementing partner." (SNGO 1: 6f)

According to the SNGO respondent, when delegates try to implement projects themselves, this results in bad relations and conflicts in the partnership. It can also 'threaten' the SNGO's identity as an implementing partner. In other words, the SNGO respondent wanted the NNGO representative to enact a form of distributive leadership based on genuine respect and equality. On the one hand, this is in line with the praxis approach. On the other hand, the quote also illustrates that the type of distributive leadership the

SNGO respondent calls for is rather rigid. Formal agreements play a significant role for SNGO members. According to the respondent, the role as implementing partner is framed by a formal agreement about the division of labour between the NNGO and the SNGO. Formal organisation is a key feature of managerialism. SNGO members probably stick to formal organisation because they are well aware of the power asymmetries involved. Formalisation may be their way of enacting the values of equality and a more equal distribution of power.

5.2.4. Capacity development is based on gaps

The SNGO respondents have a broad view of capacity change, and they generally emphasise that it is very important to 'be capable of something', e.g. "fulfilling the obligation" (SNGO 2: 4) or "serving better" (SNGO 3: 4). These aspects pertain to the intangible elements of capacity development. But this never manifests in an organising theme. The theme that organises the SNGO's understanding of legitimate capacity development is closely linked to the NNGO's definition. The SNGO respondents focus more on their own weaknesses. One of the respondents explained: "So when the gaps have been identified, then we come up with a plan for how we are going to eliminate your shortfalls, enhance your strengths and improve on the other weak areas." (SNGO 5: 5). The respondent describes capacity development as based on the identification of gaps, such that reality is compared with an idealised version of how things should be. Often, the respondents emphasise activities that are visible and tangible, such as training initiatives (SNGO 1: 2, SNGO 3: 4, SNGO 7: 4, SNGO 6: 3), or material resources like buildings, motorbikes or money (SNGO 4: 8, SNGO 6: 3). The SNGO's focus on its own weaknesses overshadows their potential strengths, disabling a praxis-based approach to capacity development.

5.2.5. The SNGO is not capable

Another profound organising theme is that 'the SNGO is not capable'. Several conversations with SNGO members dealt indirectly with the theme of the SNGO as an incapable organisation. This theme is rooted in the organisation's experience of lacking financial resources and of its asymmetrical power relationship with the NNGO. Although this theme is articulated in the interviews, it is not openly discussed within the SNGO or in the partnership. In other words, it is a shadow theme.

The SNGO members expressed a lack of capability on different levels. One of the respondents explained: "Overall, I would describe the SNGO as an organisation which people out there trust. But they are not aware of the internal challenges to that image. So overall, it's an organisation, which gives hope to some, but at the same time it frustrates others who seek support [...] from us and find that it is not forthcoming. The main reason is, as I said earlier, that we are not - we haven't reached a state where we can stand on

our own two feet and respond to the community's needs on our own." (SNGO 2: 6) The respondent described tensions between external expectations of the organisation and the SNGO's actual performance. In terms of its context and identity, the respondent depicted the SNGO as an organisation that is incapable of meeting the expectations of others.

In general, financial resources play a central role in the sense-making of the SNGO members. The SNGO respondent said: "Because the situation, as we are now, is like SNGO minus partners, to me I feel like we are nothing. The SNGO as a volunteer organisation in [country], minus our partners, is just the projects which we are implementing - we are almost nothing" (SNGO 2: 3). The respondent also explained that if there were "emerging issues", the SNGO could not make its own decisions about how to redistribute resources "because first we have to ask for approval from the delegates" (SNGO 2: 6). The lack of control over financial resources in the SNGO thus leads to a sense of not being able to make its own decisions.

Another respondent described the SNGO's lack of an independent source of revenue as follows: "As I said, at least the organisation needs to have its own resource base. When all the partners are gone, we should be able to move on with our - with the organisation." (SNGO: A) This dependence on the partners is underlined by the way in which the latter are depicted as actors who come in from the outside, set the agenda and steer the organisation, as yet another respondent explained: "The driving force has been the partners and their interests. Because without funds we cannot run these projects" (SNGO 7: 1). This self-image of dependency is reinforced by the SNGO members' purported lack of vision and direction. One respondent said: "But I feel like we don't have a vision. At the SNGO, we don't have a vision today about what we want" (SNGO:A). Vision is a top element in Kaplan's hierarchy of organisational development. However, these matters are not discussed openly in the SNGO.

The shadow theme 'the SNGO is not capable' is closely related to sense-making in the SNGO, whose members feel dependent on the NNGO. There is an underlying assumption that in order to be a capable organisation that is able to make its own decisions and act independently, the organisation needs to have control over its financial resources. This sense of independence reinforces the asymmetrical relationship between the SNGO and NNGO, but does not arise as a theme in conversations between the two organisations.

6 Conclusions

The overall idea of partnerships in development is to give partners a greater say in (i.e. ownership over) how resources are spent. It is clearly questionable whether this has occurred in the SNGO-NNGO

partnership, even though the latter may be described as an exemplary case. The NNGO secures financial resources, and the SNGO receives the funds. The NNGO is positioned as the capable partner, while the SNGO is regarded as the passive, receptive partner. Neither of the involved actors seems able to openly address this asymmetrical relationship. Based on the legitimate organising themes, the actors enact and maintain the asymmetrical power relationship based on formal, top-down leadership and rationalistic power blindness. As a result, the partnership, in this case, is mainly enacted according to a managerialist approach. Formal, top-down steering is a significant part of the partnership, since the SNGO must submit quarterly reports to the NNGO. Furthermore, since the SNGO headquarters does not have shared office space where members of both organisations can meet and talk informally, formal forms of leadership easily come to prevail. Informal interaction is a precondition for sharing leadership decisions.

Both the NNGO and the SNGO mainly focus on visible elements such as skills, and material resources such as workshop training, equipment and money, which are located on the lower levels of Kaplan's hierarchy. NNGO members mainly do this because they expect it to be effective, based on epistemic arguments. SNGO members mainly focus on the visible elements because they represent a tangible expression of change in the local context. This indicates a material understanding of capacity development that is relatively easy to control and to quantify. A linear, scientific understanding of capacity development limits what can be done and talked about when it comes to capacity development. Less visible aspects of capacity development like vision, strategy and values, which are located at higher levels of Kaplan's hierarchy, are generally neglected. Instead of challenging the vision and values of the partnership, the actors maintain the official ideology, notably through 'the marriage' theme. Consequently, the vision actually inhibits capacity development instead of supporting it.

However, despite the prevailing managerialist approach, there are also signs of practical wisdom, which has the potential to be further explored. NNGO representatives are, for example, aware of the importance of relations, they know that they lack knowledge about the local context, they show some awareness of value differences, and the NNGO elements of distributive leadership are appreciated by the SNGO respondents. SNGO members show some awareness about the distribution of power in the partnership, notably in the shadow theme 'the SNGO is not a capable organisation'. Likewise, both NNGO and SNGO members address the need to change mindsets among volunteers. All these elements address the higher level of Kaplan's hierarchy, but none of the actors use their awareness to initiate changes in roles and relationships, or to challenge the official ideology underpinning the partnership. Instead, they behave in a risk-averse way and stick to the official ideology, 'the marriage'. As long as the theme of the SNGO as the incapable partner remains in the shadows, actual capacity development in the SNGO will be difficult to achieve. The

partnership simply lacks phronetic leadership, whereby practical wisdom is mobilised in order to challenge institutionalised beliefs in the vision, values and perceptions of the necessary skills and resources. Instead of a pragmatic approach where the respondents try to answer the question ‘What is good, right, and just for everyone in this context?’, the prevailing capacity development principle is ‘What do we scientifically know to be effective?’

Our case study has implications for partnerships in practice. As partnerships mature, organisational and strategic complexity often increase, which actually seems to increase the need for phronetic praxis, instead of just sticking to managerialism. An alternative approach to capacity development that confronts shadow themes, is less power blind, and is more aware of value differences, could actually enhance the potential for capacity development at the higher levels of Kaplan’s hierarchy. To do so, partnerships must adopt ideologies of praxis and cultivate a language that can sustain practical wisdom.

Our study can be seen as a contribution to the pragmatic tradition in partnerships in development. The study suggests that the praxis approach can be a viable way to enhance and deal with opportunities for capacity development in partnerships, but it is beyond the limits of this study to fully test the potential of an alternative, more praxis-based approach. Future action-based research could explore such an approach in more detail and seek to clarify the extent to which it could replace or supplement managerialism.

Supplementing managerialism may be a more viable path than replacing it, since strong forces are likely to uphold the institutional structures of managerialism for a long time to come. Donor organisations are still urged to maintain their belief in managerialism, because Northern governments increasingly hold them accountable for the effective use of funds.

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