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**Strengthening North–South Partnerships:  
Addressing Structural Barriers to Mutual Influence**

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# Strengthening North-South Development Partnerships: Addressing Structural Barriers to Mutual Influence

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## **Strengthening North-South Development Partnerships Addressing Structural Barriers to Mutual Influence**

### **Introduction**

Improving North-South partnerships<sup>1</sup> to be more equitable and effective has been a priority of most US third sector development agencies for more than a decade, yet current attitudes suggest that much work remains to be done (Dichter & Fisher, 1988; Drabek, 1987; ICVA, 1987; Interaction, 1989; IFCB, 1998; INTRAC, 1998; Abugre, 1999). Since the late eighties, US private voluntary organizations (PVOs) have conducted numerous research projects, organizational self-studies, and workshops to guide partnership change efforts<sup>2</sup>. However, surveys of US and Southern NGOs carried out in 1989 (Interaction) and 1998 (Leach, Kalegaonkar & Brown, 1998; IFCB, 1998) continue to demonstrate significant gaps in perceptions of the value and impacts of partnerships.

One of the most significant differences concerns the issue of mutual influence, a critical factor associated with effective partnerships (Dichter & Fisher, 1988; Alter & Hage, 1993; Brown & Ashman, 1996; Lewis, 1998). While Northern PVOs report that some influence has shifted to their Southern partners, many Southern NGOs say that they have little influence in their relations with Northern agencies. African NGOs even report that cooperating with Northern NGOs threatens their missions and autonomy (IFCB, 1998). As the globalization of civil society expands, it will become even more critical to improve international relations between civil society organizations and reduce perceptions of Northern dominance (Edwards, 1999; Offenheiser et al., 1999). In sub-Saharan Africa, poverty is expected to increase and demands for equitable and effective development cooperation will intensify (World Bank, 1999). Indeed, many PVOs say they anticipate increasing the extent to which they work and share control with Southern partners (Leach, Kalegaonkar, & Brown, 1998).

Some argue that US PVOs and other Northern agencies are duplicitous, using partnership rhetoric to mask their on-going control of international aid relationships. Others suggest that these relationships can never attain the mutuality necessary for effective partnerships because they embody the larger structural inequality between the relatively wealthy North and poorer South. While there may be some truth in both these perspectives, this research explores an alternative explanation for the continuing North-South gap in perceptions and apparently limited success of PVO change efforts. It may be that PVOs' investments in organizational learning and change have been sincere, but limited to aspects of interorganizational relations which are more easily changed and de-coupled from underlying structural factors that skew control of joint activities in favor of the Northern partners.

The change initiatives of most PVOs, as reflected in internal documents and staff attitudes, have emphasized concepts of partnership, policy guidelines, individual attitudes, and interpersonal relationships. Less attention has been given to structural factors like policies and procedures that govern areas such as terms of funding and reporting procedures. These policies and procedures are more difficult to change because they are heavily determined by the strategies, systems and cultures of PVOs and their donors. They tend to be taken for granted by those responsible for initiating and managing partnerships.

Yet in the longer-term, organizational systems and strategies are not impossible to change. Senior PVO leadership that is committed to improving partnerships and aware of the importance of structural factors can redirect organizational change efforts to address the most critical issues. The goal of this paper is to improve understanding of the ways in which structural factors influence interorganizational arrangements

and suggest new focal points to guide PVO change efforts to improve their development partnerships with Southern NGOs.

## **Partnership Literature And Change Efforts**

Most partnership change efforts have been informed by research that emphasizes factors associated with what Astley and Van de Ven (1983) would consider the agency of organizational actors. Those who see partnerships as expressions of voluntary agency understand them as emergent forms of collective action which evolve through a series of negotiated phases (Gray, 1989; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Brown and Ashman, 1996). Critical factors associated with effective partnerships are the development of trust (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994), cooperative interpersonal relationships, and processes which promote communication, mutual influence and joint learning (Brown and Ashman, 1996; Lewis, 1998). In keeping with this perspective, change efforts have focused on policy statements and workshops to change individuals' ideas, attitudes, and behaviors as they interact with partners.

Partnership change efforts have made less use of contrasting structural perspectives (Astley and Van de Ven, 1983). This literature is less well-developed, but suggests that partnership behavior is influenced by pre-existing and fixed factors in the partnership environment that constitute underlying structures. Partnership environments include organizational elements like policies, systems, and culture, as well as external factors like government policy and economic trends. In this view, partnerships are not entirely emergent nor freely negotiated; instead they are partially determined by structural factors that shape the choices of organizational partners. Research on structural factors in interorganizational relations has focused primarily on governance structures, and suggests that effective structures promote shared control, e.g. they are horizontal rather vertical, representative of partners, and relatively autonomous from funders or organizational parents (Alter and Hage, 1993; Yan and Gray, 1996; Leach, 1994).

International development partnerships tend to use formal agreements such as contracts or letters of agreement to govern the relationships. Experience suggests that under-studied structural factors in international development partnerships are those that would influence the negotiation, implementation, and evaluation of agreements and joint activities. They may include organizational strategies, internal procedures for accountability, organizational systems and culture, and policies of key external stakeholders like donors and governments (Offenheiser, Holcombe & Hopkins, 1999). This research was designed to explore the structural factors influencing partnerships between US PVOs and African NGOs and identify those most associated with effective performance.

Criteria for defining the effectiveness of interorganizational partnerships, like those for defining organizational effectiveness in the third sector, is a debated and evolving topic (Herman & Renz, 1999). For the purposes of this study, partnerships will be considered to be effective when both parties agree that their goals have been achieved and express their satisfaction with the partnership (Alter & Hage, 1993; Geringer & Hebert, 1989; Yan & Gray, 1995). Satisfaction is important because it is an indicator of the extent to which partners perceive benefits from the partnership beyond its explicit goals. Satisfied partners tend to continue to invest their resources in partnerships, whereas dissatisfied partners either exit relationships or become passive participants.

## **Methodology**

Since the study was intended to be exploratory, relevant to practitioners, and cross-culturally valid, three sets of principles guided its design: multiple case analysis (Yin, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994), action research (Schein, 1988) and intergroup theory (Alderfer, 1986). The research process was somewhat

complex, but necessary to achieve the desired results. This section offers a brief rationale for using each of the three sets of principles and describes the methods by which the research was carried out.

Case studies are appropriate for understanding how processes like interorganizational relationships evolve over time within their specific contexts (Yin, 1994). Cross-case analysis offers the advantage of preserving rich detail of the cases while identifying analytic themes from which to build theory, such as the structural factors in development partnerships (Yin, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Action research principles suggest that research is more relevant to practice when practitioners are involved, so we engaged practitioners in generating research questions, interpreting data, and developing action plans for future change (Schein, 1988). Finally, intergroup principles suggest that valid data is more likely to be obtained in cross-cultural studies when research teams mirror the cultural group membership of the system, so we created a joint US-African research team to shape the protocol, carry out the interviews and interpret the data<sup>3</sup>.

### **Case Selection**

Four partnerships of US PVOs and African NGOs were selected from nine that volunteered to participate in the project through the PVO headquarters.<sup>4</sup> They best fit criteria to ensure the data would be relevant to a wide range of partnerships. The partnerships were located in countries in the same African region, involved widely implemented types of development programs, and were perceived by the PVOs to have evolved for long enough to permit useful learning. At least three of the four were selected by the PVOs as particularly good examples of their partnerships.

The main characteristics of the partnerships are illustrated in Table 1, below, and brief narrative descriptions are provided in Appendix I. Of the four different PVOs and NGO partnerships selected, two were in Kenya and two in Ethiopia. Although it was not intentional, in each country, one partnership involved a church-based PVO which had been in a long-term partnership of about ten years and one involved a child sponsorship agency in a relatively young partnership of about two years. The development programs involved the fields of agricultural development, integrated community development, education and microfinance.

**Table 1: Partnership Cases**

<b>Country &amp; PVO Identity</b>	<b>Major PVO Program Strategy</b>	<b>Development Program</b>	<b>Age</b>
<b>Kenya church-based</b>	Work with local partners	Agricultural development with small farmers	10+ years
<b>Ethiopia church-based</b>	Work with local partners	Integrated community development	10+ years
<b>Kenya child sponsorship</b>	Operate own programs	High performing microfinance	>2 years
<b>Ethiopia child sponsorship</b>	Operate own programs	Develop innovative models in education sector	>2 years

### **Protocol Design**

We expected that exploring the issues surrounding equity and effectiveness with the representatives of the partnerships would be sensitive. Since these were on-going relationships, neither party would want to jeopardize it by criticizing the other. Therefore, the questions were designed to elicit the story of how

the partnership evolved in the eyes of the individual being interviewed. We used a process model of partnerships to engage practitioners in recounting how the organizations selected each other as partners, negotiated joint agreements, implemented their relative roles and responsibilities, evaluated partnership goals and renegotiated new agreements (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Gray, 1989; Brown and Tandon, 1995). Their assessments emerged as part of their story.

Similarly, we asked open-ended questions encouraging practitioners to identify the structural factors in the organizational and external environments that influenced their partnerships. Responses to these questions brought out both positive and negative factors. Often these factors were recognized as being based in systems external to the individuals involved, e.g. organizational policies or governmental politics. Again, we focused on the 'how' questions, encouraging practitioners to describe how the various factors influenced their partnerships.

### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

The research team interviewed key staff identified by each agency and reviewed archival documents such as internal memos, contracts and monitoring reports. Following joint interpretation of the data by the team members, case reports of each partnership were written and then reviewed and accepted by the practitioners (see references). To facilitate joint interpretation of the data by practitioners and researchers, a conference was convened in Nairobi, Kenya. Representatives of each partnership presented their own case and participated in identifying common themes, issues, and directions for improvement. Finally, each partnership met individually to develop concrete action plans (Ashman and Muyoya, 1999). The issues generated by conference participants relating to the structural factors influencing their partnerships were key themes guiding the cross-case analysis in the next phase of the research.

Following cross-case and grounded theory-building methods, the cases were analyzed through an iterative process (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss, 1987). The data was coded for common themes and matrices comparing a wide range of factors across the cases were constructed and revised. As key patterns emerged, the data was reduced to isolate and illustrate key factors. The following sections discuss the structural factors associated with effective partnerships that emerged from the comparative analysis. Given the relatively small number of cases and the exploratory nature of the study, results at this stage are tentative. Propositions are offered to build theory of effective partnerships and guide further change interventions in PVOs. The emphasis here is on the changes that PVOs and donors can make, since in most cases the balance of power in shaping structural arrangements lies with them rather than Southern NGOs.

### **Perceptions Of Partnership Effectiveness**

Comparative analysis of the four cases using the two indicators of effectiveness, goals and satisfaction, reveals a gap in satisfaction with the partnerships that is consistent with those reported in surveys of larger samples of PVOs and Southern NGOs (IFCB, 1998; Leach, Kalegaonkar & Brown, 1998). Both sets of partners agreed that the development goals for which the partnerships had been created were being achieved – project proposals, agreements and reporting requirements tend to ensure that this is so. However, most of the US partners reported a high degree of satisfaction with their partnerships while their African partners were more reserved and expressed several concerns with partnership arrangements.

The four case reports provide contextual data that helps to understand the reasons behind the gap in perceptions between the U.S and African partners. In general, the African partners' perceptions reflect a

sense of inequality and a lack of mutual influence in important areas of the partnerships. Lack of influence is not only a dissatisfying experience, but functions as a barrier to managerial autonomy and performance. It contradicts the espoused agenda for “capacity building” of many Northern PVOs (Leach, et al, 1998). This section summarizes the concerns of the African NGOs with their relationships to their PVO partners. These concerns are then linked to structural factors in PVOs and their stakeholder environments.

Coding the case reports (Strauss, 1987) led to three indicators of satisfaction: attitudes towards partners, images of the partnership and concerns with the partnership (Table 2). Overall, the US partners expressed respect and support for their African partners. The two church-based PVOs were not merely satisfied with their NGO partners, but expressed a high degree of admiration for them. In both cases, the African NGOs had developed in size, program expertise, and local stature among NGOs and other development actors during the time of the partnership.

When asked to suggest an image or metaphor for their partnerships, US PVO staff offered images demonstrating equality, such as a “*crew team rowing together*”, or the “*two wheels of a bicycle*”. Serious concerns about the African partners were voiced in only one case, focusing on leadership and absorptive capacity. These reflect common concerns of US PVOs with Southern NGO partners (Leach, et al, 1999; Dichter & Fisher, 1988), and in this case may have been heightened due to the young age of the partner (about two years) and the significant amount of funds involved, e.g. hundreds of thousands of dollars.

**Table 2: Relative Satisfaction with the Partnerships**

<b>Indicators of Satisfaction</b>	<b>US Partners</b>	<b>African Partners</b>
<b>Attitude towards the partner</b>	Respect	Measured appreciation
<b>Metaphors for the partnership</b>	Equity-based	Family-based inequities
<b>Concerns with the partnership</b>	Few: leadership & administrative capacity in 1 NGO	Several: formal agreements & partnership management in all PVOs

In contrast to their US counterparts, the African NGO leaders expressed a more measured appreciation for their US partners. None offered high praise, but most suggested that their US partners were “*better than other donors*”. They described the relationships as cordial, if not warm, “*trust with checking*”. In all four cases, many PVO program staff were themselves African nationals, so language and cultural differences were not generally problematic. Above all, the African NGOs valued the financial resources and technical support provided through the partnerships. All the NGOs wanted the funding to continue beyond the life of the contract under which they were currently working.

The metaphors used by most of the African NGOs were family-based, and unlike the US images, included an element of power difference, like parent-child, or husband-wife. Sometimes the imagery included anticipated separations, e.g. “*graduation*”, “*divorce*”, and “*weaning off*”. Finally, in contrast to the few concerns of the US practitioners, the African NGO leaders raised several concerns about a number of aspects of their partnerships. These concerns can be grouped into two main categories, the terms of formal agreements and PVO management of partnerships. Each item of concern is associated

with increased managerial difficulties for the NGOs. Once the concerns have been outlined, the structural factors within the PVOs and their environments that compel them to enact these problematic arrangements (for African partners) will be identified.

**Concerns with Formal Agreements**

Generally, the US and African practitioners described the process of coming to agreements as one of *jointly* negotiating the goals, responsibilities, funding amounts and reporting guidelines. However, the concerns noted by the African partners suggest that the negotiation process did not enable them to influence the outcomes to the extent preferred. The written agreements in three of the four cases include a number of conditions that establish upward accountability to the PVOs and their donors rather than mutual accountability to the NGOs and their communities.

In all four cases, the African NGO partners perceived contracts as too short (they varied from one to three years) to make significant development impacts. The case conference brought out their shared concern with the uncertainty of conditions for renewing or ending contracts (Ashman and Muyoya, 1999). The issue was less that project funds would end at some point than in being able to negotiate mutually satisfactory arrangements leading to sustainable development projects and programs.

**Table 3: African NGO Concerns with Formal Agreements**

<b>Aspect of Formal Agreement</b>	<b>Partnership Cases</b>	<b>Impact on African NGOs</b>
<b>Short length of time of agreement (1-3 years)</b>	All 4	Not long enough to make significant impact
<b>Uncertainty concerning renewal or ending of agreement</b>	All 4	Hinders planning & project sustainability
<b>Regulations limiting use of funds</b>	2 of 4: Kenyan & Ethiopian church-based	Hinders NGO financial sustainability
<b>US ownership of major capital items &amp; non-liability for actions of NGO</b>	2 of 4: Kenya child-sponsorship & Ethiopia church-based	Hinders asset-building of NGO; NGO bears risk
<b>Contradictory requirements, e.g. 1 yr. contract with PVO, yet 5 yr. contract with government</b>	1 of 4: Ethiopian church-based	NGO bears risk
<b>Insufficient overhead for large grants</b>	1 of 4: Ethiopian church-based	NGO is ‘de-capacitated’, e.g. depletes resources to cover costs of grant administration & reporting
<b>Lack of mechanism for NGO to ensure PVO compliance in releasing resources</b>	1 of 4: Kenya child-sponsorship	Hinders NGO in fulfilling program obligations to communities

In the two PVOs that granted large sums of money, the PVOs (and in one case the donor) reserved the right to ultimate ownership of capital assets, and the PVO protected themselves from liability for

wrongful acts by the NGOs. These conditions were perceived to disempower the African NGOs and force them to bear the risk in the partnership. Other concerns expressed by some of the African NGOs centered on the dilemmas associated with some conditions placed on receiving funds. Two mentioned PVO restrictions that hindered them from becoming more financially sustainable in their own national context. Another mentioned that his NGO was caught between signing one-year contracts with the PVO and five-year contracts with the government (required by the PVO). The NGO, arguably the most vulnerable partner, was forced to assume the risk of being the intermediary between the donor, the US PVO, and the host government.

The African NGOs accept it as matter of course that they will report on the project impacts and the funds received, yet they have little say over what will be reported, when, and in what format. “*We have to know what the donor wants and give it to them.*” Payments are usually provided in installments, and the NGOs have to submit proper reports in order to receive the subsequent payments. If the PVOs are slow in fulfilling their obligations, the NGOs have no recourse, and can be put in compromising positions with their communities by being unable to follow through with their program commitments.

In contrast to this general pattern of formal agreements that ensure upward accountability, one case stands out as very different. The formal agreement in the partnership involving the Ethiopian child sponsorship PVO was designed explicitly to encourage mutual accountability (Table 4). Under the guidance of the donor, the PVO shaped the formal agreement to be more flexible than normal. The PVO staff wanted the formal agreement to support the informal relations of trust and mutual trust that they understood to be at the heart of the partnership, so they developed memorandums of understanding (MOUs) rather than formal contracts. The MOUs were written only after several discussions of mutual interests had taken place, at both PVO and NGO offices. Contrary to standard practice, the PVO encouraged the NGO to keep the bank accounts close to the communities in which they were working, and they expected that some mistakes would be made with the finances in a learning process. The PVO staff had originally put a liability clause in the agreement, in compliance with their standard procedures, but removed it at the direction of the donor, who thought it would hinder the development of trust with the partners.

**Table 4: Sources of Satisfaction in Formal Agreement in Ethiopia Child Sponsorship Partnership**

<b>Aspect of Formal Agreement</b>	<b>Impact on African NGO</b>
Relationship-led agreement leading to MOU, not contract	NGO mission & program goals influence agreement
Mutual negotiation of reporting guidelines	NGO has influence in setting indicators & procedures for reporting
Donor removed liability clause in original PVO draft agreement	Risk is shared by NGO, PVO, & donor
PVO encourages downward accountability to communities, e.g. funds in local bank accounts	NGO & communities have more control over funds

**Concerns with Partnership Management**

African partners’ concerns about the ways PVOs managed partnership relationships can be summarized as four key issues: rigid adherence to procedures, internal resistance to complying with partnership agreements, personnel turnover, and the large size of the PVO (Table 5). In three of the four cases, both

African NGO and US PVO staff observed that partnerships are hindered when organizational procedures are followed rigidly rather than flexibly applied to emerging issues and problems.

There is no quarrel with the existence of organizational procedures to guide program and project management; all organizations need some degree of policies and procedures to ensure accountability and foster consistent behavior organization-wide. Instead, the issue is the lack of willingness by PVOs at times to respond collaboratively to issues and concerns with existing arrangements experienced by the African partners. Commonly, African NGOs face unpredicted events that influence project performance and their relationships with communities and governments. Social or political conflicts can disrupt activities and lead to new demands for service. Economic downturns can decrease project benefits, leading to needs for additional resources. If the PVOs do not respond, the NGOs either have to mobilize additional funding elsewhere (difficult in a resource-scarce environment) or scale back their support to their communities.

**Table 5: Concerns of African NGOs with Partnership Management**

<b>Aspect of Partnership Management</b>	<b>Partnership Cases</b>	<b>Impact on African NGOs</b>
<b>Rigid adherence to procedures</b>	3 of 4: Kenya church-based, Ethiopia church-based, & Kenya child sponsorship	Limits resources available to respond to communities
<b>Resistance to complying with partnership agreement</b>	2 of 4: Ethiopia child sponsorship & Kenya child sponsorship	Hinders program effectiveness
<b>Personnel turnover</b>	3 of 4: Kenya church-based, Ethiopia church-based, & Kenya child sponsorship	Increases uncertainty & need to reinvest in building the relationship
<b>Large size of the PVO</b>	2 of 4: Ethiopia church-based & Kenya child sponsorship	Slows responsiveness of PVO to NGO priorities for its programs

Despite their formal agreements, internal accounting and administrative staff in the two child sponsorship PVOs resisted complying with partnership agreements. In one case (Ethiopia), the country director intervened in support of the partnership, but in the other, the release of funds and assets were significantly delayed, which in turn hindered the NGOs' effectiveness in implementing the program. Since the child sponsorship PVOs were primarily operational, used to implementing programs themselves, their accounting and administrative systems did not facilitate arrangements that were perceived to reduce the control of the PVO over crucial resources.

PVOs may be unaware of the impact of some of their internal policies and systems on their partners. It is very common for managerial staff in US PVOs to change every two to three years, rotating between country offices and the headquarters. This may contribute to PVO goals, but from the African partner's point of view, it increases the uncertainty surrounding the partnership and necessitates further investment in relationship building with the new personnel. Similarly, the large size of a PVO may enable it to have certain kinds of impacts, but African NGO partners reported feeling marginalized in the context of either the other partners competing for the PVO's time or the larger size of other PVO activities.

Given this list of concerns of the African NGO partners in these four cases, it is easy to understand why African NGO leaders are so skeptical about the equity and effectiveness of the relationships. They face competition from PVOs that pursue operational strategies even as they experiment with partnership approaches. Terms of receiving funding ensure upward accountability to donors and often require the NGO to bear the risk of development activities. NGOs have no recourse when PVOs don't comply with agreements. PVO procedures and cultures can enforce rigid guidelines that do not fit well with the local situation. At their worst, unchecked resistance from internal PVO systems can undermine partnership agreements on which NGOs have made commitments to their communities.

With little imagination, one can generate a list of conditions which African NGOs would enforce if they could: longer contracts, more influence in negotiating project reporting guidelines, time limits for the release of funds to them, sanctions for failure of PVOs to comply with agreements, contract renewals determined well in advance of end, special funds for emergencies, and so on. These kinds of provisions would not only increase their influence in the partnerships, but also more importantly, foster their managerial control and effectiveness in carrying out development programs for African communities. In turn, the NGOs would build their capacity to lead development efforts over the long-term.

**Structural Factors in Formal Agreements and Partnership Management**

Why do formal agreements and partnership management practices tend to skew influence to the PVOs even as they voice their commitment to partnerships? The explanation offered here is that structural factors in the PVOs and their resource mobilization environments shape the negotiation and management of their partnerships in ways that increase their control and reduce that of their partners. Again, these factors tend to be taken for granted and PVO personnel assume they are difficult, if not impossible to change. They tilt the balance of influence towards the PVOs even when partnership-minded individuals attempt to create mutually beneficial arrangements and trusting interpersonal relationships.

The structural factors behind most of the PVO behaviors of concern to their African NGO partners are standards, procedures and policies embedded in their systems for ensuring accountability and management control. These systems enable the PVOs to carry out core tasks and processes like resource management, program management and organizational growth. Table 6 summarizes the African NGO concerns and associated structural factors in PVO systems.

**Table 6: Structural Factors Associated with African NGO Concerns**

<b>African NGO Concerns</b>	<b>Associated Structural Factors in PVOs &amp; Stakeholder Environment</b>
<p><u>Formal Agreements</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Short length of time</li> <li>- Uncertainty concerning renewal or end</li> <li>- Regulations on use of funds</li> <li>- US ownership of major capital items &amp; non-liability for NGO actions</li> <li>- Contradictory requirements</li> <li>- Insufficient overhead</li> </ul>	<p><u>PVO Accountability Systems</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PVO &amp; donor policies</li> <li>- PVO policies &amp; strategy</li> <li>- PVO &amp; donor policies</li> <li>- PVO &amp; donor policies</li>   <li>- PVO policies</li> <li>- PVO &amp; donor policies</li> </ul>
<p><u>Partnership Management</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rigid adherence to procedures</li> <li>- Resistance to complying with agreement</li> <li>- Personnel turnover</li> <li>- Large PVO size</li> </ul>	<p><u>PVO Management Control Systems</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PVO culture</li> <li>- PVO financial control systems</li> <li>- PVO policies &amp; practices</li> <li>- PVO strategy</li> </ul>

Elements of formal agreements like the time period, conditions for receiving and using funds, ownership and liability clauses, percentage of funds allowed for overhead, and renewal procedures are typically aspects of PVO and donor policies that are brought to formal agreements as non-negotiable conditions. Some may be based in the external environment, such as US legal regulations on federal funds, yet others are enacted by the PVOs or donors to ensure managerial control. Policies behind at least three of the concerns – conditions on funding, contradictory requirements and insufficient overhead – appear to be made in the PVOs or donors with little consideration for the impact on partners who operate in different national legal and economic environments.

The renewal of agreements is a sensitive area for both PVOs and NGOs. Formal procedures require that projects be formally evaluated and further funding be made conditional on demonstrated impact and continued need. Although informal communication can mitigate the uncertainty for African NGOs, they cannot plan for the future until formal commitments have been made. In the PVOs, decisions are made not only on the basis of the project, but also in the context of larger strategic issues. Declining financial resources from US donors can force PVOs to reduce their support to existing partners, even when projects warrant continued funding. PVO leadership and program staffs do not like this situation either, since they tend to understand the needs and want to keep ‘good’ partners. Yet the impact on African NGOs is that they can suddenly find themselves without funding for activities that communities have come to value and depend on for economic and social sustenance.

Accountability and management control systems are developed in the context of PVO strategies for resource mobilization and program design. As PVO resource mobilization strategies target certain donors or kinds of donors, internal systems and procedures are created to routinize associated tasks and obligations. Similarly, as program strategies evolve, internal systems are created to support the routine tasks associated with PVOs’ roles and functions in program partnerships. Although these systems and strategies probably have not been designed to enforce inequitable arrangements on their partners, they appear to have that very impact.

### **Structural Changes To Improve Development Partnerships**

Interorganizational partnerships may be relationships between organizations, but they do not start and stop at organizational boundaries. Agreements that link partners in joint activities also engage their internal procedures, systems and cultures. These findings, although exploratory, suggest that partnership theories that conceptualize organizations as unified actors, relatively free to negotiate agreements, implement joint activities, and evaluate results, need to be revised. Instead, organizational partners must be seen as bringing their own complex systems, shaped by internal interests and stakeholder demands, to partnership arrangements. These systems influence the evolution of partnerships in ways that can hinder or support intended partnership agreements. As one US PVO manager reflected, *“its like a marriage, you don’t get just the individual, you get the whole family”*.

In most international development partnerships, PVO procedures and systems have been designed to ensure organizational control and accountability only to US stakeholders. This leads them to behave in ways that can be counterproductive to effective development partnerships in the eyes of their partners. Current practices in PVO-NGO partnerships may ensure that projects achieve the relatively short-term goals for which they are created, but they do little to accommodate the needs for managerial autonomy and long-term performance of their Southern NGO partners. It is not difficult to understand why African

NGO leaders would say that in general, cooperating with Northern agencies threatens their missions and autonomy (IFCB, 1998).

PVO leaders and donors who are committed to further improving development partnerships must be prepared to make structural changes within their own organizations. Changing organizational systems and strategies is complex, and personnel comfortable with existing systems may resist change processes. The following propositions could guide action learning processes by PVOs and donors to make partnerships more effective. They address the structural factors identified in this study as the most problematic to NGO partners. The first three address internal systems and policies. The fourth one addresses longer-term strategic choices of PVOs, and the final recommendation is addressed specifically to donors.

### **(1) Mutual Accountability In Formal Agreements**

Obviously, PVOs must develop systems and procedures for ensuring accountability to their donors, whether they are individuals supporting a poor child or major government agencies carrying out U.S. foreign policy. Recent negative media reports about some PVOs and increased government demands for accountability have heightened awareness of the need for clear and strict policies and procedures guaranteeing that funds are used for their intended purposes. Unfortunately, these pressures on the PVOs appear to be passed on to their Southern NGO partners with little opportunity for partners to either moderate the standards or enforce those of their own design. As a result, accountability mechanisms enforce upward accountability to donors rather than mutual or downward accountability to partners and their community stakeholders.

If accountability is defined as “the obligation to render an account for a responsibility that has been conferred” (Vic Murray, email, 1999), US PVOs and their donors must recognize that they are not the only parties conferring responsibility. Their funds are not the sole resources invested in these partnerships. Southern resources such as NGO capacity, knowledge of local conditions, expertise in development programs, and relationships with local stakeholders are equally valuable resources for which Southern NGOs and their partners also need to account. If US PVOs and their donors agree with Kajese (1987) that “the burden of responsibility for development lies in the South”, then it follows that systems for mutual accountability are in order.

A better appreciation for the resources invested by Southern partners and the pressures for them to be accountable to their own stakeholders can lead US PVOs and their donors to be more open to negotiating arrangements that enforce mutual, rather than upwards, accountability. Of course, many of the conditions imposed by PVOs have their origins in US law or strict financial policies that will not be changed easily. But PVOs can also consider and respond to conditions put forward by NGOs to improve their own accountability and performance, such as less cumbersome reporting procedures or provisions to avoid delays in releasing funds. PVOs can behave differently, especially with the support of external donors, as demonstrated by the Ethiopian child sponsorship PVO.

P1: Extending the principle of mutual influence to accountability mechanisms in formal agreements will increase the satisfaction of Southern NGO partners and their accountability to their local stakeholders. Revised procedures should focus on:

- more flexible forms of agreement;
- shared liability for inherent risks; and
- increased Southern partner influence in determining conditions of funding, e.g. reporting procedures, availability of emergency funds, etc.

### **(2) Responsive Partnership Implementation.**

PVO procedures, policies, and cultures lead to partnership management behavior that is perceived as controlling and unresponsive by Southern NGO partners. Of course, PVOs need management control systems that foster consistent organizational knowledge and behaviors necessary to achieve their goals. Creating and managing these systems in PVOs is especially complex because they operate a variety of programs across multiple countries, and with multiple donors. Pressures for uniformity within systems spanning diverse environments are understandable. Yet the *sine qua non* of managing effective partnership relationships is that control must be shared between the partners. At present, in most PVO-NGO relationships, the NGOs shoulder the burden of adapting to PVO policies and procedures. Organizational change efforts in PVOs can focus on improving the responsiveness and flexibility of partnership management systems.

PVOs can take at least two steps to promote more responsive behavior. The first is to promote a cultural change in managerial systems to recognize the importance of responsiveness in partnership relationships. Responsiveness is an under-valued characteristic of effective third sector organizations (Herman & Renz, 1999), so it will fall to the most senior leadership to communicate the importance of responsiveness and provide practical guidance to distinguish the necessary from the flexible conditions and policies.

The second step is to work with Southern NGO partners to institute mechanisms to jointly monitor and adjust the partnerships, separate from those for monitoring and evaluating the projects. Southern NGOs may negotiate acceptable agreements, but then experience crises or operational dilemmas in their environments that they had not predicted. PVO partnership management can become problematic, as when funds are not released on time. Regular genuine opportunities to assess and adjust the arrangements could address many concerns of Southern NGO partners. Although two of the PVOs in the study convened regular workshops with their partners in a country or region in order to promote communication and target issues of mutual concern, their NGO partners did not cite these workshops as examples of responsiveness. More attention needs to be given in individual partnerships to identify and respond to emerging concerns.

Operational PVOs face unique organizational challenges as they adopt partnership approaches. In these two cases, senior managers played important roles as internal champions, encouraging and pressuring internal staff into approving partnership practices. The partnership projects were managed by separate units and integrated institutional learning in project management. Senior leaders in operational PVOs should anticipate the internal change processes associated with partnerships. They should take proactive steps to educate and create incentives for internal staff in finance and administrative roles to carry out partnership agreements.

P2: Increasing the responsiveness of PVO partnership management practices will increase the managerial autonomy of Southern NGOs, their responsiveness to their stakeholders, and increase PVO success in capacity building and institutional sustainability. PVO change efforts should focus on:

- educating and rewarding staff for responsive partnership management,
- instituting mechanisms to monitor and adjust the partnership relationship effectively, and
- senior leadership interventions in operational PVOs to ensure compliance with partnership agreements.

### **(3) Collaborative Planning For Sustainability.**

Declining levels of donor funding in the US and other western countries have heightened sensitivity in PVOs and NGOs to the issue of the sustainability of projects and programs (Leach et al., 1998). As the

future stream of financial resources becomes less secure, pressures to ensure effective results with lasting benefits increase. African communities as well as the NGOs in our study voiced strong interests in ensuring that they would be able to continue project benefits should their US partners leave the country.

PVOs tend to think in terms of '*exit strategies*', whereas the African NGOs in our study talked about new approaches to '*weaning off*' (Ashman and Muyoya, 1999). The concept of 'weaning off' is different than that of 'exit strategy' in several respects. The label, 'exit strategy' is a PVO-centered concept, oriented to help the PVO determine how it will leave a partnership. 'Weaning-off', in contrast, is a partnership-centered concept taken from East African family systems. It is the term used for the transition when adult children form their own households, and suggests a more gradual process. The implication for partnerships is that both partners have responsibility for transforming their roles in predictable and mutually understood directions. Essentially, the expectations and procedures associated with the end of funding agreements need to be more explicit and open to mutual influence.

None of the African NGOs wanted US funding to go on forever. They were interested in taking measures to increase the sustainability of their programs and organizations. They were frustrated by the lack of PVO accommodation for the environmental challenges they faced and the absence of collaboration in planning for sustainability. Partnership monitoring mechanisms would promote better understanding of NGO constraints by PVOs and vice versa. Joint agreements on times and procedures for renegotiating agreements well before they are due to end would increase the predictability and choices of Southern partners. If desired, PVOs can even join NGOs in planning for ways to sustain projects and programs, like the Ethiopian child sponsorship PVO in our study that introduced its partners to other donors.

P3: Collaborative planning for project and organizational sustainability will increase managerial autonomy and performance of Southern NGOs. PVOs can revise their contracting procedures to:

- include mechanisms for joint planning for sustainability from the start of partnership agreements,
- document environmental conditions impinging on NGO sustainability, and
- support NGO partners in measures to increase their sustainability.

#### **(4) PVO Program and Resource Mobilization Strategies.**

Discussions about how to make North-South partnerships more effective are irrelevant if they do not take into account fundamental strategic issues currently facing the international aid system (Edwards, 1999; Offenheiser et al., 1999). In particular, two trends are forcing many PVOs to reconsider their program and resource mobilization strategies. The overall reduction in funding for international development from traditional US sources is creating pressure on PVOs to prioritize program activities and find new sources of funding. At the same time, the growth in numbers and capacities of Southern civil society organizations like NGOs has led to increased competition among PVOs and NGOs for donor funding. Competition is intensified by shifts in donor strategies to fund Southern NGOs directly, rather than through PVO intermediaries.

To some extent, these tensions are forcing PVOs to choose between operational and partnership program strategies. Unfortunately from the point of view of partnership, some of the large PVOs are strengthening their operational roles on a global scale rather than using their resources to strengthen the capacities of Southern partners (Lindenberg & Dobel, 1999). At the same time, demands for more equitable relationships with Southern NGOs are leading them to experiment with partnership approaches within the context of basically operational strategies, like the two child sponsorship agencies in our study.

The partnership literature has emphasized the importance of shared development visions in effective partnerships because they foster the development of shared goals and criteria for success (Leach 1994). These findings suggest that shared vision is important, but not sufficient. PVO-NGO partnerships work more effectively when the partners negotiate a sound strategic fit in which they perform complementary, rather than competing, roles in joint projects (Gates, 1993). In our study, the only tensions stemming from the strategic fit between the partners were due to resistance from financial control systems designed for operational, rather than partnership responsibilities.

The roles and functions of PVOs and NGOs in partnerships are determined by the overall strategy of the PVOs. Most NGOs see themselves as designing and implementing development projects and programs, and look for resources to support them from international sources like the PVOs. There are many programmatic reasons for US PVOs to opt for a partnership rather than an operational strategy. Southern NGOs are well positioned to carry out long-term sustainable development at the local level. They are also better positioned to identify development needs, and maintain relationships with communities and host governments. In some cases, NGOs are better equipped to carry out programs demanding specialized expertise.

P4: A sound strategic fit creates a strong foundation for development partnerships. Strategic fit is sound when partners share a common development vision and perform complementary roles and responsibilities in development projects and programs. PVOs should:

- revise program strategies so that their primary role is to support Southern partners' role in development with funds, information, and other desired resources, and
- complement operational strategies with partnership approaches and develop internal PVO capacity to act as partners rather than contractors.

The extent to which PVOs are able to expand the partnership strategies depends on the availability of resources from donors supportive of partnership approaches. It is striking that the PVO in our study with the most flexible partnership approach (Ethiopia child sponsorship) was directed and supported by the donor to take such an approach. The donor was an ex-employee of the PVO who had joined the funding agency to improve his ability to foster partnerships. The PVO managers said they never would have been able to implement the approach with its usual systems and traditional funding sources.

Not all partnership-oriented donors are new. The church based PVO whose partnership we studied in Kenya has recruited donors to support its partnership strategy for its entire history. To build support for its approach, the PVO regularly educates its donors by bringing them to visit Southern partners. The point here is to recognize the reality that PVOs do choose and influence their donors as part of their resource mobilization strategies. As resource environments contract, it is not easy to appreciate the room for choices, and indeed the latitude for many PVOs is shrinking. At the same time, PVOs can strive to recruit donors who understand the value of partnership strategies in the evolving field of international development and relief.

P5: PVOs can increase the effectiveness of their partnerships by strengthening resource mobilization strategies to identify suitable donors and influence others to appreciate the value of development partnerships.

#### **(4) From Donors To Partners.**

The final recommendation is addressed to donors, rather than PVOs. Given the influence of donor standards, procedures and policies on PVOs' ability to enact effective partnerships, a shift in perspective

on partnership membership is critical. Whereas we tend to think of partnerships as between two sets of actors, PVOs and NGOs, we should be thinking instead about “partnership chains” of relationships that extend from donors through PVOs and NGOs to communities. As one of the African NGO leaders said, *“if there is a good partnership at the institutional level, it extends to the communities.”*

Donors must be considered as actors in partnerships, not simply funders of partnerships. The terms with which they allocate funds to PVOs directly influences the scope for negotiation and decision-making with Southern partners. To the extent that donors intend to strengthen partnerships between PVOs and NGOs, they must reassess the impact of their funding arrangements on the partnership chain of relationships. Donors themselves face structural factors in their own organizational and stakeholder environments that will resist such changes, yet the imperative for change is clear.

P6: Donors can support more effective partnerships between US PVOs and Southern NGOs by adjusting the terms of their funding to increase the flexibility and responsiveness of PVOs to Southern NGO realities.

## Conclusion

The literature on partnerships as applied in the international development field has created relatively greater understanding of the agency-related elements of effective partnerships agency rather than the underlying structural features (Astley & Van de Ven, 1983). As a result, change efforts to improve partnerships between US PVOs and Southern NGOs have focused more on changing ideas, relationships, and general policies than internal systems for accountability and managerial control. By their very nature, structural elements are much more difficult to change and will require concerted efforts by senior PVO leadership and their donors.

PVOs are at a crossroads, as Michael Edwards (1999) and others suggest. One option is to make their roles as agents of foreign aid more explicit, drop the rhetoric of partnership, and continue to participate in structural arrangements that enforce upward accountability and PVO managerial control. The other is to build on the progress that has been made in improving cooperation with Southern NGOs and address the tough structural issues that now remain as barriers to more authentic and effective partnerships. Business considerations may press PVOs towards the first option, while missions and development effectiveness lead towards the second. If the growing global consensus on the pivotal role of civil society institutions in just and sustainable development is correct, there can be little doubt in the value of partnership strategies with Southern NGOs for maximum impact on the urgent and complex social problems of international development and relief.

## APPENDIX I

### Four US-African Development Partnerships

#### **(1) Kenya church-based.**

The African NGO, an agricultural development agency working with small farmers near a regional Kenyan city, was about six years old when it first initiated the partnership with the PVO. Founded by a lay parish, the NGO established an autonomous governance structure after the first few years. In a search for funding, the Managing Director approached the PVO, a medium-sized church-based PVO that maintains a regional office in Nairobi. Due to the PVOs role in supporting local organizations to carry out development programs, the Nairobi office is staffed only by a regional director, a program officer, and a few support staff. Within a few meetings, the PVO and the NGO determined that they shared similar visions of development. By the time of the study, the PVO had funded the NGO for three successive projects. The partnership is characterized by shared values based in Christian religion and professional development practices.

#### **(2) Kenya child sponsorship.**

The partnership was created when a large international child sponsorship PVO decided to spin-off a successful microfinance program into a local NGO. The PVO provided funds and technical support to assist the local community in founding an independent NGO, governed by a local board, and managed by a Kenyan professional from the microfinance sector. Once the local NGO was created, the PVO negotiated an agreement, explicitly within a partnership framework, to provide funds and technical assistance for a period of three years. They were a little more than halfway through the agreement at the time of the study. In many ways, the NGO was the ‘child’ of the PVO, dependent on the PVO for its original identity and resources. Yet its leaders were clear about their vision and directions for the NGO as a locally based microfinance institution.

#### **(3) Ethiopia church-based.**

The Ethiopian NGO and the US PVO had been cooperating for almost ten years. The founder and General Manager of the Ethiopian NGO got the idea for it after several years’ employment in another US church-based PVO involved in relief activities. He persuaded his personal church association to help found a new NGO and address some of the country’s pressing post-war needs, and contacted the US PVO in a search for resources. The US PVO is a large church-based PVO that has been heavily involved in relief and community development. When possible, the PVO prefers to support local counterparts to carry out development projects and programs. The agreement to cooperate was made on the basis of shared vision and a professionally determined assessment of need. The first round of satisfactory cooperation led to subsequent projects, eventually turning into agreements involving resource transfers valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars. The NGO now implements integrated community development projects in three regions of the country.

#### **(4) Ethiopia child sponsorship.**

The partnership between the US child sponsorship PVO and a young Ethiopian NGO in the education sector is one of ten initiated by the PVO under the mantle of a vision-driven partnership project to support innovations in the education sector. Although most of the PVO’s funding came from either the US government or private contributors, this project was funded by a small US foundation. The project officer in the foundation was an ex-employee of the PVO and initiated the grant in order to foster the

PVO's role in supporting the development of the education sector in several African countries. The PVO created a new unit, with new personnel, to run the partnership project. At the time of their interview, the staff was entirely Ethiopian, several with professional experience in the education sector. Their enthusiasm for the partnership project and relationships with their Ethiopian NGO partners was high. Their project was young, but generating significant results for both US and Ethiopian partners. The latter reported that the partnership supported their mission and aspirations.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Whether or not cooperative relationships between Northern and Southern NGOs can be described as ‘partnerships’ is a hotly debated issue. Partnership is widely understood to indicate relationships based on equity and mutual benefit, yet many question whether power inequalities related to the role of the Northern NGOs in transferring financial resources and North-South identities prevent any possibility of achieving genuine partnership. These questions notwithstanding, this paper uses the term partnership in a broad sense to describe the relationships between US and African NGOs. It is the term that both the Northern and Southern NGOs use to refer to the relationships, and Northern NGO leaders and staff express great interest in improving relationships to become more like genuine partnerships.

<sup>2</sup> The following statement illustrates commonly agreed-on principles to guide partnership policy development: Southern and Northern non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should collaborate together on the basis of equitable and genuine partnerships that grow out of mutual respect and trust; compatible purposes, strategies and values; and a two-way exchange of information, ideas and experience (ICVA, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> The researchers were identified by the Institute for Development Research, Boston, MA and MWENGO, in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study was funded by the Office of Private Voluntary Cooperation (PVC) in the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Washington, DC.

<sup>4</sup> Earlier efforts to solicit partnerships viewed as ‘good’ by Southern NGOs in a Southern-led international NGO forum had failed. The only example mentioned did not involve a US PVO in development cooperation.