North-South/South-North partnerships: closing the 'mutuality gap'[1]

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SUMMARY

This article examines mutuality and difference in partnerships. Partnership is a widely-debated concept: it can represent collaboration based on equality and mutually-beneficial processes and outcomes; it can also involve highly unequal power relations and determination of means and ends. This article examines the construction of mutuality based on difference in practitioner to practitioner partnerships between local governments in Uganda and the UK. It argues that some of the lessons from these partnerships can help to rethink partnerships in other contexts. First, practitioner to practitioner partnerships can pose an alternative to partnerships based simply on divisions of labour between organisations. Second, partnerships conceived as learning models that build on mutuality and difference offer the potential to challenge power relations. Rethinking how practitioner to practitioner partnerships can be made more effective in this respect can provide models for other types of partnership.

INTRODUCTION

A major challenge to the discourse and practice of partnerships is how to address unequal relations between partners. Inequality may be based on differences in a range of dimensions such as access to resources, power relations, knowledge, capacities and capabilities. Partners may also have different assumptions, perspectives/world views, agendas and expectations. Although such differences are evident in many North-North/South-South partnerships, they are even more apparent in those between North and South/South and North.

This paper focuses on how particular approaches to partnership might begin to address issues of inequality, power and difference. The focus of the paper is thus not on

partnerships per se but ways of challenging partnership thinking and practice. We argue that partnerships are dynamic processes through which partners have the potential to learn and thereby promote new forms and practices. To investigate this potential, we take as our starting-point two counter-posing ideas: an ideal view of partnership that is based on mutuality (Brinkerhoff, 2002a, 2002b; Penrose, 2000), and a sceptical view that assumes mutuality is not possible because of inequality, especially unequal power relations (Fowler, 2000; Harriss, 2000). The extent to which a given partnership approaches the ideal or the sceptical can be described as a *mutuality gap*. As we shall argue below, however, mutuality is not based solely on sharing; it is also based on difference.

Counter-posing ideal types of partnership is, of course, a heuristic device. In practice, partnerships lie to greater or lesser degrees between these two views. This idea thus bears some relationship to Brinkerhoff's conception of partnership as 'relative practice' (Brinkerhoff, 2002b, p.14). Our concern is particularly with the dynamics of learning, which we suggest have the potential to close the mutuality gap. Although Brinkerhoff is also interested in the potential for learning, her focus is the learning that takes place *about* partnership (ibid., p.9), whereas this analysis is more concerned with the learning and knowledge transfer that takes place, both intentionally and unintentionally, directly and indirectly, in relation to the *substantive aims* of a partnership.

The substantive aims of partnership clearly include a wide range of possibilities, from collaboration on joint projects to exchanges of know-how. The practitioner to practitioner partnerships of our study began as part of an attempt supported by the European Union to bring about technical cooperation between municipalities in North and South. Although the substantive aim was to provide technical cooperation to the

South, it was expected that the partnerships would also bring some benefit to the North. It was thus proposed that the partnerships would be based on mutuality, and that the partnership would be a learning relationship. Our concern was to examine such a two-way learning process. Studying each of the partnerships as 'revelatory cases' (Yin, 1994) enabled us to explore the challenges as well as the potential for learning, the implications for approaching the ideal as opposed to the sceptical view of partnership, and what lessons there might be for other types of partnership.

The partnerships were between (i) Kampala City Council (KCC) (Uganda) and Kirklees Metropolitan Council (KMC) (Yorkshire, UK), and (ii) Iganga Town Council (ITC) (Eastern Uganda) and Daventry District Council (DDC) (Northamptonshire, UK). The study, which took place between March and July 2003, involved interviews with officers and politicians, and members of community organisations as appropriate to the particular contexts. Draft reports were prepared for informants and discussed and validated in individual briefings, seminars and workshops from late 2003 to early 2004.

The next section locates our framework of analysis in the context of broader debates about North-South/South-North partnerships, while the following section provides some characteristics of the partnerships in this study. The article then analyses the processes and outcomes of the practitioner to practitioner methodology at micro and meso levels, that is, with respect to the individuals involved and their wider organisations. The final section suggests some key considerations for learning in partnerships to help close the mutuality gap.

POWER, DIFFERENCE AND MUTUALITY IN NORTH-SOUTH/SOUTH-NORTH PARTNERSHIPS

Partnership is common parlance in initiatives for development within and between North and South/South and North. It is espoused by many international development agencies as well as being the focus of the 8th Millennium Development Goal. Partnership has gained currency because of changing perspectives on the role of the state, private sector and civil society in economic life and social provision. Its prevalence in discourse and practice has made it a focus of scrutiny by those wanting to promote partnership from a critical perspective (Brinkerhoff, 2002a, 2002b; Maxwell and Riddell, 1998; Penrose, 2000; Solomon and Chowdhury, 2002), and by analysts sceptical about the relationship between the espoused theory of partnership and its theory in use[3] (Crawford, 2003; Fowler, 2000; Harriss, 2000; Lister, 2000).

In international development, partnership has been integral both to the 'new policy agenda' and the 'new public management' of the 1980s and 1990s (Minogue, 1998; Robinson, 1993). On one hand, it has been seen as an alternative approach, based on the idea of joint ownership of interventions, to earlier forms of aid conditionality (Kaizzi-Mugerwa, 1998; Maxwell and Riddell, 1998). On the other, partnership is seen as a more efficient and effective means of achieving commercial and social goals, for example in public private partnerships and other forms of coordination and cooperation (Robinson et al., 2000). It is also suggested that organisations form partnerships because they can build on their comparative advantages and divisions of labour, develop

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[3] 'Espoused theory' and 'theory in use' are terms from Argyris and Schön (1996): 'By "espoused theory" we mean the theory of action which is advanced to explain or justify a given pattern of activity. By "theory-in-use" we mean the theory of action which is implicit in the performance of that pattern of activity" (ibid., p.13).

integrated and win-win solutions to problems, and enhance the public good in a sustainable way (Brinkerhoff, 2002b, p.6). Such an account is aligned to the ideal rather than the sceptical view; however the reality may not be nearly so ideal in practice.

Literature about partnership between North and South tends to focus on donor-recipient relationships, in particular on the dimensions of power, participation, trust and sustainability, as well as mutuality. The relative power of country partners in donor-recipient relationships - and their different agendas - are mirrored at meso and micro levels. However power is complex and is not necessarily unidirectional. An interesting example is Lister's (2000) study of partnerships between northern and southern non-governmental organisations which examines the interaction of discourses, structures and the agency of individuals. She suggests that although structures reinforce power asymmetries, 'the 'capacity-building' which is a common element of partnership arrangements strengthens a Southern agency's voice and ability to affect the overall framework' (ibid., p.236). Capacity-building may focus on the learning of specific skills and competencies; it may also be more generic and diffuse, for example in building confidence, enabling people to speak in meetings and developing leadership. Such generic capacities can be one of the most important ingredients for influencing wider organisational change (Johnson and Thomas, 2004).

What does the kind of interaction examined by Lister then suggest for mutuality which forms, along with organisation identities[4], one of the key dimensions of partnership in Brinkerhoff's own framework? Brinkerhoff suggests that there is a complex set of norms, values and practices embodied in mutuality, for example:

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[4] Brinkerhoff says that organisation identities are 'that which is distinctive and enduring in a particular organisation' (2002b, p.15).

'horizontal…coordination and accountability and equality in decision making', 'jointly agreed purpose and values and mutual trust and respect', 'mutual dependence…respective rights and responsibilities', commitment to goals (2002b, p.15). Brinkerhoff also notes that partnerships assume that there are 'collaborative advantages' (ibid., p.6) and that partnership is a 'rational response to complexity' (ibid., p.175).

Partnership as a rational response to complexity that brings advantages to both (or all sides) may be part of the reality. Such a conception assumes that partners play complementary roles, which in turn are based on difference as a key component for their rationale. However difference can have more than one role in partnership. Our heuristic of ideal and sceptical views of partnership can be a useful device for examining the dynamics of partner relations.

In the ideal view, difference is a driver of mutuality. The ideal view of partnership is based on ideas of dialogue, reciprocity, trust and sharing different values, knowledges and practices to realise mutual benefits. It is a co-operative relationship and requires institutional arrangements involving a 'set of normative rules, determining what behaviour is permissible and what constitutes a violation of trust… designed to facilitate exchange in a situation otherwise open to exploitation' (Lorenz, 1989, quoted in Harriss, 2000, p.228). Mutuality, in this ideal sense, makes a virtue of difference, enabling each partner to offer and gain something. Importantly, it offers an opportunity for learning.

In contrast to this 'ideal' conception, the sceptical view notes that 'the language of partnership thinly veils direction based on power difference…' (Harriss, 2000, p.227). Thus, in the sceptical view, the basis of difference is inequality, particularly in power

relations, and so questions the basis for mutuality which lies at the core of the ideal conception. 'Difference that drives mutuality' has benign connotations, whereas 'difference through inequality' implies poorer and richer, less and more valuable, and is manifested in a relative lack of mutuality that might be evidenced by unidirectional flows of knowledge, resources and benefits.

The ideal conception of partnership is the basis of espoused theory, while the sceptical view is a critique of espoused theory arising from observations about theory in use. However, both ideal and sceptical views and practices are likely to be evident to greater or lesser extents in most partnerships. As noted by Robinson et al., 'the language of partnership often masks a complex reality, which is that relationships take many different forms, and that these vary widely in terms of the ways in which power, interests, substance…are organized' (2000, p.13). This article indeed locates the practitioner to practitioner partnerships that we discuss below *between* the two conceptions of partnership, and explores whether the tension between the two provides a space within which to rethink partnership as a learning process and to suggest on what basis a partnership might tend towards the ideal rather than the sceptical view.

PRACTITIONER TO PRACTITIONER PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN MUNICIPALITIES

The practitioner to practitioner partnerships, such as the municipal partnerships we now describe, fall within what Fowler (1998) has called 'authentic partnership': '*mutually enabling, inter-dependent interaction with shared intentions*' (ibid, p.144; emphasis in original). To promote such mutuality, Fowler called for more horizontal partnerships

between groups and organisations with similar interests, such as civic groups and local governments. The municipal partnerships in this study are of this horizontal type.

The formation of North-South partnerships between urban municipalities in the mid-1990s was influenced by the brown agenda/Agenda 21 emphasis on local action and by the decentralisation agenda of major donors for good governance and democracy. The partnerships were brokered by organisations such as the UK Local Government International Bureau and have received funds for projects from the EU, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and, in the case of the Kampala-Kirklees partnership in this study, from the World Bank.

The aims of these partnerships, when they were initially funded by the European Union, focused on knowledge transfer of approaches, practices, tools, techniques and skills, from North to South. Thus they included: technical assistance from the UK, training and work experience attachments for Ugandans in the UK, local projects to improve the urban environment and services in Uganda, and community/NGO/local government linkages to support services delivery and increase community participation (Pasteur, 1998, p.22). However, it was also suggested that projects should build on examples of good practice in both South and North (ibid., p.23).

Further to these aims were two further assumptions, one methodological and one aspirational. The methodological assumption was that knowledge transfer would take place through northern and southern professionals working together in a 'practitioner to practitioner' relationship. Such an assumption is based on the idea of professional equivalence and relative parity of status, and that officers from partner authorities would share knowledge and ideas on a collegiate basis. The aspirational assumption was that there would be learning benefits to both North and South.

It was however assumed that the learning benefits might be of different types. For example, a conference of the Local Government International Bureau on Uganda-UK partnerships in March 2002 emphasised that the benefits were principally 'soft' ones for the North, and included greater cultural awareness, friendship and mutual understanding and learning, together with personal benefits for the UK officers involved. However Rossiter (2000. pp.26-27) notes that northern partners also have the potential to benefit in other ways, for example, by: adapting southern participation processes, especially those practised by the NGO sector; learning from innovations in decentralised government in the South; adapting southern anti-poverty agendas to the northern context; learning about poor community coping and self reliance strategies in the South; and, learning about user involvement in service provision in the South.

The two partnerships in this study focused primarily on environmental (or public) health, although issues such as financial management and planning were included. In the Iganga-Daventry partnership, environmental health referred mainly to waste management, storm water drainage, clean water supply and health promotion in Iganga. In the Kampala-Kirklees partnership involvement was mainly with waste management and traffic management in Kampala, as well as an evaluation input by Kirklees into the rehabilitation of the Kampala main drain. Although there were no practical projects in either of the two UK Councils, officers in Uganda had the opportunity to experience and comment on work carried out by the UK councils in their visits either for study tours or to work alongside their counterparts. UK officers in turn had their (first for many) experience of trying to marry their developed country experience and practice with the limited resources available for environmental health infrastructure and practice in Uganda.

World Bank funding of the Kampala-Kirklees partnership covered time spent by Kirklees officers on the projects. The relatively modest funding for projects in the Iganga-Daventry partnership did not enable the possibility of a similar arrangement. The Kampala-Kirklees partnership was also based on contracts and more tightly interpreted by the two Councils than that between Daventry and Iganga. In the latter, the Memorandum of Understanding for the partnership included building community links, none of which occurred in Kampala-Kirklees. Furthermore, a 'Friends of Iganga' group was set up in Daventry in 2000 because a financial crisis within the Council meant that it could no longer be formally involved (although it still hosts study visits by officers from Uganda). Officers, current and retired, thus work on Iganga projects in their own time through the 'Friends' (which also raises money).

Although the Kampala-Kirklees partnership was more tightly bounded than the Iganga-Daventry partnership, informal as well as formal processes of partnership characterised both of them: as well as building professional trust by working together, friendships and one to one relationships were built, and maintained by letter and email outside the visits made in both directions by officers and some politicians. In spite, or because of, this process, as well as other reasons we return to below, the Kampala-Kirklees partnership stopped in 2002, while, as mentioned above, the Iganga-Daventry partnership is now sustained through non-governmental links.

MUTUALITY AND THE MUTUALITY GAP IN PRACTITIONER TO PRACTITIONER PARTNERSHIPS

Mutuality is important for the stability of practitioner to practitioner partnerships. In the case of local government, authorities have to justify their activities in terms of their core

functions, i.e. they have to deliver effective services to their own constituencies (to whom they are accountable). In these circumstances, it becomes difficult to justify continuation of a partnership unless mutual gains in terms of core functions can be demonstrated. For Brinkerhoff, this is the 'organisation identity' dimension of partnership (2002b, p.15) - i.e. the enduring and distinctive aspects that ensure the organisation's sustainability.

The espoused views of the practitioner to practitioner partnerships of our study leaned strongly towards the ideal, in that mutuality was a core operating principle. Thus it was claimed that different knowledges, experiences, practices and contexts were respected and formed the basis of dialogue between the partners. There were inevitably inequalities, manifest in relation to material, human and financial resources. In practice, there were also different values placed on respective knowledges. Thus the realities of inequality, and power relations that are often embedded in discourses as well as structures, influenced working relationships to some extent and resulted in a mutuality gap with respect to the ideal. In spite of this, the strong value placed on learning helped to sustain a dynamic that mitigated the mutuality gap. The following sections examine the processes and outcomes involved.

Mutuality in partnership processes

Partnership processes can be analysed through the relationships of those involved and through the partnership activities. Although they are inter-connected, the analysis can take place at the micro-level of the individual agents who are involved and at the meso-level of the partnership as an inter-organisational relationship.

The individual agents

At first glance it would appear that the relationships between the individual practitioners would be adversely affected by the large differences between the Ugandan and UK authorities both in capacity (the potential to do things) and capability (the ability to manage capacity for tangible outputs) (Platt and Wilson, 1999). The UK partners were much wealthier in terms of financial resources than their Ugandan partners. In terms of human resources, Ugandan and UK education and training systems have many similarities, and the officers in the partnerships were qualified people. However, the opportunity for gaining experience in work projects, specialising in a given area of engineering or environmental health, and for building tacit knowledge and developing 'best practice' was much greater in the UK than in Uganda. In Uganda, there are limited budgets and therefore personnel, and professionally-qualified officers have to manage a multitude of tasks. In the sceptical view of partnership, therefore, these inequalities between the partner authorities would be apparent in the working relations, with a dominant role played by the northern partner, a unidirectional knowledge transfer (based on the idea that knowledge and best practices reside in the North), and a resource transfer levered by the northern partner, whether directly or not. In sum, the sceptical interpretation of these inequalities would have an adverse effect on the mutuality of the partnership process.

The actual practice as seen through our research, however, qualifies the sceptical view. Although the capability limitations of the Ugandan counterparts to operationalise projects could be a source of frustration in the working relations, there were also high satisfaction levels when these obstacles were overcome. An example is a water, hygiene and housing project in Iganga in which officers from both councils worked as a team to design, conduct and analyse a survey, carry out community consultation and negotiate a

division of labour with the community, with the end result of clean water, an immunisation scheme, latrines dug and improved housing conditions. This and other experiences suggest that the espoused theory *and* theory in use of practitioner to practitioner partnerships are potentially able to bridge or sidestep the sceptical view.

There are several reasons that help to explain why practitioner to practitioner partnerships are able to make this bridge, despite the large resource inequalities. Firstly, despite material inequalities, there was a claim towards knowledge parity, encapsulated by officers in phrases such as: 'we spoke the same language'; 'treated the problems at the same level'; 'you are peers on the same side'; 'you can share ideas'; 'you have people who share common problems'; 'each party comes with some knowledge'. The basis for this claim was two-fold. Partner officers were operating from a similar foundation of theoretical knowledge in civil engineering or environmental health, particularly given the similarity of University engineering syllabi in the UK and Uganda. There was also a more tacit dimension. Officers shared a broad knowledge and discourse of problem definition and problem solving. Virtually all officers, whether Ugandan or British, said that they saw problems in the same way. Shared frameworks and applications are key components for sharing tacit knowledge: 'The mere transfer of information will often make little sense if it is abstracted from embedded emotions and nuanced contexts that are associated with shared experiences' (Nonaka, 1994, p.14).

Secondly, there was a kind of 'characteristic-based trust' between the officers (Zucker, 1986)[5], which in turn facilitated what might be termed 'dialogic learning': 'mutual understanding… [where]… other participants are treated as genuine persons, not as

objects of manipulation... [and where]... actors do not primarily aim at their own success, but want to harmonise their action plans with the other participants' (Huttenen and Heikkinen, 1998, p.311). Although trust was based on the professional relationship (i.e. similar professional characteristics), officers also had actively to nurture it. One Daventry officer stated: 'It felt very strange to start with, trying to explain what we did. It was a bit lukewarm...'. In the Kampala-Kirklees partnership workshops established common ground which the officers could build on. In the Iganga-Daventry case, personal friendships added a layer to the trust established in professional relationships. The process of building up the relationships, which were started by high level officers from the northern councils paying visits and gradually moving on to project development, allowed for what Vangen and Huxham (2003) have called a 'cyclical trust-building loop': having enough trust to start, pursuing modest goals that can be met and which will thus reinforce trust; then developing more ambitious initiatives.

Thirdly, the 'professional challenge' of building knowledge around practice in resource poor environments to meet social goals of public health was also cited as commitment to joint learning, and a motivator for UK officers, who were forced to 'go back to basic principles' and 'throw away the book'. Finally, the officers worked on funded projects together, which involved two-way visits - a learning opportunity for both UK and Ugandan officers.

Thus conceptualising partnerships as learning helped promote mutuality in the relationships between the individuals. In addition, as has been shown by Lister (2000), it emphasized the importance of individual relationships. The conceptualisation does

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[5] Zucker distinguishes between trust that is based on shared characteristics, such as kinship, ethnicity, religion, profession, etc., and forms of trust that are developed over time. However, the two are not

however raise the question of whether the learning in use matched the learning espoused. Firstly, it is not clear from our findings that knowledges were necessarily seen as equivalent. For example, there was a tendency to take the UK councils as examples of best practice (albeit to be adapted to a different context). Secondly, although it was recognised that the Ugandan officers had knowledge of local context not possessed by their UK counterparts, it is not clear that this knowledge was given equal value to the UK officers' knowledge of 'best' practice. Thus some UK officers saw themselves to some extent as teachers, trainers or mentors, even though they struggled not to weight their own knowledge differently. One retired UK officer commented: 'The main obstacles were the ability to leave all the baggage behind in terms of the way we do things. We have assumptions about our expertise and a tendency to 'tell''.

The organisational level

Although the original EU projects for the partnerships espoused learning but not bi-directional or mutual flows, the aspiration of mutual learning between individual officers influenced perceptions of the partnership process at the inter-organisational level. Between Kampala and Kirklees, inter-organisational relations were formalised through contracts related to the specific projects that initially the EU and then the World Bank funded. On one hand the contracts acted as enabling devices to define roles and responsibilities, as the basis for funds to be released and as documents against which progress could be monitored. On the other, they were subject to the diverse perceptions of the partnership actors, including the World Bank. Thus, Kirklees saw itself as being a 'critical friend' to Kampala. But over time there was an increasing feeling on the Kirklees side that the friendship was taking on more of the character of informal

necessarily mutually exclusive, as we argue in this paper.

consultancy with Kampala expecting Kirklees to resolve problems rather than engaging in a joint problem-solving process. This widening mutuality gap was reinforced by intermittent feedback and communication between the councils, and by the World Bank's own perceptions of the partnership as an alternative (and cheaper) consultancy. The influence of the World Bank in widening the mutuality gap gathered force when it requested Kampala to engage in a competitive tendering process for future contract partners.

Although formal contracts have a place in establishing rights, responsibilities and accountabilities, they also provide frameworks that are open to interpretation and can therefore offer space for flexible practice. As we saw in the Kampala-Kirklees partnership, this space had both advantages and disadvantages. By contrast, the Iganga-Daventry partnership was based on a Memorandum of Understanding not a contract. The operationalisation of the MoU depended even more on the relationships between the officers (and politicians) and on the role of trust. Trust can be seen as an informal form of contract, based on an implied commitment to a shared view of process and outcome. In Iganga-Daventry, there was personal commitment of partnership champions. That the partnership was based on champions was both a strength and a weakness (also argued by Lister, 2000). For Daventry officers, this commitment translated into raising funds for projects and working alongside their Iganga colleagues. However, the organisational commitment was more problematic because of Daventry District Council's own funding crisis in 2000. For Iganga officers, sustaining the momentum of the projects outside the visits was difficult because of the multiple demands on their time, shortage of resources and occasional wavering on the part of the Town Council. Other pressures (which applied to both partnerships) included

projectisation, which meant that external funders required concrete results within tight time frames, which often ran counter to effective joint learning processes.

While contracts, and to some extent MoUs, embody formal accountability, the types of relationship built through the partnerships also generated a *moral* accountability: the expectations that work on projects would continue outside visits, and that there would be communication and feedback. This moral accountability was a source of some frustration, mainly in the northern partners, who pointed to lack of feedback and therefore lack of mutual learning. However reverse frustrations were experienced by the southern partners with respect to the constrained schedules and availability of their northern counterparts.

Finally, one might expect partnerships predicated on joint learning to be reviewed from time to time. There were a number of formal reviews in the Kampala-Kirklees partnership that were primarily related to the funding regime and internal accountability. There were, however, less formal ways of taking stock and making changes over time, even though they tended to be in response to forced change rather than innovations to initiate change. The most evident example was the formation of Daventry Friends of Iganga, when the council had to reduce its commitment. The creation of an NGO has however been accompanied by constraints on external funding for developmental projects with the result that the Friends rely largely on local donations and individual commitment, and continually manage a tension between sustaining a partnership based on practitioner to practitioner learning and raising money for charitable purposes.[6]

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[6] In spite (or because of) these pressures, officers and members of the Friends have begun to draw on regional environmental health networks in the UK to organise working visits to Uganda.

Mutuality in relation to partnership outcomes

Learning was espoused as an outcome as well as a process in the partnerships. As an outcome, the kind of learning envisaged is based in constructivist theories about the interaction between understanding and experience, old and new knowledge (Atkins et al., 2002). The constructivist view sees learning as an experiential and transformative process, but of course, it is not necessarily so. Different types of learning form part of the whole spectrum of learning practices - instrumentally copying or reproducing, adapting new knowledge for strategic purposes, as well as challenging old ideas and old knowledge in the transformative sense. These particular categories are derived from Entwistle's analysis of approaches to learning (Entwistle, 1997), but there are many other models (Coffield *et al*., 2004). We have analysed knowledge transfer and learning in these partnerships in more depth elsewhere (Johnson and Wilson, forthcoming), and here summarise some of the main issues where they inform intended and mutual partnership outcomes. Again we examine two levels – the learning outcomes for individuals, and the challenge of scaling-up from individual to organisational learning.

The mutuality of individual learning outcomes

In principle, there is a trade-off that benefits both sides. First, for southern practitioners, there is the potential to learn from the northern practitioners' experiences, principles and practices of problem definition and solution. In the partnerships under study, there were several ways in which this occurred. Reproductive learning included replicating models, for example, an initial attempt in Iganga to copy Daventry's house to house refuse collection system. When the costs and practicalities of running such a system proved unsustainable, a more strategic adaptation of the model was devised. Strategic adaptation of UK models to Ugandan contexts informed the experience of individuals in

both partnerships (for example, use of new techniques such as computer-aided design for traffic management, or adapting house to house survey designs to assess health care needs). Learning about process, or the social dimensions of knowledge and its use, was also a key element of learning in Uganda. For example, it was realised that new models of traffic management derived from Kirklees cannot be imposed in Kampala - they are culturally specific and require consultation and negotiation; equally, working with the community on health care requires consultation and negotiation, as noted in the water, hygiene and housing project in Iganga. However, UK models of problem definition and solution were not automatically taken as models for replication or even adaptation. To some extent, there was a process of using models for reflection and deeper learning by comparing them with the possibilities and constraints in Uganda. As one Kampala engineer stated: 'What works in Kirklees does not necessarily work here'.

Second, the roles of the UK officers as advisers and critical friends meant that they too benefited from the trade-off and learnt a number of new skills: how to carry out informal training; team-working; communication skills (with their counterparts, and with members of other organisations such as the police and taxi drivers in Kampala, or community groups in Iganga); negotiation (with funders and politicians in their own and in the Ugandan councils); public speaking (having to address meetings and, in the case of Iganga, visiting schools). This learning on the job, which could be seen as strategic in terms of realizing partnership goals, was not only expressed or applied in the Ugandan context but had effects in the workplace in the UK. In Daventry, officers gained confidence, they were better able to negotiate projects, and they built working relationships across conventional professional and departmental divides. In Kirklees, there was even a transformative experience, when the consultation process needed to

design and implement a new traffic scheme in Kampala made Kirklees officers re-think

the nature of their own public engagement and begin to use consultation processes for

innovation in traffic management in the UK.

From individual to organisational learning?

To what extent did the individual learning through the partnerships contribute towards

organisational learning in the respective councils? While our study cannot provide a

definitive answer, it was evident that the four local authorities had difficulties building a

learning culture around the partnerships, and sharing and embedding individual learning

organisationally. We noted several contributory factors. Firstly, embedding individual

learning partly depends on the structural position of the individuals in the organisation

as well as other factors conducive to organisational change (Johnson and Thomas,

2004). We came across several instances of the difficulties officers faced in sharing

their learning from the partnerships more widely because of this issue. Secondly, it may

be difficult to share and embed learning beyond the individual or a specific unit even if

there is a strong learning culture, as the local authority may still not conceptualise

partnerships as potential sources of learning. Finally, councils have a political as well as

a bureaucratic life: as well as having an impact on continuity, political changes can also

potentially reduce a council's motivation to capitalise on the learning from partnerships.

Thus power relations *within* the councils can also affect mutuality.

APPROACHING MUTUALITY BY LEARNING FROM DIFFERENCE

Our analysis has illustrated potential advantages in the conceptualisation of partnerships

as learning models in terms of closing the mutuality gap. Particularly, the

conceptualisation appears to enhance parity and mutuality because the partnership is

seen as an endeavour of joint interaction, inherent differences between the partners are seen as opportunities rather than constraints, and learning benefits occur for northern as well as southern partners. By making the learning explicit, such partnerships draw attention to the possibilities for making both the learning and the partnerships more effective.

Such a process compares favourably with how the conventional mechanism for knowledge transfer and learning in development consultancy was perceived by two of our informants:

> 'In 1991 a First Urban Programme was formed here, [with] the World Bank giving us technical assistance, in which we got 14 expatriates consuming a whopping $4m. At that time the internal capacity of KCC was low, and not many people could benefit from their presence, so there was either very little benefit or nothing. The expatriates left their reports and many of us thought it had been a waste of money.' *(Senior officer, Kampala).*

> 'In the traditional technical help an expert comes to manage a project for a limited period. The expert comes with a huge budget. Then there is a counterpart who is very under-funded. The expert does not understand why things are delayed, comes with the missionary zeal of someone who knows the answers. The relationship with the counterpart thus becomes fraught.' *(Senior Officer, Iganga).*

Learning partnerships and mutuality based on difference are not, however, a magic bullet for North-South/South-North development practice. Conscious agency is required to make such partnerships work. For example, the practitioner to practitioner approach

confirms the importance of trust, although in this instance, trust emerged from the relative parity of the professional relationship between the officers. Other types of learning partnership would need to pay greater attention to establishing and building trust. Furthermore, partnerships based on learning do not circumvent issues of power relations between the actors, although they imply a commitment to address them. Joint learning starts from the different knowledges that the actors bring to the learning and, as we have indicated above, these are not necessarily equally valued. Higher-valued knowledge can easily become embedded in 'blueprints' (e.g. the perceived UK 'best practice') for attempted reproduction. If different knowledges are valued more equally there may be strategic adaptation (e.g. of UK 'best practice' to a local context). For deeper joint learning that challenges and re-thinks practice, there has to be an even stronger commitment to valuing different knowledges equally. This last also illustrates the importance for each partner of learning how to learn (Argyris and Schön, 1996).

Finally, learning through partnerships need to lead to learning in the partnership organisations. This scaling-up from individual to organisational learning was perhaps the most challenging aspect, and is an area of interest for organisational change more widely. It is probable that learning partnerships can only work effectively in terms of enhancing and developing practice if the participating organisations themselves have a learning culture into which they feed. An interesting question for partnership organisations is whether they can promote such a learning culture.

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