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Decision Making in Partnerships for Development: Explaining the Influence of Local Partners

Willem Elbers1 and Lau Schulpen1

Abstract
This article examines decision making in the partnerships between three private aid agencies and their local partners in Ghana, India, and Nicaragua. Drawing upon a mixed methodology, the article maps the relative influence of these partners vis-à-vis the agencies and reveals the processes underlying decision-making outcomes. Three main findings are advanced: (a) Institutional rules regulate per topic the extent in which partners can participate in the decision making, ranging from exclusion to full decision-making authority; (b) four clusters of decision-making topics were identified reflecting the different degrees to which partners are allowed to participate in the decision making; and (c) while partners’ ability to influence decisions above all is affected by the institutional rules, some have more influence than others depending on their organizational capacity and their respective project-officer.

Keywords
NGOs, partnership, power, decision making, private aid agencies

Partnership has been the preferred type of institutional relationship between Northern and Southern nongovernmental development organizations since the 1970s. Emerging initially as an expression of solidarity between the global North and South (Fowler, 2000), partnership now is regarded as essential for ensuring local ownership of

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development activities, linking it directly to the effectiveness and sustainability of nongovernmental development aid (Ashman, 2001; Lister, 2000). In addition, the legitimacy of private aid agencies became intertwined with the notion of partnership due to the claim that they, as opposed to bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, are able to have high-quality relationships with Southern counterparts (Fernando, 2007).

Yet critics have stressed a gap between the prevailing rhetoric and reality of partnership. Since the 1990s, a range of studies have pointed out that North–South relationships in private development aid are characterized by power asymmetries (Ebrahim, 2002; Fernando, 2007; Hudock, 1995; Lister, 2000). As partnerships are based on resource transfer, they are said to invariably result in donor–recipient behavior. Doubts can thus be raised to the often claimed (enhanced) performance of nongovernmental development assistance (Ashman, 2001; Fowler, 2000). Edwards and Fowler (2002) pointed out that those private aid agencies that are unable to maintain equitable relationships with their Southern partners risk losing their legitimacy.

This article examines the power dynamics in the partnerships between three private aid agencies (Action Aid, Christian Aid, and Interchurch Organization for Development) and their local partners in Ghana, India, and Nicaragua. It poses two principal questions: (a) To what extent are the local partners of the three agencies able to influence decision making? and (b) What explains their relative influence? Overall, this article aims to improve our understanding of the power inequalities present in partnerships while offering tangible starting points for those private agencies wishing to enter into more equitable relationships.

**Partnership and Power Asymmetries**

Within private development cooperation, the term *partnership* usually refers to the relationship between Northern aid agencies and their Southern counterparts. Whereas the former provide financial and technical support, the latter are responsible for implementing development programs (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2004). Although no generally accepted definition exists, most authors argue that partnerships differ from other types of institutional relationships due to their value-based nature. Qualities commonly associated with partnership include shared goals, mutual influence, trust, and mutual respect (Fowler, 2000; Lister, 2000). Arguably, it is these values that are said to make partnerships more effective than other kind of relationships because they result in the creation of synergy. The latter, it is assumed, produces results that individual partners could not obtain (Fowler, 2000).

Since the 1990s, a range of studies delved deeper into the power asymmetries characterizing partnerships. Private aid agencies are known to unilaterally establish the partnerships’ governance structures (Crawford, 2003), determine local partners’ priority areas (Crawford, 2003; Lister, 2000), and define accountability requirements (Ashman, 2001; Ebrahim, 2002) and funding conditions (Ashman, 2001; Michael, 2004). Local partners’ resource dependence has been identified as the main source of such power inequalities (Ebrahim, 2002; Hudock, 1995; Lister, 2000; Michael, 2004).
However, greater power of private aid agencies does not render their local counterparts powerless. Local organizations are known to enlarge their room to maneuver through personal relationships (Baaz, 2005; Fernando, 2007), trust building (Mawdsley, Townsend, & Porter, 2005), the strategic use of discourse (Ebrahim, 2001; Hilhorst, 2003), the selective release of information (Ebrahim, 2002), and the private aid agencies’ need for success (Ebrahim, 2002). The latter show that partnerships to some extent are characterized by mutual dependence (Michael, 2004; Sanyal, 2006).

This article aims to further the existing literature on partnership power asymmetries by addressing two important gaps. First, it explicitly includes the institutional context of decision making that has largely been overlooked in existing studies. Institutional theory argues that the rules regulating actors’ participation in decision making directly contribute to, and maintain, the power asymmetries in institutional arrangements such as partnerships (Ostrom & Crawford, 2005; Scott, 2008). This insight is particularly important when identifying the barriers to more equitable relationships. Second, existing studies analyze partnerships power asymmetries in a general way, with little explicit emphasis on the actual range of topics over which power differentials manifest themselves and the degree of influence exercised. Consequently, they are not only characterized by a high level of abstraction but also offer few tangible starting points for those agencies striving for more equitable relations. This study seeks to overcome this limitation by using a mixed methodology new to partnership research.

**Influence in Decision Making**

In analyzing power dynamics in partnership, this study draws on the classic work of Dahl (1957) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962). They conceptualize power in terms of influence in decision making but offer alternative insights into how influence is exercised. Although the power debate has undoubtedly progressed since these classical studies and some might have add another layer or dimension of power (Arts & Van Tatenhove, 2004; Barnett & Duval, 2005; Clegg, 1989), we believe that many modern power theorists reproduce these classical approaches in their own frameworks. Giddens (1984, p. 15), for example, feels Bachrach and Baratz are right when distinguishing “two faces of power” that they represent “as the capability of actors to enact decisions which they favor on the one hand and the ‘mobilization of bias’ that is built into institutions on the other.”

For Dahl (1957) influence is the ability to prevail over another actor in decision making. He suggests that “A has power over B to the extent to which he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (pp. 202-203). In conceptualizing influence the focus is on observable conflict resulting from diverging preferences and interests of the actors involved in decision making. Dahl analyses influence by examining the outcomes of a series of concrete decisions in which participants have different preferences. The aim is to determine whose preferences eventually prevail or are turned down in the decision-making process (Lukes, 1974).
Bachrach and Baratz (1962) add that influence is not only exercised by prevailing in decision making but also by affecting the process of agenda setting. Influence then is also exercised by the exclusion of certain participants and issues from the decision-making arena. Preferences that participants cannot express never reach the agenda and do not become part of decision making. They thus add the importance of the decision-making process to Dahl’s focus on outcomes.

Participants may deliberately keep certain issues from reaching the agenda. This may be achieved by turning certain issues into a taboo, manipulating the norms, rules and procedures that regulate the agenda setting or forbidding certain participants from entering the decision-making arena altogether. Barach and Baratz (1962) also draw attention to the “rule of anticipated reactions” referring to situations where one participant is afraid to speak up against another for the fear that the latter will invoke sanctions against him. All these mechanisms have in common that they often remain hidden for outsiders who can only see the outcomes of decision making (Lukes, 1974).

Bachrach and Baratz (1962) have proposed that decision making in agenda setting may be assessed empirically by establishing whether participants have (overt or covert) grievances. Participants have open grievances when they overtly express their dissatisfaction with certain issues but are unable to get these grievances on the decision-making agenda. Covert grievances are those that have not been openly voiced and as such remain hidden. Once the grievances have been identified, the aim is to determine the specific mechanisms that keep them from reaching the agenda.

Method

Three private aid agencies were selected for this multiple embedded case study (Yin, 2003): Action Aid (AA), Christian Aid (CA), and Interchurch Organization for Development (ICCO). Table 1 highlights some of their main characteristics. The selection of the agencies was made on the basis of the following conditions: All three agencies (a) work on an international scale on a variety of themes with local partners in developing countries, (b) in their policy articles explicitly claim to strive for equitable relationships, and (c) have governance structures representing different degrees of decentralization. Young, Koenig, Najam, and Fisher (1999) suggest that private aid agencies using a decentralized governance structure are more likely to have democratic decision making. To improve the external validity of the findings, fieldwork was conducted in Ghana, India, and Nicaragua—countries that are known to have very different civil society sectors (Heinrich, 2007).

Empirically assessing partners’ influence in decision making first requires the identification of those topics on which partners’ preferences differ from their agencies or on which grievances exist. An initial literature review (yielding surprisingly few results) was complemented by open interviews with project officers (POs) of ICCO and leaders of Ghanaian NGOs during a pilot phase of the research, making the identification of key topics an integral part of the study. After several iterations, a level of saturation was reached resulting in a definitive list of 19 topics (see Table 2). During the fieldwork, the
respondents from the different countries consistently confirmed the relevance of the identified topics.

These topics served as the starting point of a survey conducted among partners and in-depth interviews with partners and agency staff. Whereas the survey mapped decision-making outcomes, the interviews captured the decision-making process. Data collection took place between February and September 2008. In total, 96 interviews were conducted with partners and agency staff, whereas questionnaires were administered among 25 ICCO partners, 21 AA partners, and 22 CA partners. The partner representatives interviewed and surveyed were those responsible for managing the relationships with the agencies. To improve sample representativeness, partners were selected on the basis of their thematic focus, size in terms of budget and staff, geographical location, and the length of the relationship with their agency. To strengthen the validity of the findings, anonymity was guaranteed to all who participated in the research.

### The Institutional Framework of Decision Making

Using the concept of “rules of the game” (Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1984), this section analyses how decision-making processes and outcomes are affected by the partnerships’ institutional frameworks. Though institutional arrangements have overlapping rules dealing with different aspects of actors’ (inter)action (Ostrom & Crawford, 2005),
they ensure stability by offering a framework within which concrete interactions can take place. In this article, the focus is on the actual rules in use related to decision making, thereby bypassing the distinction between formal (i.e., fixed and authorized in legal texts or documents such as contracts) and informal rules (i.e., “routines” of action established over time).

The rules governing the partnerships were reconstructed on the basis of in-depth interviews with agency staff and examined through the theoretical lenses of agenda setting and decision making. This analysis yielded two key findings. First, the rules were found to be unilaterally set by the agencies. Second, with all three agencies, four clusters of topics were ascertained representing four different degrees of participation. The first three clusters represent increasing opportunities for partners to participate in the decision making, starting with exclusion from decision making in Cluster 1 to

Table 2. Key Topics in Partnership Decision Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue area</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size of funding</td>
<td>The total amount of funding that partners receive from an agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period of funding</td>
<td>The time period over which partners receive funding from an agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding core costs</td>
<td>The use of agency funding for overhead costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>The thematic focus of a project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target group</td>
<td>The beneficiaries of a project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>The plan used to reach project objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project planning</td>
<td>The implementation time table of a project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity building</td>
<td>The activities aimed at strengthening a partner’s organizational capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation stakeholders</td>
<td>The stakeholders with which partners cooperate during project implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format financial report</td>
<td>The framework used for financial reporting to the agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format narrative report</td>
<td>The framework used for narrative reporting to the agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency narrative reports</td>
<td>The number of narrative reports that have to be submitted to the agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring Evaluation</td>
<td>The methodology according to which a project is monitored, the terms of reference used for evaluating a project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic areas of interest</td>
<td>The themes in the agency's policy framework that qualify for funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership policy</td>
<td>The rules regarding the rights, roles and responsibilities of the agency, and partners and the governance structure that underlies them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country strategy</td>
<td>The action plan stating how the agency seeks to achieve its objectives with partners at the country level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner selection</td>
<td>The choice of organizations at the country level with whom the agency cooperates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocation of funding</td>
<td>The distribution of agency funding to its partners at the country level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interviews conducted during the study.
decision-making authority in Cluster 3. The fourth cluster consists of topics on which participation in decision making is less consistent and varies from partner to partner. The clustering of AA appeared to differ somewhat from that of ICCO and CA (see Tables 3 and 4).

**Cluster 1: Exclusion From Decision Making**

The rules in this cluster in principle do not allow partners to set the agenda, let alone give them decision-making authority. Topics belonging to this cluster include the thematic areas of interest, partnership policy, partner selection, and the allocation of funding. In the case of AA, it also includes the period of funding and frequency of narrative reporting.5

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**Table 3. Partners’ Participation in Decision Making Within ICCO and CA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Topics in partnership decision making</th>
<th>Agenda-setting opportunity</th>
<th>Decision-making authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Thematic areas of interest, partnership policy, partner selection, allocation of funding</td>
<td>No/ad hoc</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Size of funding, period of funding, country strategy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Theme, target group, strategy, project planning, monitoring, and cooperation stakeholders</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Funding core costs, formats financial and narrative reports, frequency narrative reports, capacity building, evaluation</td>
<td>Yes/no</td>
<td>Yes/no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ICCO = Interchurch Organization for Development; CA = Christian Aid.

a. ICCO does not work with country strategies.

Source: In-depth interviews with agency staff.

**Table 4. Partners’ Participation in Decision Making Within Action Aid**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Topics in partnership decision making</th>
<th>Agenda-setting opportunity</th>
<th>Decision-making authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Thematic areas of interest, partnership policy, partner selection, allocation of funding, period of funding, frequency of narrative reports</td>
<td>No/ad hoc</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Size of funding, funding of core costs, format financial reports, country strategy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Theme, target group, strategy, project planning, cooperation stakeholders</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Formats narrative reports, capacity building</td>
<td>Yes/no</td>
<td>Yes/no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: In-depth interviews with agency staff.
Although the processes used by the three agencies to select their overall thematic areas of interest may differ, they select their thematic areas without involvement of partners. Instead, their choice is based on such factors as the experience and input of agency staff at the country level, the existing thematic focus of partners, and an analysis of new trends in the international development arena. As a PO of ICCO concludes, “It was an internal process. In the end we as ICCO took that decision without our partners” (interview, August 2, 2007). The same holds for decisions about the allocation of funding to the different partners.

The three agencies also do not involve their partners in the decision making related to their partnership policy. Although they may individually be allowed to comment on the contracts, partners can neither exert influence on the institutional policies dealing with mutual rights, roles and responsibilities nor on the governance structures underlying the partnerships.

With none of the agencies it is standard practice to consult existing partners when selecting new ones, although ad hoc consultations do take place (particularly with well-trusted partners). The final decision, however, remains in the hands of agency staff.

**Cluster 2: Opportunity to Set the Agenda**

The second cluster covers those topics where the rules allow partners to set the agenda but not decision-making authority. This includes the size of funding, period of funding, and the country strategy. In the case of AA, it also includes the funding of core costs and the format of financial reports.

Regarding the size of funding, the agencies authorize the budget. Partners, however, may have some room to negotiate if the agency feels “that the partner will really need the resources for doing the work” (interview, PO CA, August 12, 2008). Partners of ICCO and CA also enjoy some room to negotiate the time period for which they receive funding, whereas with AA, these periods are nonnegotiable. Whereas some partners of ICCO and CA have succeeded in getting 4 years of funding, their bargaining space usually is limited for periods longer than 3 years. In contrast, AA works with fixed funding time lines depending on activities. For example, partners involved in child-sponsorship activities are awarded longer contracts than those that are not.

In developing country strategies, both CA and AA take the input of their partners into account. Both agencies organize extensive consultations where partners provide input and act as a soundboard. Final decisions, however, remain with the agencies if only because “you cannot give your partner too much voting power because you will run the risk of going off track” (interview, Head of Programmes AA, April 30, 2008).

Although the country strategies have to fit within overall policy, both CA and AA allow some flexibility at the country level. In India, for example, the country strategies of CA and AA contain specific subthemes not present in their overall frameworks.
Cluster 3: Decision-Making Authority

The rules of the third cluster allow partners to set the agenda and take final decisions. Principally, this cluster relates to project content: theme, target group, strategy, monitoring, project-planning, and cooperation with stakeholders. All three agencies grant their partners decision-making authority on these topics as long as they stay within the boundaries of agency policy (e.g., thematic, target group, strategy specific). There is, however, a major difference between the agencies: AA’s working relationship with its partners is more “hands on” compared to that of ICCO and CA. In practice, this implies that partners of ICCO and CA operate more autonomously than those of AA.\(^6\)

A clear manifestation of this difference are the institutional roles and responsibilities of the agencies’ POs. POs of AA play a (pro-)active role in the implementation of their partners’ projects and meet their partners several times a year to discuss planning, strategy, and monitoring decisions. Besides, they are directly involved in capacity building of partners and communities and (co)initiate and manage campaigns. In contrast, POs of ICCO and CA are excluded from direct participation in project implementation. Their tasks are largely limited to disbursing funds and arranging technical assistance. Their contact with partners is less frequent and intensive resulting in a more distant relation.

Finally, AA differs regarding monitoring. ICCO and CA leave it up to their partners to do their monitoring as they see fit, although their staff might offer suggestions. AA demands a participatory reflection and review process that is also an instrument for ensuring downward accountability and in which people from the communities and staff from the partners and the POs of AA participate. As long as partners follow the basic principles of the participatory reflection and review process, they generally have a lot of influence on how and when to conduct them.

Cluster 4: Variable Application of the Rules

Finally, a cluster of topics was identified on which agency rules are flexible and some partners have more influence than others. Topics in this cluster include capacity building, the funding of core costs in the case of ICCO and CA, the formats of financial and narrative reports, and the frequency of reporting and evaluation.

In principle, all three agencies feel that partners are in the best position to identify their own capacity-building needs. Occasionally, however, agency staff may decide to intervene and impose their capacity-building preferences on partners. This happens when a partner’s PO perceives major shortcomings in a partner’s capacity and the partner is either unwilling to address these issues at all or is unwilling to address these issues according to the PO’s preferences.

In contrast to AA, ICCO and CA do not have explicit policy guidelines for funding core costs. With them, proposed core funding budgets need to be “reasonable,” meaning
that some partners enjoy more flexibility than others. AA-partners’ influence on the funding of core costs is much more limited due to strict policy guidelines.

None of the three agencies has fixed formats for narrative and financial reporting. In practice, some partners receive explicit reporting instructions and others write their reports without ever receiving comments. Interventions in reporting largely depend on the perceived quality of the reports. In the area of narrative reporting, all three agencies in principle have fixed requirements. ICCO and CA, however, allow some room for negotiation with some partners reporting biannually and others annually. AA’s requirements in this field are nonnegotiable, although there are differences between Ghana, where partners report quarterly, and India where biannual reporting is the norm.

Evaluation practices differ substantially between AA and the other two agencies making a comparison on this topic impossible. For ICCO and CA, partners usually have a major influence on the terms of reference and the choice of evaluators, although the agencies occasionally assume more control even against the wishes of partners. A PO of ICCO explains: “[With evaluations] this differs a lot per partner and per program. If there are not many problems, generally many things are left to the partner. If there are problems, then ICCO will take more initiative” (interview, August 5, 2008). With AA, the participatory reflection and review processes reduce the need for separate evaluations. In Ghana, evaluations are hardly conducted at all, whereas in India project reviews are conducted every few years by AA staff.

**Partners’ Perceived Influence**

Figure 1 presents the main outcomes of the survey amongst partners. The box plots capture partners’ perceived influence on the 19 key topics in decision making. The scale represents a continuum of the influence of partners vis-à-vis their agencies. At the low extreme end of the scale (1) the agency decides without any influence from the partner on decision-making outcomes, whereas at the high extreme end (7) partners decide without any agency influence. A score in the middle (4) means joint decision making and equal influence of both partners and agency on its outcome. Each box plot contains the minimum and maximum, the 25th and 75th percentiles, and the averages. Outliers and extremes are represented by circles respectively stars. The results from the different case countries are surprisingly similar (see the appendix for the findings at country level).

The four clusters of topics identified in the previous section are clearly reflected in the box plots. With all three agencies Clusters 1 through 3 represent increasing levels of influence in decision making, whereas partners’ influence on topics associated with the fourth cluster varies considerably. Figure 1 also shows that the clustering of ICCO and CA is identical and differs from that of AA. Several topics belonging to the fourth cluster with ICCO and CA (funding core costs, format financial reports, frequency narrative reports) are part of the first and second cluster of AA. In addition, the period of funding falls under the second cluster with ICCO and CA but under the first cluster with AA.
Figure 1. Partners’ perceived influence
Note: “Country strategy” in the case of ICCO and “internal monitoring” and “evaluation” in the case of AA are not included in the figure.
Source: Survey conducted among partners.
Topics belonging to the first cluster score a 2 or lower, meaning that with these topics partners perceive the agencies to make the final decision while having little to no influence on the outcomes themselves. This is consistent with the fact that the rules restrict participation in decision making to ad hoc agenda setting at best. With all three agencies, the topics in this cluster thus relate to their policy (thematic areas of interest, partnership policy, partner selection, and allocation of funding).

Topics in the second cluster have an average score around two with ratings ranging typically from 1 to 3 and a few partners ranking their influence with a 4. Partners’ influence here thus varies from no influence to equal influence. As the rules associated with the second cluster allow partners to set the agenda but deny decision-making authority, these findings suggest that some partners have less and others have more influence than allowed by the rules.

Topics belonging to the third cluster score on average ratings between 4 and 6. In principle, partners’ influence thus runs from joint decision making to full autonomy. Again, a few partners appear to have less influence than allowed by the rules. With all three agencies, the topics in this cluster relate to the project content (theme, target group, strategy, project planning, and cooperation with stakeholders).

As expected, topics in the fourth cluster vary considerably, with scores ranging from 1 to 7 on most topics. This then implies that partners’ influence varies between partners. It makes sense that this cluster is much larger in the case of ICCO and CA, considering that their rules are less strict and explicit than those of AA.

Toward Explaining Differences: Project Officers and Organizational Capacity

The variations between and within clusters begs the question as to what determines these differences. Discussions with partners and agencies revealed two central forces at stake here—the role of POs and partners’ organizational capacity.

POs act as mediators between agency-prescribed rules and partners who are required to abide them. They are responsible for interpreting institutional policies and ensuring proper translation into action; however, they also have to deal with the demands and needs of their partners. Whereas rules should ensure uniform behavior, POs’ actions are characterized by a degree of subjectivity as “you cannot eliminate the personal element” (interview, PO AA, September 15, 2008). There are thus differences in POs’ willingness to hand over decision-making authority and stretch the rules. The former then refers to POs displaying dominant behavior and controlling decision making, and the latter refers to PO’s preparedness to allow for exceptions to the rules. Experiences range from POs pursuing their own agendas to POs demonstrating “solidarity” when partners could not deliver or suffered financial difficulties. For POs themselves, trust is the key factor affecting their behavior toward partners. They are more inclined to interpreting rules flexibly when they trust a partner. Some of the well-trusted partners enjoy special privileges such as...
relaxed reporting requirements, more core funding, and more capacity-building support.

These privileges do not mean that partners are merely passive actors at the mercy of agency rules and POs. On the contrary, their leverage in decision making in Clusters 2 to 4 is also seen as related to their organizational capacity in which 4 types of resources are identified as crucial. The first critical resource is, not surprisingly, money (also see Ebrahim, 2002; Hudock, 1995; Lister, 2000). Agency staff and partners not only express the latter’s (in)dependence on their agency primarily in terms of money but interviews also clearly revealed that (a) partners able to raise funding from multiple sources are in a stronger position to negotiate; (b) the fear of losing funding acts as a barrier for raising ideas, preferences or criticisms; and (c) this fear about losing funds may bring some partners to reshape their organizational preferences to fall in line with agency priorities.

The second key resource is having a reputation of a credible organization that improves partners’ attractiveness toward funding agencies and hence their ability to raise funding and negotiate. Credibility is partly derived from organizational characteristics commonly associated with enhanced organizational legitimacy (e.g., ideology, membership, board composition, and linkages with the grassroots level). Furthermore, it is associated with the ability to deliver results and to be accountable. In effect, in all three case countries, partners with a strong reputation had in fact funding agencies coming to them and not the other way around. The underlying idea of symbiotic relationships (see Michael, 2004; Sanyal, 2006) was clearly explained by a CA-partner: “We do believe that Christian Aid needs us as badly as we need them. With our work we give them a lot of visibility, particularly compared to some of their other partners. This is what gives us power” (interview, September 24, 2008).

The third critical resource identified is knowledge and expertise. A partner without a well-defined vision and clear-cut ideas is not in a position to defend its organizational agenda. Besides, not only money but also knowledge and expertise are needed for all operations and thus for reaching and sustaining a position in which one can have leverage in decision making. Of particular importance then are, according to interviewees, knowledge of donor trends, thematic knowledge, and skills in such fields as (report) writing, research, management, and accounting.

Finally, the size of a partner is identified as the fourth critical resource. Large organizations are generally attractive to the agencies because their large outreach enables them to make a significant impact. In addition, being associated with a large partner improves the agencies’ own visibility. This coincides with the findings of Michael (2004, pp. 24-25) who also points out that large organizations are attractive due to their ability to absorb large amount of funding while spending relatively low amounts on support, monitoring, and evaluation.

Looking more closely at these capacity issues as explanations for differences in partners’ influence, it is important to again point at the variation between AA and CA/ICCO. The argument then is that AA partners tend to have a weaker organizational
capacity than those of ICCO and CA. This is mainly because AA has a community-centered approach and primarily works with grassroots organizations. In contrast, ICCO and CA prefer to work with larger and established NGOs.¹⁰

Although the finding that strong partners have more leverage than their weaker peers suggests that country context is relevant (some countries are known to have stronger civil society sectors than others), this does not clearly emerge from the data. This, however, may be caused by the agencies’ explicit preference for specific partners. As these preferences are consistently applied in the different countries where the agencies work, they may further diminish the relevance of country context.

Conclusions

The analysis shows that partners’ influence above all is determined by the institutional rules that regulate decision making. Four clusters of decision-making topics are identified reflecting different degrees of partners’ participation in decision making. On some topics, partners have no influence at all and on others they have virtual autonomy. Overall, partners appear to have the least influence on topics related to agency policy and funding, and the most influence on topics related to project content. Despite the uniformity brought about by the institutional rules, some partners have more influence than others, depending on their organizational capacity and their respective project officer. At the policy level, however, the rules are all-determining, leaving little opportunity for project officers to amend them and for partners (irrespective of their organizational capacity) to influence decision making.

The three agencies show remarkable consistency in these general conclusions. However, on a number of topics partners of AA have considerably less influence compared to those of ICCO and CA, implying that a more decentralized approach does not necessarily reduce power asymmetries. These differences can be dedicated to (a) the more strict nature of AA’s rules, (b) the relational approach of AA that is characterized by more PO involvement, and (c) AA’s preference for grassroots partners as opposed to ICCO’s and CA’s preference for more established partners. The study finds few differences between the case countries in terms of partners’ influence underlining the importance and consistent application of the rules.

This article makes two particular sets of contributions to our understanding of power asymmetries within partnerships, while at the same time offering tangible starting points to those agencies wishing to enter into more equitable partnerships. First, the article shows what partnership power asymmetries are about in practice by identifying 19 actual topics that are key in partnership decision making. By doing so, it offers a common frame for joint problem analysis and solution finding. Second, the findings illustrate that institutional rules are of paramount importance by enabling and constraining partners’ influence in decision making. As such, those agencies looking for more equitable partnerships should decide for each of the different topics in decision making whether a redesign of the institutional rules is desirable.
Appendix

Partners’ Perceived Influence Per Case Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>ICCO</th>
<th>Christian Aid</th>
<th>Action Aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic areas of</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>1,14</td>
<td>1,63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership policy</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>1,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of partners</td>
<td>1,40</td>
<td>1,29</td>
<td>1,14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocation of funding</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>1,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of funding</td>
<td>2,67</td>
<td>1,67</td>
<td>2,14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period of funding</td>
<td>1,56</td>
<td>2,00</td>
<td>3,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country strategy</td>
<td>6,80</td>
<td>5,57</td>
<td>5,63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>6,60</td>
<td>4,80</td>
<td>5,20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>6,40</td>
<td>5,71</td>
<td>5,88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project planning</td>
<td>6,90</td>
<td>5,60</td>
<td>5,83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target group</td>
<td>6,40</td>
<td>5,67</td>
<td>6,13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation stakeholders</td>
<td>4,25</td>
<td>1,33</td>
<td>4,38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format financial report</td>
<td>5,78</td>
<td>2,33</td>
<td>5,50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format narrative report</td>
<td>1,33</td>
<td>1,29</td>
<td>3,75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency narrative report</td>
<td>4,50</td>
<td>3,29</td>
<td>4,57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>6,50</td>
<td>4,67</td>
<td>4,63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal monitoring</td>
<td>6,43</td>
<td>5,00</td>
<td>5,13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity building</td>
<td>5,40</td>
<td>1,86</td>
<td>4,71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding core costs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Authors’ Note

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Notes
1. These agencies are involved in a variety of themes in the field of international development, while having in common that partnerships with local partner organizations in developing countries are central to their approach. More about this is discussed under the Method section.
2. Lukes refers to work of Dahl and Barach and Baratz as the first and second face of power. Lukes’ added a famous third “face” that focuses on the influence derived from shaping one’s thoughts. This study does not include Lukes’ third face in the analysis, as it remains a conceptually disputed notion lacking an accepted methodology for its empirical assessment. See Clegg et al. (2006) for a discussion.
3. Decentralization here refers to the extent to which the agencies have handed over decision-making authority to decentralized units of the organization in developing countries. At the time of research, Interchurch Organization for Development (ICCO) managed its partnerships centrally from its head office in the Netherlands, Christian Aid (CA) used country offices and Action Aid (AA) not only worked with country offices but also with regional offices within countries. By selecting multiple agencies with different governance structures, a wider range of experiences and practices could be included in the study.
4. In Nicaragua AA was not included. Despite numerous attempts over a 6-month period, AA Nicaragua did not respond to the invitation to participate in the study. In order to maintain the deadline of the study, AA was left out of the Nicaragua study.
5. Rules of an individual agency as well as the application of the rules in individual case country are only discussed when they deviate from the rest.
6. This reflects the underlying differences in the agencies’ approach to partnership. Though an elaborate analysis of these differences falls outside the scope of this article, it seems likely that they are related to the agencies’ different organizational histories. ICCO and CA are part of a group of private aid agencies for which partnership has been the modus operandi since the 1970s. In this approach, partnership was deemed a relationship providing equality in ways of working and mutuality in respect for identity, position, and role (Fowler, 1998). For AA, however, partnership has only been central to its approach since the early 2000s. Before that, it was a directly operational organization involved in project design and implementation (Owusu, 2005). As such, AA has traditionally had a strong presence “on the ground” that is still clearly present in its partnership approach.
7. This finding does not come as a surprise. March and Olsen (1989, pp. 23-24) argued that the application of rules is always subject to interpretation. The more vague and abstract the rules are, the more room there is for alternative interpretations.
8. This list is by no means meant to be exhaustive but does contain those resources favored most strongly by partners and agency staff.
9. The aspect of size seems to be less applicable to AA due to its explicit preference to work with grassroots organizations.
10. Grassroots organizations are known for their relative weakness in terms of organizational capacity (e.g., Michael, 2004).

References


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