

Partnership: The New Name of the Co-operation to Development

by Paolo Martella and Javier Schunk¹

People in the street are greatly amused by intellectuals, or pseudo-intellectuals, who invent strange terms to define concepts which could be defined without problems by common words. However, sometimes a single word contains an enormous quantity of meanings, experiences and prospects and this is, perhaps, the case with the word “partnership” in the frame of international co-operation to development. Obviously this word comes from “partner”, an idea of international solidarity which became popular since the sixties. During that decade the general lines of the co-operation activities with the developing countries, managed by NGOs and religious institutions were affected by a sort of “Copernican revolution” and also the international organisations were interested by this radical change. The philosophy of working for was replaced by the philosophy of working together. Thirty years later this “revolution” still represents the final aim, the utopia, for people who work in the international co-operation. Most of them are persuaded by the conviction that a development program should be planned with a local representative partner to have good prospects of success. Nevertheless the best intentions often collide with the difficulties of this approach when compared to the easy-managing of the programs where the beneficiary is a passive subject. A first primary analysis tells us that the main reason of these difficulties is due to the fact that partnership, as far as the North partner is concerned, requires an opposite attitude with respect

to the hidden colonialism which, often unconsciously, affects our mental structures and behaviour while, for the South partner it requires the capability of overcoming the charitable logic and a strong wish to be involved in the development process.

In the following pages we will try to examine briefly some features of this collaboration path, with the hope that partnership, for a growing number of organisations, will move itself away from the shop-window of good intentions to the workshop of project elaboration.

Churches, public institutions, local NGOs – Looking for the ideal partner

Striving through the story of international voluntary services since its primary forms of missionary laity, we can roughly distinguish some phases as far as the choice of the partner by the NGOs is concerned. In the sixties the need of finding a partner was the need of finding a cultural intermediary among the voluntaries and the local people. The Christian NGOs, chose the Churches as preferred interlocutor to play this role. We have to remember that in those years, the Vatican Council II stirred up great hopes everywhere in the world. For each believer, but also for many atheists, the Catholic Church in those years was representing the most authoritative international institution to guarantee a favourable progress for everybody, a development process aiming at the integral liberation “of each person and of the whole person”. In the seventies, the co-operation community became aware that a form of dialogue with the public administration was required to guarantee a future to the achieved results after the official end of the program. According to the common opinion governments and local institutions, although criticizable, were the only subjects able to bring their countries out of the poverty. This fact, together with the augmented self-determination of the NGOs with respect to the missions, caused an increased interest towards partnership with institutional subjects. In the eighties it was realised that the public administration might be an unreliable partner due to poor flexibility to the changes in social and political scenarios. So the

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North NGOs supported the creation of local popular organisations in their own image and likeness and began to collaborate with them. That was a fundamental step for the political maturation of several developing countries towards democracy since the local NGOs, which are an expression of a small but dynamic civil society, represent an important counterbalance to dictatorial drifts. The direct link between NGOs in rich and poor countries made the problem identification without the bureaucratic elephantiasis easier, and allowed a trust relation and an experience exchange among “citizens of the world”. The increase of 300% in the help to development through South NGOs which has been estimated between the sixties and the nineties is not casual. When the state realised that the local NGOs were becoming a powerful centre, it expected the partnership to become a “menage a trois” where the public administration plays an intermediary role. Nowadays this form of co-operation with the government or the local institution which performs a function of supervisor and political controller is becoming more and more frequent.

Each of these types of partnership has advantages and disadvantages. The partnership with the Churches for instance has a good presence, relying on the missionaries, but a weak flexibility since it is applicable only to particular projects and requires volunteers with strong religious motivations. Partnership with the public administration can be much more flexible in terms of project typology but has the disadvantage of poor or no popular adhesion. Working with the local NGOs the problem of being representative is overcome but the lack of presence remains unless the local partner is a great national NGO. A common problem is the need of a reliability verification since the South NGOs’ world is a sort of jungle where the idealists are mixed together with the opportunists and sometimes with the dishonests. This counts true also to the North NGOs, but we have to be aware of that guilt feelings, as well as the mystification of the partner, can cause bitter disappointment. As a conclusion we could say that the ideal partner doesn’t exist but that for each project type and for each social or political scenario it is possible to define a different partnership. According to R. Chambers we can affirm that: “It’s necessary to diversify instead of standardising the co-operation relationship, to find the plurality of partners instead of exclusive relations with governments, and to comply with flexibility instead of bureaucratisation”.

Resource, methodology, scope – A partnership for everybody

We have seen that several entities can play the role of partners, now we shall observe that the same concept of partnership can be thought in different ways. At the lowest level, partnership is a resource. The employment of local personnel has two advantages. It saves project costs (less burden for the salary of emigrated employees) and creates new local job opportunities. At this level, roles and responsibilities are strongly unbalanced. The project elaboration, the financial resources and the management are completely in charge of the North partner while the South one has responsibilities only about the definition of field interventions and areas, the use of skilled labour and the engagement for complying with fiscal and commercial advantages as a local actor. In few words, the partnership in this form is a relation of job offer from a North partner to a South one which remains a pure implementor. Aiming for overcoming the limits of this approach, the partnership can be thought as a methodology i.e. a practice of co-operation activities to guarantee a more direct link with the project reality and as a long-term co-operation which will help to make the partner to be autonomous. At this level the partnership is moving in the direction of the decentralisation of responsibilities from the North to the South. On the financial side, resources remain mostly with the North partner but the South one is now invited to share the decisions relevant to project investments and expenses. On the side of activities management the South partner is much less subordinate with respect to the case of partnership-resource since it is involved in writing the operative plan and in the evaluation of the program effectiveness. The role of the North partner is now centred on training for the improvement of the technical and management capabilities of the South partner. Greater attention in the selection of volunteers is requested which should be not only skilled but also gifted with capabilities of mediation and listening to be able to realise a true intercultural dialogue, identifying the need of the population and emphasising the local resources. Shifting away from the pure utility logic of we can understand partnership as a scope for people aiming to work for a development which should produce fairer relations between North and South. In this sense the partnership can help the North to acquire a critical consciousness of the development processes (the experience in the projects teaches that the life quality is not depending on the implementation of super-modern technologies) but also to practically realise strategies to solve

conflicts rising from the cultural diversity (which is mainly important in the frame of problems associated to the immigration of “extra-community” persons in our countries). To the South partner the viewpoint of partnership-scope supplies instruments to afford the complex scenario of interdependent and global economy: so it can become a development agent with complete assumption of responsibilities towards its own countries. At this level the North partner becomes a consultant with the task of coaching the local managers for an increased assumption of responsibilities; as a consequence it accepts modifications to the project requested by the partner. Its financial and technical contribution must be decreasing until becoming completely neglected at the end of the program. The South partner, in his turn, as he is more involved in the management responsibilities, must assume a systemic view to plan far-sighted strategies and to pursue the objectives by harmonising financial, productive and human resources.

A “marriage” with “divorce” behind the corner

To put in practice this path is difficult since the partnership is an encounter between representatives of different cultures. The experience teaches that in this case misunderstandings can occur due to the poor knowledge of the other’s culture, so verbal and non-verbal communication, may risk an interruption in view of two possible scenarios. In the former, a tempt of understanding of the interlocutor’s reference models is tried by learning his cultural interpretation code. In the latter, the stronger representative imposes his cultural interpretation code to the other one by projecting on the reality his mental schemes. To obtain this result, he will resort to violent instruments which shall produce physical or cultural violence. Of course the partnership can fit only for the first scenario since the second is proper of a colonialist viewpoint but it is also evident that in the first case good results can be obtained only in the long period with a great effort of patience and humbleness. So it is possible that the understanding break and that the encounter change into clash. To avoid this prospect, a first effort must be done to remove the commonplaces and the prejudices. As, the sociologist and philosopher Ya Mutuale Balume says: “Anyone who wants to be a partner must engage himself in the fields of demystification and demythisation both in the South and in the North”. It is necessary, in our countries, to leave stereotyped views of a third world which is only swollen tummy children, wars, slaughters and a starving crowd waiting for the European co-operation agent, but also to unmask the

idea of “land of milk and honey” associated to the occidental countries in the mind of developing countries’ populations. Only in this case it will be possible to understand each other having a complete perception of our differences, complementary features and expectations. Secondly, it must be admitted that our capability of influencing complex development processes from outside is poor so that the trait-d’union role with the society in the project place can be more successfully played by a local cultural mediator. Finally the partnership viewpoint presupposes the humility to express the needs and to call the other one for help in the aim of satisfying them. The typically eurocentric pride of persons who never call for help and surely not an African or Latin-American, as a matter of fact, masks the inability to define a mutual exchange. On the contrary a lasting partnership relation must be based on the reciprocal estimation to see in the other’s experience an enrichment of one’s own experience.

Transparency, active attitude scope-sharing – three factors for success

In spite of the different problems, more and more organisations are planning programs which involve local partners with growing management responsibilities. They verify with satisfaction the maturation of these subjects from scarcely organised and dependent groups to completely autonomous local agents of development. A recent study ordered by COTA (Collectif d’échanges pour la Technologie Appropriée) to verify the effectiveness of the interventions sponsored by the European Union in supporting popular organisations in poor countries, showed both the increasing role played by those organisations in their countries and the growth, also qualitative, of partnership among North and South NGOs specifying several areas where promising collaborations started. Among them: the methodological feature of co-operation programs, the technology transfer problems, the education to development, the political pressure activities on government institutions, the commercialisation in North countries of South products and the creation of credit structures. According to this study the success of new forms of co-operation to development based on higher responsibility sharing of South NGOs rises from three main factors: easier check capabilities in the economic management (transparency), decline of the merely assisted development (active attitude), definition of common objectives (scope-sharing). Transparency makes the finding of financial resources easier, the active attitude attracts the occidental countries an-

noyed by pure charitable trends and the scope-sharing augments the partnership stability reducing the “divorce” incidence. This result allows to hope that the partnership is actually going to represent the new name of the co-operation to development, and perhaps a training process for the so-called UNO of peoples

appealed by a lot of subjects, to give new responses to world problems which are more and more complex, but also less and less solvable in the viewpoint of, a system still anchored to the criteria of nation-states and sovereign national governments.

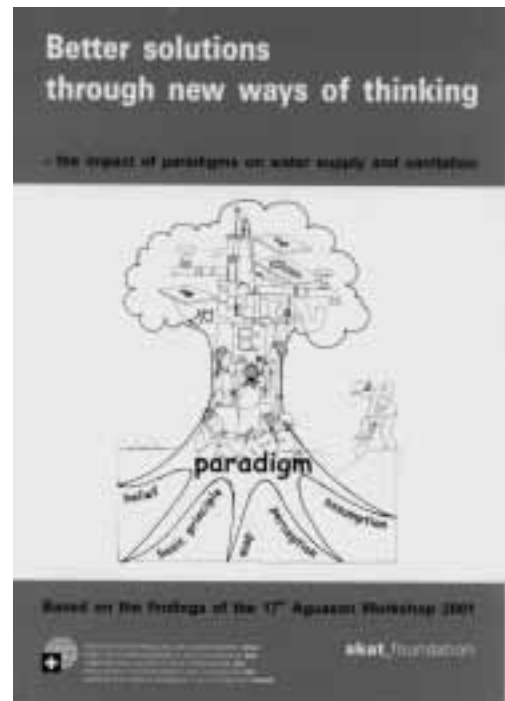
Book review



Better solutions through new ways of thinking – the impact of paradigms on water supply and sanitation

The recent history of water supply and sanitation projects in developing countries offers many varied examples of approaches, assumptions, beliefs and patterns - otherwise called paradigms regarding initiation, decision-making, design criteria, financing, and the management of operation and maintenance. These paradigms are like the roots of a tree in that they form the foundation and determine the nature and sustainability of a project. The tasks of making wholesome drinking water and satisfactory sanitation available to everyone remain huge and challenging, and it is important that efforts in this connection are based on the best possible foundations.

This booklet has been derived from the presentations and discussions at an Aguasan workshop. It includes an explanation of the importance of paradigms, suggestions for investigating and modifying paradigms, and examples of the processes of reviewing and modifying paradigms, based on case studies from Africa and Asia. The examples show how new paradigms can lead to radically new – and potentially better – solutions.



ISBN: 3-908156-04-1

The booklet can be obtained at
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