

AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

General consensus in the development community is that, in order to ensure a just and equitable future for all people on the planet, there are immense challenges to be overcome. This agreement extends further: to accept that in order to address these challenges successfully, civil society organisations are compelled to be collaborative and act in a mutually reinforcing manner. This acceptance is normally articulated in the catch-all concept of 'partnership'. This often (mis)used term has come to encapsulate a range of cooperative behaviours, all the way from donor/implementer relationships to loose alliances and platforms. This generic use of the term is often cause for confusion.

So what does partnership mean in the real world? How different is the conceptualisation of partnership from its application? What facilitates 'good' partnership? This learning paper explores these and other questions from the perspective of the Oxfam Australia (OAU)-led program in South Africa. It reflects on the articulated model of partnership put forward by Oxfam globally, how the model has been applied in South Africa, and how the experience of implementing the model influenced its evolution to what it is in 2015. It examines four issues: power, contestation, trust and adaptive practice, and finally, it puts forward an emergent partnership model drawing on learning from OAU program practice in South Africa.

CONTEXT: OXFAM AND PARTNERSHIP

Oxfam understands partnerships as mutually empowering relationships, which are aware of power imbalances and focused on mutual growth, organisational development, institutional strengthening and above all, on achieving impact. We believe that programs implemented in partnership increase the collective knowledge, skills, reach and experience applied to an issue or challenge. Programs implemented in partnership are likely to be better at encouraging and enabling the real participation and investment of people living in poverty...¹

This rather long and ambitious statement is the definition of partnership as understood by Oxfam globally. The definition, as is the case with most international non-governmental organisations' (INGO) definitions, is difficult to fault as it gives explicit recognition to power, and has a strong focus on impact. This definition is further supported and expounded on through a set of core Partnership Principles, which further recognise that multiple forms of relationships exist, determined by contextual factors:

At Oxfam, we strive to ensure that these principles underpin all our work – with local communities, with local civil society organisations, with other actors – both in funding and non-funding relationships. While differences in context may require different approaches, we strive to ensure that all of our work respects these six Partnership Principles:

- Shared vision and values
- Complementarity of purpose and value added

¹ Oxfam Great Britain, February 2012, *Working Together*, Prepared for Oxfam International, 3

- Autonomy and independence
- Transparency and mutual accountability
- Clarity on roles and responsibilities
- Commitment to joint learning.²

The principle statements are again comprehensive, rational, inoffensive and easy to agree with. From the idea that we work with those with whom we have ‘shared vision and values’, to notions of ‘transparency and mutual accountability’, and ensuring ‘autonomy and independence’, there are no points of contestation here. This would be the same if we interrogated any INGO’s partnership principles, policies, charters or whatever form or framework used to articulate how they would like to work with others. Why then experientially, is the state of partnership in the development sector so poor? Why does the practice of partnership meet with such criticism?

THE CHALLENGES OF PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

As touched on above, these principles seem intuitive and should be easy to adopt. They provide a positive and empowering backdrop against which partnerships can be developed. They are in line with the broader ideological rights-based frameworks that guide the development sector. They are rational. However, these principles do not sufficiently take into consideration the ‘human’ factor – accepting that relationships/partnerships exist between *people*. These principles and frameworks treat organisations as completely rational agents unbound by emotion.

In practice, the rational agent, totally compliant with stated governance and operational principles, does not exist. Relationships, and because of this, inter-organisational partnerships, are complex and can often be fraught with emotion. Development organisations have to accept that partnerships, whether these exist between individuals or organisations, are difficult and dynamic. Partnerships are driven by self-interest and gain, are sometimes temporary and expedient, and are neither value nor power-neutral.

Because of this, partnership principles and the resultant practice they inform have to address issues of power, contestation, trust and complexity for all parties involved in a partnering arrangement. It is insufficient to assume that partnerships will work because they are well articulated in formal contracts or (on the other extreme) guaranteed by long-term relationships. Partnerships require active management, constant interrogation and regular reinforcement. The formation and management of a partnership is an active exercise. The following sections examine the limitations of the Oxfam Partnership Principles based on the experience of delivering the OAU program in South Africa.

Shared vision and values

These shift and change over time. The ideals, principles and issues that bring organisations together into a partnership in the beginning may become less compatible over time. This is

² Oxfam Great Britain, February 2012, *Working Together*, Prepared for Oxfam International, 3

natural. In practice it is rare that the commonality of vision and values is ever assessed beyond the primary partnership agreement being reached. While an extraordinary amount of time and energy is put into building commonality in the beginning of a program, very little, if any energy is put into revisiting these through the lifespan of the partnership.

Complementarity of purpose and value added

Value is often determined by the dominant partner, with the lesser partner being assigned into roles that complement the achievement of the stronger partner's ambition and goals. Control of resources – financial and intellectual – is a critical factor that allows dominance in the partnership. It is often the case that one organisation or a cluster of organisations within the partnership comes to dictate the agenda and actions of all members.

Autonomy and independence

Power differentials always exist in partnerships but often go unacknowledged or ignored because of the discomfort many development organisations have with the idea of having 'power over'. As a result, many development partnerships suffer low levels of accountability. The excuse – of respecting autonomy and independence – often subverts accountability.

Transparency and mutual accountability

At the best of times, achieving transparency is difficult without extremely high contact between partners. Given time and resource constraints, the practice of accountability is far more compliance oriented than is generally accepted. Organisations are straining under the weight of cascading and increasingly complex compliance processes being snuck into the sector under the guise of the accountability agenda. Mutuality is also not particularly well practiced, with these masked compliance practices favouring the more powerful parties in the relationship.

Clarity on roles and responsibilities

This is probably the easiest of the principles to achieve. However, in many instances, role definition (and the consequent resourcing) is a point of contention. Partners with higher workloads often feel like they carry the burden of delivery without a fair share of the resources. While roles and responsibilities are often made explicit, they are sometimes not accepted and remain a point of contestation and conflict.

Commitment to joint learning

What learning means is often poorly described, and practiced in a way that is extractive and instrumental, in favour again of the larger, more powerful partners. Learning is undertaken to meet a compliance need and very rarely embedded into strategies and plans. Events and documentation are set up and run as proxies for learning. Joint learning is highly reliant on mutual trust and respect and the valuing of all insights. In practice though, stronger partners, looking for bigger impacts, overlook the insights emerging from others' practice.

The examples above, point to the centrality of power in partnerships, to the need to invest in trust building and to manage relationships actively. To build better, stronger partnerships,

development organisations have to become more conscious of the power implicit in their status and reputation, manage the overt power arising from their resources access and size more effectively, and contribute to the formation and development of robust relationships.

PEOPLE, POWER AND PRACTICE

The following sections reflect on the issues described in the introduction: power, contestation, trust and adaptive practice, and how these manifest in the partnership relationship. Drawing on the experience of the OAU program in South Africa, the cause of these issues and 'emergent principles' derived from practice are discussed. This is then followed by a section that describes the origins and experiences that influenced the partnership model and practice.

Power

Organisations like Oxfam are powerful. Whether they choose to accept it or not, INGOs, because of their reputation, access and the resources at their disposal, are more powerful than the majority of partners they work with. Because of the factors described in the previous sentence, this power differential can be considered normal, however, INGOs are deeply uncomfortable with having 'power over' others, and, because of this discomfort, tend to reinforce the self-belief that, because of their stated principles, their relationships are power neutral.

This is far from the case. The power differential that exists between the staff of INGOs and local organisations is real. In order to deal with it effectively, power has to be consciously managed. Without a consciousness of ones own power, awareness of the effects of having 'conferred power' and actively managing partnerships, staff run the risk of developing practice that is paternalistic and condescending. The risk is that INGO staff 'give away' power or act in solidarity with those organisations they see (or will not acknowledge) as less powerful than themselves, despite disagreeing with the choices and strategies of their partners. Development partners have to be willing to confront each other on the issues, to engage in robust debate, and to agree to disagree should it be necessary. Healthy power relations are mediated by critical reflection on practice and a consciousness of action and consequence.

Contestation

A central feature of a healthy partnership is the willingness, ability and freedom to disagree. Contestation is important in that it allows ideas to be tested and refined, and sheds light on the core beliefs of the partners. In the real world, bad partnership arrangements persist because of a hesitance to engage in robust debate. Partnership managers often lack the courage to engage in difficult conversations primarily because of a discomfort with power.

As discussed above, a refusal to engage a partner as an equal, without fear or favour, or to respect their ability to formulate arguments and engage in robust debate around issues that matter, is paternalistic. Partners should consult regularly and without fear, and should be

open to a contestation of ideas. Contesting ideas is critical to the maintenance of a developmental partnership that results in mutual growth and benefit.

Trust

Having trust and mutual respect for every member of the partnership is an important enabler for developing healthy power relations. This trust and respect is built over time – it does not happen overnight and does not emerge from a contractual relationship. Respect and trust are earned through contact, consistency of engagement and the willingness to speak directly and openly to one another. High levels of trust support a culture of transparency and accountability.

Adaptive practice

With the above preconditions in place, the practice of partnership review is strengthened. Organisations and individuals who have trust in each other will be better placed to have robust conversations about common purpose; demand their autonomy and independence; contest ideas and thereby enhance learning; and most importantly, ensure mutual accountability. While the establishment of the first three pillars takes time and are often influenced by changes in the operating environment outside of the partnership's control, regular joint review and consultation embedded in the partnership's ways of working makes the breakdown of partnerships less likely. Joint, regular review is central to the maintenance of healthy partnerships. From the above, a clear principle emerges: honest joint reflection and problem-solving has to be seen as both a consequence and a driver of strong partnerships.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL IN SOUTH AFRICA: EXPERIENCES AND INFLUENCES

The partnership approach that was documented for the final phase of the OAU program in South Africa emerged organically from the experience of implementing a program and working in partnerships with a wide range of South African civil society organisations (CSO) for over more than twelve years. Partnership, as understood by the program, describes the complex relationship that exists between OAU in South Africa and the civil society organisations it collaborated with in the delivery of the program. The idea of partnership and partnership formation encompassed the range of interactions, commitments and expectations that existed in the bi- and multilateral relationships that constituted the program partnership. Partnership was not considered a static notion.

The OAU program placed high value on the relationships with partner organisations. More than just contractual arrangements, partner organisations were engaged through people. Relationships were managed through high levels of personal contact; strengthening individual relationships between multiple staff; and regular engagement with all parts of OAU operations.

An important process that supported this was the Partner Orientation meeting. Held on a regular basis, the meetings were designed to introduce new partners to the OAU team and each other. This was to ensure that compliance requirements and procedures were clearly understood, but more importantly to lay the groundwork so that people (both Oxfam staff and partner CSO staff) developed positive relationships bilaterally with OAU, and multilaterally with other partners. These strong interpersonal relationships (beyond just email, telephone and meeting-based contact) that were reinforced over time were critical to the way the OAU team managed its partnerships. Having multiple connection points between organisations and OAU was a distinct enabler of transparency and trust.

Partner-led Programming

Partnerships were carefully constructed to meet the ambition and strategic vision of the program, which wherever possible, was co-created. Through ongoing analysis and sharing in consultation meetings between the members of the partnership, OAU was able to keep pace with the shifting development environment in South Africa. More than only using the external analysis, the needs articulated by communities through OAU's partner organisations formed an integral part of strategy development and testing undertaken by the program.

For example, in 2007 the OAU program was still largely focused on HIV and AIDS response, with an emergent area of work focused on food security and livelihoods for HIV-affected households. One partner, Operation Upgrade (OpUp), was delivering an innovative HIV and AIDS prevention program through the rollout of an Adult Basic Education and Training program (ABET) for women living in the rural uMkhanyakude District in KwaZulu-Natal province. OpUp had long realised that access to food³ was important for the successful delivery of education programs and had worked with the women's ABET groups to start a vegetable growing project to supplement household nutrition.

After some work by OAU to assess emergent climate change impacts, OpUp approached OAU to assist with what they thought was a humanitarian crisis – water access was poor and impacting on households' ability to grow food. The subsequent assessment conducted by an OAU humanitarian team highlighted the fact that by all technical definitions, the uMkhanyakude District was experiencing a drought. This analysis and consequent small-scale water-harvesting project, established in partnership with OpUp, went on to form the basis of a five-year Australian Government funded program to improve hygiene and sanitation in South Africa. OpUp and other partners' lobbying efforts greatly influenced the OAU country strategy to respond to an emergent issue in South Africa. The willingness of OAU to put forward some of its own contingency funds had long-term positive implications for the program.

³ OpUp embarked on this area of work for two reasons: (i) poorly fed learners struggled with concentration levels in classes; and (ii) women were largely responsible for feeding their families and being in class used time that they would normally use to collect and prepare food. A cheap, nutritious easy-to-access food source had to be developed and they partnered with Rotary International to develop low cost food tunnels.

This example of joint reflection and adaptive practice, provided a much needed short-term intervention into a community, improved the contextual understanding of OAU and the rest of the partnership and gave rise to a new area of programming that has subsequently proved critical to the South African development context. The OAU approach, to limit their expert status (and thereby mediate inherent power) and elevate partner experiences as serious programming questions, allowed for a more nimble, almost prescient⁴, approach to programming.

Building Coherence – Filling Gaps

The partnership was always viewed as more than the sum of its constituent members. At peak, the OAU team managed a total portfolio of 46 contracted partners and a host of strategic partnerships and alliances with coalitions, universities, think tanks and research institutions, as well as a smattering of government agencies, private sector companies and individual consultants. Analysis of the partnership was undertaken on an ongoing basis to ensure it was shaped to remain relevant and achieve impact.

This analysis, for instance, resulted in the partnership expanding to include new actors who provided specific thematic or technical input into the partnership. This was the case when CREATE and RAPCAN joined the partnership in 2012 to support the development of disabilities inclusion and child protection policy development. Both are now documented as models of good practice, have significantly influenced the take up of the policies within the program, and provided traction for these organisations to use the materials, concepts and processes to extend similar work into the development sector in South Africa.

Over the course of the program, a number of partnerships have been terminated for a variety of reasons. These ranged from poor performance to a divergence in terms of program approach and ideology. In some instances, OAU saw partnerships being renewed after a time. This was a result of partners correcting operational issues and improving compliance and delivery, but also in relation to program strategy intersections. For example, Project Empower's relationship with OAU ended after they, like CREATE and RAPCAN, had assisted partners to develop HIV and AIDS workplace policies⁵. When the Disaster Risk Reduction program was started, the partnership was renewed to bring much needed insight into the living conditions of young women in informal settlements – an area of specialisation held by Project Empower (PE). Combined with contributions from Refugee Social Services (RSS) and Sophakama, PE's perspective provided the OAU program with the opportunity to explore formative work in urban programming. Much of this work has gone on to be quoted in a number of Oxfam documents and an external collection of papers dealing with resilience and urban programming⁶.

⁴ OAU, had it continued programming, would have been well positioned to respond to the severe drought conditions experienced in South Africa in 2015/2016.

⁵ Oxfam Australia. 2008. Case Study 9: Building Positive Organisations through Policy Development, Durban, South Africa

⁶ Twigg, J. 2015. Good Practice Review 9: Disaster Risk Reduction, Commissioned by Humanitarian Practice Network, Managed by Humanitarian Policy Group, Available from: <http://odihpn.org/resources/disaster-risk-reduction>

Some of the more interesting outlier partnerships were not within the program itself. For example a partnership with the Health Economics HIV/AIDS Research Division (HEARD), a research centre based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, to conduct research on inequality and mentor a group of university graduates in order to develop a contextual analysis for the program greatly enriched the partnership strategy. Organisations like Her Rights Initiative (see *'Partnerships within partnership'* section below) and Equal Education (EE) who were not part of the formal partnership, provided valuable anchoring points for some of our partners' advocacy work.

Healthy relationships are sometimes typified by their utility, i.e. people are able to engage with each other as per their need and the PE example, perhaps most effectively, demonstrated this. Relationships end and, provided the relationship is healthy, can be re-established when needed. Not all relationships were formal (as described later in the paper) but were deliberate, to ensure the strengthening of the overall partnership. The partnership model was deliberately heterogeneous, allowing the entry and exit of a variety of partners as per the needs of the program.

Unlikely partnerships – Interesting Outliers

Diversity of partnerships was important to program success. Having a mix of partners with a range of thematic foci and differing approaches and models allowed for a broad range of actions to be undertaken. This also supported critical reflection and learning: important areas of success and a marker of the OAU program.

In 2008, to further shape the work of the OAU program when it expanded into the Eastern Cape, a fairly unique partner was taken on. In recognition that youth unemployment was having significant impact on development programming in the province, Umzi Wethu, the skills development arm of the Wilderness Foundation in South Africa, was supported to integrate HIV and AIDS modules into the psycho-social support component of their program. It was thought that this particular partner would assist OAU to understand some of the challenges of working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in more formal training settings.

Support for Umzi Wethu (Umzi) came under quite strong internal criticism because, in one senior OAU leader's opinion, it was a 'boutique project' – reaching too few people to have impact. Umzi's impact on the overall program cannot be overstated though. Through its exploration of appropriate psycho-social support models for young people at risk, Umzi has provided invaluable insight, and, with the support of Oxfam to document and disseminate the Umzi model, has informed skills development programs across the country. Their strong focus on monitoring and evaluation, and their consequent understanding of the challenges facing the people they work with, resulted in HIV and AIDS awareness and support being extended to the families and communities from which the young people in their program are drawn. Umzi influenced the practice of the entire partnership to consider more deeply the social, environmental and cyclic factors that affect behaviour change programming, and

through the documenting and dissemination of their model, will hopefully go on to influence the broader sector as well⁷.

Partnerships within Partnership

Internal partnerships and alliances are a further feature of the partnership model. Partners are encouraged to work together on issues of common concern. These partnerships may be mutually reinforcing and ideologically aligned as in the case described in the sexual and reproductive health rights example below, or they could be reinforcing and ideologically contested as in the food security example. The partnerships are exemplified by high levels of trust and a willingness to engage in robust debate on methods and approaches.

Justice and Women (JAW), Her Rights Initiative (HRI) and AIDS Legal Network (ALN) all worked together to address issues of women's sexual and reproductive health at a local, national and regional level. With ALN acting as the primary advocacy partner in the region, and JAW and HRI both gathering local evidence and developing case studies in support of the policy influencing action, partners were better able to leverage local to regional action. The successful publication of a report on forced sterilisation of HIV positive women received widespread attention in South Africa and the region. This partnership within the partnership has gone on to include Project Empower (PE). It has also moved to include other issues, particularly relating to menstrual management in schools, Tholulwazi Uzivikile (TU) and OneVoice may also join their actions.

Farmers Support Group, Siyavuna and Biowatch are partners working in the food security and livelihoods sector. They work along the entire agricultural value chain, but with a strong focus on improving production methods. The partners hold divergent views on the agro-ecological approaches, but have still managed to find the room to work and consult each other on issues of common interest, while still debating and testing each other's methods and approaches in a collegial and critical learning environment. This tension – the contestation of approach – has led to a much deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges that the various approaches provide for community and has allowed for a more varied set of tools and approaches to be compiled and made available to practitioners.

Contestation can only be useful in contexts where there are high levels of trust between parties. OAU, because of its long-term relationships with partners, occupied a position of trust and was therefore able to facilitate unlikely alliances and coalitions. Because of the reputation of dealing honestly and directly and being open to questioning, this role, as a broker/facilitator, was made much easier as partners were free to engage OAU individually

⁷ For access to each publication of the three part series go to:
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/an-extraordinary-journey-umzi-wethu-training-academy-for-vulnerable-youth-322346>
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-journey-continues-umzi-wethu-training-academy-for-vulnerable-youth-578596>
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/nurturing-through-nature-the-socio-economic-impact-of-umzi-wethu-on-rural-easte-600637>

or collectively in a robust and direct manner with a clear understanding of the decision-making frameworks and power structures which governed the relationships.

Learning Together is Important

Learning together is important. Despite this, many partnerships pay lip service to deep engagement on the questions and challenges they face. The OAU program approached learning in the partnership in an adaptive manner because of the experiences of failure in capacity building processes. One of the key changes in the way the program engaged partners in learning was to abolish mandatory training. Partners were invited to participate in processes as they saw the need to. This decision, over time, resulted in increased participation, as partners selected processes and events that they felt had value for them. Partners were not penalised for non-attendance, and wherever possible, process designs for learning included offsite training, as well as onsite support delivered as per partner-specific needs.

Learning in the partnership was embedded in a range of processes, principle among these being the 'Link & Learn' events. These were designed to focus on specific learning emerging from the partnership. The Link & Learns were designed as showcase events in which partners shared their knowledge and experience, as well as being an exposure opportunity, during which outside organisations presented their thinking and learning on critical issues facing the development sector. In 2009, the partnership hosted its first all partner Link & Learn to attempt to increase interaction between partners, many of whom would not have been in contact with partners outside of their program specialisation. Called 'Intersections', the event had a strong skills building component (in this case social media); the larger pool of partners generated intense debate, stimulated a range of new connections and collaborations, and provided the OAU team with valuable insight into the future needs of partners.

Over time, and because of the increased opportunity for contact, partners also became more confident, defined their intra-partnership networking opportunities, and tapped into a pool of dedicated resources to support these. This practice later expanded to the joint identification of external learning opportunities and prioritisation, with the OAU office playing a facilitative/support role. The practice of capacity building evolved alongside partner priorities and interests, to have elements of general awareness raising/knowledge sharing, skills development and specific tailored interventions delivered by partners to each other, as well as through external consultancies.

Building Capacity

In the later stages of the partnership, capacity building was highly targeted with, for example, only a small group of partners self-selecting to participate in succession planning and governance support work. Many organisations had been worked with over a number of years, to develop second tier leadership and to improve board governance but only ten of the partners, based on the maturity and urgency of the issues, opted to participate in the support program. Technical training – on issues of financial management or fundraising

proposal development for instance – was provided directly to individual partners using highly customised approaches because their needs were specific.

Capacity building also came to be seen as iterative and cumulative, with partners being provided with training as they or Oxfam saw the need, and providing exposure to more complex ideas, methods or approaches as the organisations matured. A central feature of this approach included peer learning and exchange within the partnership (this was especially true for partners working on HIV and AIDS, DRR and livelihoods) and creating opportunity to engage organisations external to the partnership through exchange visits and learning trips. Wherever possible, capacity building support was provided to mesh with the partner's program activities; thereby minimising the impact on their day-to-day operations and ensuring that the contextual, practical application of their learning was reinforced through action.

While this was the preferred approach, as the OAU program took on more technical and donor driven contracts, with highly prescribed implementation plans, and the model lost some of its agility. Central features of the capacity building model were retained however. By ensuring that the emphasis on the technical content was retained, through taking a firm stance on the approach and methodology – participatory, iterative action learning processes – results were maintained.

In all of the capacity building work, the OAU team were encouraged to learn with partners, often attending training session as participant monitors; it could be argued that as much value accrued to the OAU's organisational development as to partners. This practice, did much to 'level the playing field', contributing significantly to the team's ability to navigate and mediate power in addition to (by reflecting on their own learning limitations) supporting development of capacity building programs and processes that were more appropriate to participant needs.

The Unspoken – All Things Come to an End

Ending partnerships is never easy, but what was learned and applied over the years, was that they all had to be managed in as human a manner as possible. When problems were identified, OAU staff were tasked with opening a conversation with the affected partner to develop a solution, agree on corrective action and then to resource those actions. These had to be monitored and discussed on an ongoing basis, and when sufficient time and resourcing had been applied, a decision was made about continued partnership. Once an agreement to terminate a partnership was taken, a phasing out plan was agreed, with the driving factor being that the withdrawal of direct resourcing and support would have minimal impact on the partner's operations.

The decisions to terminate relationships have been partner-initiated as well as initiated by OAU. In the case of Fancy Stitch and the Centre for Positive Programming (CPP), partners approached Oxfam to indicate that the value of the relationship had decreased over time. Even when initiated by partners, the same careful exit strategy was followed. This speaks to

the high levels of trust enjoyed by OAU in South Africa, which is even more starkly illustrated in the example below.

A particular partner⁸ approached the office, suspecting fraud was being perpetrated by one of their senior staff members. This notification was both to ensure that the trust relationship was honoured, but also to ask for help resolving the matter. Under the guise of a program audit, and in agreement with the leadership of the partner organisation, OAU deployed an audit team to review basic practice and make improvement recommendations. Following this, and based on suspicions being confirmed, an external forensic audit was recommended, the cost of which was borne by OAU. The result of the audit was that charges were brought against the staff member in question, along with a summary dismissal.

Throughout this process, the partner remained in contact with OAU and made a commitment to act on findings, despite the potential negative consequences for their reputation. Given this willingness to do the right thing and the trust that existed in the partnership, the relationship was maintained and strengthened once resolution had been achieved.

Trust again features as a strong element in developing and maintaining healthy partnerships. Combined with a professional practice that demanded that exit processes were fair and, as important, seen to be fair, the OAU programme in South Africa was much better placed to work in the manner that it did – with a highly relational, flexible, trusting and human-centred model.

The sections that follow described the emergent model that begins to derive from the experience described above. Using a basic ecological framework as the basis for the model, some of the key elements are described through examples from the OAU practice.

AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIP

All viable ecologies contain a multitude of organisms, each with a particular function that, when functioning and in balance, ensures sustainability of the ecosystem. Each organism is part of a network of dependencies with inputs from one set of interactions or processes generating outputs that are in turn, necessary inputs for another part of the system, or even the generation of inputs into the preceding process. These complex webs of dependencies and interdependencies are essential for the health of the whole system which itself, may be part of a larger system.

Healthy ecosystems are self-correcting. Disturbances are eliminated over time, either through establishing a new point of equilibrium that allows the system to continue to function effectively, or through adaptation that allows the system to survive, albeit with an

⁸ The partner is not identified to retain confidentiality.

altered composition. Highly networked systems are not prone to collapse without significant disruption because, more often than not, they operate with high levels of redundancy. Many of the organisms in the network fulfil multiple and sometimes duplicate roles.

Partnership models that are built on the above ecological metaphor are potentially more robust, agile and sustainable than traditional approaches that are often linear and utilitarian. Using this approach, partnership formation and management becomes more of a dynamic and reflexive activity.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE PARTNERSHIP: SHAPING RELATIONSHIPS

The OAU partnership model, as used in the later years of the program, was founded on ecosystems thinking. It recognised that organisations, like their organic counterparts, are related to each other and interact in complex ways. In order to ensure a ‘healthy’ program, organisations of various kinds needed to be brought together in a partnership that mimicked natural ecosystems. Organisations, in order to grow and develop, needed to work together and be influenced by one another. Within this ecosystem, the OAU office itself occupied an active role and was also acted on/influenced in a very direct way.

Membership and Selection

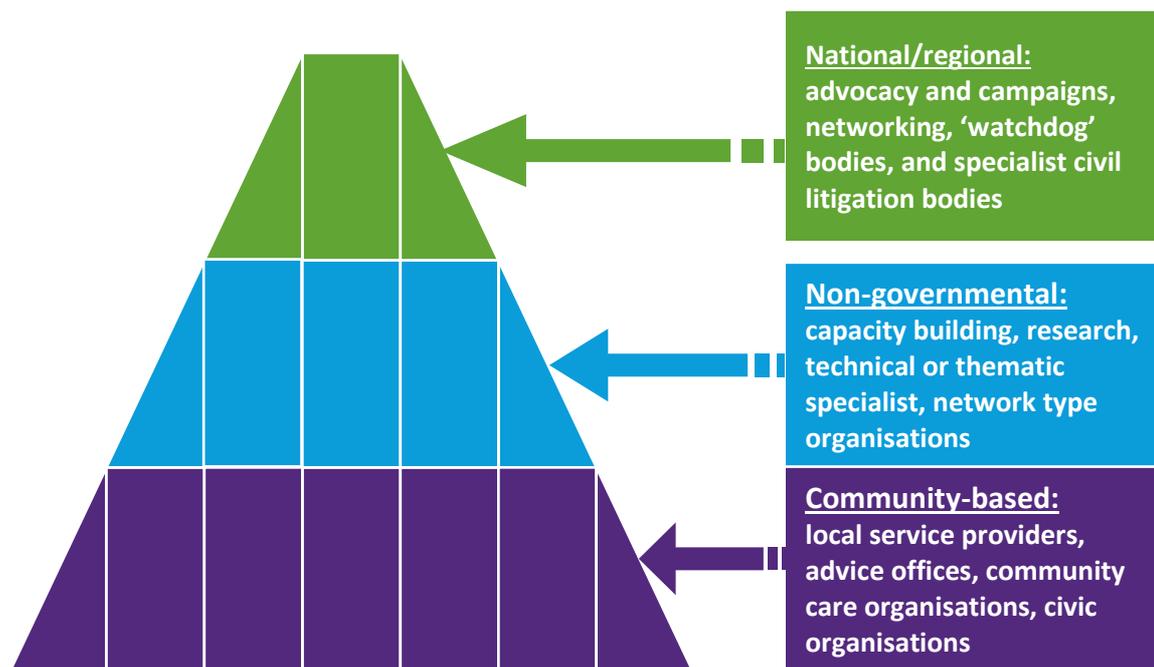
At its most basic, the partnership model could be described as a hierarchy, with community-based organisations (CBOs) at the base of a pyramid (see figure 1 below) and national advocacy organisations at the apex. An important, but often undifferentiated group of organisations, loosely termed non-governmental organisations (NGOs), were included in this description to ensure their role in the ‘ecosystem’ was not overlooked. This role, to actively facilitate information flows, relationship building and deliver essential capacity and information to the system, is central to the dynamism and sustainability of the ecosystem. And despite this critical role, these organisations are increasingly being overlooked in favour of nascent movements and ‘grassroots’ organisations. OAU considered it essential that the partnership it created was diverse and representative of the broad range of experiences of South Africans.

The hierarchical description should not influence the reader to think about the organisational forms (organisms) as having orders of importance. Like any natural ecosystem, all of these types of organisations are essential to the success of the partnership (ecosystem) as a whole. Ecosystems will have high levels of redundancy, i.e. many of the organisms will perform the same or similar functions, in order to maintain information flows. It is important to remember that it is the *functions* of the ecosystem which will need to be maintained and this is the analysis of utility that needs to be made when considering altering the membership (adding or removing partners).

“...program partnerships are deliberately diverse in order to ensure that a broad range of experiences, learning and skills can be harnessed and shared. While individual partnerships are important, the mix of partnerships across the program is critical to meeting the effectiveness and impact of the program⁹.”

Figure 1 below, describes the partnership approach for the No Longer Vulnerable program framework, highlighting this hierarchy, and inferring relative numbers and the shape of participating organisations:

Figure 1: Partnerships Framework¹⁰



This ecosystems approach was supported by a set of principles that were intended to stimulate more conscious partner selection given the experience of establishing partnerships was that little consideration was given to any selection criteria other than technical capacity. These principles were made explicit to ensure that partner selection was not a checklist exercise, and that in selecting partners we considered the whole program and its strategic intent (the ecosystem), ahead of the component parts (the organisms).

“...there is a strong bias towards support for community based organisations ... partners are also selected to ensure the program is diverse in terms of its geographical spread, the range of issues covered, the beneficiary groups they work with and the networks they are able to access and influence¹¹.”

⁹ Oxfam Australia. 2011. *No Longer Vulnerable Program Framework July 2012 – June 2015*, 16

¹⁰ Adapted from: *No Longer Vulnerable Program Framework July 2012 – June 2015*

Note: the term community-based organisation refers to the nature of the organisation’s program, not its registration. This term will then be used to refer to organisations whose programs are embedded in community, have a high level of local ownership and are generally staffed and managed by the people most affected by the issues.

¹¹ Oxfam Australia. 2011. *No Longer Vulnerable Program Framework July 2012 – June 2015*, 16-17

In recognition of power, it was also critical that the process of partnership formation was not one-way – that Oxfam did not ‘select’ partners in the strict sense of the word. Rather, the emphasis was placed on mutual acceptance and the conscious formation of a partnership in which all partners had clarified their expectations of each other and entered into the partnership with full knowledge of their roles and responsibilities. The partner orientation process, as described in previous sections, was central to this power mediation. Another feature of the model is that potential partners were therefore identified through a number of processes and there were multiple ‘routes to partnership’ as follows:

- “An extensive partnership mapping exercise is completed as part of the initial program design...
- Partner approaches Oxfam directly once the program is established and if they believe their work is aligned.
- Field staff identify potential partners once the program is established to fill technical or information gaps, to meet specific needs of marginalised groups not benefitting from the program or who have well established programs that can be enhanced through support from Oxfam¹².”

Beyond the above, OAU staff who engaged in partnership formation were also encouraged to consider the ‘personality’ of the organisations and how this might impact on relationships within the partnership. Responding to the principle that people came first and that as a consequence, relationships mattered, the impact of new partners on intra-partnership social dynamics had to be considered critically. In practice, the OAU team invested a significant amount of time in pre-partnership work.

Partnership Formation

Introducing new elements into a stable ecosystem will disrupt that system as the system will drive to a new point of stability. Disruption can be positive, leading to the establishment of new information pathways, the adaptation of the constituent components and potentially, to improved efficiencies and effectiveness of the systems as whole. Disruption can also be catastrophic, resulting in the system correcting to a point that is out of balance and toxic for all of its members. The introduction of new organisms (new partnerships) has to therefore, be very carefully considered and their introduction into the ecosystem (the partnership) carefully managed.

In the OAU experience, the establishment of formal relationships with new partners could take up to a year as several processes were undertaken before partners could be contracted, including: a series of site visits by a Program Coordinator to share information about Oxfam, its ways of working and the program; a capacity assessment to determine whether the organisation meets minimum standards for contracting and to identify capacity gaps which may need to be filled; the submission of a concept note by the partner which will be assessed and feedback given to complete a final proposal; participation in a partner orientation workshop in which the intention to partner was confirmed; and lastly proposal submission and appraisal.

¹² Oxfam Australia. 2011. *No Longer Vulnerable Program Framework July 2012 – June 2015*, 18

Throughout the formation of the partnership, it was made clear that both parties had the right to withdraw from the partnership at any point. Potential and existing partners were encouraged to constantly evaluate their relationship with OAU to test whether the strategic fit, ambition and values of the organisations remained in alignment. This was achieved through regular opportunities for sharing and learning together, though conversations during monitoring visits, and through the reconfirmation opportunity that partner orientation workshops offered.

Partnership Management

Because of the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of systems with high levels of complexity, active management of the system, and particularly information flows, are critical. Techniques for managing highly complex often rapidly changing systems rely on feedback loops: the ability to interrogate the system and receive feedback rapidly, as well as a willingness to intervene when the flow of information is interrupted.

As a consequence, communication flows between partners (in this case OAU was seen as a member of the partnership – a constituent organism in the ecosystem) was prioritised. Partners were encouraged to work with each other directly and to connect the partnership to others, without the need for an OAU interface. The overall partnership had to be:

“...designed to maximize learning amongst and between partners of varying skills level, experience and thematic expertise¹³.”

If this was achieved it was expected that:

“...a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the development landscape and the particular issues confronting South African society at any particular time [would] allow Oxfam and its partners to develop and test a shared understanding of the context in which programs are delivered¹⁴.”

Partnership management was an active process that was supported by regular contact and robust engagement on issues. Reflection and review was a multi-directional process in which OAU had to be equally accountable for its role and impact on the partnership. To ensure that review processes were not biased in favour of OAU, partners were surveyed on an annual basis to determine their levels of satisfaction with OAU practice. The annual Partner Satisfaction Survey provided insight into the quality and value of the OAU contribution to the partnership and allowed partners to voice criticism. Partners were also supported to meet with one another to discuss issues of partnership and to provide feedback directly to senior managers on issues they felt were important to raise.

¹³ Oxfam Australia. 2011. *No Longer Vulnerable Program Framework July 2012 – June 2015*, 17

¹⁴ Oxfam Australia. 2011. *No Longer Vulnerable Program Framework July 2012 – June 2015*, 17

Monitoring

As discussed in the previous section, the dynamic nature of complex ecosystems requires that feedback loops be kept as short as possible. Information that is accessed and processed regularly allows for appropriate interventions to stabilise the system. Whether these interventions are to dampen negative impacts or to reinforce positive impacts, the quality and regularity of information for ensuring the ecosystem is able to correct, is critical. Self-monitoring, feedback and response are important to the success and stability of the ecosystem.

Monitoring of partner progress in relation to the partnership aims and the 'health' of the partnership – the relationships – is an important feature of the OAU partnership model. In order to ensure that information was useful to the partnership and supported the achievement of common aims, monitoring was approached in a participatory manner, the basis of which was joint agenda setting for monitoring visits to guide these visits. OAU staff and the partner identified issues for discussion prior to a monitoring visit taking place. All monitoring visits included formal and informal interactions with management, staff and beneficiaries and were scheduled to ensure minimal disruption of the partners work. OAU staff were expected to visit the partners to see and sometimes participate in day-to-day organisational processes. Monitoring visits were not undertaken through pre-organised structured, showcase type field visits, rather visits formed part of a continuum of interactions through which partners shared information and concerns with OAU.

The progress of the joint work was managed through a high contact model, using the multiple entry points into each other's organisations, as well as the connections and relationships established during the partnership formation phase. Every opportunity had to be taken to strengthen inter-organisational connections between all members of the partnership, which contributed to the highly connected, agile, networked ecosystem that the partnership relied on to be successful.

Learning

All of the monitoring and feedback within a system such as the one described above, would have little to no utility if the information generated by the system did not affect the system itself. Self-correction is impossible without an assimilation of the information into the system to allow the system as a whole to adapt and evolve in response to triggers from the environment or to shifts and changes in the composition or efficiency of its constituent parts.

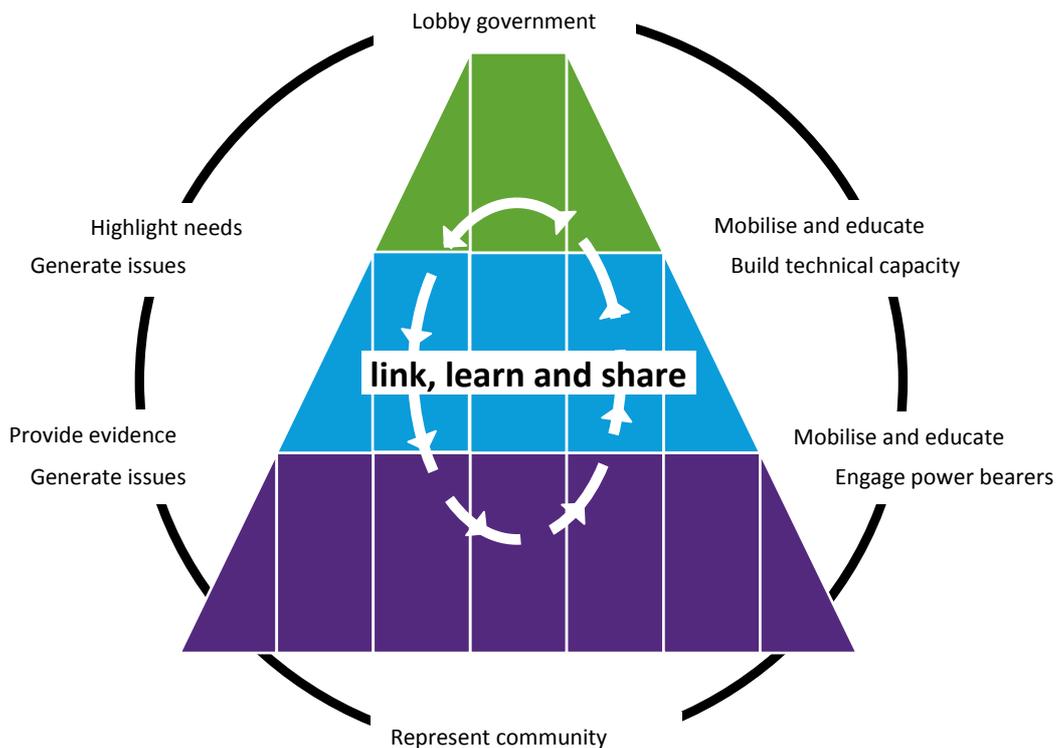
In the OAU partnership model, learning – individual and joint – allowed the partnership to adapt and evolve and to respond to the shifting environment. The responses to this learning, the assimilation of the results of actions, helped the partnership remain responsive and relevant. Through approaches that promoted joint learning, a common understanding of the issues allowed for more agile programming models, as partners developed an analysis of environmental impacts and their responses together. This in turn supported rapid, scaled up action in response to the shifting environment:

“The cross partner[ship] collaboration has a multiplier effect in that it supports the broad and rapid dissemination of learning and through this the adaption of methodologies and approaches and better integration of programs and services across partner organisations¹⁵.”

The diagram below describes the idealised learning and collaboration processes supported by the partnership model. Again a hierarchy is described, although in practice the model would be far better described by a complex multi-dimensional matrix, with non-adjacent, multidirectional relationships.

To better illustrate the flow of learning and information in a cycle, the diagram assigns a set of functions to each of the types of organisations used, to illustrate the membership above. In practice, these organisations would not be bounded by these simple roles as they would almost inevitably fulfil multiple roles and have broad sets of skills and relationships upon which they could draw. They would, as described previously, have built in redundancies that will allow the system to remain stable.

Figure 2: Learning and Collaboration in the Partnership Model



Much of the practice described in this section has come about as a result of trial and error. The partnership model and practice has been developed iteratively and with a certain level of measured risk-taking. To some extent, this process of developing the partnership model would not have been possible if the elements of good partnership had not been in place to some degree to begin with. What has driven the model to the point of high functionality though was the realising of the limitations of traditional partnership management

¹⁵ Oxfam Australia. 2011. *No Longer Vulnerable Program Framework July 2012 – June 2015*, 17

approaches and then consciously taking the risks and working with the learning to improve and refine the approach.

The introduction of (eco)systems thinking and the revelations of adaptive management's iterative approaches provided the much needed theoretical underpinnings to deepen the understanding of partnerships as ecosystems, and to support the development of a practice to match the highly complex environment and relationships that OAU in South Africa had to work in and with.

VALUE ADDITION

At a glance, the model described seems to present a value for money challenge. High contact, highly relational partnership approaches cost money and time. Effectiveness, if measured against the original program design, would be poor if the program partnership responded to every bit of stimulus and feedback it received. Uncertainty and a lack of focus are not good for the achievement of objectives. A range of critiques could and can be levelled at the approach. So what would we do to respond to these points?

A Response to Power

The model deals with power explicitly. It recognises that power is a shifting and dynamic force that enables the network. It recognises that institutional and hierarchical power are better mediated in the network, giving weighting to technical expertise, experience and insight-prioritising learning and information flows as key enablers for the success of the partnership. It increases accountability, by forcing the partnership managers to reflect on the dependencies and interdependencies of their objectives with the rest of the partnership; it compels partners to engage the system to advance their own agendas, to listen and respond to opinions and information and to act in the interests of the whole.

Contestation

Learning in a non-hierarchical system is driven by contestation. With no clear primacy, i.e. no member of the partnership being more important than any other, a culture of debate and interrogation of ideas is easier to facilitate. Partners with differing approaches and ideologies are able to work in the same system in support of a common agenda with their difference and diversity adding to the whole. Rather than this difference being seen as a distraction, it should provide opportunity for deeper, more robust debate that ultimately improves rigour. Not only that but, the space enables comparative learning, allowing partners to test a variety of approaches and methods in parallel and, through a supportive learning agenda and strong trust relationships, to critically assess successes and failures.

Trust

The partnership is founded on trust and positive relationships. It is through these relationships of trust that higher levels of accountability can be achieved. It is within a trusting environment that innovation can be fostered. Trust is a foundational value to promote an entrepreneurial culture in which failure is seen as a normal and intrinsic

component of the learning cycle. Trust is built over time and through relationships with people, a key facet of this approach.

Adaptive Practice

Take measured risks, fail fast, learn fast, adapt and start again. The age of linear programming is gone. Working in complex environments requires the construction of partnerships that mimic environmental complexity. It requires that partnerships be agile and responsive to change and that all learning be incorporated into the partnership quickly. Managing complex partnerships in complex environments relies on management practice that is not limited by a fear of failure.

For one, this ecosystems approach to partnership is entirely focused on the achievement of outcomes. The dynamic nature of the approach allows for a deep interrogation of the program trajectory and how this contributes (or doesn't) to the achievement of the partnership goals and, more importantly forces the partnership managers to act in response.

CONCLUSION

Not much of what is presented in this paper is new or original. It is not intended to provide impetus for a rapid scale up of the partnership models currently being used. In fact, the development sector as a whole seems to be drifting quietly (as it does) into this territory. The territory in which the absolutes of development theory do not hold and in which practitioners accept the complexity of the real world and approach the challenges we face in more patient and thoughtful ways. The model and ideas in this paper are borrowed from a range of places, of which very few are citable. It's a paper based on observation, but more importantly, it's a paper that represents a distillation of an experience of many people across nearly two decades of programming in South Africa.

What this papers is intended to provide is the first sight of a praxis that may or may not inform current and future theory. It puts forwards a model that is human-centred, highly reliant on the relationships between people. It asks practitioners to be more adventurous and at the same time more thoughtful and conscious of how they work. It asks that practitioners be more hurried and more patient. It asks that individual relationships be placed first and that the interest of the whole be advanced.

It is much like life itself.



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