

POLICY BRIEF FOR NORRAG NEWS 41

THE POLITICS OF PARTNERSHIP: PERIL OR PROMISE

The concept of partnership has been ‘en vogue’ for quite a while in defining relations between donors, universities and individual researchers around the world.

Universities are looking for international partners for a variety of strategic or opportunistic reasons. They wish to combine each other’s strength in teaching and/or research, to exchange staff and students, to get access to brains, funds & markets, to diversify their student population and faculty, to become part of the global academic arena.

Development donors see it as the preferred mode of collaboration in which institutions are linked by a common cause and agreed collaborative agreements.

A number of questions come to mind when looking at the policy and practice of partnerships: What is meant by partnership? Who are the partners? What are their roles? What interests are at stake? And how to balance them? Who decides for whom and to what purpose a partnership is established? Can partnerships be sustained; under what conditions?

These are the questions that are being raised in the contributions of NORRAG News 41 (NN41) on the Politics of Partnership.

Donors and partnerships

For development donors, partnership seems to have become the approved way to relate to the developing world whether as a donor, an NGO, or a researcher. Correctly so, donors now call themselves ‘development partners’. They expect the implementers of development programmes, be it NGOs, universities or individual researchers, to follow suit and establish partnerships rather than implement activities for counterparts in developing countries.

As a consequence, partnership is no longer a choice for Northern universities or researchers wanting to work in the developing world; it has become a condition of their collaborations in the South. Many agencies supporting ‘academic linkage programmes’ or ‘development research’ expect Northern institutions – even graduate students – to have ‘partners’. Some Northern agencies expect the Southern institutions to take the lead in choosing their Northern partners.

Although the authors in NN41 recognize that the idea of development partnership is important as it recognizes that development cooperation is a relationship whose effectiveness depends on the practices of both parties, most of them point out that it would be simplistic to assume that all parties are equal, and that in these circumstances, outcomes from the partnership depend on the relative bargaining power of the different parties.

From practical experience we learn that this asymmetry between partners remains the principal obstacle to productive collaborations. Why? Because the mantra that partnerships should be mutually beneficial is difficult to fit in with the view that they should prioritise Southern needs and agendas, the ‘partners’ are not equal in terms of capacities and resources when they enter their collaboration, the responsibility of the financial part of the collaboration lies mostly with the Northern partner.

Despite the problems involved, institutions in the North and South play by the rules that are

‘imposed’ on them by funding agencies which may inevitably lead to the establishment of ‘fake’ partnerships that exist more or less only on paper.

Academic partnerships

Is partnership a fake concept in development cooperation? Are all partnerships ‘*fata morganas*’ (mirages) or are there shining tangible successes? Fortunately the authors come up with examples of successful partnerships between academic partners and they manage to analyze factors which contribute to these successes. Successful partnerships:

- Are based on mutual interests and a shared vision and not on dependencies and aid-driven concepts.
- Require clearly identified roles and responsibilities, in order to live the process of mutual learning for change harmoniously, with equitably shared risks and benefits.
- Require awareness of the asymmetric situation and a willingness of partners to achieve a more balanced situation.
- Should not be only based on individuals. While individuals matter, partnerships based on individuals tend to disappear with or because of them. Partnerships should be institutional, should be based on long term plans and should be part of the human resources and other strategic maps of organizations involved.
- Should design clear platforms and mechanisms for generating, sharing, utilizing and internalizing knowledge.
- Require partners to agree on how gains – immediate and future – are to be shared.

Concluding comments

It seems that there is a basic dilemma of matching politically correct principles of ‘partners in development’ with the implicit asymmetries that exist between ‘developed’ and ‘less developed’ partners. This dilemma exists at all levels of development cooperation, at those of the donors (read ‘development partners’), universities and individual researchers.

The contributions in NN41 suggest that ‘partnerships’ are rather an outcome than a starting point of collaboration. This notion acknowledges realities that exist and aspirations of collaborative partners. The good news is: If certain basic conditions are fulfilled, the concept may work!