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Assisting Poor People Through NGO Partnerships: Experiences from South Asia and South Sudan

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Executive Summary

Over the past twenty years or so, there have been vast shifts in the modus operandi of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), such as Concern. INGOs have moved away from direct implementation in service provision towards working in partnership with local NGOs (LNGOs). Much of the literature on these partnerships speaks very positively about their potential for sustainable and locally-driven development impacts, and encourages INGOs to hand over control and decision-making powers to their local partners. While this can be laudable and very valid in certain contexts, a skewed emphasis in literature, discussions and thinking on idealistic notions of the partnership process can, in fact, distract practitioners from the end-goal of assisting poor and marginalised people through these partnerships.

INGOs, these days, often have mandates that either require or express a strong preference that they work with local partners, regardless of the context. This can lead to INGOs not being as discerning as they should be in selecting local partners, or continuing to work with them even if there are problems, for example corruption or poor performance. This can be extremely problematic as it can mean that INGOs actually undermine the NGO sector rather than strengthening it, by inadvertently supporting or ignoring bad practice.

International NGOs have a significant role to play in transforming this picture by disaggregating their approaches to partnership depending on the context and the individual partner, and by taking partnership more seriously within their organisations. Some best practice from the author's experience in Pakistan, India and South Sudan is suggested, including tips on selecting partners systematically, and starting partnerships small and building trust. A further recommendation for INGOs is to consider staying close to partners in terms of monitoring and reporting until this

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trust is built. Emphasis is also placed upon clear and regular communication with partners, and about partners internally. This raises the broader issue of INGOs' systems and staffing, and how crucial it is for effective partnership that there is a focus on this. The assumption that LNGOs are necessarily strong in achieving participation of, and accountability to, communities is questioned, and INGOs are advised to take a degree of responsibility for these areas. The importance of coordinating with other donors of local partners is also stressed, both for partnership in general and capacity building in particular. Finally, if partnerships do have to be terminated, there is guidance given on how the process can be open, fair and transparent, rather than hidden away as is often the case.

In the author's experience, these tips may lead to more effective partnerships by encouraging INGOs to think through, clarify, contextualise and disseminate their approaches to partnership. This kind of process is usually highly popular with local partners, who otherwise can be left in the dark about INGOs' workings and intentions. The hope is that these more effective partnerships will lead to better lives for the poor and marginalised people that INGOs exist to serve.

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1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years or so, there have been vast shifts in the modus operandi of international non-governmental organisations, such as Concern, working in the development sector. In what is possibly the most significant of these shifts, most INGOs have moved away from direct implementation in service provision towards working in partnership with local NGOs[2]. Many organisations have developed broad mandates to work only, or primarily, through civil society partners[3]. A further development sees INGOs reducing the requirements on their local partners in order to give them more freedom in implementing projects. There have been many positive outcomes of these changes and few people argue with the premises that development processes need ultimately to be locally owned and managed, and that a strong national civil society is essential for democracy. However, most of the literature which calls for these changes is based around examples of partnerships from areas with well-developed and relatively high-capacity civil societies, notably in South Asia.

Moving to partnership with the same speed and scale in post-emergency areas like South Sudan, or a number of other countries in Africa with extremely nascent civil societies, or even universally within South Asia, can be counter-productive, and indeed, can prevent benefits reaching the intended target group: poor and marginalised people. Supporting NGOs in a manner which does not demand enough accountability can actually support bad practice within the NGO sector and inadvertently lead to the creation of insincere, corrupt organisations. The onus is on INGOs to ensure that the resources entrusted to them actually benefit poor people. INGOs need to balance this with supporting the development of strong and independent national civil societies. Using the author's experience working with local NGOs while with Concern in Pakistan, India and South Sudan, this paper will present some suggestions on attaining this difficult but crucial balance.

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[2] These terms are being used to describe the typical funding relationship between, usually Northern, International NGOs and Southern local or national NGOs working in developing countries. It is noted that organisations referred to here as 'local' may be more 'national' in scope but for the sake of clarity local will mostly be used in this paper. The term 'donor' will also frequently be used to refer to INGOs who fund local NGOs. While the focus in this paper is on NGOs, many of the same principles will apply to the funding relationships of other donors, be they private, bi-lateral or multi-lateral.

[3] Usually defined as all organisations between the family and the state, with the exception of for-profit firms, civil society organisations are not always benevolent, nor do they always promote democratic principles or human rights, for example the Ku Klux Klan. Nonetheless it is generally accepted that a strong independent civil society is necessary for democracy as it can fulfil functions such as reducing the gap between elected officials and citizens, and placing checks and balances on government by monitoring its performance. (Eade 2000: 12; Van Rooy, 1998: 10) Although partnerships with 'civil society' organisations are spoken of here, which would include trade unions, research institutes, business associations and so on, the reality is that organisations like Concern tend to work with NGOs which form a narrower subset of civil society. Having said that, Concern is increasingly striving to work with a more diverse group of civil society actors.

2. The Phenomenon of Partnership

Many faith-based organisations have been working 'in solidarity' with Southern partners for decades. However, for most other international NGOs, partnership is a much more recent concept, motivated by changing donor priorities, the emergence of strong Southern NGOs and the belief that benefits such as increased poverty reach and cost-effectiveness can ensue from such relationships. There has thus been a massive increase in the number of partnerships between Northern and Southern NGOs over the past two decades. According to Fowler (2000: 3) "everybody wants to be a partner with everyone on everything, everywhere".

To illustrate how quickly the phenomenon of partnership has taken hold, Concern's global Strategic Plan of 1998 contained a commitment that each country programme should "provide ongoing support towards the development of a minimum of one local organisation" during the five year period of the plan (Concern Worldwide, 1998: 15). The next strategic plan, only four years later, went far further by stating as an indicator that, "

by the end of the plan almost all non-emergency projects . . .will be operated with or through local partners" (Concern Worldwide, 2002: 15). Suddenly, partnership was the default strategy rather than the exception.

2.1. High Rhetoric and High Hopes

Simply put, "partnership between organisations involves cooperation for a specific purpose in order to achieve common objectives" (Mohiddin, 1999 cited in INTRAC, 2004: 18)[4].

Among development NGOs, however, the term partnership has taken on many lofty aspirations. NGOs first began using this term in the 1970s when "partnership was understood as a code word to reflect humanitarian, moral, political, ideological or spiritual solidarity between NGOs in the North and South that joined together to pursue a common cause of social change" (Fowler, 2000: 3). Later, it was also felt that partnerships could build the capacity of Southern organisations and enhance 'social capital' by increasing trust in societies and enabling citizens to keep a space

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[4] Elements often linked with this term include reciprocal obligations, and shared responsibilities with the expectation of mutual benefit.

separate from the government and the market. The idealistic literature on partnership extols the possibilities of the increased equality, mutuality, local ownership, sustainability and the people-centred development that could arise. Using such an approach, partnership is seen as an end in itself.

Yet, for some practitioners within international NGOs the purpose of partnership is a lot more functional. This view sees partnership as an effective and efficient means to achieve short-term and long-term goals, through service delivery projects and partner capacity building programmes respectively (Brehm, 2001: 10). MacLeod (2004: 2) cautions against focussing on the quality of partner relationships at the expense of the quality of the development work which these partnerships are ultimately aimed at carrying out[5]. Indeed, others (Lister, 2002: 9; INTRAC, 2004: 11) have commented on the normative nature of the partnership literature, which fails to provide hints and tools for reality.

The author's experience working on NGO partnerships across different contexts is that these aspirational, yet unrealistic, views of partnership, in addition to dominating the literature, also infuse the discussions and inform the policies and practices of many field-based INGO practitioners. Much of what is written or said publicly about partnership is more about 'what should be' than 'what is', which is not very helpful when the reality on the ground is difficult and messy, as it often is. Furthermore, a political correctness has developed around the area of partnership which, at times, disables practitioners from speaking frankly about negative realities that they experience, stifles learning from these experiences and hence works against future improvements.

3. Rhetoric versus Reality: The Importance of Context

There are many reasons why NGO partnerships sometimes do not work and there is usually fault on both sides. This section will explore some of the most common reasons of partnership failure in post-emergency or transition environments, for the purposes of illustration; however most of these points are equally valid in other environments, emergency situations and also long-term development scenarios.

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[5] This obviously does not apply in pure capacity building programmes which have partners as the only intended beneficiaries.

Take a typical post-emergency scenario such as Orissa, India after the super-cyclone of 1999, the border area of Pakistan and Afghanistan from 2001 after the American bombings and the subsequent refugee crisis, or South Sudan in 2005 after the peace-agreement was signed. In these scenarios, international donors, including NGOs, tend to arrive in large numbers with huge budgets to be spent quickly. Often donors, particularly NGO donors, have mandates which require, or at least strongly prefer, that they spend these budgets through LNGOs.

Yet, almost by definition, these areas emerging from conflict or other disasters often have fragile social, political and economic environments and are unlikely to have strong or developed NGOs which can absorb these large amounts of funding in a way that provides significant benefit to the poor and marginalised people who are usually the target groups of assistance.

The laws of supply and demand dictate that what normally ensues is a burgeoning of local organisations. While some will be sincere, inevitably the availability of relatively easy money and the usual shortage of other ways to earn money in such areas will mean that not all organisations will be sincere[6].

However, rather than capturing these basic facts of low capacity and the risk of insincere organisations in their context analysis and adjusting accordingly, donors and INGOs often continue to try to follow their mandate of working through local NGOs in a similar way that they would in other contexts, and the effects of this are often negative and problematic, even if organisations are sincere.

Local NGOs get swamped by potential donors and asked for numerous proposals for projects in different sectors and different geographical areas, in which they may or may not already work. Like their international NGO counterparts, local NGOs have institutional survival concerns and often tend to want to take on all possible projects with all available funding while the offers are on the table. After all, it is likely that

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[6] Corruption can happen everywhere and international NGOs are certainly not exempt. However there are several factors that make corruption issues particularly common in post-emergency environments, with new or pre-existing NGOs. Among these, government regulation of NGOs is often weak, NGOs' own boards which have the oversight mandate are often non-functional or non-existent and difficulties of communication and logistics compound the problem of getting accurate information (Fowler, 1997: 32; 2004: 15; Holloway, 1998: 41; Clark, 1991: 51).

their popularity with donors will be short-lived as the attention-span of the donor community is often short and subject to sudden changes of focus. Thus, the NGOs in this situation will tend to take upon many partnerships with diverse projects. One of Concern's partners in Pakistan at one point counted nine international partners with almost as many discrete projects. While this is not necessarily problematic, it is unlikely that an NGO, in this situation, will have the required capacities to absorb all the new funds and implement all the different projects effectively. After all 'development' is a difficult business, and many organisations working in post-emergency environments are more used to providing relief items and services rather than engaging communities in long-term development activities. However, a rapid shift to development is often what the donors insist upon in post-emergency settings[7].

This picture seems quite bleak but in fact there is a lot of hope of effective NGO partnerships serving poor and marginalised people, even in these difficult post-emergency environments. There are many committed individuals and organisations that want to work sincerely. The remainder of this paper will attempt to answer the following question: how do INGOs and other donors, identify these committed organisations and give them the support that they need so that poor people benefit?

4. How INGOs Can Play Their Role in Effective Partnerships: Nine Tips

There are ways in which INGOs work which can promote or hinder effective work by local partner organisations. Nine practices are suggested here from the author's experience which can assist INGOs in working more effectively with and through partners, and which has, so far, always been highly appreciated by sincere local partners, as these practices reduce the ambiguity often surrounding INGOs' partnership approaches and plans.

4.1 Partnership Processes
The Issue: INGO processes for working in partnership are often either not systematic, not disseminated or not contextualised

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[7] Another problematic factor here is that some donors refuse to pay 'administration costs' of their partners such as salaries of central-office staff, preferring only to contribute 'project inputs', narrowly defined as seeds or borehole equipment or medicines or the salaries of field-based staff. This hinders an organisation's ability to grow in tandem with the growth in its projects and its donors' expectations.

Given the huge shift that has taken place between international NGOs delivering services directly and handing over responsibilities to local organisations, it can be surprising to see that some organisations do not seem to have much documentation on what will make these partnerships effective. If INGOs were starting to work in a new sector for the first time such as health or education, they would tend to see the need for technical expertise and guidelines to staff and so on, but for a 'soft' approach such as partnership, it seems to be taken less seriously. Perhaps by now it is felt that partnership is already 'mainstreamed' into INGOs' ways of working but the author's experience is that this is far from the case and often INGOs operate on an ad-hoc basis with regard to partnership.

In other cases, some internal clarity exists on partnership processes (which can include operational guidelines and the policies and principles that underlie them) but this is not communicated to local partners, and sometimes not even to the INGO's own field staff. This leads to local NGOs feeling unclear about elements of partnership such as how long they can expect partnerships to last. Given that many local NGOs rely exclusively on INGOs and donors for their organisational survival, this is unfair.

Another important consideration is the contextualisation of partnership processes. Many INGOs work in a large number of countries across very varied contexts (Concern, as a medium-sized INGO, works in thirty countries. World Vision works in almost a hundred) yet, at times, have policies or systems around partnership that are supposed to apply to all their countries of operation from countries with highly developed civil societies such as parts of South Asia and Latin America, to countries with very much emerging civil societies due to conflict or political dictatorship in parts of Africa and East Asia.

When the author researched this area of partnership in India in 2004, most of the INGOs interviewed did not have a tailored set of guidelines on partnership for India— even though many of them worked exclusively through partners. While it is understandable to want to standardise and work with common principles in different countries, it is irresponsible and can be detrimental to attempt to work with the same procedures and systems in these vastly different settings. It can either lead to micro-

managing high-capacity partners and not giving them enough autonomy, or, more commonly, it can lead to not giving enough time and attention to low-capacity partners.

Tip 1: Set out clear disaggregated partnership processes for different contexts and communicate to staff at all levels and to partner, or potential partner, organisations

One effective way to do this is in a document outlining these partnership processes to be shared widely with staff and partners. In Pakistan, India and South Sudan (among other countries), Concern has tailored sets of Partnership Guidelines[8] for each country programme. The following headings summarise some of the contents which were considered useful in these different contexts. Ideally much of this information should be negotiated with partners and some of it could also be documented and regularly reviewed in a partnership agreement or memorandum of understanding (MOU).

Vision and principles of partnership for the INGO
Selection process: criteria for partners and what partners can expect from the INGO
What to do when no partners are available
Partners in the Programme Cycle Management cycle (proposal writing, reporting, monitoring and evaluation)
Communication with partners and around partners (internally and with other donors)
Duration and phases of partnership
Monitoring and evaluation of the partnership, including minimum standards
Capacity building (of partners and of INGO staff to work effectively in partnerships)
Criteria and processes for ending a partnership

Several of these areas are elaborated upon in the sections below.

4.2 Partner Selection

The Issue: Partner selection can be poor and unsystematic, and can lead to problems later in the relationship

Many of the problems in partnerships such as the aforementioned poor performance and corruption issues have their roots in the beginning of the relationship, in cases where INGOs select partners without a systematic process, for example when they

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[8] For more detail on any of the recommendations here or examples, please contact the author.

feel under time pressure to select partners, perhaps to meet deadlines for proposal submission.

> **Tip 2: A well-thought out and systematic partner selection process is crucial, including seeking recommendations from previous donors**

Three key elements of selection processes that often get skipped when processes are rushed include:

> Visiting the organisation's projects at community level, as well as its head office, and asking target groups about its work

> Seeking recommendations from at least two other donor agencies from which the local organisation has received grants in the past (if these exist), and considering these in the selection process. It is rare that this happens, which is surprising considering that we usually seek references when hiring staff members! And yet failing to take this simple step inadvertently supports bad practice as corrupt or poor-performing NGOs can continue to receive funds from different donors without making changes to their practices.

> Prioritising a committed LNGO leadership. It is extremely unlikely that an organisation without committed leadership will ever thrive. In Pakistan, one of Concern's partners had a strong leader but one whose priorities were largely elsewhere. Despite some committed junior staff and some good programme work at times, it was unfortunately eventually found that capacity building efforts would never bear fruit in the long-term due to the lack of commitment of the leadership, and the partnership was eventually terminated.

4.3 Building Trust in a Partnership

The Issue: No matter how good a selection process is, it is usually when two organisations start to work together that they really get to know one another

> **Tip 3: Consider starting partnerships small and building trust**

An effective way of selecting long-term partners can be to work with them on short-term projects, perhaps for one year, with a small amount of money, relative to the funds available for long-term partnership. This gives both partners a chance to see how they work together before large investments of time, money and energy are

made. This is particularly useful with newer or lower capacity organisations. Concern initiated such a programme in Pakistan and South Sudan.

4.4 Communicating with and about Partners

The Issue: INGOs and their partners do not always communicate systematically and regularly with each other. There can also be gaps in INGOs' internal communication around partners.

> **Tip 4: Establish clear and regular communication mechanisms with partners, and internally about partners**

Regular communication with partners, at head office and field levels, and amongst the INGO's own staff is important for effective partnerships. In South Sudan, Concern found some internal communication gaps between head-office finance staff and field programme staff around partner activities which led to problems. Concern's efforts to resolve these led to the institution of a 'Partnership Management Cycle' which maps out regular meetings which should occur at all levels, e.g. Concern management meeting with the partner's management etc.. If after decades of experience, NGOs felt the need to come up with a Programme Management Cycle, and since these days many organisations are implementing their programmes entirely through partners, why not take partnership seriously enough to also manage it systematically and clearly? Again the schedule of communications should be negotiated in advance with partners and be appropriate for the partners involved. This could also be put into the partnership agreement or MOU so that both parties are clear on the expectations before they start.

4.5 Reporting and Monitoring

The Issue: Reporting and monitoring systems can be at the wrong level for effective and accountable partnerships

With the ascendance of the solidarity notion of partnership, it has become very popular and politically correct to give partners a lot of autonomy and not to micro-manage them. This can be very valid. Distance or *laissez-faire* partnerships can be the most effective option in situations where trust and confidence exist that benefits will reach the target groups. However, where this is not the case, as the author would argue

with regard to many organisations in post-emergency contexts, distance or laissez-faire funding can be irresponsible and can do even more harm than good.

> **Tip 5: Work closely with partners in terms of monitoring and reporting until trust is built**

In problematic contexts donors should take extra care to stay close to their partners in terms of reporting and monitoring in the early stages of the relationship until sufficient trust is built up, to ensure that benefits are reaching the community. This may seem harsh but INGOs must never forget that their first responsibility is to the intended beneficiaries in communities, not to the partner organisations (unless it is a purely capacity building programme, as mentioned). When a good level of trust exists with partners, it will usually make sense for INGOs to take a step back and perhaps move more toward joint monitoring and evaluation with the partner in terms of the programme outputs[9].

4.6 INGO Systems and Staffing

The Issue: The impact of weak internal systems and staffing of a donor becomes amplified when working in partnership

Many problems which hinder partnerships have to do with internal issues within INGOs, poor communication mechanisms, internal staff problems and so on. Poorly functioning internal systems can lead to a lenient approach, in practice, to partner accountability which is open to abuse.

In addition, the quality of an INGO's relationships with partner organisations will be proportionate to the quality of its staff involved with these partners.

> **Tip 6: INGOs should have their own houses in order to be good partners. As part of this, staff should be assessed on their capacities and attitudes to work in partnership**

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[9] However, it will always be important for INGOs to play a major role in monitoring the impact of the programme on poverty levels, as well as monitoring financial probity to ensure that funds are being spent in a cost-effective manner for the good of the communities.

INGOs often plan to build capacity of local partners, but usually do not give enough attention to whether or not they have the capacity to do this! Even the most competent staff on technical issues may lack the softer skills necessary, such as facilitation. They may also have the wrong attitude for effective capacity building. They may not believe in the concept of partnership. Particularly in situations where local partners are weak, staff of international NGOs often wonder why they are working through partners rather than working directly which, at least in the short-term, INGOs can sometimes do more effectively. Orientation should thus be given to existing staff on the rationale for partnership and new staff should partly be assessed on the criteria of these broader skills and attitudes required for partnership and capacity building. A recognition of the need for internal capacity to build capacity has led to the development of a small, high-level programme team in Concern India whose staff are recruited primarily based on their potential contribution to partner capacity building.

4.7 Community Participation in Partner Projects

The Issue: 'Local' NGOs are not necessarily strong in community participation and accountability to target groups

At times, international NGOs assume that if they are working in partnership with a local NGO that they do not have to worry about the issue of participation and accountability to communities as the local NGO will already be close to the communities where they work. This can often be a faulty assumption for three main reasons.

Firstly, the question must be asked, how local are 'local' NGOs? Sometimes groups are genuinely community-based, but in many other cases they are run by urban middle class people. This is not necessarily a problem but should be recognised lest it be expected that the NGO will easily relate to the poorest and most marginalised groups. There are also issues of tribe and ethnicity which can create divisions among people, restricting, in some cases, the ability of a local NGO partner to involve poor and marginalised people in all aspects of projects and to be genuinely accountable to them.

Secondly, the NGO simply may not prioritise the participation of, or accountability to, the community. They may feel that they have a good handle on the poverty situation

in the area. ("We are the community." was a common refrain of some NGOs in South Sudan), and are providing what is clearly needed, and it would therefore not be useful to ask others questions to which they already have the answer.

Finally, engaging in quality participation and achieving effective accountability to communities[10] is difficult. Local NGOs may have to work hard to achieve a good working relationship with certain communities, and will certainly have to make efforts, just as international NGOs do, to ensure participation of the poorest and most marginalised in programmes, through techniques such as Participatory Rural Appraisal or Participatory Learning and Action (PRA/PLA).

> **Tip 7: Take action to ensure that appropriate levels of community participation and accountability to target groups exist in partner-run projects.**

INGOs should not wash their hands of the issue of community participation or accountability, but should work with their local partners in a concerted manner to make sure that these occur effectively, as per the particular project. INGOs should also work to convince partner organisations of the rationale for, and benefits of, participation and accountability, and assist them in institutionalising these principles.[11]

4.8 Coordination with Other Donors

The Issue: Coordination with other donors is difficult but essential for partnership and capacity building

Concern is often not the only donor of its local NGO partners. In South Sudan one of Concern's partners had twelve donors. Yet, too frequently, capacity building initiatives lack the desired impact because donors are operating on their own pre-set agendas for example, gender or HIV&AIDS mainstreaming, rather than coordinating with one another. Similarly, for partnership in general, coordinating with other donors is highly beneficial in terms of information sharing and finding solutions to difficult issues.

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[10] Concern is currently researching and piloting various mechanisms to improve its accountability to communities which it intends to share with partners.

[11] Regular joint monitoring visits between the INGO and the partner can help to assess the development of this consciousness and these skills in partner organisations.

While it is essential, coordination with other donors is also very difficult. It only works as far as people are prepared to contribute and inevitably not everybody pulls equal weight in networks and fora. In addition, despite much trumpeting of the importance of coordination, some organisations simply go ahead and do what suits them individually. There was an example of this in South Sudan where a group of three donors (of which Concern was not one!) agreed to freeze further funding of a certain local NGO as a large amount of money remained unaccounted for. This seemed to be having a good effect until one of the donors backed down and agreed to fund the organisation for something else. This obviously completely undermined that particular initiative, but more broadly, sent a dangerous message to local organisations that international NGOs do not really mean it when they talk about accountability.

Having said that, Concern has had many positive examples of collaboration with other donors. In South Sudan, Concern initiated coordination fora to try to make its partnership work more effective[12].

> **Tip 8: Initiate, if not already existing, coordination fora with other donors of each local partner**

Quarterly Donor Round Tables[13] brought together all donors of a local partner to discuss:

> common issues and giving consistent messages to partner organisations,
> collaboration on partner programmes funded by other donors,
> collaboration on partner capacity building, ideally to pool resources to support a partner's long-term capacity building plan
> harmonisation of donors' requirements and standards on monitoring, reporting etc..

An active email list was established for these fora which was very useful for information sharing.[14]

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[12] In 2005, Concern was also one of the founders of the South Sudan Capacity Building Forum www.sudancb.org which brought together thirty-seven INGOs to discuss how international NGOs can better interact with, and build the capacity of, local partners in South Sudan. The objectives of this forum are similar to the quarterly donor coordination meetings mentioned here, but on a more macro level. This was partly a recognition that a group of INGOs inevitably affect and shape greatly the LNGO sector in a country, especially in emerging civil societies such as South Sudan.

[13] Some of these meetings were held without the presence of the local partner, which may seem unfair but given the context and the frequent problems with partners in South Sudan, donors sometimes decided that they needed a space where they could speak frankly with other donors without the presence of the organisation in question. However, meeting minutes were sent to the partner in question and they were asked to input into the agenda so that they could raise issues for their donors to improve on. Most of the time, as it happened, the local partner did not mind not being present, and were enthusiastic about their donors coordinating amongst themselves more. Unsurprisingly, they were particularly keen on initiatives involving the harmonisation of donor requirements, and some work was done in these meetings around common reporting and budgeting formats

[14] Possibly the greatest beneficiaries of these coordination fora were the distance donors, such as Novib in Holland, who would ordinarily visit partners once per year. Keeping a handle on events from a distance is extremely challenging, especially in a

4.9 Partnership Termination

The Issue: Partnerships are often terminated quietly and privately by INGOs when the problems are around poor performance or corruption, which limits the room for learning by themselves and others

In South Sudan, Pakistan and India there were several examples of corruption or poor performance of local organisations being eventually acted upon by donors who ended the relationship—only for another donor to come in and fill their place in funding that same partner. In some cases the new donor did not know of the poor track record of the organisation. In addition, in many cases, the INGOs who terminated the relationship are reluctant to provide this kind of information to others as they feel that a failed relationship reflects badly on them. But if dealt with properly, partnership termination can be a learning opportunity for an INGO and serve as a reminder to all in the NGO sector that the number one priority should be to assist poor people.

> **Tip 9: If partnerships have to be terminated due to corruption or poor performance, be fair, open and transparent about the process. Consider involving other donors and the government if appropriate.**

In South Sudan at one point, Concern found out about the mismanagement of funds by a partner which Trócaire also funded. The organisations tackled the issue as a united front, commissioning an independent audit, seeking explanations of irregularities from the partner, terminating the partnership when no explanations were forthcoming and approaching the government at national and local levels to report the incident and to recover some of the donated assets. Taking this systematic, transparent and open approach to terminating the partnership, rather than doing it quietly as organisations often do, was important as Concern and Trócaire wanted to send the message that, as international NGOs, they were there to serve the people and were not afraid to end a relationship which did not seem to be doing so. Constant and full cooperation with the other donor agency, Trócaire, increased the strength of Concern's influence, both during the relationship and in its termination.

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volatile context like South Sudan with poor communication, and therefore these donors were very happy to be in touch with others who were closer to the partner organisation on a day-to-day basis.

International NGOs and donors should be vigilant that the funds given to partner agencies are being used for the purpose for which they were given, and should not hesitate to inform other stakeholders of corrupt organisations after they have gone through a transparent process of investigation. Anything else is facilitating corrupt practice.

5. Conclusion

Intended beneficiaries should always come first. INGOs accept funds on behalf of certain groups of people and must be vigilant in ensuring that the benefits for which the funds were given reach them. Due to the political correctness that has built up around the theme of partnership, there is sometimes a danger of INGOs' partner organisations becoming effectively the primary beneficiaries of development projects instead of community members!

Local NGOs in the South have a crucial role to play in the future of effective development work. However, INGOs cannot step back and abdicate responsibility for the final impact of the work agreed upon with partners. INGOs have an important role in supporting and ensuring that partner-implemented projects, which they fund, consult communities and ultimately benefit them in the short- and medium-term, and that they strengthen the local NGO sector to be able to better serve their target groups in the long term.

For this INGOs need to put more energy and resources behind their organisational approach to partnership and coordinate closely with other INGOs. They must also stay close to their partners—in terms of support and monitoring—as long as this is necessary, and communicate with them frequently and frankly. Sincere LNGO partners will generally appreciate these moves and most importantly, INGOs owe all this to the poor and marginalised people that they exist to serve.

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