

What are the barriers to 'Reframed Partnerships', and what could we do?

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This paper summarises the outcomes of a series of conversations on 'Barriers to Reframed Partnerships' held in 2023. These conversations were held in the frame of our Faith in Action programme and their focus on strengthening project partnerships for stronger programme implementation. This paper will be shared internally. The intention is to integrate concrete outcomes into EU-CORD's workplan and to encourage everyone to participate on the journey towards reframed partnerships.



Introduction

The EU-CORD vision for partner relationships reflects the aspirations noted in the network's value statements, particularly the first two:

- Relationship: at the heart of the network lies the [quality of the relationship between us and those with whom we partner](#) and the degree to which we co-operate.
- Servanthood: [we strive to achieve our mutual goals in a spirit of servanthood](#), supporting each other while respecting each agency's specific identity.

In 2023, Adrian Hawthorn ran an exercise called 'Barriers to Reframed Partnerships'. The exercise set out to listen to the 'unvarnished opinions and attitudes' within the network through the lens of our shared colonial histories of oppression and exploitation.

Each session followed the same steps. An overview of colonialism and the violent expansion of exploitative empire building. Participants were then asked for (i) first reactions to the topic.

The next stage was to ask what the (ii) benefits might be if equality in relationships between members and partners were to be realised. Next, participants were asked (iii) what the barriers are and finally (iv) what the solutions might be.

Responses were noted anonymously for confidentiality purposes and to promote honesty. The groups that participated involved people experienced in development or humanitarian work over many years, are employed by either members or their partners and are based in (i) West Africa; (ii) South Sudan and Ethiopia; (iii) Uganda and (iv) South-east Asia. Sessions was also run at the (v) Funding and Partnerships Forum and the (vi) Faith in Action Forum.



The four sessions run in partner countries took a broader understanding of the questions and embraced economic, political and historical factors while the Funding and Partnerships Forum and the Faith in Action sessions confined answers to the member/partner relationships.

The results are presented here firstly as broad comments on (i) Initial reactions to this topic; (ii) Benefits of fixing the issues; (iii) Barriers and (iv) Possible solutions. This is followed by comments on each of the recurring themes. For simplicity, we used 'northern members' to refer to EU-CORD members and 'partners or partner countries' to denote the predominately low and middle-income countries where most EU-CORD members and their partner's work.

Initial Reactions

The sessions held in the partner countries using Teams considered discussions and actions on the topic of reframing of partnerships to be of 'great importance' while northern participants saw it as important, but as one amongst many competing priorities. Participants in South-east Asia saw the challenge as one of adaptation to a changing world and is perceived to be less threatening.

One striking opening comment illustrates that we live in different worlds.

"Girls leave school early and are offered for early marriage as young as 10 years old for dowry. Boys join gangs smoke, drink and fight. As partners, we work to break these repeating cycles which perpetuate poverty."

In the project setting, local communities feel they are dealing with imposed western ideas and methodologies. The impacts of global political and climate events are real but information and understanding of these changes affecting how the world around them is changing is poor making them in many respects trusting yet highly vulnerable. The 'reframing of partnerships' is seen by partners as an increasingly important topic as awareness of histories increases and calls for equality and reparations gather pace in political circles.



Traditional donor finance (grants) for civil society organisations is declining[1] so there may be less we can do with available resources. Strengthening partners is a way to enable them to access the increasing funding with awards going directly to local organisations. Climate change is driven mostly by wealthy northern member countries while the consequences are being suffered in partner countries which is an injustice but also creating a responsibility to respond. The church is also culpable in history and needs to work towards restitution since slavery was established at a time when the church was part of the state, and the church gave its approval.

[1] OECD (2023), "Funding via development and humanitarian civil society organisations has been declining", in OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Poland 2023, OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ba475276-en>.



Benefits from Reframing Partnerships

All agreed there are gains to be secured through greater equality. A move towards 'sharing the power' is seen as better than 'shifting the power'. The view was often expressed that a new mind-set is required based on a better understanding of the colonial impacts of our histories. A 'roundtable' concept is envisioned where all are equal. To get there, existing suspicions and grievances would need to be understood through being brought into the open thereby improving awareness and trust. Shared understandings can replace misplaced assumptions and prejudices. Through true partnership local partners would be able to share their challenges which are often seen as being overlooked.

Partners suggest they understand the local context of poverty best and can offer ideas for the best ways out of poverty. There can be a distrust of donor-imposed objectives which can include human rights conditions which sometimes challenge local cultures and can create unintended conflict. Too often northern members are perceived to be the implementer of the donors who bring their objectives and methodologies including regulations, values, and human rights while side stepping local practical problems.

Empowered partners can start to deliver locally led actions. One comment advised that northern members should place less emphasis on implementing projects and place more on capacity building partners.

'Then impact of our work would improve reducing poverty, addressing the root causes of hunger'. Our shared goals can become more realistic and achievable, a place where all contribute to overcoming poverty - northern members, partners and project participants.

What are the Barriers to Reframed Partnerships?

For northern members, pre-existing assumptions often exist which subconsciously undermine partnership. For example, the traditional role is where the northern members make decisions while partners passively accept what is offered. In this case, some participants suggested that this can lead to an underlying sense of inferiority and passivity. This occasionally hinders willingness to openly address genuine fears and challenges experienced by partners and communities whose real needs are being overlooked. This leads to two camps at the same table.

Partners advised that they appreciate partnerships which helps wealth creation through livelihoods and business development as well as education which prepares people for secure futures. Where gender issues are being addressed through women's empowerment it was stressed that it's important to involve the men. To fail to do so contributes to domestic and community conflicts.

'Whoever has the finance has the power to decide what gets done' was raised. Partners are squeezed in the middle between the donors and needy communities. They need to find finance too which often deflects them from focus on northern member projects.

Partners in Africa highlighted the importance of strong biblical family relationships based on father son businesses and extended families which include strong bonds. Europe is seen as using corporate business models which are secular, regulated, lacking in biblical precedent and are considered to be alien and misunderstood by many in partner countries.

Northern members and partners working in south-east Asia see human rights as a source of conflict with local cultures and government. Asians living in communist countries have decided that it's better to live at peace with a one-party state and traditional patriarchal structures than to live with conflict. To challenge this status quo has negative consequences.



Recurring Themes

1. What is 'true partnership'?

The roundtable is where everyone is equal. One quote from the 'partners' suggested that north and south could co-exist separately, but another participant noted that this denies the teaching of Paul in Corinthians (I Cor 12 v 14-20) which describes the body of Christ as one body with many equal but different parts. Equality cannot be assumed to exist since it is evident that many suspicions and assumptions exist which need to be recognised. A willingness to work out shared objectives together based on shared awareness and understanding can be achieved if space and time is given to developing such relationships.



Here real partner challenges can be shared without fear and where partners don't feel alone facing their challenges. Burdens are shared. In West Africa the power balance is seen as being about 10% to 90% but to reach 40% to 60% would be a significant achievement. The initiative would need to be taken by northern members since that's where the power is focused.

2. Need for capacity building of partner organisations

In order for partners to lead locally driven initiatives, prioritising capacity development becomes essential. This includes building leadership abilities, developing skills, sharing learning, reflecting on values, and approaches to pathways out of poverty.

Partners sometimes need to share the power within their own organisations and so become increasingly corporate organisations and less individualistic. Training, workshops and learning would all be relevant and welcome.

3. Existing grievances and suspicions

Trust has to be built and while the barriers sessions never said so explicitly it was evident that amongst some there is a sense of grievance. Suspicion nearly always exists at the outset of relationship building until honesty permits openness. Our shared historical background to the aid sector where oppressive colonialism has left its mark in the form of suspicions and inferiority complexes. Comments such as "if an African comes up with the idea it is ignored but the same idea from a European is applauded" reflects this. Partners spoke of being unable to be honest with northern members, to share their fears and challenges openly, feelings that need to be overcome.

There is a need for reconciliation through forgiveness for our associations with the colonial past and continued attitudes at national and international levels. Today this includes climate change. Moving forward with changed relationships which embrace equality, listening, humility and sharing would be necessary to demonstrate that change has taken place.

4. Donor influence

All sessions in the south noted that members are perceived to act as instruments for donors to a greater or lesser extent. This is often resented since donors are perceived to impose their own objectives which don't meet the real needs of communities. The sentiment was strongly expressed that partners understand the poverty needs of communities best but that they are not listened to.

In south-east Asia the donor emphasis on human rights causes particular concern. Empowering local communities



and strengthening advocacy can clash with government where dissent and challenge is discouraged. This leads to conflict between needy communities and duty bearers with negative consequences for those we seek to help. Sensitivity in how to approach human rights issues is needed.

5. Power of finance

These quotes reflect the thoughts of some partners:

“Development needs to be motivated by compassion and not finance”. “What gets funded gets implemented” and “finance always comes with strings”.

There is a thread here that reflects a big separation between northern member ideas about how development should take place through the setting of objectives and how this is perceived by partners. One comment reflected the difficulty where project participants attended workshops on human rights, while their basic needs of hunger were ignored.

6. Key biblical references for partnership and development

When asked which biblical texts influenced understanding of justice and development issues a range of old and New Testament verses were referenced:

I Cor 12 v 14-20 which speaks of the body of Christ being made up of many parts and each being of equal importance which is seen as aspirational.

Mark 6 v 3 – Jesus was a carpenter like his father, a typical model of the business which we see here rooted in the family and acts as a strong model particularly in Africa. The corporate organisation is seen as a western development based on European culture. Hence ‘conflict of interest’ is seen by some as being European problem!

Gal 6 v 2 “Carry each other’s burdens” so share challenges with one another.

Matt 19 v 19 “Love your neighbour as yourself”. Foundational to all our relationships.

Matt 5 v 14 – 16 “Put the light on its stand so that it gives light to everyone in the room”. Call to help everyone of whatever faith, ethnic background or circumstances.

7. Human Rights Agenda

This is seen particularly in south-east Asia as being contentious since this is seen as being a strong donor objective. Without sensitivity there is a real risk that vulnerable communities would be encouraged to challenge duty bearers bringing them into conflict with government. This could lead to imprisonment. With civil society space being



squeezed this is a challenge. Democracy, advocacy and the rights-based approaches which are so fundamental to western ideas of development can cause difficulties. Societies in south-east Asia have made an agreement for peace and not to challenge government but to settle for one party states. This autocratic approach to governance is seen as consistent with the way societies have been run for centuries in their countries. This point was less strongly made in the African sessions but still exists. Little mention was made of this topic in the Funding and Partnerships and Faith in Action sessions. Northern members and donors tend to place importance on civil society rights e.g. democracy and freedom of religion while partner countries place the emphasis on rights associated with basic needs. E.g. food, clean water and education etc.

8. The Traditional Family

Particularly in the African sessions emphasis was placed on the role of family which is seen as being central, biblical and the focus for belonging. In contrast, Europe is seen as secular and individualistic, where the church is weak, having little influence. Hence, Europe places emphasis on an individual's rights as opposed to the strength of the community working together. This cultural factor is seen as an issue where business is concerned. The family business where family members participate in the same business is seen as natural and biblical. 'Conflict of interest' can be understood in this cultural context. Gender empowerment initiatives need to involve men and thereby reduce the potential for domestic conflict.

Recommendations

Consideration of these recommendations would contribute towards better outcomes in programmes, improved quality and better partnership experiences for everyone.

- Northern members should ensure time and space is provided to build trust through listening and understanding colleagues based in the partner countries, finding out what suspicions might exist, what outlooks towards development prevail and what the challenges are. Time spent considering biblical teachings which influence development would help increase mutual understanding.
- Partners emphasised that they know best the challenges communities face and how these can be overcome. Members could help ensure that partners are equipped with appropriate analytical techniques and have opportunity to express these views.
- The opportunity exists to capture partner led data gathering and analysis of poverty which can be included in studies which could be given to donors to influence their policies and funding decisions. This would also give visibility to both members and partners with donors.
- Seek to move towards 'true partnerships' where partners feel valued and respected through being empowered. Partners used the phrase to 'share the power' as opposed to 'shifting the power'.
- Intentionally capacity build partners so that learning is shared developing skills and awareness that enables localisation to become a reality.
- Where donor human rights approaches are required working closely with partners to ensure cultural and community sensitivities are respected.
- Gender issues should be approached with the involvement of men who should participate in the changes towards women's empowerment. Traditional paternalistic leadership requires female role models to validate changes to female roles.



- Time spent understanding community faiths, traditions and family would help ensure values are shared and behaviours influenced to improve programme outcomes.

Concluding Remarks

I am grateful to everyone who participated and offered their honest and sometimes emotional opinions. There was a high level of trust and honesty amongst everyone evident in discussions, willingness to share openly and with the hope that we are following the right path in seeking equal partnerships.

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