

# **Power in partnership? an analysis of an NGO's relationships with its partners**

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## **Summary**

This paper analyses partnership relationships between NGOs and donors. Using a framework adapted from Dahl (1957) to explore issues of power in the relationships of a US-based development NGO, it questions whether the current emphasis on organisational partnership is useful or whether, in practice and in theory, greater recognition should be given to the importance of relationships between individuals. It examines whether asymmetrical relationships can be termed partnerships and highlights the potential for such a discourse to reinforce existing power inequalities.

## **Introduction**

The increasing interest in NGOs among policy makers and social development researchers has not been matched by a development in the conceptual frameworks for analysing them. There have been some attempts to relate concepts both from Western non-profit studies (Billis and MacKeith, 1995) and organisational theory (Hudock, 1995) to the study of NGOs but these areas have not been well developed and functional approaches, which can be translated into practical guidelines, have tended to dominate (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993). In the analysis of inter-institutional relationships, the approaches adopted have often ignored the role of individuals and failed to consider historical and socio-political questions which may cause organisational relationships to fail.

This article applies a conceptual framework drawn from organisational theory to try to understand the processes of NGO partnership. It is based on a case study of relationships between a development NGO based in the US (the NNGO), an NGO local to the Central American country where the study was conducted (the SNGO) and a bilateral donor agency active in that country.

## **NGOs and partnership**

NNGOs are currently enduring a 'crisis of identity' (Smillie, 1994) and there has been much discussion of appropriate roles, with increasing emphasis placed on 'bridge-building' roles to span gaps among different constituencies (Brown, 1990), and involvement in 'capacity-building' activities with SNGOs. 'Partnership' and 'partners' are terms that have risen to prominence and are linked directly with both bridge-building and capacity-building, as suggested by a donor organisation:

... [North-South] partnerships can make it possible to tailor development projects to local needs and concerns, thus leveraging the development expertise and resources of outsiders well beyond Northern capabilities. Widespread capacity building enhances the ability of Southern partners to deliver and expand their services - while reducing costs and increasing legitimacy with local governments and actors. (USAID, 1997, p220).

Although the concept of partnership was influenced by ideological notions of international solidarity in the 1970s and 1980s (Fowler, 1997; Murphy, 1991), North-South partnerships are currently seen to enable more efficient use of scarce

resources, increased sustainability and improved beneficiary participation in development activities. Furthermore, it is thought that the creation of synergy through partnership produces results that partners could not obtain without collaboration (Brown, 1990). The advantages of inter-organisational and cross-sectoral partnerships were first propounded within the field of US and European social policy, where the concept came to dominate in the 1980s (Billis, 1993; Mackintosh, 1992), and where current discussions on partnership are more advanced than those within either the development or NGO fields. However, within both areas there is a lack of clarity over definitions, and suggestions for more appropriate terms such as 'collaboration', 'coalition', 'accompaniment', 'development alliances' are common (Lewis and Ehsan, 1996; Billis, 1993). A number of practitioners and observers have identified elements that should be present for a 'successful' partnership including:

- mutual trust, complementary strengths, reciprocal accountability, joint decision-making and a two-way exchange of information (Postma, 1994, p451).
- clearly articulated goals, equitable distribution of costs and benefits, performance indicators and mechanisms to measure and monitor performance, clear delineation of responsibilities and a process for adjudicating disputes (USAID, 1997, p1).
- shared perceptions and a notion of mutuality with give-and-take (Tandon, 1990, p98).
- mutual support and constructive advocacy (Murphy, 1991, p179).
- transparency with regard to financial matters, long-term commitment to working together, recognition of other partnerships (Campbell, 1988, p10).

In a recent comprehensive assessment of the concept of NGO partnership, Fowler (1997, p109) lists twelve organisational features which lead to 'authentic partnerships', including approaches to gender, human resource policies and fundraising.

#### Problems with partnership

However, there is frequently a disparity between the rhetoric and reality of NGO partnership. The most frequently cited constraint to the formation of authentic partnerships is the control of money (Sizoo, 1996; Dichter, 1989). Indeed it has been suggested that this may make true partnership impossible:

... this is a dialogue of the unequal, and however many claims are made for transparency or mutuality, the reality is - and is seen to be - that the donor can do to the recipient what the recipient cannot do to the donor. There is an asymmetry of power that no amount of well-intentioned dialogue can remove (Elliott, 1987 p65).

However, the concept of North-South partnership has also been criticised at a more fundamental level, as being a Northern-imposed idea which is deeply tied up with the need for Northern aid agencies and NGOs to establish a legitimacy for operations in the South and demonstrate their 'added value' in the development process. Lewis' (1998) study of an inter-agency aquaculture project in Bangladesh suggests that agencies competing for scarce resources may use 'partnership' to promote their own institutional survival rather than as a way of advancing common objectives.

There has also been some work suggesting that the concept of 'organisational partnership' itself should be questioned. Dichter (1989) claimed that successful partnerships were often those in which strong personal relationships had developed and Brown (1996) linked this to the emerging body of work on the importance of 'social capital'. He argued that the stronger the personal relationship, the higher the levels of social capital available for cooperative problem-solving and the more easily gaps created by different levels of power and knowledge can be bridged. Brown and Covey (1989) argued that 'social change organisations' are often loosely organised and do depend on personal relationships which, while providing flexibility, makes them particularly vulnerable to changes or challenges to the leadership.

## A framework for analysing partnerships

It is widely recognised that a study of partnerships must analyse the power dynamics within those relationships. Within the study of organisations, many theories of power are behavioural, that is, concerned with the degree to which actions by one person or a group can be shown to have a discernible effect on the behaviour of others (Pfeffer, 1997). Dahl suggested that 'A has power over B to the extent to which he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (Dahl, 1957, pp202-3) and his breakdown of the elements of power was adopted as a basic framework within which to examine power relationships between the organisations studied.

Dahl distinguished four key constituents of the power relation. Firstly, he identified the *base* of power, that is the resources that A can use to influence B's behaviour. In this study, the base of power is examined in terms of the resources involved in the organisational relationships and the relevance of the resource dependence perspective (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) is assessed as a means of understanding this. Hudock (1995) has applied this approach to NNGOs and SNGOs in West Africa, although her analysis does not give sufficient weight to non-financial resources such as legitimacy<sup>1</sup> and facilitation of grassroots participation. Thus SNGOs are seen as entirely dependent on NNGOs, with a restricted notion of interdependence. However, resources are defined within this study as 'anything of value, tangible or intangible, that can be exchanged between organisations' (Saidel, 1991, p544).

Dahl's second element is the *means* of power, that is, the specific actions by which A can make actual use of these resources. It is examined here in terms of the inter-organisational linkages which constitute the 'partnership' and uses Farrington and Bebbington's (1993) distinction between *collaboration*, which implies a measure of formalised dependence of one partner on another for certain activities, and *linkage* which is a more generalised term. Both can be either formal or informal.

The third of Dahl's elements is the *scope* of power which is understood to be the set of specific actions that A, by using its means of power, can get B to perform. This is analysed as the area over which the organisations exert influence, and a distinction is made between *structural* influence by one side on the institutional and organisational characteristics of the other, and *operational* influence which is activity and project-specific (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993).

Finally, Dahl identified the *amount* of power, that is the net increase in the probability of B actually performing some specific action due to A using its means of power. In this study, an attempt is made to gauge differential amounts of power within the relationships by analysis of areas where the exercise of power is perceived to produce tangible results. However, the empirical obstacles involved in attempting to measure how much power is exercised (Pfeffer, 1997) prevent a more rigorous analysis of this aspect of power.

However, critics of Dahl have argued that he only analysed concrete decisions, failing to recognise that power is not just a relationship between individuals, but sustained by the 'socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups' (Lukes, 1974, p22). Lukes noted that power may be exercised by shaping the needs of others and thus A does not simply get B to do what B would not otherwise do, but rather makes B acquire desires and actively pursue ends that are in A's interests. The existence of a consensus does not therefore eliminate the possibility that power is somehow being exercised - indeed those situations which may appear to be free from the exercise of power can be those in which power differences are the most deeply ingrained (Dawson, 1996). This issue is considered in a fifth category, under *framework* of power which attempts to move beyond a behavioural conception of power, to unpack the question of latent conflicts. Moreover, it is also recognised that the organisations and inter-organisational network under consideration themselves operate within a 'social and systemic context that prefigures what will and will not be considered a policy choice or social alternative' (Parenti, 1978, pp12-13).

### **The case study**

The NNGO studied is part of the international development arm of a US evangelical Christian membership organisation which has been working in Central America for over two decades. It was invited to work in the country where the study took place at the end of the 1980s by a number of local church-based social development organisations. Since then, activities of the NNGO in that country have included sustainable agriculture and natural resource management projects and primary health programmes. It coordinates its work with a number of governmental ministries, bilateral agencies, local NGOs and community-based groups and other NNGOs. It has about 20 employees, plus a varying number of health and agricultural

extension workers. Its annual budget for the fiscal year 1996-7 was approximately US\$500,000, of which about 65% was provided by one bilateral donor.

The NNGO's initial purpose in the country was to work alongside church-based SNGOs to strengthen their capacity and help them formulate and implement development projects. However, there were problems with these local partners, such as their perceived lack of vision and capability, and progress was slower than anticipated. The NNGO faced financial pressures as well as demands from its head office to be able to demonstrate its impact more clearly. This led the NNGO to become the direct implementor of a primary health project funded by the donor. As a result of the donor's strict requirements for how such projects should operate, the project did not involve local partners, either in the design process or in the implementation. An agriculture and natural resources project which did include a role for local churches as implementors was later also funded by the same donor.

The NNGO is currently involved in the institutional strengthening of two local church-based partner organisations - the relationship with one (the SNGO) is a focus of this study. Formally established in 1989 to provide emergency assistance to those affected by a natural disaster, the SNGO has carried out small programmes of rural credit and sustainable agriculture and has supported local educational initiatives. The NNGO's stated aim in the relationship is to 'build their capacity to obtain funding from other donors to carry out similar projects in other areas of interest to them'. Currently the NNGO provides considerable financial support to the SNGO in the form of the Director's salary, funding of small training efforts, loan of vehicles and technical and office support. The NNGO also assists with technical advice and networking, encouraging the SNGO to form its own national and international links. The SNGO's only relationship with the bilateral donor is through this 'capacity-building' element of the NNGO's programme - there is no direct interaction between the two organisations.

## Findings

Key elements in the NNGO's relationships with the SNGO and donor are summarised in table 1.

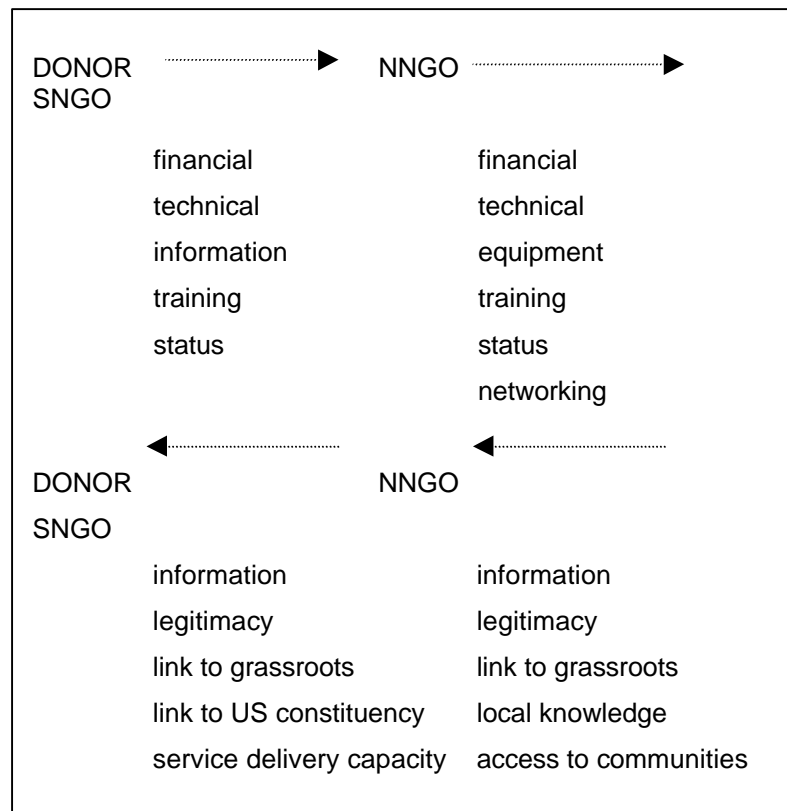
**Table 1 The NNGO's relationships with the SNGO and donor**

	SNGO	DONOR
Elements of relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- called 'partnership' by NNGO but not by SNGO</li> <li>- based on friendship between the Directors</li> <li>- interaction occurs ad hoc</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- called 'partnership' by donor but not by NNGO</li> <li>- influenced by personal relationships</li> <li>- formal interaction. Only through Director to donor</li> <li>- donor considers it has recently become more 'NGO-friendly'. NNGO denies this.</li> </ul>
Tensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- role of church in development programmes. SNGO considers NNGO not fulfilling its mandate from its membership</li> <li>- understanding of holistic nature of social development. NNGO seen as too technical.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- time-consuming reporting requirements</li> <li>- lack of consideration for appropriate project timescales due to agricultural seasons</li> <li>- excessive oversight on some aspects of grant</li> <li>- lack of flexibility</li> <li>- greater concern by donor to show efficient disbursement of funds than developmental impact.</li> </ul>
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- no NNGO accountability to SNGO.</li> <li>- some SNGO accountability to NNGO based on finance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- NNGO accountable to donor.</li> <li>- no donor accountability to NNGO and few opportunities for NNGO to influence policy</li> </ul>
Dependence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- NNGO considers SNGO dependent. SNGO feels some limited dependence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- both NNGO &amp; donor acknowledge NNGO dependence.</li> </ul>



Base of Power

**Figure 1 Model of resource flows identified between the organisations**



The NNGO is both dependent on the donor for the resources for which the SNGO is dependent on the NNGO, and dependent on the SNGO for the resources for which the donor is dependent on the NNGO. This implies a 'double dependence' of the NNGO, in that it has few of its 'own' resources which it can exchange. However it is recognised that not all resources are of equal importance and it was noted that resource dependence occurs 'upwards', because of the emphasis on technical, project-based development which requires the input of technical and financial resources. The resource for which there is dependency 'downwards', that is a link to the grassroots, is not perceived as being of such importance, nor is the internal capacity of the NNGO, which is that organisation's key resource. The power is seen to rest with the donor and the NNGO because of their control of financial resources, although the NNGO is, itself, dependent on the donor for these.

**Means of power**

The interviewees recognised that the dominant mechanism for linkage and collaboration in both organisational relationships was individual relationships between key actors at a central level, especially in the NNGO/SNGO relationship. Attempts have been made in the past to institutionalise this relationship, with joint project activities being undertaken in agricultural extension. However, due to unresolved conflict at field level, the organisations have recently moved from collaboration at several levels to a more informal linkage at head office only. Although there are more mechanisms at different levels and a contract which could be legally enforced, the interaction between the donor and the NNGO still relies on the quality of the personal relationships. Indeed, the relationship with the donor has improved markedly in the past year because of a change of personnel in the agency. While there are formal consultative mechanisms through which NGOs can influence policy or register complaints, the efficacy of these is questionable as there is concern about being refused future funding. In the context of a current policy and programme conflict, the NNGO Director has expressed his opinion with frankness to the management unit contracted by the donor to oversee administrative aspects of the grant procedure, but has not done so to the donor itself because of his perception that it will achieve nothing.

### **Scope of power**

During the period of more formal organisational collaboration between the SNGO and the NNGO, both organisations exerted operational influence over activities and the NNGO also had structural influence on the SNGO in terms of the processes and procedures used. Within the current informal linkage, the NNGO can be seen to exert a measure of structural influence on strategic organisational issues and operational influence on project design and implementation. The SNGO has neither structural nor operational influence over the NNGO.

The donor benefits from operational (but not overtly structural) influence over the NNGO, but there are no effective mechanisms by which the NNGO can exert either structural or operational influence over the donor. Moreover, the extent and types of reporting required, the timetables produced and the complex procedures which must be followed as a grantee of the donor can be seen to have had a structural influence on the NNGO, whose own procedures, processes and timetables have been adapted to correspond to those of the donor. Furthermore, the Director of the NNGO admits that he has changed the focus of his activities over the years so that they fit more

closely with the donor's priority activities. The majority of its efforts are not now directed towards fulfilling its original vision, which is also its mandate from its membership, that is to work through the churches to effect change.

### **Amount of power**

Differing amounts of power in the relationships were noted in the following areas:

1. Influence on the design of programmes and project activities. When the NNGO wished to provide credit to small farmers as part of its programme of agricultural extension, the donor prohibited it, as it did not wish credit providers to have close relationships with the farmers. Thus there is currently no credit provision within the NNGO agriculture project, even though the Director feels strongly that this element is necessary. However, when the NNGO threatened to stop paying the SNGO Director's salary unless he was involved in activities which were considered more 'development-oriented' and less focused on the church, the SNGO Director refused but the NNGO continued to fund him. However, whether this should be entirely attributed to the NNGO's need for the SNGO's resources, or is partially affected by the personal friendship that exists, is not clear.

2. Organisational procedures: the donor's reporting requirements absorb an enormous amount of NNGO staff time, particularly that of the Director. Moreover, the NNGO's accounting and operational procedures have been moulded to fit in with the donor's requirements and the proposal submission process is run to the donor's timetable and does not fit in with elements crucial to project implementation such as agricultural seasons. The NNGO has also influenced the SNGO's organisational procedures by attempting, on occasions, to speed up the SNGO's extremely slow, but very thorough, processes of consultation with its membership. It has also attempted, with mixed success, to introduce new processes for reporting to donors. It has been a source of much frustration to the NNGO that the SNGO seems unable to work at the speed the NNGO feels that it should.

Although a certain measure of power is exercised asymmetrically in both sets of relationships, there is a smaller amount of power in the NNGO/SNGO relationship than in the donor/NNGO one. This may be because of the different contractual nature of the relationships, or it may be because of a greater interdependence within the NNGO/SNGO arrangement.

### **Framework of power**

The analysis of the elements above shows how crucial the definition of the overall framework is for the exercising of power within this set of relationships. In the creation of the framework, the key element is defining control of financial resources as the base of power, an issue linked to questions of definition and power within the whole 'aid machine' (see Ferguson, 1990). Therefore, not only do the donor organisations determine the parameters of activity because the control of resources legitimises their power, but they also define the category of 'resource' itself. Power in this context is therefore self-perpetuating, because it is used both to obtain resources (Pfeffer, 1997), and to shape the organisations' need for such resources. In the context of this study, the structural influence of the donor on the NNGO and the NNGO on the SNGO shapes the needs of these organisations by affecting the types of activities undertaken and the approaches to development which are pursued, which further reinforces the existing framework of power. Thus while financial resources are perceived by all the organisations as providing a constraint and some measure of dependence 'upwards', the framework and activities of the donor and the NNGO are constructed so as to reduce the need for the resources of legitimacy and local knowledge and thus diminish the 'downward' dependence.

### **Discourse, structure and agency in partnership**

Do the asymmetrical power relationships, based both on the ownership of financial resources, and the definition of this resource as the base of power, preclude partnership between the organisations studied? There is a good working relationship between the organisations, with levels of linkage and collaboration varying over time and some level of interdependence. However, it can be questioned whether there is a genuine sharing of skills, responsibility and accountability, and also whether these relationships create the type of synergy which is considered to characterise genuine partnership. Moreover, the relationships that do exist are based on personal friendships and are not institutionalised. The use of the term 'partnership' by the organisations higher up the chain about the relationships lower down, but not the reverse, suggests that there may be elements in the discourse itself which should be considered.

Furthermore, this study raised fundamental questions about the shaping of the framework within which the term 'partnership' is used. Ferguson (1990) uses the

term 'instrument effects' to describe the unanticipated effects of certain processes and patterns of discourse through which reality is constructed. It is my contention that one of the instrument effects of the discourse of partnership is the adaptation of the power framework and the creation of a slightly changed reality, which serves to hide the fundamental power asymmetries within development activities and essentially maintain the *status quo*. In the context of an approach to development which is being threatened by calls for its reassessment (Sizoo, 1996) and an increasingly strident and capable Southern voice, donors and NNGOs have adopted the discourse of partnership, with its associated concept of capacity-building, in order to bring this voice into the dominant framework and maintain stability. As Postma (1994) comments, 'Not only does discourse arise from asymmetrical relations of power; it reproduces and intensifies those relations and restricts the possibility of a more genuine encounter between partners' (p455).

While there has been a certain amount of work on the understanding of power processes within and between organisations and individuals, Pfeffer (1997) argues that there is a gap in knowledge about 'how strategies of social influence fail, about when theoretically predicted determinants of power don't predict actual power, and about when power is used in situations either more or less than predicted by the context' (p150). One of the reasons he may see this gap is his belief that 'power is, first of all, a structural phenomenon' (1981, p4). However, the perceived gap can begin to be understood by examining the relationship between structure and agency within and between organisations. At one level, if power is found in the relationships between agents rather than being inherent in structures, it is less theoretically predictable and more dependent on an individual's exercise of it. Within the context of this study, the mechanisms of partnership, through which power was exercised, were found to be those of individual relationships. At an organisational level, partnership in this example was through agency, not structure. However, on a larger scale, power was seen to be inherent in the structural framework of development and in the dominant discourse, including that of partnership, which could actually be seen as reinforcing power asymmetries. This framework not only influences actions at an organisational level, but can also be seen to be influenced by it, in that the 'capacity-building' which is a common element of partnership arrangements strengthens a Southern agency's voice and ability to affect the overall framework. Giddens' view of power is helpful in understanding this dialectic: 'we have to relate power as a

resource drawn upon by agency in the production and reproduction of interaction to the structural characteristics of society' (1979, p257).

## Conclusions

Partnership as a concept dominates the social policy field and has been readily incorporated into NGO practice and rhetoric. However, although issues relating to partnership are increasingly being addressed in the literature, the theoretical understanding of it, from an organisational perspective, is limited. This study suggests that inter-organisational relationships between NGOs may be falsely categorised and understood within much of the current NGO literature. The fact that inter-organisational relationships for NGOs are frequently based on personal relationships is recognised by many NGO practitioners but not adequately incorporated into the management theory. Moreover, this study suggests that an investigation of inter-agency partnership must not only consider issues of power but also be carried out at several levels. It is not sufficient just to consider asymmetries of power between agencies as constraints to partnership, but the wider framework within which those agencies operate, and the mechanisms for establishing those frameworks including the use of discourse, must also be taken into consideration.

It was beyond the scope of this study to delve further into the discourse and power structures operating within the framework of international development assistance. Moreover the danger of a tautological argument on such issues, 'organisations are powerful...because they have power', is recognised. However, if by examining a set of relationships at the micro-level, this study has shed some light on processes at the macro-level, then it will have contributed to an attempt to understand one of the key terms in development cooperation and suggested some areas which merit investigation in the future.

Additionally, there are a number of practical implications arising from the study:

1. While context may structure actions at an organisational level, it does not determine them and individual actors and relationships are critical. This can be an advantage as individuals work directly with others despite the boundaries of institutions (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993). However it can also be a disadvantage, as recognised by the donor: 'Partnerships are strongest if there are multiple linkages that connect the organisations involved. If all relationships are

simply managed by organizational leaders, the partnership is vulnerable to changes in individuals and patterns of organizational leadership'.

2. Donors need to give thought to the process of institutionalising relationships - their implicit assumption in propounding partnership as a means forward in development is that it is a structural relationship between organisations. This study suggests that this may not always be the case.
3. The dominance of personal relationships within the organisational relationships calls into question much of the theory currently being developed for NGOs in terms of capacity building, institutional strengthening, scaling-up and diffusion of innovation, which all rely on organisational processes as the basis for change. This study suggests that a more actor-oriented approach may be appropriate for the development of NGO theory.
4. If partnership between agencies is desired, then there should be a clear understanding between the potential partners of what this entails and its implications for practice. As Lewis and Ehsan (1996) suggest, an examination of these issues may help agencies to confront the gap between what they say they are doing and what they actually do, or as Postma (1994, p467) says, 'intentionality is integral.....to the processes by which collaboration and institutional development take place.' It may also make explicit the danger that partnership could be used as a form of co-option.
5. Collaboration between agencies should not be assumed to be partnership. As several observers have noted (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993; Fowler, 1997), partnership linkages do not function by themselves and may take years to develop. Whether structural or operational, if linkages are to be effective, the mechanisms underpinning them have to be carefully managed.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>: A problematic concept, but used here as rightful authority to operate (see Sogge, 1996, p41).

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